AFROPOLITAN SATIRE:
A Critical Investigation

And

VOLTA:
A Novel

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates satire as a mode for expressing the African diasporic experience, using a synergy between creative and critical research.

The critical research probes the intersections of satire and African migration, termed Afropolitanism, by examining what it means to posit the following Afropolitan novels as satirical creations: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). The study analyses the different kinds of satiric devices in these novels, drawing on principles from the various western satiric traditions, showing these writers' relationships to other twentieth-century satirical writers (western and African), and also exploring the origins of these Afropolitan novels in African oral traditions. The research scrutinises these novels' treatment of economic inequality, unsafe political climates, shaky racial relations, thorny class boundaries. It argues that relocating overseas squeezes Africans into new behaviour, culture, and perspectives that necessitate them to modify their identities and beliefs which have hitherto underpinned their existence. This new frame of mind upsets the foundations of their moral reasoning. Furthermore, it contends that these unexpected changes lend themselves to a kind of satire that fluctuates artistically and multiculturally.

The creative strand ("Volta," a novel) is interwoven with the findings from the critical aspect, using the architecture of satire to construct a novel that explores a protagonist fraught with unexpected displacements in circumstances, physical and psychological. It extends the critical research by exploring the question of globalisation when identity and belonging are fractured, and migrants struggle for acceptance and validation but are constantly hampered by many shades of prejudice and obstacles. "Volta" delves into the harrowing effects of a forced escape from home, the abandonment of an opulent past to embrace a prickly transformation in a foreign society that offers only a marginal compensation for every effort.

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A Note about "VOLTA: A Novel."

A small portion of the Norwich section of the novel was submitted in 2019 to the University of East Anglia, as part of the requirements for the qualification of MA Creative Writing, Prose Fiction.

PART ONE: THE CRITICAL COMPONENT

AFROPOLITAN SATIRE: A CRITICAL INVESTIGATION

INTRODUCTION

> "Afropolitans—the newest generation of African emigrants, coming soon or collected already at a law firm/chem lab/jazz lounge near you. You'll know us by our funny blend of London fashion, New York jargon, African ethics, and academic successes [...]. Most of us are multilingual: in addition to English and a Romantic language or two, we understand some indigenous language(s) and speak a few urban vernaculars" (Selasi 2013, 528).

In a 2005 seminal essay, Taiye Selasi popularised the term Afropolitanism, in a tone of playfulness, veneration, and seriousness. It is this simultaneous mix of teasing and admiration that has become the most distinguishing feature of a clutch of significant novels published in the last fifteen years by African authors about immigration to the West. Such novels include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013), NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016). Selasi, in that widely celebrated article of 2005, teases about the way African immigrants become distillations of many different cultures from around the world. She ribs African immigrants about their adventures in new careers, their experimentation with a medley of fashion traditions, and the way these travellers showcase their polyglot competencies wherever they go. Selasi elatedly points out that these behavioural fusions and patterns would not have been possible had there been no movements across geographical boundaries. In my view, with its teasing and sarcasm, the essay succeeds in establishing Afropolitanism as an instinctive subject of satire.

Satire compels humanity to pay attention to itself. It is an all-purpose camera that pans its lens on eccentricities that might evade other means of capture and investigation. Any activity, subtle or obvious, which prompts people to take notice of new permutations in human behaviour, can be regarded as satirical. Guilhamet (1987) argues that satire "emerges along with a belief in the superiority of the past to the present [...]. Thus the object of satire is a present danger or perversion of a hallowed norm" (165). Generally, humans are quick to notice deviations from expected

behaviour, those perceived abnormalities often piquing in them a curiosity to seek answers and new insights that might amend existing follies.

Travel is one of the activities that can arouse people's observatory instincts. Migrating to a new territory usually heightens our tendency to monitor virtues and values, foibles and absurdities. A traveller's ability to spot nuances in behaviour sharpens as soon as the new culture happens to be alien to the traveller's original worldview, leading to debates about the nature and prevalence of differences. Such disparities can also be sociological, climatic, religious, economic, legal, anthropological, and moral. Satire is all-pervasive. It often disguises itself, possessing the ability to protect its creators. Novelists and other artists often shield themselves under this protection to expose societal defects that might be difficult to tackle by any other means. For this reason, satire becomes essential for exploring the uncertain and challenging lives of people who travel to new places.

When Africans migrate to the other parts of the world, they might become what has been termed as Afropolitans. These are people who by the very nature of their ambitions are daunted in their strides, vulnerable in their relationship with their visited domain, yet they remain unwavering. Regardless of unexpected setbacks, these migrants are willing to take risks in their new environment by knocking down their original selves and rebuilding them with freshly acquired values and ideals of urbanity. Sometimes, they dabble into new occupations, working and studying concurrently in order to become equipped and trusted.

Afropolitanism embraces the multiplicity and hybridity of African identities within an identity-conscious world, seeking to conceptualise a universe where Africans cannot be condensed into a homogenous mode of life. It entails building a world in which African ethos and identities are "post-racial" and ephemeral, and variability is permanent and acceptable (Balakrishnan 2017, 1). Consequently, Africans have begun to envision Africa's new, migratory future, blurring the demarcations of nationality and country, and embracing the universality of being a native in a foreign city. As a neologism, Afropolitanism has rekindled new narratives of transnational belongingness of Africans, challenging the stereotypes of race and culture, to establish travelling Africans as multidimensional. In the words of Mbembe (2020):

> "Afropolitanism is an aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world. It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim

> identity—which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race, and to the issue of difference in general" (60).

To some Africans, therefore, Afropolitanism is just a description of a set of individuals who are African but are domiciled in Europe or America (or elsewhere in the world), people who have become cosmopolitan and partly westernised. These people view Africa and the world through multicultural lenses—local, global, and in-between—so Afropolitanism becomes strictly an African experience of the external world. Olaniyan (2003) quips, "I don't see a large thriving community of Iraqis in Mexico or Cambodia, or Americans and Britons rushing in droves to catch the next flight to Nigeria [...] for want of a better life" (4). However, to other Africans, Afropolitanism is an ideal by which they can more easily navigate the challenges of migrating overseas. It is a standard that is latent in the sense that an African migrant does not have to inscribe it on a T-shirt, yet it is present, operating subconsciously. As a matter of fact, Mbembe (2020) contends that being an Afropolitan requires the ability to understand "the traces of remoteness in closeness, to domesticate the unfamiliar, to work with what seem to be opposites—it is this cultural, historical, and aesthetic sensitivity" (60).

Migration, therefore, opens up ways of assimilating foreign viewpoints and philosophy for Africans who travel to tolerate, adjust, imbibe, and recreate realities. So being an African living in other parts of the world is not for the faint-hearted. Abidde (2021) contends that "the belief in many quarters that Africans are not smart meant that they were perceived as a people incapable of modernity and needing direction and or protection" (10). Black immigrants, therefore, have to work twice as hard as whites to prove their competence or risk being considered irrelevant and dispensable. This view is corroborated by Ojaide (2008) when he posits that "[w]hile migration to the developed West is a relief from the economic discomfort of Africa, it burdens the individual with psychological, spiritual, and other problems" (46).

As these hindrances rear their ugly heads, these Afropolitans tend to bond together to reinforce each other's strength, sharing their instincts of danger and survival strategies. In the process, comparisons usually ensue, as postcolonial migration of Africans seems to be predicated on emulation, which compels migrants

to pin their hopes and dreams on successful people and events located abroad. These well-off individuals and situations appear, from a far distance, to embody the ladders towards achievable goals. Such an emulative activity is often ambitious yet ambiguous because these migrants do not have access to the facts and data that might enable them to make informed comparisons. The outcome of such a subjective exercise is often disappointing. At best an illusory practice, a skewed expectation places migrants in a predicament that might worsen their social and economic outlooks at present and in the future.

In other words, there is always psychological volatility among migrants, an itchy unfamiliarity typical of visitors to a new domain who struggle with the uncertainty of their reception, finances, and accommodation. They quiz their visited culture with a troubled mind that worries about why things are so different from the norms of their home countries. The new city, even if it exists in harmony, seems to be in disarray, baffling their thought processes. When they strain to picture exactly the way the city operates, they fail, because their consciousness is frail and friable at the outset, and they fantasise a great deal about future comfort, about the struggle to make ends meet, to make their imagination sensible. They toil to weave their contrasting strings of reasoning together.

Migration stimulates an alteration of worldview, sensitivity and identity, shaping the experiences of migrants in ways that engender either an enhancement or dilution of self-worth (McLeod 2000). The theory of Afropolitanism seeks to universalise the migratory experiences and cultural transformations of Africans in megacities around the developed world. The neologism, according to Selasi (2013) aims to highlight the multiplicity and hybridity of African identities within a globalised culture. Some of its attributes are transcontinental migration, multiculturality, international fashion, tech-savviness, transnational education, sexual freedom, global employment, intercontinental cuisine, and multilingualism. It also comes with counterfactuality, which means the alteration of the lives of travellers in ways that contradict who they used to be. They become adjusted versions of their former selves and souls, counterfactual to how they used to live, dress, and reason, and “must form an identity along at least three dimensions: national, racial, cultural—with subtle tensions in between” (530). Selasi contends:

> "Were you to ask any of these beautiful, brown-skinned people that basic question—'where are you from?'—you'd get no single answer [...]. This one lives in London but was raised in Toronto and born in Accra [...]. 'Home' for this lot is many things: where their parents are from; where they go for vacation; where they went to school; where they see old friends; where they live (or live this year). Like so many African young people working and living in cities around the globe, they belong to no single geography, but feel at home in many" (528).

In the words of Balakrishnan (2018), "Afropolitanism corresponds to both a description of Africa's worldly entanglements as well as an ethic against preserving parochial 'native' identities over diversity. Implied, too, is an African modernity defined by its willingness and openness toward the global: a state of becoming" (575). Thus, the concept of Afropolitanism reshapes the migratory lives of Africans into a universal one.

Eze's (2016) inquiry proposes the twin idea of local Afropolitanism and foreign Afropolitanism, a holistic approach to Afropolitan inclusiveness, mobility, and mutability of identity. He contends that Afropolitans do not only live abroad, but they also live in African cities. He describes "the Afropolitan (*Afro polites*) as one who, on the strength of birth or affinity can call any place in Africa his or her place, while at the same time being open to the world" (114, emphasis Eze's), adding that "it is important to note that this mobility does not have to be exclusively between Africa and the West. It can be between one African city and another, or even within an African city" (115).

This frantic, yet elusive, pursuit of diasporic dreams affects migrants in several unpredictable ways, including but not limited to health impairment, acculturation, self-withdrawal, microaggression, alienation, mental fatigue, and physical violence. All this comes with a diasporic life defined by a never-ending restlessness, that incessant mental and physical frustrations that result from the deficiencies of birthplace and the diaspora fraught with failed promises. For this reason, there is a sudden effort to adjust to new and often unexpected harsh realities.

Critical attention to Afropolitanism has focussed on constructions and deconstructions of African identities (Balakrishnan 2017; 2018; Neumann and Rippl 2017), racial Afropolitanism (Adejare 2018), and sexual Afropolitanism (Lyle 2018),

among other studies. It has been argued that Afropolitanism is essential for understanding the creative and developmental potential of young Africans in an increasingly mobile, tech-driven, and neo-postmodern world (Roy 2016). My research, therefore, synthesises these and more studies to investigate literary Afropolitanism, in particular the satirical propensities of Afropolitan literature, taking as my examples Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah,* NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names,* and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers*. Through a reading of these three Afropolitan novels, I will draw on the distinctions between different kinds of western satire in order to clarify the different kinds of satire and satiric tools present in the novels. I have chosen these novels because their authors are all Afropolitans themselves, domiciled in America, and their stories are loosely based on their various experiences while navigating the American society. In addition, situating these female authors as satirists has become germane at this time because the practice of satire has often been accused of exclusive male domination, often tailored towards devaluation of women and femininity (Blades 2016; Zekavat 2017), and studying these female novelists ensures gender inclusiveness, particularly the African female visibility.

The satire in these Afropolitan narratives spans gentle teasing through moderate ridicule to weighty diatribes. *Americanah,* a stark romantic satire with a protagonist who suffers from diasporic and racial dissatisfaction, swings between ribbing and derision, banter and mordancy, sometimes hinting at correction, at other times subverting all notions of correction and cure. *We Need New Names* revels in irritated playfulness, applying a witty, acidic humour while ridiculing political decay and economic hopelessness. *Behold the Dreamers* utilizes a blend of subtexts to showcase moral decadence. The sublimity of its satire serves to accentuate the diasporic nightmare of its protagonists who, through contrived plans, aspire to live through the convoluted American system.

In order to dissect the various kinds of satire in the novels I am dealing with, it will be useful to draw on the distinctions available in traditional satirical theory of the West. The most common difference is the one often drawn between the Juvenalian and Horatian modes of satire. Juvenalian satire is harsh. It drenches its target in grating discomfort because it is acidic, unsympathetic, and punitive. It sinks its scalpel violently into its targets, creating bitterness and hurting their feelings, a kind of lawless satire that threatens and endangers individuals and authorities (Griffin, 1994). A satirist in this mode uses aggression and outright terror to subvert the gaze of every

version of corruption and tyranny, detesting oppression. Highet (1962) equates such a satirist to "the tragedian" who "hates most people or despises them" (235).

Conversely, Horatian satire is mild and soft on its target. It uses the masking techniques of benevolent euphemism, subdued ridicule and comic irony, seeking to cure without cutting. An anaesthetic process, the goal of such satire is never to offend or injure its recipients, even while it uncovers the truth and stirs the misbehaving targets to the final stage of satiric processing, which is purification. Highet (1962) opines that this type of satirist "tells the truth with a smile so that he will not repel them [the targets] but cure them of that ignorance which is their worst fault. Such is Horace" (235). It is a mode of satire that delights in applause, display, play, and playfulness. Horace, in order to demonstrate his artistic harmlessness, ridicules using a "genial approach toward the satiric target" (Blades 2016, 14) and "produces light-hearted laughter at the absurdities of mankind" (15).

It is important to note that both the Juvenalian and Horatian variants can be considered inherently stable because they often seek to reform their targets, correcting a prevailing flaw or a vice. They do not waver or crumble. They are sure about their intentions, standing firm with their tools, because they are convinced that they know what is right or wrong. Especially in the Horatian, moralising is a pervasive element. Such satire is didactic, wanting to teach the sacred rules of saintliness to deviants. I will delve into how some of these Afropolitan authors offer moralising guidance to Afropolitans as well as a satiric examination of their conditions. Also noteworthy is the fact that these two traditional modes of western satire can be made artistically unstable by combining and interchanging their usage on a target, the way some of my chosen authors have done in their novels.

However, there are certain kinds of satire that are naturally unstable because both the satirist and the satire are not sure if their satiric punches can make some corrective difference. They tend to be delicate, fluctuating in their executions. Sometimes known as Menippean satire or degenerative satire, these sorts of writing are common in postmodern novels. Their satiric techniques swing. They dilate and contract, and are often sceptical of their intended result—a postmodern attribute. The interpretations of these forms of satire tend to be fragile and slippery, giving room for multiple layers of results and meanings that are themselves brittle. This should not come as a surprise because postmodern satire is chaotic, and "[h]ow to tell a satire

remains a problem despite some very good work on the subject over the last thirty years" (Guilhamet 1987, 1).

Specifically, Mennipean satire is often associated with scepticism, which Frye (1957) describes as "a comic humor of doubting plain evidence. Cynicism is a little closer to the satiric norm: Menippus, the founder of the Menippean satire, was a cynic [...]" (230). Thus, the ambivalence of intention is at the heart of such satire. It delves into psychic suspicion or conscience editing, what Griffin (1994) refers to as "probing moral intelligence" (16). It is a complex, malleable, and open-ended form that can probe the tiniest part of human folly.

Weisenburger (1995) propounds degenerative satire as an ambitious, dynamic, and disruptive mode suitable for the complexities of postmodernism. He argues that such satire disassembles structures and "functions to subvert hierarchies" (3). An armament against authority and supremacy, such satire cuts deep and serrated, glorifying its own vitriol, fury, and affrontery. Because it does not moralise, seeking to reconstruct its objects, I argue that it is a non-traditional extension of the Juvenalian satire. Degenerative satire embraces forthright vituperation of intolerance, brutality, and bizarre imagery without any rational attempt at "posing corrective norms designed to return aberrant behaviour to acceptable standards" (Swetnam 1996, n.p.). So it stabs delinquent targets with a vengeance, disregarding probity, because satiric correction is often subjective and contestable. According to Neeper (2016), "satire is to lead to the [...] acculturation of empathy in readers, so that we are put in 'the proper relation to the truth,' rather than to the inducement to the righting of personal faults or social ills, the avowed aim of the conventional satirist" (p. 287). I contend that what is moral in one society may be considered immoral in another. In fact, this cultural relativity is one of the attributes that make this form of satire unstable and elusive. Strehle (1996) posits that the degenerative mode of satiric writing has become rampant and audacious in contemporary times: "to flay rather than to mend," adding that "contemporary fiction indicts without consoling; it finds large scope for unchecked greed and virtually none for ethical values" (145). It is "the lunatic fringe of satire" which "has come to dominate" (146).

Given the complexities of living in a foreign territory, its alienating culture, and the psychological issues it provokes, I find both the stable and unstable variants of satire (Juvenalian, Horatian, Menippean, and degenerative) in the three Afropolitan novels I am studying. Their authors examine the implications of being a twenty-first

century African émigré, highlighting migrants in jeopardy whose conscience is sometimes malnourished by falsehood. The tough and pitiless Juvenalian satire is always aimed against the racism of western societies. Every so often, the moralising Horatian satire throws its tender tentacles at the Afropolitans themselves. It teases and smiles at their follies, highlighting their dreams and delusions. But, in reality, beneath these obvious manifestations of satire, something more subtle and incongruous is present in these books. I call it the unstable satire, which doesn't keep these distinctions clear between satirists and their objects of satire. It is psychologically probing, examining the uncertainty and instability in the minds of Afropolitans.

The subject of African immigration requires considerable tact. The sensitive nature of the problems and issues often explored could predispose a writer to being dubbed racist, sexist or fundamentalist, including all sorts of phobic: Europhobic or even "Ameriphobic" and so on. To avoid this accusation, these three writers have often resorted to the use of unstable satirical techniques—sometimes tender, other times brutal and unpredictable—to examine the unexpected changes that immigration engenders. The satiric objective of these authors contains "[i]nquiry and [p]rovocation" (Griffin 1994, 36), an open-ended purpose that creates avenues for holistic and honest conversations about matters that affect African humanity. Griffin provides a principle for investigating unstable satire of this kind, when he contends that such satire is "problematic, open-ended, essayistic, ambiguous, uncertain [...], resistant to formal closure, more inclined to ask questions than to provide answers, and ambivalent about [...] pleasures" (5). I, therefore, rely on Griffin's axiom to study the vicissitudes of African migratory experiences, correlating them with the kinds of always revolving satire that they may engender.

However, no matter how worthwhile these distinctions from the western satirical theory are, it should not be misconstrued that these Afropolitan writers are principally influenced by western satire. Although some famous works of western satire—Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and Voltaire's *Candide,* for example—may have inspired their works, these writers are Afropolitans, and they draw on both African oral and western literary traditions. Indeed, the stimulus of their satiric writing comes mostly from the vast traditions of African satiric works, such as the feminist satire of Buchi Emecheta, the sarcasm of Wole Soyinka, the wittiness of Chinua

Achebe, the exaggerations of Ngugi wa Thiong'o, the proverbs and oral traditions of the Igbo, among others.

In this thesis, as a matter of fact, one of my objectives is to draw comparisons between my three Afropolitan authors and other African writers because satire also appears to be the most common mode of exploring Afropolitanism. Moreover, many African scholars seem to use such a mock-serious trope to explore germane issues of migration relating to Africans, ridiculing their preference for foreign ideas, products, and lifestyles, as well as stoking a desire for the development of Africa. Even Selasi (2013) gently satirizes: "Some of us are ethnic mixes, e.g. Ghanaian and Canadian, Nigerian and Swiss; others merely cultural mutts: American accent, European affect, African ethos" (528).

I will, therefore, establish the all-pervasiveness of satire by comparing my three authors with other authors whose portrayal of the immigrant experience "responds essentially to the same underlying factors—the pull of opportunity and the push of abject poverty" (Adepoju 2000, 383). For example, Chika Unigwe depicts the migrant ambitions of traumatised women in *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009), in which the characters migrate from Nigeria, fed full with cringeworthy falsehoods. On arriving in Belgium, they are traumatised with the disappointing reality on ground. The satire here is sometimes strong and bitter, other times soft. Teju Cole explores the incompleteness of a migrant doctor through solitary excursions in *Open City* (2011). The protagonist hovers like an aimless hawk from place to place. He keeps creating space for deeper reflections on arts, evolving and appreciating of his own habit. However, even as a psychiatrist, he is unable to detect or cure his own mental volatility. The satire in *Open City* is mostly teasing and tender. Without violence, these narratives draw attention to the issues of race and identity, the burden of ambition, and how being an African immigrant in a globalised environment can lead to unexpected complications.

Satiric humour as a nonaggressive tool of liberation against oppressive regimes is well-researched (Sorensen 2008; Joseph 2018), in addition to its function as an articulator of socio-economic immorality and rot (Akingbe 2014), and its role in entertainment is unquestionable. However, the function of satire in exploring the experiences of disadvantaged and disparaged African immigrants in megacities has never been researched. I argue that satire creates an opportunity for the examination of the psychic consequences of migration, its pitfalls and laurels, opening up

conversations about the challenges of Afropolitans around the world. This is imperative because satire with its attending "humor opens new spaces for historically marginalized individuals to be heard" (Holoch 2012, 1).

In addition, Bakhtin (1981) elaborates on the strategy of "demolishing distance" through "popular laughter," declaring that laughter bridges socio-economic gaps, drawing distanced entities closer. He states that "[a]s a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical, it must be brought close" (21). I am building on Bakhtin's strategy to interrogate and extract dirt, disgust, and laughter. I intend to scrutinise how these three things disrupt structures that create boundaries, seeking to institute human equality as enacted in these Afropolitan narratives and, as a result, establish how their satiric aesthetics have represented the Afropolitan consciousness on a hyper-realistic level. I contend how the satiric components of patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and gender barriers in these novels render the ultimate exposition of Afropolitan dilemmas in black and white. Such reformative satire could help to change wrong attitudes, correcting misperceptions about what it means to be a Black person, to live as a Black person, and to migrate as a Black person.

However, the greatest indication of the Afropolitanism of my case study writers, perhaps the strongest single influence on them, is not an African writer but an African-American author, Toni Morrison. These African novels and their Afropolitan authors appear to be inspired by Toni Morrison's postmodern novels, which are adept at examining the richness and limits of Blackness, and the length to which the search for a fulfilling identity can attain before it creeps into unexpected self-delusions. Morrison herself wrote from the periphery of America's racial struggles. But her artistic creations have succeeded in transforming her periphery into an abiding centre for Black consciousness, renaissance, and recognition, commanding both Blacks and whites to gaze at the conquests and challenges of that centre. Wallinger (2007) confirms that Morrison's "credibility [...] allowed her to be persuasive, provocative, and polemic at the same time" (117). Her works—*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987), for example—portray Blackness in America as a disturbing attribute.

In the same vein, my case study authors, influenced by Morrison's standpoint, depict the immigration of Black Africans to America as such a disconcerting experience that the immigrants are seen to be troubled by the selves they left behind and frightened by a future they do not seem capable of catching up with. At strategic

sequences in their novels, these authors focus their satiric probes on the deviance of the hosts, then on the escapades of the migrants, and sometimes on the diasporic encounters of the authors themselves. And in keeping with postmodern pursuits, each of these satiric entities never seems to find a pleasing realisation of their goals, as every dream sports a nightmare that aborts the dream, and the pursuit will start all over again and again, unstably.

It is not farfetched to see why Toni Morrison holds special attraction for these African writers. Being Black and female, Morrison represents a pivot for race and gender discourse. These are the key issues these Afropolitan writers are also confronted with in their daily lives as immigrants. As well as the chief themes they mostly explore in their various works, their literary intent seems to be about dismantling stereotypes about their femaleness and African origins, correcting other people's social misconceptions about what Blackness generally is, what Black femininity—in particular—should be and should do. Morrison herself, in conversation with Brown (1995), appears to have provided the strongest stimulus for this sort of remedial writing for her disciples:

> "Black writing has to carry that burden of other people's desires, not artistic desires but social desires; it's always [...] working out somebody's else's agenda. No other literature has that weight" (455).

In fact, Morrison places much of the weight of this counteractive literature on language, which is the most powerful of all her armoury in defence of Black legitimacy and in the destruction of mistaken beliefs about Black people. Sometimes, her language is innocuous, subtle and gentle, and yet effective in conveying her thoughts. At other times, her words are quite stark, blistering, and jarringly blunt, as in the following lines of dialogue from *Song of Solomon*:

> "'You? You're going to kill people?'
> 'Not people. White people.'
> 'But why?'
> '[...] To keep the ratio the same.'
> '[...]'
> '[...] Why kill innocent people? [...]'

> '[...] There are no innocent white people, because every one of them is a potential nigger-killer, if not an actual one [...]'" (Morrison 1995, 171).

This sort of steaming disgust and revenge is often directed at contradicting power and undermining social hierarchies. It is an attribute of the postmodern degeneracy of satire, which also embodies an artful resistance to all manner of suppression. Belligerent and bold, such satire seeks to defy all forms of backlash, control, and censorship.

Toni Morrison, as a postmodernist, confronts all manifestations of status quo in favour of the idea of decentring, which gives room for alternative views and existences that are valid and symbiotic, yet opposite. She upholds the creation of multiple presences, with each presence—irrespective of its size or population—having an unshakable significance. Davis (1998) argues that "Morrison's work should be recognized as contributing a fresh voice to the debates about postmodern history, a voice that challenges the centrism and elitism of much of postmodern theory" (243). This implies that, for Morrison, it is not just enough to be postmodern, but the postmodern itself must be continuously interrogated to prevent it from being another chokingly permanent clog in the wheels of growth and dialogue. In accordance with Bennett and Royle (2009), "[t]he postmodern challenges the 'logo-centric' (the possibility of final meanings [...]). It challenges the ethnocentric (the authority of one ethnic 'identity' or culture [...]). It challenges the phallocentric (everything that privileges the symbolic power [...] of the phallus and therefore of masculinity)" (287). These avowals give rise to hybridisation, which allows for experiments that use ideas in innovative ways to birth new perceptions, forms, and genres. Postmodern hybridisation upsets traditional modes of seeing and being, thereby rendering them impermanent and debatable, as explored in the three Afropolitan novels in focus.

In regards to *Americanah*, therefore, I examine how the displacement and uncertainties in the Afropolitan experience generate unstable satire. While extracting the satirical imports of the sequences in the novel, I explore how disillusionment with home country can trigger the urge to migrate. I consider the initial difficulties that orchestrate the decision to tweak oneself while abroad so as to create a façade of satisfied existence there. Since Black migrants often band into groups and associations as a means of challenging the limitations placed on them by their new environment, I

investigate the expectation of having Black people mop up the dirt of white prejudice. As a consequence, Black people end up being entangled in the filth. In addition, I examine how laughter draws two diametrically opposed entities into a troubling closeness, and how laughter destabilises class and privilege. This is because a laughing human being is a briefly unstable human being who forgets their status as long as the laughter lasts. And I also appraise the various processes leading to the acquisition, consciously and unconsciously, of mutated minds, altered selves, and alien tastes.

Focussing on *We Need New Names*, I make a case that the voice of a child narrator, with its innocence, is a source and strategy of precarious satire. I appraise how the growth from childhood to adulthood also leads to constantly changing perspectives that equally engender precarious satire. Drawing on Cobo-Piñero's (2019) concept of "Afropolitan picaresque," I negotiate an evaluation of *We Need New Names* as a satiric narrative shaped by roguish adventures and an obsession with lingos and excrement (472). I bring into play the Swiftian satiric model of shifting circumstances and settings by examining the incessantly changing platforms of inequality, loss, and nostalgia in the novel. And I examine the desire to stay afloat and optimistic in the midst of these complexities, leading to (mis)discovery of oneself either at home or overseas.

In respect of *Behold the Dreamers*, I show how excessive ambitions abroad lead to self-delusions and distasteful behaviour, providing the basis for upheavals and the instability of hope, voice, and personality in the narrative. I explore how the fragile proximity of unrelated entities (race and recession, despair and distance, for example) can embody the equalisation function of satire. While examining the elusiveness of some migrant ambitions—such as the acquisition of foreign citizenship and white-collar jobs, for example—I look into how the pursuance of an overarching goal can plunge migrants into deceptive personalities who lose sight of little but valuable opportunities at their fingertips while living in precarious conditions abroad, a risky postcolonial state of affairs.

While Afropolitanism captures the complexities of Anglophone migrants and migrancy, it is noteworthy to highlight its Francophone counterpart, which is called Afropeanism. It deals with the challenges of Blackness and Frenchness in a way that allows an African person domiciled in France to be inhabited by a mind that traces the person's roots back to Africa. Because of the French worldview of subsumption, which maintains that whoever holds French citizenship is French, regardless of skin colour

or nationality, Afropeans appear to make a valid point as they uphold their Frenchness. Adesanmi (2017) opines that “Afropeanism stakes an unapologetic claim to an autochthonous European identity inflected by African origins” (275). In other words, Afropeanism makes the provocative statement that French Africans are as French as European French people.

The proponents of Afropeanism are strident in their quests to challenge how Africa and Blackness have been misrepresented in the French media and cultural productions. These Afropeans are predominantly African authors and thinkers who write mainly in French, including “Fatou Diome, Alain Mabanckou, Léonora Miano, Wilfried N’Sondé, Sami Tchak, Kossi Effoui, Bessora, and Abdourahman Waberi” (Adesanmi 2017, 275). To these intellectuals, Afropeanism is a movement—in action for more than a decade now—to correct the misperceptions of French-Africanness, to dismantle the reductive policies and programmes that place them at the periphery of the French society, rather than deservedly in the centre. These intellectuals are solidly African, solidly French, striving to exist in a world that allows them the advantages available in both. One might describe this as a rootedness in Africa embellished with French citizenship that challenges the superiority of French whiteness, which keeps defining who is French and who is not, on the basis of bigotry. According to Knox (2016), “More than a shared African history or culture, what unites Afropean individuals is a shared experience of exclusion on European soil” (95).

Afropeanism and Afropolitanism concentrate on subverting western stereotypes about Africa and Africans as peasants, and redefining the African identity abroad as one capable of technology, leadership, networking, education, influence, productivity, and yet still conversant with all things African and Black. Like Afropolitans, Afropeans also grapple with the convolutions of transnational identity and belonging, cultural multiplicity, and behavioural hybridity because of “a ‘natural’ and de-politicized result of transnationalism” (Ede 2016, 91). These Afropeans often thread their way through the fabrics of difficult French cultures, weaving in and out of their original and acquired identities, as the situations demand, to establish the acceptability of Blackness and Frenchness across France.

As stated by Gourgem (2020), “‘Afropeanism’ challenges French nationalist identity by blurring the distinctions between Self and Other, French and African. To contest the homogenizing discourse of identity in France, [Léonora] Miano uses hybridity. She portrays Africans in France with a dual identity belonging to both

France and Africa" (53). In some ways, this seems rebellious, one of the unintended consequences of the assimilationist colonial policy of France in Africa. The French policy was to eradicate African culture and teach Africans to feel disdain for their ways of life in order to produce Africans who would exude the French language and culture as though they were biologically French. France wanted to see Africans without any hints or tints of Blackness. However, the Afropeans flipped their identity, asserting their Blackness, when they realised that being only French offered them a lot of limitations of access to the privileges of French whites.

So, by way of prolific literary productions, Afropeans have put up strong resistance to French oppression, engaging in dialogues and conferences that seek to amplify their voices in face of utter powerlessness. In any case, claiming Frenchness without being allowed to be fully French like a white person is utter marginalisation. In a BookRising interview with Pierrot (2023), the Cameroonian-French writer, Léonora Miano, one of the most outspoken promoters of Afropeanism, is of the opinion that being confined in Blackness does not give Black people the opportunity to explore the universality of their potential in full. Miano argues that "when you enter a racial category, you are no more a universal creature. You're like the others, someone, something specific and something limited, and of course it is not very appealing. It [Blackness] robs you of enormous amount of power to be just in that little box when you were something so huge before you were reduced to what is now called Blackness" (n.p.). Hence, Afropeans seem to band together to confront this robbery of authority. In my opinion, this is a useful strategy that gives them an opportunity to evolve and broaden, thereby subverting the limitations placed on them by all the white dominations and Black exclusions in France.

However, I have chosen to explore Afropolitanism in thesis because I was raised Anglophone in Nigeria, and I am at present an expatriate in the United Kingdom. My personal observations and experiences have exposed me to the transformations that Anglophone Africans undergo while living abroad, and most of these changes are teasingly satirical in their manifestations.

Afropolitan satire is a creative portraiture of the aspirations of African immigrants, and how it blends African and non-African satiric traditions to synthesise migrant-experienced prejudices, subjugations and displacements, as well as feats and successes. It creates public awareness about the existence of immigrant ambitions, triumphs and anomalies that such dreamers often experience. Such satire is a serious

attempt to limn, tease, cajole, joke, or dramatize both their favourable and unfavourable odysseys, and it is an all-encompassing portrayal. On the one hand, it consists of the activities of African immigrants who find it comfortable and worthwhile to explore the opportunities that exist in the West, which is the focal point of Taiye Selasi's Afropolitan vision. On the other hand, the satire embodies in some ways Achille Mbembe's model of Afropolitanism, which submits that Africans are already culturally and perceptually hybrid at home, even before they move abroad, due to centuries of precolonial interactions with Africans and non-Africans trooping into, within, and outside the continent. He goes on to state in a tone that is playfully satirical that in Africa "the history of itinerancy and mobility means talking about mixing, blending, and superimposing" because "what we call 'tradition' does not exist" (Mbembe 2020, 58). In other words, Africa has always been a patchwork of influences—religious, psychological, social, commercial, political, and philosophical, among others—from within Africa itself and from all over the world. By extrapolation, there could be—for example—an element of the Igbo culture and religion (Nigeria) found in the Zulu culture and religion (South Africa) and vice versa, which is encapsulated in "[a]wareness of the interweaving of the here and there, the presence of the elsewhere in the here" (59).

Generally, Mbembe's interest in Afropolitanism as a form of domestic hybridisation seeks to scrutinise Africa's migratory transformations from within Africa and the world's nomadic pressure on Africans also from within Africa. Mbembe asserts with conviction that "it is not simply that a part of African history lies somewhere else, outside Africa. It is also that a history of the rest of the world, of which we are inevitably the actors and guardians, is present on the continent" (59). That is to say, Africa is a blend of the influences and initiatives orchestrated by both foreigners and natives.

In this thesis, I am going to be looking at one kind of Afropolitanism, which is the Afropolitanism of Africans who have emigrated to Britian and America. However, Mbembe also describes another kind of Afropolitanism, which is that of African migrants within Africa. Such internal African migration is common among Africans—for example, Nigerians migrating to Ghana or Zimbabweans travelling to live in South Africa, and vice versa—and these travels give rise to physical and psychic dislocations, abandonment, loss, and placelessness within the continent. As a result, the interactions of such African migrants domiciled in Africa would produce a mode of

satire that is homegrown. Such satire would be imbued with flavours of African sarcasm, pun, proverbs, idioms, irony, allegory, among other instruments of satire.

However, these satiric tools might not pay attention to the issues of skin colour and racism because, in some African countries, racism is not a factor that determines or undermines the behaviour of Africa-based migrants, for obvious reasons. In Africa, Blackness is unnoticeable because it is the norm. But in some racially diverse African countries, racism is a huge factor because race is a determinant of access to privileges in those countries. So, Africans migrating within Africa would make for matchless satire that tackles tribalism, poverty, internecine wars, limited access to finance, teachers' strikes, homophobia, religious extremism, political profligacy and greed, infrastructural scarcity and decay, xenophobia targeted at fellow Africans, and corruption, among other ordeals—all satiric targets that one might call "African problems." As a consequence, "[t]his urge to make Africa unique is presented as a moral and political problem, the reconquest of the power to narrate one's own story—and therefore identity" (Mbembe 2002, 255).

Curiously, these challenges generate overarching critical questions, which I intend to tackle in this thesis and in the novel that accompanies it. How can we locate the narratives of these Afropolitan satirists in the broader genre of satire? Should we classify their satire as traditional, postmodern, degenerative, Menippean, or some combination thereof? What are their authorial sources of inspiration, and what traits do they share with previous global satirists in the West or in Africa or elsewhere? In what diverse ways have these authors deployed the techniques of both traditional and postmodern satire in portraying Afropolitan experiences? What roles do comedy, farce, parody, irony, carnival, sarcasm, and incongruity play in their satire? How does their literary manner relate to the subjects of migrancy, race, displacement, isolation, inequality, and poverty that they are dealing with? What factors—economic, political, social and cultural—engender the trend of satirical writing among these Afropolitan writers?

Thus, Afropolitan satire is both Afrocentric and Eurocentric and, by extension, world-centric. In my view, the Afropolitan models propagated by Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi are complementary, not competitive, and never mutually exclusive. They both seek to ensure that the image of Africa is represented truthfully and completely, that Africans are depicted as full humans embodying both competencies and vulnerabilities. The objectives of these two Afropolitan variants have been synthesised

to construct "Volta," the creative component of this thesis. The novel explores the volatility of a Nigerian man who has been raised exclusively in Nigeria, equipping him with the moral sensitives of home and grounding him in the foundations of his native laws and mores. But he later emigrates to the United Kingdom where his advantages and privileges are questioned and disrupted, realities he is not adequately prepared for. The novel is a project in postmodern African satire, reinforced by mordant comedy and farce. A cross-continental narrative that weaves back and forth through time, memory, and eras, the story knits together a cast of characters with satiric foibles.

"Volta" deals simultaneously with both Africa and the world, exploring the former in detail and using it to place the complexities of the latter in proper narrative perspectives. In most Afropolitan novels, such as the ones I'm studying, this appositional practice of providing geographical contrasts is common. The living conditions of these novels' protagonists in Africa are often juxtaposed with their current situations abroad, furnishing the reader with a kaleidoscopic inspection of the significant events and moments in their lives. Growing up in Africa plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives and viewpoints of Ifemelu and Obinze in *Americanah*, Darling in *We Need New Names*, Jende and Neni in *Behold the Dreamers*, long before their migration to the West.

"Volta" also has at its thematic core the exploration of Blackness, displacement, isolation, inequality, betrayal, loss, migration, racism, and culture shock. It generates social comedy, delineating the postcolonial African experience. Moreover, it satirizes the socio-political realities of our times, applying pun, repartee, diatribe, burlesque, parody, ribaldry, exaggeration, carnival, and slapstick, among others, to illuminate the paradoxes of Afropolitan experience. While the novel seeks frankly to chastise racial discrimination and subvert many stereotypes against Black people in the diaspora, the protagonist is himself a quirky migrant who evinces subtle absurdities characteristic of human beings in need who earnestly seek survival after an abrupt interruption of their liberties.

Volta itself is a poetic term, describing sudden disruptions in the stream of life's activities, thoughts, consciousness, and indulgences. It embodies, among others, those significant moments of emotional flux. This might include mood swings, broken voices, gesticulations, and hesitations, which together communicate the instability of the mind and body. I have extended this principle to my novel structurally (through the way in which the various sections of my narrative alternate between fictive present

and flashback) and emotionally by showing the mood of the characters swinging from elation to melancholy and back. "Volta" is fast paced and highly episodic. Its migrant characters scamper from place to place, from scene to scene, symbolising the restlessness of their conditions and the precarity that pervades their daily lives abroad. Such a breathless, emotional mode of living is often widespread among people who are rootless in a place and who are searching for stability in the face of endless flux. Fuller (2018) acknowledges emotional flux as "a shift of thought or feeling which develops the subject [...] by surprise or conviction to its conclusion" (2).

However, unlike other Afropolitan novels predominantly exploring displacement, "Volta" examines the psychological procedures that underpin the notion of reluctance, that instinct to keep clinging to homeland without the craving to migrate. I call this the ambivalence of expatriation. The narrative embraces political satire in the form of judicial and legislative invectives, embellishing both cultural and religious thoughts to illuminate Blackness, migration, and memory. The story extends racial investigation by highlighting other geographical sources of racism such as the Asian/Arab racism, as well as the prejudice from other European nations—biases that people rarely discuss in the mainstream media. "Volta" is set in the United Kingdom to capture the experiences of British Afropolitans, exploring their transitions in culture and shifts in identity. Due to the differences in laws, customs, and sensibilities, the migrant challenges in Britain would certainly be different from what is obtainable in America.

In particular, "Volta" does this by delving into what one might call the "displacement racism disorder," which occurs when one migrant discriminates against another migrant whose skin colour is deemed different, inferior, and yet both migrants suffer from the bigotry orchestrated by another race with a superior skin colour—white, for example. Oddly, everyone taking part in this show of mental disorder is a migrant, displaced voluntarily or involuntarily from home. Moreover, "Volta" explores what one might describe as the "same-race" racism. This is a form of contempt or chauvinism that occurs when a migrant despises another migrant of the same race. For instance, a Black migrant who meets other Black migrants from different African (or Caribbean) countries and feels more qualified than (or superior to) them. The chief cause of this, my novel reveals, might be the stiff competition for the few opportunities available to the already marginalised group.

CHAPTER ONE

THE UNSTABLE SATIRE IN *AMERICANAH*

INTRODUCTION

> "Bartholomew wore khaki trousers pulled up high on his belly, and spoke with an American accent filled with holes, mangling words until they were impossible to understand. Ifemelu sensed, from his demeanour, a deprived rural upbringing that he tried to compensate for with his American affectation, his gonnas and wannas" (Adichie 2017, 115).

The passage above from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's third novel, *Americanah*, is a portrayal of African immigrants who are stuck between two cultures, always readjusting their ideas and attitudes and reinventing themselves in response to the daunting challenges they face in megacities around the world. There are cracks in their verbal expressions, mutations of their viewpoints, contortions of their bodies, and continuous swings of their thought processes. Adichie's narrative strategy is to inhabit this instability, moving back and forth across many satiric modes, with a versatility that matches the varying identities of the immigrants. We can call Adichie a satirist, so long as we do not shallowly restrict satire to "mockery." Every so often, Adichie teasingly addresses the follies, confusions, and difficulties that migration engenders, and at times she is bluntly instructive and moralistic, uttering what she believes, issuing recommendations to Afropolitans, and frankly denouncing racism. But the real power of her satiric writing is in the narrative modulations by which she switches between various modes of satire at different times in order to capture the vagaries of her characters.

Most scholarly attention to her creative output tends to highlight only her concern about gender equality, celebrating her as an icon of feminism, a decoration elevated by her speeches and writings solely dedicated to the subject, including the publication of the book, *We Should All Be Feminists* (2014). However, the extract above exhibits the satirical playfulness in her work, something which scholars and critics have ignored about her writing. This satiric play is a device which raises vital

questions about African identity, belonging, and migrancy, especially the African cross-continental migrancy, which has been aptly termed Afropolitanism, and about the transformative language with which the conversations around these issues are conducted. It foregrounds and interrogates the reason why some African immigrants create, for example, fake copies of their lives (forged names on forged documents from forged lifestyles and forged accents) while seeking acceptance and citizenship in Europe, America, Asia, and elsewhere. There exists an obvious congruence between Adichie's art as a novelist—someone who ideates, reinvents herself, originates alternative realities, groups people together, and disperses the groups—and the kinds of behaviour and psychology she is depicting among her Afropolitans. In this respect, therefore, Afropolitanism is a portrayal of certain human beings, their lives and their culture, but also of a particular kind of literature, which springs out of the way of life it portrays.

In this chapter, I am going to explore the implications of positing Adichie's third novel, *Americanah*, as a remarkable work of Afropolitan satire. The story follows two protagonists, Ifemelu and Obinze, who fall in love as young people in Nigeria. Ifemelu is self-assured, outspoken, complex, and courageous, always in control of her femininity and sexuality. Obinze, the son of a university professor, is bookish, calm, and considerate. The young lovers are later separated when Ifemelu travels to the US to complete her university education due to the incessant strikes by Nigerian university lecturers. Obinze graduates in Nigeria, intending to join her, but the fear of recent terrorism in America denies him a visa, so he opts illegally for England instead.

In America, Ifemelu is shocked to navigate a strange and complicated society, riven by race, class, and all sorts of social prejudices against Black people. Despite her brilliance, she finds it difficult to maintain her identity and sexual agency in America. Obinze suffers the same discrimination in England, working as an undocumented worker in a warehouse. Both of them later depart from abroad and reunite in Nigeria, after fifteen years of separation, to renegotiate their love, amid complications of ongoing romantic engagements and marital entanglements. Hence, *Americanah* marks an important contribution to the ever-growing body of work in Afropolitan literature, fiction and non-fiction that capture of the ups and downs of African lives overseas—the conditions of immigration generating inconsistencies that only an equally inconsistent and hybrid satire can exploit.

Critical exploration of Adichie's work to date has concentrated on polemical, ideological issues of politics, religion, war, and patriarchy, reflecting how the critics have linked her with activism through literature. Stobie (2010) contends that "Adichie can therefore be seen as progressive and reformist in her viewpoint towards [...] religion" (422). This is evident in her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), in which, despite the uncomfortable domestic violence that permeates the words of its pages, the often-demonised indigenous religion is treated with respect and care, elevated to occupy the same canonised position as the popular Roman Catholic Church. Adichie dedicates her entire second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), to a full-blown national war that destroys millions of lives. In these novels, we see her discomfort with instability, unpredictability, and violence, whether orchestrated by politics or by patriarchy, and how she hints at reformation. As a result, Simoes da Silva (2012) argues, and I agree, that "the repeated acts of violence on the body of the individual in Adichie's writing [should be interpreted] as a metaphor for a broader concern with the body of the nation" (458). So she writes in a way that creates space that kicks off conversations about uncomfortable subjects in both global and local culture, politics, religion, among others. Sometimes, her writing is rooted in both clarity and ambiguity at the same time, allowing for interpretations that are debatable and leaving room for variable meanings, each one gathering its own evidence to secure its own validity.

Adichie has for long developed this peculiar technique of uneasy, indirect, and fluctuating satirical writing, in which mutable modes of irony, metaphor, and caricature destabilise cultural and social structures. She is interested in looking at the white world through the eyes of alienated Afropolitans. She investigates the immigrant unfitness that makes them feel a worrying distance from the culture they have migrated to, compelling them to look at the inhabitants as aliens. She explores how, as the friction of change begins to grind the inadequacies and insecurities of her Afropolitans, they start to behave like the aliens, too. As these immigrants try to copy their hosts' culture of introversion, for example, minding their business in loneliness and isolation—a practice that runs contrary to the communal living they were used to back home—they feel miserable and abandoned. That's why when Amaka in *Purple Hibiscus* leaves Nigeria and arrives in America, encountering restlessness and white-behaviour shock, she writes to interrogate her sudden reality in the new environment: "[W]e don't laugh anymore [...] because we don't have the time to laugh" (Adichie 2005, 301). Laughter then turns out to be something desirable that has become

unreachable. And because laughter has now become a scarce commodity, Amaka must develop a taste for alternatives and a capacity for self-manipulation in order to conform, comply, and survive.

Although Amaka's departure with her family to America portrays a certain kind of dissatisfaction or fracture within the Nigerian society, Adichie is simply showing her fixation with the ways in which Africans even in Africa are already culturally hybrid, beginning with that first novel. In the same vein, the outbreak of civil war in her second offering, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, debases two aristocratic sisters with exalted British degrees, tastes, and attachments to the level of peasants in dusty, war-torn villages, leading to their degeneracy, as they descend from laughter and abundance into desperation and starvation. They start to redesign their lives, cooking without salt and sometimes eating nothing for breakfast instead of their usual sausage and sandwich. Her writing exposes how people dwell in gloom and silhouettes and "see things only in shadow, only in half glimpses" (Adichie 2014, 430). It is a life that seeks to find some satisfaction in the face of emptiness and lack, a desperate situation some immigrants are sometimes confronted with.

I will discuss Adichie's work through the framework of Horatian and Juvenalian satiric principles, as well as the African sources in her satire. I will demonstrate how Adichie keeps changing satirical strategy between the modes that I have identified as being comparable to the traditional distinctions in western satire between the Horatian and Juvenalian and, also more importantly, the Menippean and the degenerative. I am choosing to use the distinctions of the western satiric theory because they are a useful way of enacting and making distinctions within Adichie's work.

Americanah uses comedy, carnival, disgust, desperation, decadence, and regeneration. What is notable is how it fluctuates through a wide variety of modes. Adichie writes in a way that at times conforms to the sort of satire, either Horatian or Juvenalian, which upholds conformity with established mores and rectification of deviant targets as the ultimate aspirations of satire. Satire of this kind is a therapeutic aimed at extinguishing flaws, stupidity and vices, while preserving morality. Neeper (2016) hints that traditional satire might even function as a preventive vaccine by saying, "Traditionally, the satirist locates a target of human vice or error, excoriates through dramatic, often hyperbolic and distorted presentation that folly, and reveals or implies an alternate course of thinking and action that could prevent the fault from

afflicting others" (284). Echoing this further, Bloom (1974) writes that satire is often "associated with a positive moral end, whether to expose or correct—or both" (47).

It is important to reiterate that the Horatian and Juvenalian modes of satire are essentially stable and homogenous, seeking above all to rectify their deviant targets. But I am interested in exploring the ways Adichie moves back and forth between the two modes, a to-and-fro usage that practically makes them unstable sources of her satire. In contrast, as noted previously, the degenerative and Menippean satiric modes are inherently unstable, unpredictable, heterogenous, cynical, and exploratory, blending genres that can be derived from "folktales, legends, dialogues, diatribes, symposia, and so on" (Fisher 1997, 20). The moment when Adichie's satire is stable accords with the moments of emotional stability in her characters. This stability can either be felt or imagined. Conversely, her unstable satire corresponds to moments of upheavals in the Afropolitan lifecycle, a period of both physical and psychological distress. These ups and downs are very germane in portraying the reality of immigrant experiences.

But one of my goals is also to demonstrate how Adichie's writing is rooted in Igbo traditional thoughts, a different kind of intertextuality which places her in the wisdom of her native community. In order to do this, I am not going to be making footnoted comparisons to Igbo texts. More relevantly, I am simply going to be citing Igbo proverbs, which closely match her satiric thoughts because there is a robust oral tradition she emerges from. Being Igbo herself, Adichie imbues her work with the undiluted traditional wit, native knowledge, ethos, and understanding concentrated in Igbo proverbs. I will argue that immigration and Afropolitan experience sandwich people between two different socio-cultural patterns of reference and reasoning, provoking complexities, which upset identities and long-held convictions, unsettling the basic foundations on which the people make ethical judgements.

In Igbo culture, an exciting masquerade is often a celebration of beauty, perspectives, and kinetics, entertaining those who make the masquerade and those who have come to watch from a range of scenery. So the art of raw materials decorating the masquerade could range from reflecting mirrors, slippery reeds and sturdy ropes to velvety cloths with colours that dilate from the harshness of red and black to the soft pastels of yellow, pink, and green, or several other combinations that please the designers. And the dance celebrating the masquerade may require changing landscapes from the flatness of the market square to the hilliness of the village shrine.

"The masquerade […] not only moves spectacularly but those who want to enjoy its motion fully must follow its progress up and down the arena" (Achebe 1988, 44). Hence, Adichie's satire mirrors this unstable movement of the masquerade which, in Igbo some customs, is also an instrument of satire as it can be used to punish offenders without revealing the identity of the satirist (human or even spirit) concealed inside the ominous mask.

The instability in Adichie's satire originates from the fact that she shifts between these modes and devices effortlessly, a practice that corresponds to the caprices of the Afropolitan experience, where Africans abroad are halfway between one culture and another, grappling with the contradictory choices of what to trust, how to trust, why to trust, and when to trust, and therefore subject to troubling metamorphoses. The Afropolitans may come across kindly coincidences that might delight them, but around such coincidences there always spirals an air of ambiguity. And Adichie responds to this instability of Afropolitan consciousness by offering a mixture of satirical modes that are themselves unstable and multicultural, manifesting in the development of shifting tastes in foods, ideas and fashion, acquisition of newfangled names and alien perceptions, including the total overhaul of the architecture of migrant thoughts and sensibilities.

Some of these qualities in Adichie's writing are comparable with some specifically African satiric traditions, notably Wole Soyinka's writing. His works include *The Lion and the Jewel* (1962), a comic satire about masculine desires and vanities, and *Kongi's Harvest* (1967), a satire on autocracy and oppression, and *King Baabu* (2002), yet another satire lampooning General Abacha's military dictatorship, among others. According to Irobi (2005), Soyinka's satiric canon is one that has come to be identified "with a wit that stings. […] Soyinka indicts not only the behemoths at the helm of […] affairs but also the acquiescing civilian citizenry in the culture of corruption that has come to characterize many modern African nation-state" (143). Adichie's satire exhibits several of Soyinka's satiric devices such as mockery, exaggeration, derogation, sarcasm, caricature, and irony, to highlight Afropolitan vices and triumphs, posing questions that demand immediate answers, especially in tackling the complexities emanating from the movement of Africans towards different cosmopolitan cities.

The hopeful exodus of people out of Africa sometimes ends in unexpected hardship, leading some to improvise various means of pushing back their

disappointments. They might band into groups and associations as a means of seeking solace in one another, reinforcing their expectations. They might depart from one mental state or location and go into another, seeking stability and self-reassurance. If these things don't work out, they might start to alter their personalities, modifying their manner of speech and taste, altering the polygons of their dressing, to suit their present circumstances. They might fiddle with documentation so as to destroy their former disappointing identities and struggle towards acquiring new promising ones. Adichie's satire investigates these things and even more, one after the other, as her Afropolitans migrate from city to city.

But Adichie's writing also mirrors her own journey into Afropolitanism and her unexpected meeting with American racism. And in writing *Americanah*, she draws immensely on her experiences of living in America, having migrated from Nigeria. In a video interview with France 24 (2019), she says:

> "[I]n Nigeria, I didn't think of myself as Black because nobody thinks of themselves as Black in Nigeria. […] So when I went to the US, […] people would just say things about me, about being Black. […] But most of all, it was that I started to learn that Black wasn't a value-free idea, that to be called Black was that people made assumptions about you. There was a professor who was surprised that I wrote the best essay in class. And I realised that he was surprised because he didn't expect a Black person to write the best essay. Of course, now I very much identify as Black" (n.p.).

Therefore, it cannot be a coincidence that her protagonist, Ifemelu, recreates a version of this same statement in *Americanah*: "I came from a country where race was not an issue; I did not think of myself as [B]lack and I only became [B]lack when I came to America" (Adichie 2017, 290), an avowal laden with satirical irony of self-discovery. Appalled by these diasporic indignities, Adichie acts as an ombudsman, clutching "the powerful weapons of satire with dexterity in varying degrees to defy and subvert the established order" (Nwezeh 1982, 162), and to transgress institutional limitations and class hierarchies. Her satire interrogates the superstructure of self-deceit, fanaticism, cross-border patriarchy, racism, gender boundaries, bigotry, and cruelty, and so on, using a changing mix of complex satiric tools.

While the intellectual interest in Adichie's work continues to intensify among scholars, there is no work on the essential correlation between unstable satire and the intricacies of Afropolitanism, and this thesis exactly does justice to that. In the course of this chapter, my argument will follow the sequence of how Adichie moves from the tender, humorous satire of Horace to the acerbic satire of Juvenile to the self-effacing mode of Menippean and up to the violence of degenerative satire, repeating the sequence ultimately by returning to the Horatian, Juvenalian, Menippean, and degenerative modes again. This cyclic structure corresponds to how Adichie explores her unstable satiric themes, which start with the mere disappointment about home and the urge to migrate overseas, to the complexities that spring up after migrating, to the regret and desire to return back home, until her satire becomes irredeemably unpredictable in the end.

Investigating the satiric dimension of Adichie raises certain questions. How has she adopted satire and comedy in *Americanah* without deteriorating into narrative vapidity? What creations of satire in the novel have made it possible for her to draw attention to the challenges of intolerance, isolation, and frustration that she is tackling? Conversely, how does she write humorously and lightly of migrant degeneracies and indignities, without being tagged racist or sexist or meeting other such accusations? What confrontational ironies epitomise *Americanah* as an Afropolitan satire in particular? How has Adichie explored Afropolitan psychology in *Americanah* to challenge the traditional notions of satire? What are the functions of creative ridicule and grotesque militancy in espousing the degenerative modes of satire in *Americanah*? How has her adoption of some kinds of pejorative satire dealt with the thematic preoccupations of race, identity, class, religion, unemployment, gender relations, affectations, among other interrogations?

THE UNSTABLE SELVES AND TASTES IN *AMERICANAH*

Adichie's exploitation of comedy and farce in *Americanah* enables her to expand her satiric arc with productive humour, the kind of humour that transcends mockery and generates a capacity for empathy. We laugh and think at the same time because the humour sets our thoughts free to uncover hidden sources of knowledge that may lead us to understand the human condition better, "a comical operation of dismemberment" (Bakhtin 1981, 24). For instance, we experience this when Ifemelu's mother returns home one day and undergoes a transmogrification of sorts, induced by

religion, as she abandons Catholicism to embrace a militant brand of Pentecostalism. She grabs scissors, shears off her hair, and burns it because it is emblematic of worldly impurities. Ifemelu is dazed, thinking her mother has turned into a lunatic:

> "She watched her mother walk around their flat, collecting all the Catholic objects, the crucifixes hung on walls, the rosaries nested in drawers, the missals propped on shelves. [...] She made a fire near the rubbish dump [...], splashing in more kerosene as it dimmed and stepping back as it flared." (Adichie 2017, 41).

Through the preceding farce, Adichie satirises religious fanaticism which deludes people to stretch their beliefs so thin that nothing is left in them but elevated stupidity. They dehumanise themselves, thinking they have conquered their restrictions but they end up being mere shadows, being the burlesques of their own selves and faiths. This shade of farce is reminiscent of Wole Soyinka's line of satiric attack in *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1963), in which a cunning prophet manoeuvres his most loyal congregant to engage in all sorts of outlandish behaviour, which may include beating his wife, in order to achieve mental and physical serenity.

But beyond the farcical enactment, Adichie also entreats us to consider the predicament we find ourselves in when we pine for our old selves while embracing the enchantment of new ones. The reader may respond with laughter, but "[t]he laughter elicited by a satiric situation is not characteristically joyous. Rather it is the result of a reader's sensitivity to an occasion notable for ironic incongruity between what is superficially ludicrous and fundamentally serious" (Bloom 1974, 39). Indeed, *Americanah*'s comical satire admits us to witness a theatre of comic violence couched in entertainment. Adichie uses language to create humour that examines hidden terrors, so her writing applies laughter as an instrument of critical reasoning. Her practice of unsettling humour appears to be her way of recognising the difficulties of everyday living. It is an invitation to empathise with a set of people whose minds are exiting their bodies due to Nigeria's disorienting socio-economic inadequacies, people who want to flee from the country if given a slightest chance. We are immersed in a reality that is bitter and sweet at the same time, invited to exhibit compassion to her characters as they navigate the collapsing systems that stymie their daily productivity, leading to a decision to depart from the country and live abroad.

Hence, Ifemelu flees to America, escaping the prolonged strikes by the university lecturers in Nigeria. When Obinze is frustrated by joblessness in the country, dreaming to migrate overseas, his mother tells him, “I know that your mind is no longer here” (Adichie 2017, 234). These departures accelerate narrative transformations and character development. So when the characters move away from uncomfortable physical and emotional spaces, from traumas and other forms of mental shackles, they heave a sigh of relief. And then they mull over what they have learned from the bad experience and how that experience might enrich their future prospects, as they continue to search for acceptance, adaptation, or happiness. Departure, for these reasons, serves as a distancing mechanism for coping with socio-economic toxicities, obstacles, and mental flux.

Adichie is interested in exploring Afropolitan psychology, in how migrants should control their minds while living abroad—how they should regret, how they should imagine, how they should long, how they should hunger. This is because their circumstances are such that are often shaky, risky, and unpredictable. Ifemelu enacts this uncertainty in a blog post that details how Black migrants stand the risk of being jailed for crimes they have not committed. “When a crime is committed, [...] you might be stopped for fitting the profile” so Blacks should “pray” they are not anywhere near the crime scene (221). They should also praise white people as a way of compensating for Black errors. “If a [B]lack cashier gives poor service to the non-[B]lack person in front of you, compliment that [white] person’s shoes” (221). With this, Adichie is simply dealing with the slavish mentality among migrants, a satiric exercise that seeks to highlight and “combat a dangerous or false orthodoxy” (Lepage 2007, 92). To Afropolitans, Ifemelu appears to suggest financial flexibility as a panacea for managing such danger by saying, “please tip generously [...]. [B]lack people have a gene that makes them not tip, so please overpower that gene” (Adichie 2017, 221).

And to stretch this flexibility even further and illustrate the expediency of altering the personalities of African migrants whose minds and sensitivities are still tied to their home countries, Ifemelu draws an analogy with the warmth of African foods and the coldness of the America ones. She argues, “You are now in America: do not expect to have hot food for lunch. That African taste must be abolished” (139). Meanwhile, abolishing every unnecessary link with home might ensure a stable mind in America, especially among students, a decision necessary for productive academic

pursuits in their new environment, which might not give them a choice for grieving and managing both academic and non-academic failures.

Nonetheless, the immigrants must create choices in the absence of none, Adichie suggests, and if the created choices do not fit, the people must wear them uncomfortably until a better option hopefully comes from somewhere else. To showcase the awful condition of an immigrant wearing a lopsided choice, Adichie writes: "Aunty Uju never bought what she needed; instead she bought what was on sale and made herself need it" (108). Aunty Uju has to redact herself and conform to her current state of affairs, constantly blockading every appearance of void in her Afropolitan life.

By the same token, Adichie appears to show how making accusations works as a coping mechanism when nothing seems to plug up a void in the ambitions of Afropolitans. For example, Amara, a Nigerian lady in the UK, has been dumped by her husband who has a secret child with a Jamaican woman. Amara, crestfallen, begins to accuse every Caribbean of bad behaviour. When people gossip on the streets, Amara says they must be Jamaicans. When someone snatches another's husband, Amara grumbles that "[t]hose West Indian women are taking our men and our men are stupid enough to follow them" (244). As the Igbo proverb goes, we accuse a dog of theft when there is no cat at home to blame for the salmon missing in the kitchen. Something must fill up the yearning vacuum and bear the responsibility for migrant challenges and frustrations, thereby producing catharsis, until something blameworthy surfaces.

And from that inspection of the mind, Adichie assesses her characters' interactions with physical sites, exploring how a squalid environment alludes to disgust and frustration. Of course, it is how we imagine an occasion that determines how we dress, the volume of our footsteps when arriving at the venue, the depth of our smiles, and our reaction if anything goes wrong. When Obinze, working as an illegal cleaner in London, is confronted with "a mound of shit on the toilet lid, solid, tapering" (236), he is shocked and disgusted. "He took off his gloves, placed them next to the mound of shit and left the building" (237). Here, Adichie hints at migrant indignity and the sordid way it ends, but she also uncovers the inefficiencies and inelegances that run in every human society, whether developed or undeveloped. Even in heavenly abodes, the celestials could as well slip into the excretions of filth and flaws. This time, too, Adichie seems to expose the indecency of humanity, an ugly reality that most societies would rather not let slip.

Satirically, this is reminiscent of the excrement-throwing Yahoos in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* that portrays the human condition as nothing but garbage of shitty emissions. These things may seem unusual but they make us smell our human fickleness and vulnerabilities, adding a touch of humour, heightened by the histrionics of the revulsion. But then our moroseness begins to contaminate the humour gained because "[s]atire, as Horace practices it, is considerably more diverse than laughter at folly" (Griffin 1994, 8). Consequently, the humour as controlled by the Horatian effect is a necessary pointer that the satirised "folly" should incite our consciousness to reflect on the shackles that limit the elasticity of our shared humanity, which is sometimes upset by the elevation of prejudices that individuals and groups must confront.

Adichie quickly captures the elevation of white people in America through the way they band themselves into groups in order to assert power, and also how Black people in America need correspondingly to join forces to gain what control they can. Above all, she is particularly interested in how Black migrants cluster around one another, forming associations, for the sake of erecting defensive mechanisms against America's repulsive racism and other social-class barriers. And this reinforces the crowd-clout philosophy of the Igbo, *Igwebuike*, a viewpoint that when single brooms are bound together into a tight bunch, they sweep dirt away more effectively than what each broom can achieve as a standalone entity.

Apart from clearing out the dirt of America's discriminations, togetherness also enacts opportunities for self-reflection, appreciation, and aspiration, enthroning new interpretations of Afropolitan experience. For instance, the first time Ifemelu attends the meeting of the African Students Association, she feels her self-confidence tripled, suffused with "a gentle, swaying sense of renewal" because she does not "have to explain herself" (Adichie 2017, 139). Furthermore, with this, Adichie also hints at togetherness as a bridge back to one's faraway home, to camaraderie. She illustrates this when Mwombeki, a character in the novel, says to new Afropolitans, "Try to make friends with our African American brothers in a spirit of true pan-Africanism. But make sure you remain friends with fellow Africans, as this will help you keep perspective" (140). So Adichie is suggesting that a strong Afropolitan community is necessary for continued progress abroad, that isolation should be forbidden.

As an antidote to isolation, Adichie highlights the Afrocentric philosophy embedded in the 3C's of community survival: Camaraderie, Companionship, and

Cooperation, popularly tagged “I am in the world because of ‘we are’.” One tree can never make a forest, an adage which Adichie re-echoes when she writes, “You must nod back when a [B]lack person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the [B]lack nod. It is a way for [B]lack people to say ‘You are not alone, I am here too’” (Adichie 2017, 220). This is illustrated further when Ifemelu is worried that her African kinky hair is a burden on her, robbing her of every opportunity for self-growth and employment in America. She then discovers an online forum for Black people with natural hair and signs up. Here she finds “[B]lack women” who “had long trialing dreadlocks, small Afros, big Afros, twists, braids, massive raucous curls and coils. […] They complimented each other’s photos and ended comments with ‘hugs’. […] They sculpted themselves a virtual world where their coily, kinky, nappy, woolly hair was normal. And Ifemelu fell into this world with a tumbling gratitude” (212). This is a statement of limitless freedom, an act of self-reinvention and affirmation, and it similarly expresses a possibility for Black triumphs.

In addition to the gentle Horatian moralising above, Adichie takes advantage of sarcasm to satirise white unawareness, that brand of ignorance that blinds people because of years of unparalleled parochialism. It is that bloating confidence in one’s little crib in which, due to the total absence of social affliction, everything else is taken for granted, an advantaged blindness. As a case in point, after Ifemelu narrates how a corrupt driving instructor in Brooklyn has cheated his students, Laura shrugs, disbelieving her, “as though to say that it [the corruption] would, of course, happen in Brooklyn but not in the America in which she lived” (164). Laura is highborn, evasive, always doubtful, and overconfidently white. Adichie implies here that comfortable Americans are blissfully unaware of the cracks and faults within their country, as she satirises the way some well-off Americans polarise the country by differentiating between their America and other people’s America, as if the country is split into two.

Moreover, Adichie plays ironically with anecdotes which untangle internalised inferiority and superficiality, thereby reconstructing a fractured migrant personality. Most times, her irony is confrontational, tinged with indignation, what Frye (1957) calls “militant irony” (223). She illustrates how Afropolitans internalise the logic of the American society they live in, accepting its racism, normalising being trapped between two worlds. First, she signs a watertight communiqué about their new identity, their double-sided, black-conscious skin, just in case they are oblivious of it:

> “Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become [B]lack. Stop arguing. Stop saying I’m Jamaican or I’m Ghanaian. America doesn’t care. So what if you weren’t ‘[B]lack’ in your country? You’re in America now” (Adichie 2017, 220).

It is this ignorance of America’s carelessness that frustrates migrants, due to the excessive expectations of America’s imagined treasures. Hereafter, they are shocked and powerless. And since it makes no sense for a one-legged dog to challenge a four-legged bull to a fight, the bull of America’s complicated rejections, the distress begins to infuse survival stratagems into migrants, a bitter kind of wisdom. They may start altering their former plans, ambitions, and selves in order to cope and integrate well with the distress. It is this sort of thinking and reaction that forces Aunty Uju, a character in *Americanah*, to embrace self-denial and reject her Igbo background by saying, “Please don’t speak Igbo [...]. This is America.” However, such self-loathing has not led her to the much-coveted success because she still works multiple jobs at once in anguish, grumbling, “I thought by now things would be better for me” (109). And even when she eventually qualifies as a doctor in America and working a job that seems more lucrative and comfortable, she still complains, “I don’t even know why I came to this place” (218). She experiences what Zelt (2018) describes as “a feeling of disjuncture and unrecognition” which displaces her “from the country in which she stands, the United States, and the country with which she still identifies, Nigeria” (218).

Luckily though, to manage the Afropolitan distress, Adichie configures her confrontational irony in the novel to work as a paradigm of redemption for calming emotional stress. According to Caron (2016), “[A]n unstable irony rules postmodern satire” (173). So it should not be surprising to find it in Adichie’s satiric somersaults. And because animals are often lured using what they love, Adichie exploits the necessary urge for sex and relationships as a therapy for the management of Afropolitan distress, and to create memories (sexual or otherwise) for future remembrance. In any case, if nothing happens in the moment, there is nothing to commit to memory, and there will be nothing left to remember in the future, whether good or bad.

So we observe how Ifemelu gradually finds financial stability in the harshness of America through her relationships with men, an indulgence she perfected with Obinze, even as youths in Nigeria. And when she moves to America, she starts making out with Curt. Through him, she gets her very first professional editing job, which pays well and brings her a work visa and her green card. It surprises her "that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange [her] world" (Adichie 2017, 202). This may seem coincidental, but satire sometimes seeks to place victims into positions of comfort, and it does not matter what means the genre uses to accomplish this, whether through honour or shame, because "norms are not essential to satire, which may make judgments by internal shifts of perception that do not appeal to external values" (Knight 2004, 5). It is unmistakable that Adichie's Afropolitan satire, with its manipulability, is a literary implement that carries out complicated surgery on every situation, system or society, leaving its target informed, reformed, or amused.

Of course, mockery and caricature could amuse us, bringing the teeth and the tongue into satiric dialogue. The teeth, the oppressor, are strong and can bite, while the tongue is soft, the oppressed, always imprisoned by the teeth. But laughter, words, or yawns can force the teeth open, setting the tongue free. In other words, the teeth and the tongue are in conversation with one another, examining their strengths, values, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within a congenial setting. This is seen in the dinner scene in Curt's mother's palatial home. Many people, rich and poor, are in attendance, including Ifemelu and her white boyfriend, Curt. The ambience dazzles with carnival, posh wines, and foods. The servants and the served become equalised at the moment as they interact, smile, and laugh with one another. However, Curt's mother's quiet presence and bearing are the first attributes Adichie decides to mock and caricature, in order to personify them, activating them to alert the reader:

> "Curt's mother had a bloodless elegance, [...] her tasteful and expensive clothes made to look tasteful and expensive." She is a miser, "the kind of wealthy person who did not tip well" and often feels "no obligation for affection" (Adichie 2017, 198).

Adichie's writing here is reminiscent of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's hyperbolic caricatures in *Wizard of the Crow* (2007) when the despotic ruler is placed on the surgical table of mockery: "[H]e had his ears enlarged so that [...] he would be able to

hear better and therefore be privy to the most private of conversations between husband and wife, [...] psychiatrists and their patients—all in service of the Ruler." (14). Satirically, this is an arrangement which is actually about how the tyrannical element in the human imagination tries to reinvent what it fears by putting it up for caricature.

Interestingly, caricature is an irreverent and flexible art, and it is such satiric flexibility that allows Adichie to become seriocomic in satirising retrograde thoughts and mental attitudes that run contrary to contemporary thoughts and understanding, such as white omnipotence, the intoxicating dominance that considers subordinates as erasable errors. She illustrates what it might mean to show a subtle sort of audacity to question the omnipotence, by bringing upper and lower classes together, still staying with the carnivalesque sequence in Curt's mother's home. And so, sitting across the dinner table from Curt's mother, Ifemelu is briefly elevated to a position of privilege, and Curt's mother's affluent influence is lowered temporarily to meet midway with Ifemelu's faux nobility, so that both parties are equalised to dialogue with each other, like the teeth and the tongue. Curt's mother says, "I'm Republican, our whole family is. We are very anti-welfare but we did very much support civil rights. I just want you to know the kind of Republicans we are." Emboldened, Ifemelu asks, "And would you like to know what kind of Republican I am?" (Adichie 2017, 198). Ifemelu makes an oblique caricature of the woman's haughtiness. She sounds a little uncouth here, but satire often tries to uphold all kinds of language that do not pander to purity. Instead, the genre works to topple all goals that uphold the dignity of all disdainful authorities when their intensions are clearly flawed. In fact, Pizer (1994) argues that "indeed, in an age of renascent nationalism, such goals are justifiably regarded with suspicion; the striving towards an uncorrupted language is equated with the attempt to [...] suppress cultural minorities" (503).

In any case, Ifemelu should not have said anything at all, being a minority, but it is satire's towering ambition to cast its net into an oppressor's river and catch some fish. So, surprisingly, Curt's mother's face stretches "into a tight smile" and she says, "You're funny" (Adichie 2017, 198). Who would have thought that such a scenario would play out between an opportunity-seeking Afropolitan and an American woman born and bred with a silver spoon in her mouth? However, Bakhtin (1981) provides a perfect answer: "It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance. [...] Laughter has the remarkable

power of making an object come up close" (23). Bakhtin maintains that nothing can realign hierarchies better than laughter, which brings two opposing forces together at an equalised joyful level. Thus, Adichie's satire seems to have illustrated that one can acquire some privilege by associating with the privileged through the associative power of humour.

Switching from laughter, Adichie swiftly turns to the tactic of aggression on her pages, wetting the reading eyes, provoking the absorbing mind, and seeking to upend the status quo and subvert chauvinism. This perhaps is due to the fact that "the problem of race in America will never be solved" (Adichie 2017, 298), and also because inclusivity does not always mean visibility—you can be included and still be hidden and muzzled completely—and so her satire assumes violence that seeks to disrupt these manifestations of racial inequalities and other American absurdities. That's why her characters become blunt, hardy, defiant, assertive, and unapologetic. For instance, when a school assistant screams at Aunty Uju because she is Black, she charges towards her, tells her off, later saying, "These people, they make you become aggressive just to hold your dignity" (217). When a "stupid" white man wrongly accuses Emenike, another character, of lateness due to his Blackness, he pushes back aggressively and "told him off" (265).

With these cases in point, Adichie depicts a certain defiance on the Blacks' side of the pitch of racial battle, upholding violence as a way of manoeuvring oneself out of challenging situations. According to Weisenburger (1995), "the postmodern satirist suspects all kinds of codified knowledge as dissimulations of violence, and all of us as potential victims during their exchange. Contemporary [...] satire is itself a discourse of violence" (5). In other words, Weisenburger contends that such satiric violence is an acceptable form of artistic device, so useful that it can be used to knock over established norms—in this case, the normalised assumption and practice by some whites that Blacks are to be subservient to them. Such violence may not always be bloody though, may even be as simple as saying an intense no, but it must be seen to have been successful in subverting the established pattern of behaviour.

Moreover, by offering a strong retort to a white woman's misrepresentation of Africa and its sensibilities, Ifemelu enacts an act of resistance by telling her: "I think it's a simplistic comparison to make. You need to understand a bit more history" (Adichie 2017, 168). Also, when Kelsey misinterprets a racist novel against Africa, Ifemelu rebels against her by saying, "[...] I see why you would read it like you did"

(190). When Ifemelu asks about the cost of making a call across to London, a telemarketer says, “Okay, hold on while I look up France” (174). As well as proving the effectiveness of her sharp satire as a subversive tool against white ineptitude, Adichie satirises white psychosis that breeds disjointed reasoning and a deformed interpretation of everyday experiences of others. Indeed, these ironies cross-examine and sabotage hidden facts and engender open debate.

And, equally important, such debate incorporates the perpetual cock and hen combat between patriarchy and feminism. Here, a comparison is afforded by Buchi Echecheta’s satirical novel, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Nnu Ego works hard as a dutiful, husband-respecting wife, and she is always the one who pays her son’s school fees. But when a court queries her, she replies, “Nnaife [her husband] is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in the other words he pays” (Emecheta 2008, 245). Needless to say, some African men who migrate abroad still clutch at such cultural beliefs, which include the subservience of women. However, such men are immediately forced to understand that the western culture is different, and they must relinquish such obscene expectation entirely because the new setting is more uplifting of women. For example, Aunty Uju’s Nigerian partner in America, Bartholomew, is suffering from a severe case of Afropolitan patriarchy, forcing her to be his apron, to be used at will and dumped or hung on a wall of submission. But she confronts him with harsh resistance by screaming:

> “He wants me to give him my salary. Imagine! He said that it is how marriages are since he is the head of the family, that I should not send money home […] without his permission, that we should make his car payments from my salary […]. All he wants is for me to hand over my salary to him and cook peppered gizzard for him on Saturdays while he watches European League” (Adichie 2017, 217).

Bartholomew’s misperception can be described as a conflict of ancient African custom and modern understanding, and Aunty Uju’s defiance is a threat to the patriarchal custom. As a matter of fact, such a fierce feminist stance has been Adichie’s forte for a long time, as she also echoes it in her second novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*. When the protagonist, Olanna, is cheated by her man, Adichie writes, “You must never

behave as if your life belongs to a man. Do you hear me? [...] Your life belongs to you and you alone" (Adichie 2014a, 226). Aunty Uju and Olanna are educated middle-class characters, the former a medical doctor, the latter a UK master's degree holder, and both of them kick against subservience to patriarchy.

And yet, Adichie deploys her degenerative satire to tackle the affectations, fakeness, and fantasies prevalent among African immigrants. She reveals those contrived ways through which some Afropolitans may improvise their lives by doctoring their thoughts and documentation, to achieve an Afropolitan ease. Indeed, Afropolitanism transforms African immigrants into new varieties of their old selves, as their perceptions are altered to reflect their new circumstances. As Africans craving the comfort of the western world, they grapple with the compulsion for subsistence, leading to the urge to take on fake identities and have false visas. As an example, when Obinze fails to get a visa to travel to America, his mother, a university professor, tells a lie on her visa application that Obinze is her research assistant: "I'm going to put your name on my British visa application as my research assistant [...]. That should get you a six-month visa" (Adichie 2017, 235).

As Obinze arrives in London, he departs from authenticity and slips into inauthenticity at once, living in a complicated world of falsehood, not only lying to people in public but also lying to himself. He keeps entering into endless illusions of future actions and goals he must accomplish. He is told, "[T]he first thing to look for is an NI number. Marry an EU citizen and get your papers" (239). So he impersonates Vincent who says, "You can use my NI number and pay me forty per cent of what you make" (250). Notwithstanding that this exemplifies Adichie's adeptness at dramatizing diasporic frustration, it suggests how humans are often stimulated into self-discovery, through difficult and unpleasant experiences. It epitomises the instability to Adichie's literary practice, corresponding to the way she characterises a person in a manner that is almost a metaphor for her own kind of unstable mode of satiric writing. And this depicts Obinze as grappling with his own unpredictability, deleting his former self-confidence in order to reinvent himself to stay afloat amid diasporic challenges.

Turning to the subtle satiric mode again, Adichie paints a delicate picture of how living a lie can generate very peculiar forms of human consciousness about how we respond to our past experiences and actions, which lead us to mull over future courses of action, in the light of what could have been. This sort of thinking

interrogates the efficacy of imagined alternatives, establishing the worthwhileness or otherwise of executed choices and lived realities (Epstude and Roese 2008). Such counterfactual thinking is a pretend state of affairs, a constant procedure of bargaining authenticity and mirage, and this reasoning process is "seen as a major feature of satirical discourse" (Maslo 2016, 117). When individuals ponder a past error, listing alternative courses of action that would have led to a better result, they often plan for a means to preclude or correct such an error subsequently. For instance, after Ifemelu has begrudgingly had sex with the tennis coach for one hundred dollars in order to pay her overdue rent, she returns home with guilt, thinking about a way to remedy such a blunder. "She *imagined* packing her things, somehow buying a ticket and going back to Lagos" (Adichie 2017, 154, emphasis mine), perhaps to start anew back home where her previous sex-for-dollars would be thousands of miles away, abandoning her Afropolitanism.

Adichie's satire also aspires towards future, illusory objectives. After a disappointing event, such questions as "how else could I have done better?" and "where else could I have invested?" are common. Even after a successful outcome, the Oliver-Twist syndrome in humans motivates us to imagine for more, directing us towards a future, illusory goal (Sirois, Monforton, and Simpson 2010). We see this when Curt, motivated by Ifemelu's appreciation of his generosity, anticipates more from their relationship, by setting a counterfactual target. Curt tells Ifemelu, "I don't want to be a sweetheart. I want to *be the fucking love of your life*" (Adichie 2017, 223-224, emphasis mine). Seeking "the fucking love" underscores the unequal power dynamics between the two characters because Curt is always the one specifying their joint responsibilities, aspirations, and their modes of relaxation.

But Ifemelu is always reacting to his subtle manipulations, uncomfortable around him, and struggling to assert her choices, to emphasise her presence before him. As a struggling Black migrant in America, Ifemelu expects a caring, pampering love, but the American man dreams only about an alternative counterfactual, "the fucking love," already financing it. Tired of this counterfactual incompatibility, Ifemelu breaks out of the relationship, and Curt's target remains what it is: a counterfactual, unreal and unrealisable. Actually, Ifemelu never loves him, always showing irritation towards him. But Curt doesn't realise this, which amplifies the satire even more, because "the stronger the polarity between fact and counterfactual is, the more efficient the satire will be" (Maslo 2016, 123).

Besides, Adichie's satire seeks to avert future danger, matching the Juvenalian approach once more. After a mishap, it is often human to think about the way such an agonising event would have been averted. We seek understanding into how our state of affairs might have been distinct if a few particulars of the past had been changed (Epstude & Roese 2008). We begin to devise ways to prevent a reoccurrence. We start to dread what has not happened. When Obinze is discovered to have been using a fake identity to work in a warehouse in England, he thinks about the possibility of adjusting facets of the bygone times. "He left the warehouse that evening, for the final time, *wishing more than anything that he had told* Nigel and Roy his real name" (Adichie 262, emphasis mine). After his deportation to Lagos and fearing a future imagined disaster, he calls Nigel and tries to avert the danger by confessing, "Vincent is not my real name, Nigel. My name is Obinze. I have a job offer for you in Nigeria" (262). The fact is, Nigel would never think of going to Nigeria, having known that Obinze has not been genuine. But because Nigel is a white man, Obinze needs him as a façade to secure a contract from the Nigerian government whose officials accord the presence of white people a special privilege. This highlights Adichie's satiric punch here at xenocentricism, as Obinze is suffused with "the air of unreality, [...] of images to create a parallel life" (369).

This constant creation of alternate realities is what makes Adichie's satire indeterminate, a postmodernist inheritance. It makes her narrative disruptively unpredictable, blending a plurality of modes that cross and transfer attributes, a kind of satiric chemistry of hybridisation. It is an integrationist approach to create a polyphony of methods, genres, and elements that blend together and yet remain disparate. Ultimately, her satire has created room for more innovations, confirming Griffin's (1994) argument "that satire is often an 'open' rather than a 'closed' form, that it is concerned rather to inquire, explore, or unsettle than to declare, sum up, or conclude" (95).

CHAPTER TWO

THE SATIRE OF PRECARITY IN *WE NEED NEW NAMES*

INTRODUCTION

> "When I go to live with Aunt Fostalina, that's the kind of car I'll drive, see how it's even small like it was made for me? [...] I just know, because of this feeling in my bones, that the car is waiting for me in America, so I yell, My Lamborgini, Lamborgini, Lamborgini Reventón. My voice rings [...] and I laugh" (Bulawayo 2014, 111).

This passage from NoViolet Bulawayo's debut novel, *We Need New Names,*[1] portrays the voice of a troubled African child at the threshold of fleeing from home, who imagines that emigrating to a developed country can result in a life of comfort and luxury. This fantasy puts Darling, as she is called, in a precarious mental condition, expressed here in a language that is dreamlike and even laughable in its satiric hyperbole about the Lamborgini and Aunt Fostalina.

Bulawayo's depictions of precarity in *New Names* present us with the effects that migration can exert on an African child, who is caught between two worlds—the world of assured hunger at the place of birth and the world of fantasy abroad. This leads to what one might call the premature Afropolitanism of children who are uprooted, with no resistance, from their native country to live overseas where they cannot describe their feelings with some level of accuracy. As a result, they are plunged into a state of constant itinerancy of both body and mind, wondering and wandering, seeking and questioning. In *New Names*, the author seems to suggest that once a child is frustrated and rashly forced out of home to relocate abroad, the search for a new home and identity elsewhere becomes a pastime in perpetuity. The child was never allowed to root properly at home. The voice of the child begins to edge frequently towards marginality, occupying the periphery of existence away from home, and this typifies a precarious life that leads to a precarious mind. Such empty fantasies come

[1] For the purposes of this thesis, *We Need New Names* (2014) will be referred to as *New Names* subsequently.

naturally to those needy children who, though they are incapacitated by acute poverty and devastation, are surrounded by riches everywhere around their neighbourhood, richness they can never enjoy. Their condition therefore lends itself to being treated, as Bulawayo does, in the mode of precarious satire, which is covert due to the delicate nature of children, and yet weighty.

In the previous chapter, I examined how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie delves into the lives of Afropolitans who are squeezed into two diametrically opposite cultures, a harsh reality that compels them to fabricate new personalities: fake attitudes, fake appearances, and fake thoughts, through all of which they try to integrate with their hosts. We saw how this necessary adulteration of one's self could lead to the volatile identity which Adichie deals with in the mode of unstable satire. NoViolet Bulawayo bears a resemblance in all these respects to Adichie. Both writers are adept at the application of teasing and sarcasm, playful sequence of events, and delightful doses of tongue-in-cheek accounts. The two also share a narrative approach that is rooted in culture, seeking to provide their Afropolitans with an emotional bond with their places of origin. But while Adichie focuses on adults who have a grip of their minds and can interpret their encounters almost precisely, Bulawayo homes in on children whose outlook on the world is totally unripe, untrained, and brittle.

In this chapter, I appraise *New Names* as an invention of Afropolitan satire. Narrated by Darling, a precocious ten-year-old girl who is also the novel's protagonist, *New Names* centres around the lives of six poverty-stricken children (Darling herself, Chipo, Sbho, Bastard, Godknows, and Stina). The children are cheerful, but they are rendered homeless after a demolition exercise carried out by government's bulldozers. Alongside their penniless parents, they settle in a shanty town, a flea-infested locality ironically named Paradise, given its widespread squalor, which "is all tin and stretches out in the sun like a wet sheepskin nailed on the ground to dry; the shacks are the muddy color of dirty puddles after the rains" (Bulawayo 2014, 34). Driven by extreme hunger, these children begin to troop to the neighbouring affluent district of Budapest to pilfer guavas for food. Compared to Paradise, which is inhabited by the poor, it strikes these roaming preteens that only privileged white people enjoy the opulence of Budapest, which has "big, big houses with satellite dishes on the roofs and neat gravelled yards or trimmed lawns" (4).

Darling has ambitions that are drenched in uncertainties, but she does not realise this truth because her mind is underdeveloped, and she flounders between shock and confusion. Her picture of humanity is so vague that she cannot knit the different phases of time smoothly, so she lives, episodically, flitting from one place to another. This is what Bulawayo captures by writing her story in the picaresque mode—Darling tiptoes on the edges of foreign values, and she lives on the margins of the metropolis. Sadly, in her native country, she is also an outsider, only scratching at the fragments of wreckage.

Because Darling cannot comprehend these foreign people and their views, her idea of place blurs. She worsens every interaction, aggravating her manners, pains, losses, and sorrows, so as to make them vivid and important. She wants to see things and be seen as well. She wants her presence to be a source of joy for everyone wherever she goes, and she craves for her absence to frustrate those who value her. She needs these things if she is to win for herself a sense of existence and recognition; failing to achieve them forces her into mental chaos. She begins to showcase her thoughts in a manner that is dangerously insecure, portraying people and things in gloomy ways. She engages herself in grim play and games, giving them wacky names. Her interactions with people are infused with hazy irony that indicate her internal crisis, sometimes proving she does not want to be understood directly. She invents new names for many things so as to commemorate the value she places on them, and to redefine and decode her experiences, both savoury and unsavoury. She even modifies popular names, either as a way of undermining their prerogatives or as a means of registering her displeasure. But what naming can do is limited. So Bulawayo herself applies symbols and allegories to signify things which Darling cannot picture and name clearly because Darling is imprecise and blind. Such exactness is the attempt at a solution to the precarious condition of being a postcolonial who uses a foreign language with subtexts she does not totally grasp, a language that eludes her feelings. It is such a language that does little to convey her thoughts in a way that might grant structure to her subconscious.

As a result of these anomalies, Darling feels humiliated and dirtied. She playacts porn. She uses vomit and excrement to demonstrate her misery, her way of weighing up that humiliation and experiencing it deeply. These obscenities are methods of representing what cannot be publicly shown, but they show the elements of inequality,

violence, terrorism, and rape, both at home and abroad. Sometimes, the burden of humiliation on her is so heavy, so unspeakable, that she bursts into fits of outrage, her own way of showing the picture of things that are terrifying. She engages in these almost destructive activities because she imagines she has lost the cultural basis for seeing the world that she had when she was rooted at home. And she hurts herself and her target so that she can make the problems in her life evident and acknowledged.

The above strands of uneasiness, therefore, culminate in some critical questions. How has Bulawayo managed to deploy the voice of a child narrator to express the troubled growth of body and mind? In what ways has she shown that the development from childhood to adulthood also leads to constantly changing views and beliefs? How has she used the picaresque mode to represent the quest for achievements and knowledge? What inventions of satire has Bulawayo used to examine the tensions that exist between Afropolitans and their hosts? In what ways has she used the profusion of bleak play and games in the novel to highlight and manage the emotional ruins of her characters? And how do the play and games spotlight the expectations of her characters and their goals of comfort and mental growth? How do the quirky appellations in the novel give her characters and places the power and ingenuity to forge ahead, to enable them to interpret their situations correctly? In what ways does she teasingly portray scatology and obscenity without being seen as depraved or debauched? How has her playful expressions made it possible for her characters to stay afloat and optimistic in the midst of the racial and economic complexities in the novel, leading to (mis)discovery of oneself either at home or overseas?

Evidently, Bulawayo's work is deeply allegorical. She fuses many small tales together to form a coherent bigger story, enabling her writing to accrue multiple connotations. The undertones of her work often examine how people endure the harsh effects from the wrong decisions of other more powerful people. Her characters are often shown to be pushed and bullied around until, finally, they enact some sort of resistance. Her portrayal of these concerns in *New Names* is a testament to an art that illuminates the tyranny and irresponsible leadership in her post-independence political economy, unveiling human shortcomings in the process.

But this well-designed craft of hers is also evident in her second novel, *Glory* (2022), which chronicles the upheavals in Jidada, a country of animals in curiosity and jeopardy. In this novel, an animal allegory, as satirical as it can be, her writing is aware

of how political ineptness can upset the brickwork of a nation, dislocating the basic structure that binds the people together. She is consistent, as she is in *New Names*, in her grasp of the reaction of ordinary people who agonise about their inglorious past because it has plunged them into the ugly and unreliable present, which holds no promising bridge to their future, which they also see as a destination of emptiness. However, she is also aware of the ever-present human courage to thwart the course of injustice, that resilience which coerces an individual to persevere, trusting that the past cannot define the future, which is amendable from the strategic actions of the present.

In *Glory*, she writes in uppercase that "THE POOR AND THE RICH DO NOT PLAY TOGETHER" (Bulawayo 2022, 4). This re-echoes her persistent thematic fixations—the inequality and conflict among the kind of people she writes about in *New Names*—and it also alludes to her interest in eccentric play and games. She hints in *Glory* that the class boundary between the rich and poor is just natural and should be expected. And because segregation by class is omnipresent among the rich, it is a game they always love to play among themselves, not allowing anyone from a lower class to take part in it. However, Bulawayo also acknowledges that the poor can sometimes muster up the bravery to bring down any boundary, either by means of a peaceful protest or in the form of a fierce revolt.

In *New Names*, Darling emigrates at the height of physical and emotional distress, not daring to challenge the status quo. But, in *Glory*, Destiny, a major character, does the exact opposite, returning home from a foreign country to confront the reign of autocracy and corruption, helping the poor to win back the country that has devastated them for almost four decades. The name Destiny itself lends credence to Bulawayo's narrative passion for onomastics, her practice of naming every entity teasingly, either to expose some hidden truth or to allude to something ominous. In this case, Destiny might be interpreted as one who holds the destiny of the downtrodden animals of Jidada, one who understands their collective plight, certain that they are ultimately destined for freedom and prosperity. Destiny is that agent of transformation who promotes the revolution to make these ambitions happen, also leading the long-suffering animals in their quest to achieve an egalitarian Jidada.

However, I am interested in *New Names* because it is a cross-continental narrative that unveils the devastation of self-exiled characters suffering and striving to survive in a distant terrain, cut off from the delights of kith and kin. They are migrants for whom home is only in the heart, not in the hand. Afropolitanism disrupts their

thought procedures, bitterly teaching them that leaving home does not just mean people relocating. It also means people losing their origins, which they frequently remember. It is a cyclic mode, which Bulawayo also investigates in *New Names* through a frequent satiric memorialisation of the homeland, compelling Darling to mull over her birthplace. In an interview with Hartselle (2015), Bulawayo reveals, "I suddenly woke up to the realization that I had to make the book come full circle. I had to have Darling go back home" (33). So Darling, now clothed in a hybrid and fluid self in America, keeps remembering and calling her previous home and friends on the phone. She is suffused with tinges of longing and nostalgia, as she narrates, "It's hard to explain, this feeling; it's like there's two of me. One part is yearning for my friends; the other doesn't know how to connect with them anymore [...]. I feel a little guilty" (Bulawayo 2014, 210).

Bulawayo cites Tsitsi Dangarembga and Charles Dickens as two of her literary influences. She also mentions the stimulus of Toni Morrison. The Zimbabwean author tells Palumbo-Liu (2015) in an interview, "I think to some of my favourite young narrators—Tambu in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* [...], Pip in Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and I remember that I loved them for [...] being acute observers and commentators of the world" (n.p.). This should not be unexpected, considering the use of young protagonists and focalising in the first person by these authors.

Dangarembga's Tambu echoes Bulawayo's Darling in some way, given that they are both females who experience dispossession at the early stages of their lives. The death of Tambu's brother saves her, while the death of country saves Darling. In Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, the young protagonist, Pip, also suffers early deprivation (the death of parents). His elder sister's strictness about his upbringing even upsets his early mind formation and growth, including his relationship with his surroundings. But he is rescued by the games he plays, by an anonymous donation, and later on by his marriage to the love his life, despite his early-life challenges. Toni Morrison's debut novel, *The Bluest Eye,* centres around Pecola, a young girl, raped and made pregnant by her drug-addicted father. But she eventually feels rescued by the sheer force her imagination when she loses the baby and imagines herself with blue eyes. Placed on the platform of early-life tragedy, Darling, Tambu, Pip, and Pecola embody the spirit of human resilience and hopefulness that can ameliorate tacky family backgrounds.

The deployment of child narrators, with their purity, allows these writers to strike at their satiric targets in unexpected ways, and from unfamiliar perspectives. The minds of these child chroniclers are frail and friable, and fantastical, all the more so because they so often have suffered disrupted upbringings. Besides, there is a degree of surprise and delicacy in the voice of a growing child, a constant presence of fragile curiosity which helps to heighten irony, oxymoron and misdirection, intensifying the precarity of the writing. In an interview with *Publishers Weekly*, Bulawayo tells Rosen (2013) that '[t]here is something universal about kids. [...] [T]hey have no power" (n.p.). And, hence, with powerlessness comes the instability of voice, including the precariousness of the mind and satire. "Being a kid, you're juggling a lot," Bulawayo adds.

The instability of Bulawayo's satire can be illuminatingly compared to that of Voltaire and Jonathan Swift. Some of the sequences in her novel, especially the exploration of scatology and the picaresque model, are present in Voltaire's and Swift's most famous novels, *Candide* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Voltairean and Swiftian quests are often common in modern satires, allowing authors to spotlight periods when characters are volatile in their journeys. This vulnerability is what Gohlke (1976) associates with "a state of suffering and bondage" (405), characteristic of fictional travels. I posit that a picaresque journey is a search driven by intense optimism, a search for exposure that might provide resolutions to curiosities.

Hence, Bulawayo capitalises on this strategy to subject her child protagonist through the Afropolitanism of loss, shock, isolation, denial, surprise, subversion, and resistance. Cobo-Piñero (2019) refers to this narrative voyage as the "Afropolitan picaresque" (472). Picaresque satires involve putting protagonists through a series of predicaments that require them constantly to reposition themselves. Bulawayo does exactly this and seems to share this narrative trait with another Zimbabwean author, Petina Gappah, whose critique is also subtle but significant, repositioning her target to a place of unrecognition before attacking it. Muchemwa (2010) posits that "Gappah uses irony of situation to structure most [of] her stories and to bring characters and readers to a surprising betrayal of expectations" (140). Therefore, in a picaro's life, movement and encounters are sporadic, meandering from one point to another. Episodes do not connect a smoothly, and the distinct encounters are difficult to hang together. Usually told in the first person, such stories are fabricated in episodes of "shifting relationship between a central character and the many characters he [or she]

meets” (Paulson 1965, 77). Darling exhibits all these qualities. Thus, “Bulawayo’s narrative can be read through the lens of the picaresque mode, because it uncovers relations of inequality” (Cobo-Piñero 2019, 476).

THE OLD WITH NEW IDENTITIES IN *NEW NAMES*

The children in *New Names* notice the two different sides of their shabby existence. They are astonished by the modern infrastructures existing in Budapest and the pleasures they have never experienced in Paradise. These chilly luxuries, including a Lamborgini Reventón that looks “like a child can drive it” (Bulawayo 2014, 110), spur the children to fantasise about such plushness. They imagine fleeing from their devastated nation to live in developed countries to better their lives. They begin to plot their escape routes, which include dividing the countries of the world into “country-countries” and “not country-countries” (49), signifying developed and less-developed nations respectively. Fortunately for Darling, her maternal Aunt Fostalina who lives and works in Detroit, Michigan, arrives and takes her to America, one of the “country-countries,” kickstarting Darling’s doubleness, her rickety loyalty to America and her shapeless reminiscences of her native country.

Darling is elated at first, but her first few weeks in America leave her feeling lonely, estranged, and isolated, as the freezing snowy winter cages her indoors. She even regrets leaving home because she does “not see anyone playing country game or chasing after flying ants.” (147). As weeks roll into months and years, her much-cherished country of countries assaults her sensibilities, upsetting her idea of morality and free personality. She lives with two minds, saying “this here [America] is not my country; I don’t know whose it is” (147). Eventually, she is stuck in conflicting identities, her mind swinging back and forth between America’s race-polluted freedom and the penury-injured freedom of her home country, which is also wounded by tyranny. Unsure of which one to choose, she has to “live” in both countries at the same time. As America then becomes her physical home, her mind “lives” in her native country because she muses, “Some things happen only in my country” (147). So she embraces this fluidity as a necessary factor for her completeness in a world that keeps halving her expectations. Bulawayo exploits this duality of circumstances and imbues her narrative with palates of satiric aesthetics.

As a result, she equips Darling with a voice so perceptive and provocative that it amplifies the precariousness of her situation either at home or in the diaspora. The

young Afropolitan girl is intrepid, or she would not find the appropriate words, sometimes spiteful, other times teasing, to reify her deep thoughts and feelings, even in the face of outright horror, disappointment, or abjection. While confronting her fears and sometimes celebrating her triumphs, she elevates her voice and attitude to almost ridiculous heights. For example, to draw attention to the onset of hopeless destitution, almost a dystopia, about to take over her native country, Bulawayo signals this with a shocking image of the dead body of a suicide. Darling narrates, "[W]e see it, a tall thing dangling in a tree like a strange fruit. Then we see it's not a thing but a person. Then we see it's not a person but a woman" (Bulawayo 2014, 16). The dead woman appears to be emblematic of a morbid country, suggesting the exigency of ending the frustrations lest other people might choose the same grisly option of forced death.

Even when Darling is subtle, her subtlety can be so explicit and witty that it becomes an exaggeration of follies. She explains that the dead woman's body is "straight, like somebody drew her there, a line hanging in the air" (Bulawayo 2014, 17). The metaphorical irony of a straight-line implies an absence of options, a corollary of nothingness and of no ramified possibilities. But this could also mean some kind of straightforward, one-way journey in which a return is not possible once the child migrant departs from its usual locale, either by means of death or self-exile, and domiciles in another realm or country saturated with uncertainties.

Indeed, it is at the onset of uncertainties and the dwindling of optimism that the departed entity may begin to analyse, in retrospect, if the decision to flee was worthwhile. The migrant begins taking into account the fresh challenges that emerge in the new country, which becomes "in some sense a gapped, transitional, interstitial" and "complicated" dwelling (Clingman 2012, 64). Darling "is not really worried" because she will "be living in America with Aunt Fostalina, eating real food and doing better things" (Bulawayo 2014, 10). But Darling only notices her "gapped" existence when she sets foot in America and realises that nature itself is unfriendly. The air is cold, snowy, and there are no "men seated under a blooming Jacaranda playing draughts" (147). This deficiency of communal joys is specified in the privation of play and games, and her voice and perceptual structure begin to wobble towards transformation.

Darling's voice leaves in its wake a percussive ring suffused with a desire to understand every new occurrence she is confronted with, whether good or bad.

Sometimes, in an attempt to take in a strange, new situation, she might activate what she notices into a breathing entity, infusing it with human qualities, which she exacerbates just so she can make the situation concrete. She muses that America is bedevilled with a "coldness that [...] wants to kill you, [...] telling you, with its snow, that you should go back to where you came from" (148). It is also inhospitable, asking her to return to where she "came from," which worsens her doubt about where she really belongs, America or her native country. But Darling wants a problem-free America as well as a problem-free birthplace, an unworkable intention that makes her attempts unstable. As Cobo-Piñero (2018) states, "[u]nstable belongings are part of the new subjectivities forged in postcolonial contexts" (11). The implication is that Darling's ability to forge herself and find a comfortable belonging is hanging in the balance. She dangles between her birthplace where her stomach used to feel "like somebody just took a shovel and dug everything out" (Bulawayo 2014, 1) and America where "[n]o matter how green the maize looks [...], it is not real" (164).

By implication, whichever way Darling looks, an incompleteness stares back at her, ridiculing her. She is mocked at school in America because of her name and accent and hair, and she tries to correct these things but to no avail. She relates, "When you are being teased about something, at first you try to fix it so the teasing can stop, but then those crazy kids teased me about everything, even the things I couldn't change" (165). She cannot change the gene that produces her kind of hair and she cannot prevent the American kids from ridiculing her, so she considers herself humiliated.

Conversely, this ridicule can be interpreted as harmless and innocent, since both the ridiculed and ridiculers are children. Darling's situation at this point appears bittersweet, as the children are her schoolmates, neither friends nor foes yet. It is not uncommon for pupils to engage in such leg-pulls that discomfort their mates. But this might also imply that Bulawayo uses such teasing remarks to prepare Darling for the uneasy friendships and subtly adversarial relationships that await her as an Afropolitan living in America. As Elliott (1966) contends, ridicule can mean "a mark of inclusion, of acceptance," describing it as "a kind of initiation by ridicule, designed to see whether or not [new immigrants] can "take it" and to teach [them their] place in the new setting" (84). Bulawayo appears to be testing if Darling has enough tolerance to withstand the ribaldry that follows migration. And the young protagonist is left with only a choice between America's fierce ridicule and her home country's debacle. Clearly, Darling choses ridicule over debacle, because she continues with

America. But only time would tell if her choice would yield her the desired acceptance while continuing to brave her Afropolitan precarity in her new country.

From childhood to adulthood, Darling stretches her quest for acceptance, for the fullness of her mentality and body, by setting herself on a picaresque course. This approach is appropriate, especially for managing the precarity of Afropolitans whose consciousness is often unstable, always mulling and whining, their minds drifting home and back. Darling, the picaro, embarks on a rogue adventure that constantly transforms her personality and sociocultural perceptions, supplanting her old perspectives with new ones. This seems to be keeping with Çevik (1998)'s argument that "the life of the picaro is never static but progressively developing" (55). Such a picaresque journey, as a satiric technique, can be long or short, local or foreign, physical or virtual, surreal or sentient, turbulent or calm, but the journey aims to dredge up the filth of humanity and set it on an examination desk for the surgery of satire to take effect.

Certainly, because the picaresque entails constant movement, such a prolonged activity naturally takes its toll on the alimentary canals of the picaros. They are often ravenous, demanding food all the time. Çevik (1998) opines that such never-ending mobility is steeped in "the precariousness and the rootless odyssey of the hero from danger to danger, [...] the persistent theme of hunger and the sufferings of the individual" (53). Hence, frequent hunger forces Darling and her friends out of the obscurity and bedlam of their shabby Paradise to guzzle the guavas in the posh Budapest district. "[T]here are guavas to steal in Budapest [...]. We didn't eat this morning" (Bulawayo 2014, 1). When Darling and her gang hit Budapest, they get noticed and photographed by a white lady flaunting "[a] pink camera" (Bulawayo 2014, 6). In this instance, while Bulawayo satirises the superior-gadget-exhibitionist mentality of rich whites in the presence of poor Blacks, she equally achieves her satiric motive of making the children and their plight conspicuous, mobile, and documented digitally. Perhaps, the white lady might decide to have them travel abroad, kickstarting their Afropolitan journey. Besides, like the white lady, Bulawayo appears to invite herself and the reader to behold and empathise with the plight of the children.

In depicting further precarity in her work, Bulawayo often delves into satiric parody, which can create a grim image in the mind. Although this image can be absurd and uncomfortable, it produces a result that is clearly understood because the parody highlights the criticised flaw vividly. This parodic technique can be humorous and

shocking at same time, but this should be expected because satire revels in treating its target using both safe and unsafe means. It "is simultaneously humane and inhuman in its treatment of the world" (Connery and Combe 1995, 2). Hence, as Darling grapples with alienation and gruelling child labour in America, figuring out that this is quite contrary to the type of America she envisioned back home, Bulawayo creates a grisly image of an aging child. Darling imagines herself prematurely old and senile due to the migrant afflictions she has to stomach. She reports:

> "Time flips in my head [...]. My face, wrinkled with age, is now shaped like a can of pop, and my head is a lump of snow. I have to drag myself to the can boxes because I am so old I cannot throw anymore" (Bulawayo 2014, 256), and also "because in my head this is not what I came to America for" (263).

In highlighting the distressed powerlessness of Afropolitans and drawing attention to the choking system that enables it, Bulawayo has created this grotesque image of morbidity to emblematise what seems formless and inexplicable. In other words, she succeeds in showing that Afropolitans can be nervous and desperate, striving to figure out who they really are and what they sometimes want, toiling to cobble their contrasting strings of reasoning together. Their world, as it operates, is in disarray, and this baffles their thought processes, so they strain to picture exactly the way the diaspora operates, but fail.

From the sudden oldness of a child migrant, Bulawayo also brings Afropolitan difficulties to the forefront by deliberately worsening the same difficulties. She uses a satiric approach which one might call exacerbation, intensifying a muted anomaly until it erupts into unrestrained restlessness or even a mental disorder. Bulawayo allows Darling to spot the beginning of the problem, where it is almost unnoticeable. And then Darling fertilises the suffering to make it grow big, using either farce or hyperbole, or even both. At this point, it becomes concerning and presses for attention, thus achieving her aim of making it tangible. This corresponds to the stage where migrants begin to take rash decisions, their thoughts incoherent. Some may break out in sickness, depressed, because of shock. Some may engage in jobs beneath their moral and academic qualifications. Others may loiter from place to place in search of help that do not exist, caught in the paradox that means they are likely to lose themselves

in the diaspora in which they seek to find themselves. So subjection becomes the price of seeking to belong. LeBoeuf (2007) submits that satirists can draw attention to a predicament by "simply taking it to an extreme. Swift transforms cruelty and disdain towards peasants into cannibalism in *A Modest Proposal*, Huxley takes social acceptance of promiscuous sex and drug use into social mandate in *Brave New World*, and Colbert suggests that democracy must be completely eliminated in this country in order to encourage it in another on the *Colbert Report*" (22, emphasis LeBoeuf's).

Thus, in the same vein, Bulawayo converts Afropolitan adversity into schizophrenia. She inflicts Tshaka Zulu, another migrant character in *New Names*, with a severe psychosis that makes him brandish spears, armed against "those white vultures" (Bulawayo 2014, 269). Darling narrates, "I don't need anyone to tell me that this is proper craziness. He has been getting worse lately" (270). In spite of his deplorable mental health, Tshaka Zulu still remembers his distasteful colonial history. Hence, he hallucinates, wanting "a jet to fly him to Buckingham Place so he could go and talk to the queen about the things she owes him" (271). Intriguingly, he is also knowledgeable about postcolonial demands, seeking reparation from the empire. Despite his condition, he still remembers his history as his "knowledge takes on imperialistic connotations" (Cobo-Piñero 2018, 21). Perhaps, it is the adverse effects of the draconian imperialism in his native country that made him migrate, forcing him to seek favourable reception in an environment that triumphs in depreciating his mental assets. The flight to see the queen recalls the hallucination in one of Petina Gappah's stories, "Our Man in Geneva Wins a million Euros." In the narrative, a Zimbabwean man frustrated in Geneva takes a flight to Amsterdam to claim euros. "[W]ith a million euros, they can buy a new house, *houses*" (Gappah 2009, 141, emphasis Gappah's). However, the man is shocked on arrival that the money is a hoax.

Afropolitanism is replete with such a mix of false steps and random feats. Most times, the course of action is slow, hidden, and intangible. As a consequence, Bulawayo writes satiric allegories suffused with artful symbols. It is a case of one symbol telling multiple stories, navigating multiple questions, and amassing multiple connotations. For example, Darling tells an allegory of how she travels a long distance, alongside her Aunt Fostalina, attending her relative's sham wedding. The relative aims to use the wedding to get papers in America. They are in a car, driven by Aunt Fostalina's boyfriend, Kojo, a skilful driver. And together they all miss their way, submerged for hours in perplexity, which is worsened by a defective navigator in the car. A deer

bumps into their tyres, almost upturning the car, before limping away, bloodied. Darling regrets, saying, “By the time we finally get to the wedding, we figure the most important parts must be over” (Bulawayo 2014, 169).

The allegorical symbol of a defective navigator could be taken as a flawed ambition empowered by a faulty plan. The bumpy journey might mean a crooked channel of execution. The bloodied deer and late arrival are clearly satiric pointers of failure, the hallmarks of disappointing dreams. These indicators also show that arbitrary exclusions are the hidden truths about the lives of Afropolitans. Bulawayo’s allegories are not strictly parodic because they do not attack her original narrative designs. That is, the allegories do not destruct the existing design as they “employ their originals to emphasize their own real satiric object” (Pollard 1987, 28). This succeeds in creating the impression of extended metaphor that represents the complexities of travelling through unfamiliar territories either at home or abroad and the upshot of such a risky adventure. Therefore, migration is so much like tossing a dice, and the caprices are so unpredictable.

In the same vein, Bulawayo’s troubled characters often immerse themselves in play and games, which can be risky and outlandish, such as the plundering of guavas, playing draughts, Andy-Over, the ER abortion play, finding bin Laden, country-game, faking porn, among others. These indulgences seem to be a desired escape from their ruinous encounters every day. The games counteract their psychological injuries, providing them with companionship, including a veneer of protection in the face of unbridled insecurity. The devastation from poverty often appears to inspire the invention of these games, which can be exciting or morally corrupting. But within them lies the dramatic power of humans to perform their own stories and cast them as objects that can be passed from generation to generation. This way, the experiences remain active in a way that creates precedents that help to explore fresh ideas and interpret new occurrences. This matches with the views of Caillois (1958) who argues that “[p]lay and art are born of a surplus vital energy, not needed by the adult or child for the satisfaction of his immediate needs, and therefore available for the free and pleasant transformation [...]” (163).

So Darling and her friends pay repeated visits to the well-off district of Budapest to plunder guavas. The play is a joyful one that makes them sing as they file past, aiming to fill their hungry stomachs with guavas. The children do not worry about being apprehended because everybody in Paradise is engrossed in one form of play or

another. "[T]he mothers are busy with hair and talk" (Bulawayo 2014, 1), and the men's "eyes never lift from the draughts" (2). These games evince an imaginative picaresque, as the minds of these players are set free to wander hither and thither, and each person's silent thoughts may be incoherent, not connected with one another, as the games continue. For example, while the guava-plundering game goes on, Chipo thinks about her "painful" stomach and "has to rest it" (2). During the ER game, each character imagines a different name that corresponds with their views of an excellent medical professional. Besides, another kind of picaresque wandering is also implicit in the children's singing of "*Vasco da Gama!*" several times (2, emphasis Bulawayo's). Repeating Vasco da Gama, the first white man to voyage to India centuries ago, could mean Bulawayo's way of emphasising the onset of western imperialism and the plunder of other regions of the world. And the children's plundering of Budapest, a white-occupied district, might mean a counter-attack, an artful revenge. The refrain also suggests Bulawayo's early revelation that the motifs of migration, unsteadiness, and other forms of departures permeate her entire narrative.

This notion of movement is also true of the game of finding bin Laden, who is either dead or hidden. As soon as America places a bounty on the man, the children, hungry for "new games," set out "hunting for him" with "spears out of branches" (288), stomping from street to street. The game alludes to America's precarity as a nation, vulnerable to global attacks. But it also implies the domineering influence of America's foreign policy in global security affairs, using its military might. This places the country as a choice destination for the children during the country-game. But beyond these implications, this play evokes gallantry and discovery on the part of the children, showing their alertness to current international affairs. In some ways, however, it underscores the weaponization of the children, who have witnessed both local and international riots, either in person or on television, and are influenced negatively by these upheavals. This play also connotes that they are deprived and idle, wallowing in the fantasies that do not concern them, because their own native realities do not excite them enough or at all. If the kids were well-heeled in Paradise, they would be too busy to invent or even play any games.

By inference, the children's interest in catching bin Laden could stand as a corollary from their fixation with the ER, an American television show, which inspires their risky doctor-patient game of abortion. Participating in this game means they are fed up with who they are, and they are desirous to cast off—abort—the rotted selves

and become brand-new individuals. This is because “once you leave behind who and what you are, you just cannot be the same [person again]” (146). So the children take on new names and become medical professionals such as doctors Bullet, Roz, and Cutter (82). They want to remove their friend’s pregnancy manually with a clothes hanger. The game underlines the abysmal state of healthcare in the country while bringing out the ingenuity of the children for using the practice of naming to announce their inert desires.

As the title of the novel suggests, Bulawayo applies literary onomastics—the naming and renaming of people, places, and platforms. This is a trait she seems to have inherited from Toni Morrison who in *Song of Soloman* names her characters (Guitar and Milkman, for example) to arouse the curiosity of readers to seek deeper meaning. In the words of Ashely (2014), “Names are, of course, useful clues to authorial intent, sometimes puzzles for the ingenious and sometimes traps for the over-ingenious” (78). Bulawayo names in a manner that suggests old ways of seeing and being might have decayed and become barriers to self-development and international understanding, hence the need for fresh appellations. This is a hopeful yearning, which proposes that crafting new names might herald new beginnings. Bulawayo chooses to invent fictional names, instead of using the real ones, for most of the physical locations in the novel. For example, Paradise could have been any district in her native country, Zimbabwe, which remains anonymous in the novel. This appears to be a way of playing it safe, to disguise and wear a mask, so as to achieve the fictive freedom to tell her story. Apparently, a satirist may at times have to wear a protective mask, as we saw in the previous chapter regarding the use of Igbo masquerades to discipline offenders.

Moreover, Bulawayo’s naming conventions sometimes peel off the humanity of her characters to show the humiliation they are struggling with. Bastard implies fatherlessness and, by inference, a lack of domestic care, an unwanted entity, and an outcast among foreigners and natives. That he allows himself to carry such a horrible burden as a name, letting others call him that, is a testament of his mental power. He has accepted his humiliation, controlling it, even glamourising it by allowing everyone to say it publicly. It is understandable that he is powerless and, being a disadvantaged child, there are other priorities such as feeding and medical care that might rank higher in his reckoning. Despite these deprivations, he owns his name proudly. With respect to Fraction, this might indicate an incompetence, an incompleteness, a half-

full, half-empty existence, and a struggle to be wholesome. These strange names suggest tell-all signs that these children don't totally understand the language that has colonised their tongues.

Moreover, in terms of place names, Paradise is an antithesis of squalor. DestroyedMichygen is a lexical destruction of Detroit, Michigan, a ruination redolent of anger at the city when it does not live up to Darling's expectations, the city's assumed loftiness being a mirage. Her much-admired Lamborgini Reventón does not exist there, and Aunt Fostalina is working more than one job to meet her needs because she is an Afropolitan labourer who only scratches at the provincials of the American system. These names appear to be curious euphemisms that highlight the horrors of displacement—a postcolonial disgrace that turns people into mere wrecks.

Bulawayo uses scatology as a metaphor for depicting this squalidness, also using it to show either revenge or amusement. Evidently, bodily excretions such as shit, cough, menses, tears, blood, fart, milk, pus, urine, snot, semen, spit, puke, and sweat have been prominent satiric props from time immemorial. They have found engagements in the hands of scatological satirists like Chaucer, Juvenal, Swift, Rabelais, Soyinka, and even Aristophanes who wrote satires before the birth of Jesus Christ. Waste products from the human body can satirically symbolise anything from disgust to immorality, and from degradation to deterioration. Douglas (1966) argues that the meaning attached to the items of body-spun pollution varies from culture to culture. "In some [cultures], excreta is dangerous, in others it is only a joke" (122).

In *New Names*, therefore, Bulawayo takes advantage of excreta to signal, at once, danger, objective affront, and delight. For instance, Darling observes that her sick father is "vomiting and vomiting [...] just vomiting and defecating on himself" (Bulawayo 2014, 89). This stirs dark humour, given the repetitions of "vomiting," but it is also symptomatic of the country's sickness and the prevailing poor healthcare, because the sickness of man is also the sickness of country. Also, when a profiteering Chinese merchant meets the hungry children of Paradise, wanting them to work before receiving his gift, Godknows, one of the children, issues a revengeful faecal threat, "You want us to come at night and defecate all over?" (47). The children are powerless, of course, having no armament. But when every other weapon fails, there is always a weapon of disruption awaiting in the bowel.

Esty (1999) has argued that satiric excrement "takes on new and distinctive meanings in postcolonial [African] fiction" (25). In Bulawayo's writing, defecation can

lead not only to release and relief, but also to unexpected discovery. We see this in the wedding allegory when Darling finally makes it to the wedding hall. Finding the event and conversations strange, Darling recounts, "I get up to find the restroom" (Bulawayo 2014, 172). Alone in the toilet, she becomes relieved and confident. In addition, the toilet brings her close to what Bulawayo sees as the witlessness of white Americans about African affairs. A white woman Darling meets in the toilet tells her, "Jesus, the rapes, and all those killings! How can such things even be happening [in Africa]?" (175). In this instance, Bulawayo lightly lampoons the ignorance and vexing nosiness of the white woman, while ratifying the fact that satirists often dwell in shitty places to discover hidden truths about our world.

CHAPTER THREE

THE SATIRE OF SELF-DELUSION IN *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS*

INTRODUCTION

> "America has something for everyone [...]. Look at Obama. The man is a black man with no father or mother, trying to be president over a country" (Mbue 2017, 40).

In Imbolo Mbue's debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, one of the main characters—known as Jende—believes that America is an economic and political entity that accepts everything and everyone with no questions asked. He is a Cameroonian, living in New York as an undocumented migrant with minimal education, and Obama is his symbol of hope, economic acceleration, and citizenship without barriers. Obama is his fellow Black man, after all, a firm believer in the courageousness of dreaming. *Behold* a Cameroonian man who must benefit from Obama's Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), often referred to as the Dreamers Act. *Behold* his predicaments as the proof of the nasty political conversation that marginalises millions of less-privileged people trooping into America from around the world.

However, what Jende fails to recognise in his faulty point of reference is that Blackness does not mean equalness or unrestricted access to the same pool of privileges. Granted, Obama identifies as Black but he is not a migrant in America, and he is definitely not an illegal resident. At the point of Jende's comparison, Obama is cosmopolitan, superbly educated, a confirmed American citizen with all rights and responsibilities. Jende is a marginalised Afropolitan. Although Afropolitanism gives him the impetus and fluidity to aspire to greatness abroad, he is nonetheless an underclass Afropolitan, with no legal and economic foundations to pursue his goals successfully. It is this error in his appraisal that lands him in self-delusion, that false belief in possibilities without the necessary foundations to turn the delusion into reality. This forms one of the pillars of Imbolo Mbue's Afropolitan novel.

Behold the Dreamers is a story of dependencies, following an ambitious Cameroonian couple, Jende and Neni. They are immigrants desirous to claim America

as theirs. But they do not have the legal permission to do so. The wife depends on the husband to work towards her goals of becoming a pharmacist and an American citizen. Seeking to fulfil these objectives, the couple works for Clark and Cindy, a white American family, wealthy and generous. While Jende is Clark's driver, Neni helps Cindy at home, a handyman of sorts, performing household chores. Clark himself depends on his job as a top executive at Lehman Brothers. But when the company collapses during the 2008 financial meltdown, these two marriages (American and African) are utterly shaken to their very foundations. As the dependencies shatter, Clark and Cindy scrutinise their marriage, forcing Jende and Neni to renegotiate their ambitions as a married couple and as foreign individuals in America.

The two previous chapters have explored Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's penchant for delving into the lives of migrants who aim to exploit the opportunities in their host cities, and NoViolet Bulawayo's investigation of loss and alienation among the migrants. Imbolo Mbue also explores how immigration contributes to globalisation, especially as it reshapes and redefines the lives of Afropolitans. Mutually, these authors' treatment of migration corresponds with the remit of Afropolitanism, which aims to advocate global citizenship for travelling Africans while they still maintain the links to the lure and core of their homelands.

In terms of immigrant subjects, Adichie and Bulawayo are interested in how migration transforms the lives of single persons—aspiring Africans who are either unmarried or not yet adults. These are migrants whose lives are straightforward but can be made complex by their own decisions and personal ambitions. Because they are without partners, they have nobody to account to or to hold them responsible, so their comings and goings are moderately easy.

In contrast to Adichie and Bulawayo, Mbue turns her attention to the life abroad of a married African couple who must account to each other and are tied together by their matrimonial vows as they struggle with childcare, coping with the challenges of parenting. Her protagonists, Jende and Neni, are held captive not only by the convoluted rules and regulations of America's immigration, but also by their self-inflicted delusions, which have plunged them into severe disorientation with respect to the American system. The novel examines how their joint psychic base has been deformed by the razzmatazz of America and corrupted by its commercial priorities. Additionally, their estrangement from their native sensitivities, including even African traditions exported overseas, has further created frosts and cracks in their marriage,

which has become vulnerable to attacks from both of them. And because they are strictly bound by their African upbringings that frown at separation and divorce, they have no choice but to paper over their differences and continue pushing themselves into the intricate system of American immigration. It is a system they do not yet understand adequately. But they shove their desires towards it nonetheless, converting those desires into self-deception deliberately. And by misinterpreting the American core values, these dreamers appear mischievous to their hosts and even to themselves.

In postmodern fiction such as Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, pursuits are often like figments. They are characterized by ambitions that appear to recede as the seeker moves forward. Whenever it happens that one has established a satisfying sense of self, something unexpected intervenes, upsetting what has been achieved. It is a perplexing situation in which every advantageous move contains a vulnerable path to deterioration, and the opposite can also be correct. Thus, postmodernism seems to be about the pursuit of goals that one may not achieve. Everyone is on a quest for something farfetched, unaware of what it is, yet deploys resources to keep the engine of the chase running.

This seems to account for why Mbue's satire in the novel is gentle and tinged with subtle irony. It often hesitates to take a hardboiled position on its subject matter. As a result, it establishes tension and dispels the tension at the same time. One might call hers a dialectical satire, which hooks and unhooks its target because her cruelty contains tenderness, and beneath her tenderness cruelty lurks, leaving the reader ambivalent. For example, the dramatic moment in the Judson Memorial Church comes to mind. Pastor Natasha tells Neni, "'The American immigration system can be cruel […], but [we] will stand and fight with you. We will stand with you till the very end'" (Mbue 2017, 234). The irony here stems from the priest promising to waddle into a murky field such as immigration, which she obviously has no knowledge of. The act looks beneficial and patronising at the same time. It appears to validate the quests of Black immigrants, drawing them into white benevolence. But then it is a phoney kind of promise, which the whites are not even capable of pulling off. With this, Mbue seems to be shining a light on the false pretence of whites. Here, she comes close to harsh satire, but she refuses to strike intensely.

Such satiric hesitancy becomes obvious when one places Mbue herself in the position of a double agent, someone who walks a tightrope that straddles two worlds and must please both sides. On the one hand, she is Afropolitan, sympathetic to the

plights of her fellow migrants, exposing their needs to the American audience. On the other hand, she is an example of an American dream come true, writing about the struggles of migrants and using their ugly stories to get published and marketed in the country to phenomenal success. As a result, the line between condemnation and commendation often appears blurred in the novel, giving the impression that there is a reluctance to hit hard, satirically. It is also an approach that matches with the behaviour of the African couple, Jende and Nene, who struggle to create for themselves a false version of their personalities which they imagine would please their host. And by continuously showing their fake selves to their white benefactors, they get used to it and start to believe in the effectiveness of their falsified personalities. Mbue seems to suggest that most immigrants create ghostly portraits of themselves at the beginning and then work hard to turn the ghosts gradually into the concrete personalities they admire to become. Such self-portraiture, even when it seems harmless, is a sort of veiled self-miscalculation that Mbue tries to unveil. And she might, in fact, be a part of immigrants drawing their own self-portraits.

Her portrayal of uprooted personalities and their tribulations appears to emanate from Toni Morrison's influence, noted previously, who in her novels surveys how the selves people abandon in the past are always troubling them. Mbue acknowledges Morrison's influence in an interview with Winfrey (2017), during which she reveals that immersing herself in *Song of Solomon* feels like reading the writing of God (n.p). So, it is easy to see how Jende in *Behold the Dreamers* and Milkman in *Song of Solomon* grapple with similar challenges of exclusion and the elusive search for societal approval. They are both mentally restless and constantly mobile from place to place. Jende muses that "the new life [in America] had come with its share of new pains. It had wrought new forms of helplessness" (Mbue 2017, 245). This appears to mirror Milkman's sentiment when he reminisces that "the world was what other people told him. He felt like a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people" (Morrison 1995, 133). Obviously, a lack of self-agency is a common problem among people who have been displaced.

In this regard, we can equally compare Mbue to Jhumpa Lahiri, another postmodern novelist who also explores the psychic transformations endured by Indian immigrant families in America. Mbue's treatment of marital relationships abroad, including the difficult quest for recognition, shows the same sensibility and sensitivity as Lahiri's writing. Lahiri deftly explores the experiences of her Indian migrants, and

the nuances of their behaviour and their responses to diasporic challenges are quite similar to those of Africans, as depicted in Mbue's work. For example, among these two groups of migrants, Africans and Asians, there is always a willingness to manipulate every process of getting immigration paperwork done and a frequent recourse to religion—prayers and gods. More so, both authors often depict migrants as people who often maintain ties to their native cultures, implying that Africans and Asians always have a constant fear of avant-garde American culture polluting the morals of their children who are being raised in the cultural mores of their parents. Betty, in *Behold the Dreamers*, fears that if she does not discipline her children, "they'll start behaving like American children" (Mbue 2017, 118). In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Sudha does not want to upset her moralistic Indian parents in America, so she has to leave home to obtain a higher education before she "let loose, [...] allowing boys into her bed" (Lahiri 2008, 129). Lahiri's delicate writing satirises the fear of acquisition of new culture and alien behaviour, a restrained invective which Mbue also deploys in her own writing.

In this chapter, I will argue how a sudden contact with new culture and a distortion in expected outcomes may lead to poor self-perception and a warped soul, conditions which are common among immigrants. These problems might even be aggravated by the fact that these travellers hardly garner enough pre-migration information to prepare them against unexpected challenges. It is a dire absence that can force Afropolitans into becoming victims of their economic aspirations and the sufferers of ruptured careers. They turn out to be the casualties of identity failure, unable to claim back their old lives in their native countries while unable to cling to the new. Yet they aspire towards what Ibironke (2021) calls "hyphenated identity" (788). This might enable them to satisfy their biographical thirst to be described as Cameroonian-American or Nigerian-American or British-Nigerian, among other possible hyphenations.

Before departure, however, these migrants are ignorant of what it requires to acquire such a biography. Only upon arrival do they discover, much to their disappointment, the enormity of the time, legal, and financial commitments needed to be eligible for such a social identity. Their temperament becomes distorted, and the mental muscle needed for their spiritual transformation weakens. Each new piece of information then comes to them as a shock because they are not prepared for it or because they are not yet qualified to act on the information. Every process of

familiarisation further defamiliarizes them. As a result, desperation sets in to worsen their delusions. The unclarity of their thinking becomes even more muddled with the menace of the past misinformation and the remoteness of the current truths. Their decisions tend to become riddled with inaccuracies and distorted by false intuitions.

This warping of minds is a common thematic concern of most African narratives about the movement to the diaspora. In clear terms, Mbue's writing explores this as well, drawing inspiration from various sources—both African and non-African texts—including her own observations as an immigrant herself in New York, her personal studies and education abroad, and the experiences of other African immigrants. Here a comparison can be made with Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009). In this novel, Unigwe examines the lives abroad of four Nigerian women who have moved to Belgium to mine what they imagine is untapped wealth. But when they end up working in the redlight avenue of Antwerp as commercial sex traders, they face the distress of a dream improperly conceived and hatched. They are traumatised with the reality on ground. The narrator says:

> "Before Efe came to Belgium, she imagined castles and clean streets and snow as white as salt. But now when [...] she talks of where she lives in Antwerp, she describes it as a botched dream" (Unigwe 2010, 24).

The daily panic these women suffer distorts their souls as they try to work covertly, dodging the authorities, amidst the intense fear of deportation. One of the women eventually loses her life in the pursuit of her ambitions overseas, a bloody death that reveals to those alive that their lives are also in danger. The ensuing dislocation of the mind is so excruciating that it bursts open their past lives of pain and penury in Nigeria, leading to revelations of shocking secrets. The aftermath of the sudden death is isolation from the country they have travelled miles and miles to embrace.

This squares with the self-confessions of alienation that Teju Cole also explores in his novel, *Open City* (2012), which tells the story of a migrant doctor who struggles with loneliness and displacement, searching for a satisfying purpose in New York. Julius, the protagonist, has access to most things a migrant would wish for—a good medical fellowship, an unbridled indulgence in his hobbies of arts and music, and the

resources to travel around the world untrammelled—and yet he fails to come to terms with what his soul is really searching for. Wielding his smart facility for picturesque descriptions, Julius feels he belongs to everywhere, yet he belongs to nowhere and to nobody—having even severed his relationship with his girlfriend. With every city he visits, he tries to lay claim to it but ends up not doing so. Home, for him, then becomes unending peregrinations of a body in crisis, a body so restless its destinations become liminal and unpredictable. His body operates with a soul so disturbed and warped that it can neither understand nor seem to uphold the body in which it exists.

As in these novels, so in Mbue's writing, mental damage occurs when there is a gap between what migrants know in advance and what they experience personally on arriving at their various destinations. Just when people think they have discovered opportunities to make significant feats, something unexpected strikes to upset everything. Hence, this state of despair often prompts the migrants to use the achievements of their closest associates, especially when they seem to be highly successful, to stabilise their fidgety minds and reassess their survival strategies going forward. Willy-nilly, these allies also tend to serve as yardsticks for measuring the unconfirmed glories that lie ahead.

Accordingly, Jende and Neni are bedazzled by the wealth of their American employers, Cindy Edwards and Clark Edwards, and they use this affluent family as a barometer of the material comfort and certainty of America. Always through the Edwardses' mirrors, the African immigrant couple glimpse the future of what they could become in America if they tackle their immigration obstacles head on. While the Edwardses represent financial success, Obama symbolises political triumph, domineering on a wider scale. However, all of them are dreamers in struggle, aiming at the zenith. Interestingly, Obama is a robust campaigner of dreams. Although these visions might sometimes be hollow, stymied by economic recessions and political stalemate, he is staunchly committed to the bravery of hoping and its audacious results that could lead to surprising change.

In this thesis, I will interpret this change to mean not just an alteration or a shift but a quest for hybridity—an attempt at unbundling into multiple personalities, yet fused together—which is one of the briefs of Afropolitanism. Afropolitans who cling to Obama's philosophy of audacity might do so due to his academic feats and political leaning. He has promoted a brand of liberalism that would allow immigrants to "earn their legal status after a lengthy and rigorous process" (Miranda 2010, n.p.). As

President in 2012, he promulgated the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which would see a high percentage of illegal migrants, especially those under the age of sixteen, to acquire some legal "opportunities to previously inaccessible driver's licenses and work permits" (Vaquera, Aranda, and Sousa-Rodriguez 2017, 299). The beneficiaries of the DACA were called the Dreamers, a term to which Mbue's title alludes. Jende and Neni are clearly not under-sixteen teenagers and have not arrived in America through the migration of their own parents, yet they are called the *Dreamers* in Mbue's narrative, implying perhaps that their dream is just empty, meaningless, and ghostlike. It is a nightmare that will eventually torment them—a "daylightmare" actually—as they are not qualified to benefit from Obama's lofty dream—while amounting to yet another of those exposures of the American dream so common in US literary history.

Conversely, if Mbue has succeeded in putting a sword through the couple's Afropolitan dream, shattering it, she instantly reverses herself by splashing the word "Behold" into the novel's title. With this, she appears to advertise her Afropolitans to the American audience, eliciting empathy for their plights. "Behold" itself is a linguistically archaic word, rarely used in everyday conversations, but it is imbued with some biblical sensibility that makes it sympathetically attractive for the story Mbue is telling. She seems to say, "See, these are the real American dreamers; they are the most deserving of American citizenship, not the DACA's under-sixteens. Please, do something to save these suffering Africans!"

She gives the impression of politicising the Afropolitan dilemma without seeming to engage in any form of politicking. Hers is a creative brand of lobbying. Here, her deployment of a two-faced, ambivalent satire suggests an attempt to please both the left and the right simultaneously. While she intercedes for her Afropolitans, she showcases them for America's inspection and scrutiny like items in store windows. And one might conclude that this is a right authorial choice because the DACA itself has been instituted and promoted as a bipartisan scheme. However, irrespective of where and how the political pendulum swings as regards the DACA, Jende and Neni remain illegal migrants, and the unnerving smoke of their deportation continues to billow around their consciousness.

Interestingly, Jende and Neni's desire to be an amalgam of Cameroonian and American distinctiveness is genuine, and they are not incorrect to feel unsatisfied when the pursuit of that desire lets them down. But I argue that their state of affairs in

America contradicts the Afropolitan hybridity due to their cultural isolation and the illegality of their immigration status. They are rejected by the American immigration system, yet they seem to be in solidarity with the ambience of their misery because of an untested future they have both perceived to be in their favour. In many ways, *Behold the Dreamers* is a portrayal of characters who are willing to achieve a new level of social and economic repute, even if it means inflicting mental damage on themselves. They make themselves victims in order to seek the sympathy of another set of victims whose circumstances might even be worse. As Mbue portrays the psychic injury that occurs in Jende and Nene, she also depicts the same in Cindy and Clark. All of them are victims of the shattered American dream, although each set of marital union suffers the setback in dissimilar ways.

As a consequence, Mbue reacts to this dissimilarity by offering a mode of satire that is unsure of its outcomes, yet sure of its intentions. And accomplishing these things has raised some critical questions: how has her adoption of dialectical satire revealed the jeopardy of her characters' goals? Is the narrative poking a hole in Jende and Neni's collective dream about America and their fantasy regarding the country's endless possibilities? By juxtaposing two racially different families, how has Mbue exposed their racial differences and challenged the notion of reliability at both family and societal levels? How has Mbue manipulated the tropes of her satire to achieve such ambivalence in *Behold the Dreamers* without seeming to pander to the left or to the right political ideologies? What collateral losses are Jende and Neni likely to suffer as a result of their inexorable ambition to achieve riches and citizenship like their white employers? Given that the illusion about the American dream is wide, varied, and often elusive, is the couple's American dream totally empty and purposeless? Relating to the emulation between two different families, how is the novel structured on the comparisons between two sets of dreamers who seem very dissimilar but have related goals?

Mbue's oeuvre to date clearly shows her fascination with what one might call an interplay of outsiders looking inside and insiders looking outside. It is an insatiable search for fullness beyond one's immediate sphere of certainty. The risk is often glaring and avoidable, yet her characters pluck the courage to plunge into the fray. *Behold the Dreamers* and her second novel, *How Beautiful We Were* (2021), embody characters in continuous transitions from one vulnerable state to another. *Behold the Dreamers* deals with Africans migrating to the global north to escape the penury and

ruins of home. In contrast, *How Beautiful We Were* demonstrates how the people of the global north overtake Africa by using the power of crooked commerce, plundering the continent and upsetting its environment as they explore for petroleum and natural gas. This devastation often leads to resentment and protests that give rise to freedom fighters and dreamers. The second novel, for example, surveys a larger-than-life revolutionary named Thula who has to migrate abroad to equip herself with a solid education and return home to fight a mammoth petroleum company and its financial gluttony. Mbue tells Beer (2021) that her writing is "about a community pushing back against corporate imperialism, [...] about hope and dreams" (n.p.). These characters are never stable in their movements, but their goals remain unaltered no matter the terrain. Her characters often travel to an unknown locality to achieve some goals but end up being trapped and repelled. And the repression may arise from the citizens, laws and customs, or just the natural climate.

However, I am interested in exploring what compels Africans to emigrate to the western world, as captured by *Behold the Dreamers*. *Behold* devotes its length to investigating what African migrants become as soon as they abandon the continent. Afropolitanism alters them, transforming their goals into delusions. These migrants abandon who they used to be and create façades of themselves for presentation to their hosts, convincing their minds to trust their own façades. They immerse themselves in the mores of far-off societies, displaying their frustration in ignorance and their sanity in knowledge. This is a situation that seems to compel Mbue to make extensive use of cautious satire in *Behold the Dreamers*, an ambiguous sort of sarcasm and ridicule, but still satire. One instance of this is when Jende looks at his would-be employer's desk and sees an Obama headline that reads, "WHITES' GREAT HOPE?" (Mbue 2017, 5). Sometimes, it feels as if her satiric force of execution appears ambivalent, as though afraid to spear the satiric targets directly and noticeably. But I argue that this is Mbue's deliberate ploy to play at aloofness while driving home a vital point through hesitant sarcasm. At other times though, her objective is obvious. Hodgart (1969) opines that "[t]he art of the satirist lies in timing [...]. He [or she] must choose the moment to drop his [or her] mask and make his [or her] intention perfectly clear" (130-131).

BEHOLD THE DREAMERS: FAMILY, OBSESSIONS, AND DELUSIONS

Mbue demonstrates the tensions associated with emulative ambitions by placing side by side two racially different families, American and African, highlighting the cracks

that exist between them in a comparative manner. Family in *Behold the Dreamers,* therefore, becomes a facilitator of strategies, a space in which married couples can experiment with their collective wills and capabilities. The partners evaluate their strengths, aware of their weaknesses, alert to their opportunities, also taking cognizance of their threats. Also, the two families are in a non-competitive connection and the notion of one-upmanship is ruled out, but the dissatisfaction in both families is apparent. In the American family, there is a grave discomfort beneath the grandeur of their prime assets. Clark Edwards is in the throes of losing his job to bankruptcy. Addicted to drugs, Cindy Edwards is miserable underneath the glamour of her finery, always suspicious of her husband's infidelity. Having grown up in poverty, she no longer recognises such pain now. But she feels that, as a white adult, hardship is honourable for only Black people. She condescendingly tells Neni that "[b]eing poor [...] in Africa is fine. Most of you are poor over there" (Mbue 2017, 123). Here, Mbue exposes the aloofness of America's blinkered capitalism and the limitations of it. While mocking it for how it disconnects white people from the reality that they should have all been familiar with, she interrogates the chink in family cohesiveness using Cindy's first son who would rather prefer to grow up poor in a less-privileged family, like that of Jende and Neni. The young son fights vigorously to emigrate to India, desirous to prove that universal understanding should not be coated in white and wealth only.

And despite the obvious inequality between the American and African families, Mbue puts them in conversation with each other, deploying her own kind of satire that attacks and un-attacks its target at the same time. Her dialectical approach to satire, in which every facet of her investigations also contains the nucleus of the contradictory side, makes room for coming to terms with how persons and entities can split apart in unexpected ways. The merits and demerits of each part are revealed simultaneously. For instance, she uses the perils of the American family to highlight the glories of the African one, and the converse is equally true. The result is that the tensions, conflicts, and loopholes of ambition are laid bare. The Edwardses' children wish to be as bare and simple as Jende and Neni's children, who could grow up in America and pick up disquieting behaviour that is totally the opposite of their African parents' moral budgets. Jende and Neni could become rich, holding American passports, and yet still remain unsatisfied and dreary like the Edwardses.

Frankly, Jende and Neni understand that their strength lies in their youthful energy that does not give any hint of waning, irrespective of the winds of adversities

blowing them from side to side. They are also mindful that they are fundamentally constrained by their lack of legitimate papers. Nonetheless, American opportunities seem limitless if they can find ways to subvert their obstacles. Jende would become one of African men who are "American passport-bearing conquerors with pockets full of dollars [...]" (Mbue 2017, 19). Neni would become a pharmaceutical expert handing "out health and happiness in pill bottles" (14). And their children would stand a chance to attend the best American universities. They are Afropolitans after all, and they are in America, "to grapple with the precise nature of [...] sociocultural and material transformations" (Ibironke 2021, 790). They are willing to avail themselves of every opportunity to reconcile any discrepancies noticed in their immigration papers and provide the American authorities with any information, whether genuine or forged, to legalise their stay in America, thus taking cautionary steps towards their Afropolitan goals.

Hence, Jende and Neni are wayfarers who exhibit remarkable resistance to adversities, who reject their restrictions and continue to intermingle with the world, refusing to despair, as their tolerance quotient is immense. However, it proves difficult to attain any level of transformation without being adequately informed about the laws and social conventions of a system, especially when it is foreign and different. It is even tougher if such a system requires thorough knowledge of technical barriers (scientific or legal) and long years of interactions so as to be immersed in the unwritten rules. In fact, the weight of cultural barriers to integration are far heavier than their legal and economic counterparts, which are often in black and white, and can be swiftly studied and mastered. Because Jende and Neni cannot get adequate support, they lack the means of meaningful pursuits. They put themselves into mental and physical distress by creating a false impression that looks genuine to them.

Nevertheless, they are still fixated about their new country. Neni puts it effusively, "I am in America, I am truly in America" (Mbue 2017, 13). This obsession is what sets off their numerous attempts to manipulate immigration rules and laws in order to stay put, even when it has become obvious that, as immigrants, they have become unwanted residents. And because they cannot work legally, they become impoverished—Afropolitans without substance. Yet they cannot summon the courage to return to their home country where deprivation is even heavier and more humiliating. In fact, the thought of giving up tortures their minds more than the act of giving up itself, because returning home might be greeted with disappointment by

those left behind. Besides, an acknowledgment of failure might prompt the people returning home to see their personalities and dreams as previously worthless, their current lives as substandard, leading them to conclude that their future is already blighted with unreserved futility.

Hence, these migrants shove themselves into strenuous manoeuvres to live in the overseas territories by any means possible. The reason is that those they have left behind in Africa regard them highly as role models, expecting material riches, superior education, savviness, physical beauty, and sound health from them. Knowing that these things are the societal expectations back home, the migrants creep into anxious gambits abroad so as to measure up to these standards. The truth is that the idea of migration can be exciting at first, considering the eagerness to see new places and experience their cultures. That desire to move overseas, settle in permanently there, and rise above ancestral poverty seems irresistible. Besides, the initial thrill of the entire process can be empowering. Hence, for Africans who intend to pursue their life goals overseas, the force of their dreams is always in motion and fascinating. It is a kinetic force that may be difficult to curtail, often more powerful than every attempt to return home. But a dream can be extremely subjective, containing risks that might eradicate every possibility of achieving it.

On the contrary, a dream can be productive because the worst nightmare can contain the seed for a startling growth, fruitfulness, and fulfilment of one's vision. Jende and Neni recognise these factors, throwing every dice in expectation of a favourable outcome and buoyed by the presence of Obama the dreamer and the Edwardses the bourgeoisies—their role models. Jende degenerates into an Uncle Tom of sorts, always willing to appease the whites, yet unhappy with the white-sanctioned system that tries to exclude his ambitions. At times, he so devalues himself to such an obsequious level that it surprises his employer, Clark Edwards, telling the posh American, "I came from nothing. [...] My father is a poor man. Cameroon has nothing" (Mbue 2017, 40). This is a satire of self-deprecation, but the author goes on to reduce its impact with "my son will grow up to be a great man like you" (46). This epitomises a dream whose hopefulness is at best hesitant and uncertain. Using Clark's success as a point of reference for the triumphant future of his nascent family presupposes an assuredness about his American citizenship. This presumption instantly echoes back his self-delusion. It seems as if the more Africans-in-need associate with whites, the more they lose their Black self-worth. They become servile to white authorities and

personalities, especially when they travel overseas. As Fanon (2008) writes, “When the negro makes contact with the white world, [...] one observes a collapse of ego” (119). It is all an act of desperation, necessitated by the urgency of the problem at hand, as dreamers and hopers do not often surrender too early.

The restless isolation experienced by Afropolitans in Mbue’s writing can be compared to the alienation explored by Teju Cole in *Open City*. Cole’s main character, Julius, often detaches himself from others wherever he goes, from street to street and shop to shop, wanting no interaction with everyone around, despite his relative comfort and top medical education. Avoiding group relations, he views communication with others as an obstacle towards comprehending his own mind. Even in the presence of his respectable former teacher, Professor Saito, Julius deliberately loses himself on visiting the sick old man one day at home. Julius narrates, “I became like one who was no longer there [...] understanding [...] at a certain distance” (Cole 2012, 171). Julius’s edginess also looks to be similar to Jende and Neni’s in its tendency to be selfish. While Julius suffers from self-induced isolation, Jende and Neni grapple with the society-induced variant, seeming to be surrounded by high walls on all sides. Besides, there is a curious contrast between Neni’s and Julius’s needs, which appear to be as edifying as they are at odds with each other. While Neni hopes that establishing her name in the medical field as a pharmacist would help her to attain the much-needed acceptance in America, Julius already has his name established medically. He is a sought-after psychiatrist, yet his sense of inclusiveness and excitement remains distant. In his case, he seeks no recourse to Obama and his grand promises.

This frantic, yet elusive, pursuit of diasporic dreams affects migrants in several unpredictable ways, including but not limited to health impairment, acculturation, self-withdrawal, microaggression, alienation, and physical violence. All this comes with a diasporic life defined by a never-ending restlessness. It is the incessant mental and physical frustration that results from the deficiencies of birthplace and the diaspora fraught with failed promises. For this reason, there is a sudden effort to adjust to new and often unexpected harsh realities. As Jende and Neni’s world begin to crumble, their interaction with everyone goes transactional as they explicitly focus on what is gainful towards their specific goals. They become self-blinding on purpose, willing to compromise their values in an attempt to devolve into multiple identities they so hungrily desire. Lare (2019) confirms that “[w]ithin the global process of

acculturation is a more intensified absorption of life for new African immigrants" (249). Thus, Neni unbundles herself and dislocates her mind, ready "to be of Africa and of other worlds at the same time" (Gikandi 2011, 9). She kicks off a process to marry another man while still being married to Jende, and she puts up her son for adoption, so as to keep up appearances in America that might legally be hers someday.

In such a migrant family, the partners are at liberty to pursue their individual goals, but there is a snag because the partners have to carry each other along. They have to seek each other's approval before contracting and committing to an obligation. This could lead to bickering, a waste of time, and a loss of rare opportunities, which would not occur if the individuals were unmarried and free to act swiftly and independently. When Neni informs Jende about a New York church that promises to assist them with their immigration worries, he gets angry and asks, "You didn't think you should tell me before going?" (Mbue 2017, 235). Although Mbue here satirises the effort to scoop the sympathies of white liberals, Neni's subsequent apology to Jende does not stop her, which Jende finds upsetting. Ultimately, Neni's quest to reconfigure her identity to achieve a hybrid personality—feminist, Afropolitan, cross-culturally American—is frustrated by marriage and migration: an awful quagmire. For most inexperienced migrants like her, their personal abilities and reach may be grossly inadequate for plotting a safe route out of difficult situations, and so they may require the use of go-betweens to achieve their aims.

Behold the Dreamers can therefore be categorised as a tale of contacts, intercessors, people leaning on people and things. One might call this the agency factor, which enables migrants to sprint from one point to another in their quest for self-actualisation. This includes not only physical movement, but also the acquisition of vital information to increase their knowledge base, which would enable them to take productive decisions in their new city. As Mbue tells Moog (2016), "[t]he immigration system is complex and it often helps to have an excellent lawyer" (n.p). Such a professional assistance represents a crucial addition to the plethora of voices interceding for the migrants. Eventually, Afropolitans might need the services of maps, gadgets, hotels, taxis, airports, compasses, post offices, trains, financial and governmental institutions, the media, documents, archives, and much more.

These intercessors play important roles in Mbue's universe of interdependencies. Such a necessity of interdependency is difficult to discard in everyday life, let alone during the translocation of people, especially for new migrants

arriving for the first time in strange territories whose cultures and sensibilities are different and puzzling. These migrants must therefore rely on the services of both human and non-human proxies to find jobs, accommodation, and papers in order to settle in properly, curtailing their displacements. Mediators can help to reduce the confusions and cognitive dissonance of migrants to a manageable level. In any case, it is the duty of satire to provide “relief from tension” (Hodgart 1969, 108), and Mbue’s writing fulfils this mandate, itself acting as an intercessor.

There are sequences in her novel when Mbue seems to satirize her own experiences of working in New York and losing her job. Interrogating her encounters through her novel bestows some metafictional truth to her narrative. The novel itself becomes an intercessor for the Afropolitans of the future who might be interested in New York as a place to explore. So, for Jende to find a job in New York, for example, a career counsellor puts together a professional résumé for him, since he has never before used such a document for a job search. While satirising Jende’s unfamiliarity with the western recruitment processes, she demonstrates how the means of familiarisation can be full of bureaucracy that may upset the goals of an unprepared Afropolitan. In the same vein, she reifies the value of the agency factor and the trust that comes with it, because Jende only secures the job through the word of mouth, which comes from his friend’s friend convincing his would-be employer.

And despite the reprieve from his job, Jende’s delusions continue to fester, persuading him that seeking to subvert the tough immigration system of America is a realisable imagination. In his identity crisis, he fails to understand that if a person is illegal in a country, everything the person achieves in that country would also be illegal. His mind becomes a series of mirages, his perspective lopsided, his personality deprived of self-dependence. As such, Mbue casts a critical eye on the high hopes of Afropolitanism, which frowns on all forms of mutilations and illegalities. “[B]eing [Afropolitan] must *mean* something [good]” (Selasi 2013, 529, emphasis Selasi’s). As a corollary, it condemns dealing with international people strictly for the inducement of personal gains or aggrandisements. Afropolitanism is therefore a celebration of the autonomy to intensify the aspirations of Africans beyond the boundaries of their territories, whether local or foreign. It brooks neither self-enacted nor society-imposed restrictions.

But if living abroad means choking an existing system with falsifications, perversions, and all sorts of injustice, then the phenomenon of Afropolitanism is

defeated. It demands a commitment to international dignity to belong to "a class of globetrotters that identify as citizens of the world who willingly traverse geographies" (Steinfeld 2018, 2). For Jende, however, his misguided assessment of the economic buoyancy of America has polluted his mind for a long time, distorting his views about who he really is and what he should realistically earn, given his level of education and immigration status. He does not want to be confined within the definitions of immigration borders. He craves for a liminal existence that erases borders, enabling him to take advantage of limitless opportunities. Moyo (2008) elucidates:

> "[T]he term 'border', whilst somewhat resonant with the reality of postcolonial African migration, connotes restrictions and implies boundaries which [...] are largely imaginary social constructs. The idea of the border emphasises difference and perpetuates the notion of a binary split between dominant modes. The liminal, on the other hand, allows for a more fluid conception of cultures where a modest space remains for those who dwell on the margins of cultures" (88).

Nevertheless, liminality cannot stand on foundations of illegality. That's why, as soon as Jende notices that he has contravened his Afropolitan dignity through his futile attempts at manipulating the system illegally, he loses every interest in crafting an American persona because his personality has been moulded by his false perceptions. Now every occupational and commercial promise of America repulses him. He ceases all attempts at amending his daily existence like a loss-making business venture that must be broadened to make multiple profits and please his investors. He loses the spark to be a fickle hybrid of Cameroon and America, a personality who is fluid enough to wobble through the dictates of two cultures, yet not malleable enough to adapt totally to the mores and laws of either. He allows his cross-cultural nightmares to cease tormenting him because his Blackness is calling him home.

Indeed, Jende's dreams have been shattered. Nothing can motivate him to continue staying abroad because all his attempts have been thwarted at every phase of trying to make himself adapt and adaptable. Ultimately, his impression seems to be consistent with the views of Sussman (2000) who argues that "[f]or sojourners who have low motivation to succeed, the sociocultural adaptation phase is subverted at the stage of cultural identity salience" (364). Hence, redeeming himself from all his false

beliefs, Jende becomes resolute about his new sincerity and discovers the preciousness of his homeland, including its untapped opportunities for his future happiness and liberty in Africa.

PART TWO: THE CREATIVE COMPONENT

VOLTA:

A Novel

"In that memorable year, 1822: Oersted, a Danish physicist, held in his hands a piece of copper wire, joined by its extremities to the two poles of a Volta pile. On his table was a magnetized needle on its pivot, and he suddenly saw (by chance you will say, but chance only favours the mind which is prepared) the needle move and take up a position quite different from the one assigned to it by terrestrial magnetism."

– Louis Pasteur

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

2015

CHAPTER ONE

Landed in Heathrow, stunned by its bustle and grandeur, I stand in line, waiting for an immigration officer. On reaching him, I see his eyes are almost the colour of the dirty water in Lagos lagoon—the memory of where I've fled from startles me. When I let him know of my wish to claim asylum, he nods and asks me to follow him. I have to comply with the British regulations, one of which demands that all asylum seekers must, upon arrival, present themselves to the Border Force and take part in an introductory catechism conducted by the officials.

The immigration man turns around and walks briskly through a narrow hallway, his black boots pummelling the gleaming floor. His big belt is so tight around his waist that I worry it might bruise his lower abdomen. I skitter after him, moving as fast as he does. He stops in front of a door, turns the knob, and pushes it open. Standing aside, he tells me to enter inside the silent room, full of light, and sit down. His left hand also gestures for me to move in.

"He's here for a screening interview," he tells a woman who's also in a uniform. She's chubby. They must feed them well here in the United Kingdom. She's seated at a large desk inside the room painted in mint green. I've read somewhere that this is the colour used in mental asylums in this country. She nods, stopping to type on her black keyboard, and looks up at me as I pull a beige chair to sit across from her. As the man with the eyes of Lagos lagoon shuts the door and leaves, the woman swiftly cleans her spectacles and puts them back on. She slips out a sheet of paper from her drawer and squints at me. Curiosity shrinks my heart, flattening my stomach. What will she ask me?

"Would you be needing an interpreter?" she asks with a slight smile, her lips coated with a glossy red.

"No, I speak good English."

"Fantastic," she says, nodding. "What's your name and country of origin?"

"Tulugo Okoye, from Nigeria."

"Your age?"

"I'm twenty-four."

I'd love for her to speak a little louder, but there's nothing I can do about it. She lets out a stifled yawn. Maybe she's worked all night. As she takes down my ethnic group, languages spoken, job, faith, and family members, her long blonde hair falls

over her face. Sometimes she writes; other times, she simply ticks some checkboxes, all the while gathering her yellowy strands of hair and flinging them behind her shoulders.

"Could you tell me how you came into the UK?" she asks, staring at me, her pen ready.

"I boarded a direct flight from Lagos, Nigeria. British Airways."

As she nods and writes, I tremble, wondering why this question is necessary. Maybe she's suspected I'm an illegal, encroaching upon her country. When she asks why I'm claiming asylum, my tears surge back but I control myself. I tell her my father was a high court judge and he was murdered in Lagos. He was killed just because he insisted on looking at the substance of cases, not at the flimsy tricks from Nigerian lawyers and their clients. His assassins also pursued me, determined to snuff out my life, so I fled.

She sighs and shakes her head. "Could you also tell me where you'll live henceforth?"

The question shakes me. If I say I have nowhere to stay, will she call for my detention or send me back to my country without delay? I shiver while forming an answer in my head. But when I remember that I have a valid three-month visa, my confidence surges back. My friend, Deji Williams in London, sent me his house address, which I used for my visa application in Lagos. I swipe my phone to search for the address.

"I'll live with a friend at 34A Charterhouse Street, Islington, London, EC1M 6JZ," I say, slowly, looking at my iPhone screen.

She nods as she pens it down.

"And I guess your friend can take care of you while the asylum process lasts, right?" she says, nodding and smiling faintly, her head tilted to one side.

I hope her smile isn't dishonest. One of my relatives often says that if a foreign smile and a snake come into your home, chase away the smile and keep the snake. Although I'm not sure if this is true, I still have to be careful with my answers in this room, hoping that my interviewer's smile is genuine. My mother's best friend, Aunty Bimbo, has told me to speak the truth to the British at all times, adding that they hate lies and love truths, just the way Queen Elizabeth loves all the citizens of the Commonwealth.

"Yes, my friend is accomplished," I tell my interviewer. "He's a scientist, an Oxford graduate actually, working for a research company in London, and he's paid gainfully well."

"Fantastic," she says, writing. "Have you any medical problems?"

"Not one that I know of, but my only challenge seems to be psychological."

She glares her surprise at me. "Could you tell me more about that?"

I sigh. "Sometimes, I feel like the earth should stop rotating. And I often assume that the human endeavour to extend life on earth and live long is meaningless—and also fruitless."

"Could you repeat that, please?"

My anxiety briefly deletes my memory. I stare up at the immaculate ceiling, awash with bright bulbs, trying to remember exactly what I've just said. I say it again, later realising I've left out the last part of the sentence.

"Would you like to have a male or female interviewer during your substantive interview coming up at a later date?"

I want an interviewer who's sympathetic, who'll be patient with me throughout the lengthy session. Between a man and a woman, I wonder who's more compassionate to help me succeed through the complicated asylum processes. I feel women are more generous and humane than men. Besides, my mother and Aunty Bimbo are my immediate role models.

"A female interviewer," I burst out.

The immigration woman nods and writes, saying I'll receive my Application Registration Card at my indicated address within a few days. The card will show I've applied for asylum, also specifying if I've been allowed to work. Hoping the information on the card will be in my favour, I heave a sigh of reprieve, certain that this initial screening test bodes well for me.

"Where and when will the big interview take place?" I ask her.

"Most likely in Croydon, South London, but we'll be in touch with you before the scheduled date."

She scans my passport, takes my photograph and fingerprints, makes photocopies of the form she's just filled in, and hands me a copy. Her politeness has wiped away my fears, and I breathe calmly. She shakes my hand, bidding me farewell. I'm taken aback by the swiftness of the entire process. It hasn't even lasted up an hour, just a few minutes shy of an hour.

I step out of Heathrow's baggage claim, dragging my suitcase into the exit foyer, and see Deji Williams's head, full of rich hair, an Afro hairstyle. He cranes his neck looking out for me, towering above everyone else who's waiting to receive an arrival. His winter coat sports a hoodie that falls around the back of his neck and shoulders, and he appears to struggle to keep his plump stomach steady inside the tight-fitting coat. His jeans, taut at the thighs, are almost erupting. As soon as he sees me, he bursts out smiling, his dark face set alight by the excitement of seeing me in London. His eyeballs bulge in awe as his mouth exclaims, "Ah, that's Tulugo; my posh Aristoguy is finally here. Tulu-Tulu."

He paces towards me, one trainer stomp after another until we're close enough to hug, shouting each other's names.

"Deji, I lack the appropriate words to thank you and your mum, Aunty Bimbo, for bringing me to London," I say, pulling myself from his tight embrace. "It's become difficult for me to formulate my gratitude."

"Oh, don't worry about that," he says. "Mum and I haven't done anything special for you. Your dad's brutal death was heartbreaking, but you have to be strong, Tulu. You see, eh? Sometimes, mighty trees have to shed their leaves in order to grow larger boughs and remain stronger."

We step aside and walk to a corner, so we don't obstruct the movement of other people still awaiting arrivals. He strides with so much vigour, almost a swagger, oozing loudly the buoyancy of his health.

"Look, Deji, you seem taller than you were the last time you came to Lagos, right? Ahh-Ahh, are you still growing up at twenty-eight?"

He laughs, his husky tone pummelling my eardrums. "I'm sure you're suffering from flight sickness."

"Flight sickness?"

"Yeah, some people go through such brief sickness the moment they step out of an aircraft, and I guess it's affected you."

"I don't understand, Deji. Please don't start your barefaced cheek here. This is London, and it's more serious about everything than our happy-go-lucky Lagos."

"Yeah, that's true," he says, his dark face shimmering under the light bulbs. "I'm sure it's the same seriousness that makes you consider short people tall, and the tall

ones taller. It can afflict anyone stepping out from a long flight. It's even worse when you arrive in a developed city like London for the very first time."

"Is this some proven science?" I ask, narrowing my eyes.

He chuckles. "I'm trying to diagnose your aviation disorder."

"Stop it, Deji; I'm healthy," I insist. "And I'm robust."

"I haven't said you're not." He pats my shoulder and continues to giggle, his thick lips, pure red from birth, blooming like red roses on his dark face. "Calm down, Tulu. I'm just pulling your leg. Anyway, it's great to have you here, my man. You must be jetlagged, having flown through the night to arrive so early this morning."

I sigh. "Now, you're talking. I'm not fatigued, but my legs ache from standing for long hours, waiting to get through the border authorities."

"It's the upshot of this government's policy," he says, nodding and smoothing his well-tended beard. It covers more than half of his cheeks and hangs down in a dense bunch under his chins and lower jaw. "At the moment, almost everything is screwed up in this country, struggling with what the British call Cameronomics. Those border guys work long shifts, and by early morning they're all drained. The people at Number Ten say they're cutting down on the costs of governance, so they're reluctant to employ more government workers."

His explanation reminds me of my dead father, his ability to expound and argue and justify his points until saliva gathered at the corners of his lips, and he would wipe it away with his handkerchief and continue to explain.

Deji takes my suitcase and pushes down the handle. He doesn't roll it on the floor, like I've been doing. Instead, he lifts it up and places it on his shoulder, asking me to follow him to the train station. Some white people swing their faces to stare at him, at us, as if they haven't ever seen anyone carrying a load on their shoulder.

When we step outside the airport building, the frosty wind smacks my face hard, sending chills all over me. The cold is criminal, to be honest, threatening to rob me of my new life that hasn't even kicked off. White flakes are pouring from the cloudy sky, settling on my skin, and turning to water on impact. I stop, while Deji walks on, to pull my warm jacket out of my backpack and wriggle into it. When I ask him to wait for me a bit, thick fog gushes out of my mouth and nostrils, startling me. He turns around, stops, and breaks out laughing.

"It's not even cold this week, and you're shivering like a rabbit's ear," he teases. "On a deeply cold day, what would you do? Freeze to death? Just wait until the middle or end of January, a few weeks ahead, and see how bad the cold will become."

"I don't care whether this is the middle or tail of winter," I say. "I'm already having a cold fever."

"But how could you even wear a T-shirt to get on a London-bound flight?"

"It was warm in Lagos when I left, although the airline gave me a blanket, a very thick one. This crazy cold is too much for my precious health."

"Ah, of course, you're an over-pampered son of a rich man."

"Don't remind me of my glorious past, Deji. My grief is still raw."

He steps closer and palms my back. "Don't worry, Tulu, my man. Tulu-Tulu, I'm sorry, and I hope you'll heal in time. It's all in the past now, you know. Like water, the pain will soon dry up."

I don't nod, although I hope to repair and rebuild myself soon. If Deji says so, then it must be true. He knows Britain better than I do. He's lived and worked here for years, and he has a good degree in Biomedical Science from Oxford University. That Oxford confidence even shows in the way he walks, with heavy footsteps that bang the ground. His big eyes strike everything they see with the audacity of a bomb. Sometimes, I have to look away not because I'm afraid of him, but because I'd like to see something else.

As we both move towards the train station, we meet a petite white woman who stops suddenly near the aluminium wall. The walkway is a tunnel with overhead lights. It's wide enough to contain almost five people who would never be close enough for their skin to rub against one another. I wonder why she's halted all of a sudden, because only the three of us are on the walkway now.

"Why did that woman wait aside for us to pass?" I ask Deji when she's no longer within earshot.

Deji chuckles. "That's the British etiquette."

"Wonderful," I burst out. "I have a lot to learn and imbibe."

"Yes, it's a society of beautiful courtesies, simple but profound."

He clutches the suitcase handle and unhooks it, releasing its long silver lever. This time, holding the handle, he starts to roll my heavy box on the ground, no more humping it on his shoulder. The ground shakes as he stomps ahead. I follow him as we walk down a ramp that slopes into another long passageway. I think about the woman's

refined behaviour and how I'll behave in the midst of white people. But I must not let it bother me too much. What matters most is that I have Deji Williams, and he's the most important person to me now. I've just arrived, and I suppose that I'll get the clear picture of what these etiquettes mean after some time.

When he told me three weeks ago that he lives in Islington, I googled it and found it's a classy neighbourhood, which warmed my heart, still does. Now I guess he has the best accommodation there for us both, the type of home that parallels my father's mansion in Lagos. By and large, I'm deeply excited that he still behaves Nigerian, talking in whispers that shriek, a deep baritone which makes people turn their heads to look at him. Besides, he hasn't acquired a British accent, hasn't yet disconnected his mouth from his native sound, a grating trait common with most returnees in Lagos, even if they've only been to Ghana or South Africa.

"Deji, I see you don't yet have a British way of speaking," I say, my voice low, as we stand alongside others on the platform, awaiting the train. "It seems you don't even make any effort to have one."

He strokes his beard briefly, bending his neck to look sideways at me, appearing mischievous. "You want to hear my Bri-eesh accent, innit? With a nice inflection, innit? First, lemme drink from yor bor-or wor-aaa." He pulls my small bottle of water from my hand and sips a little. "Will tell my folks on Twi-aaa what you've just said."

"Stop it, Deji; you sound ridiculous," I say, sniggering. "Why have you swallowed all the Ts? Twitter, not Twi-aaa. Bottle of water, not bor-or wor-aaa. You punish my ears when you speak like that. Annunciate properly, for decency's sake."

"But you wanted to hear me sound British, didn't you?"

He speaks normally now.

"Yes, but that's not how the Queen and the broadcasters on the BBC World Service sound."

"Oh, that's the posh accent, Tulu. For the educated."

"That's the proper British accent I'm used to, the one I've expected to gush out of your mouth with the glibness of an Oxford graduate, the British accent they taught us at British Global College in Lagos, the exclusive school both of us attended, even though we graduated at different times."

He sighs. "Tulu, you see, eh? That accent they shoved into our mouths at BGC is a fake one. When I came here to go to Oxford, I struggled with it. People hardly understood me, so I had to learn the proper accent."

“The one that compels your tongue to delete all your Ts?”

“Not necessarily. But I also acquainted myself with a lot of English dialects: Scouse, Yorkshire, Cockney, Mancunian, Brummie—they all speak differently. I used to switch to the one necessary for what I wanted to achieve. But, later on, I stopped switching and decided to stick mostly to my Nigerian accent for daily interactions with people, but—”

“You mean I have to learn those accents you mentioned?”

“Yes, you’ll have to master them, keeping them under your tongue, to be used when a situation demands them. You see, eh? I have my office accent, my supermarket accent, my gym accent, my restaurant accent, my Tube-transport accent, and the one I use when I’m in the midst of my fellow Nigerians.”

“When is the most appropriate time to start these things?”

“Usually, at the beginning, so you can fit in quickly and be understood. Otherwise, these white people will keep frowning at you and saying, ‘Come again and come again and come again.’ And that annoys the shit out of me.”

My iPhone vibrates, buzzing, in my front pocket. I slip it out and squint, a bit miffed because I’m concerned another message has arrived from Vodafone. I’ve already received two while the airline was descending onto Heathrow’s runway, one message welcoming me to the United Kingdom, the other detailing the big-ticket costs of roaming for voice, data, and SMS.

But now I see a text message from my girlfriend Laura in Lagos instead, and I smile.

—hi tulu. have u arrived in london?

—yes, laura. a few hours ago. Here with Deji at the train station.

—ah, that’s great. pass on my regards to him.

—i sure will.

—your zodiac star has begun to align well.

—i’m not quite sure of that.

—why not?

—cos I see lots of challenges ahead of me here & i’m worried already.

—i know your life abroad will be all picaresque and episodic; you’ll be running from place to place in search of strength and permanence, but I believe you’ll succeed in london.

—alright, i hear you, babe.

—missing you already.

—likewise.

The train arrives, and we start to board. Nobody is rushing, neither shoving nor shouldering like people do in Lagos. Everywhere is calm. Turn by turn, the passengers are climbing onto the train in single file, like a calm stream flowing undisturbed into a big sea.

Inside, Deji and I take our seats, sitting next to one another, shoulder brushing against shoulder. My suitcase crouches between his legs. He's sitting near the window, and I near the middle aisle. Opposite us are two vacant seats that no one wants to sit on, and yet the train is full, and some people are standing and holding on to the steel bars on the roof of the train. I signal to a man just arriving and point at the two vacant seats, his frills the colour of Tipp Ex blurring his forehead. He glances at Deji and at me, shakes his head, and heads down the aisle.

"Is there any reason why these seats are still unoccupied?" I ask Deji.

He smiles. "Would you love to sit there?"

"Ahh-Ahh, how can I occupy two seats at a go?"

"You can. It's been reserved for us both."

"Reserved, how? Is this another etiquette?"

"Perhaps. In this section of the train, do you see anyone else that looks like the two of us?"

"None that I can see."

I stand up, canning my neck, as I survey the entire interior. As soon as I sit down, it dawns on me that Deji and I have become special commuters. We're alone.

About five minutes after the train has left the Heathrow station, at such high speed that it makes all the objects outside race backwards, Deji reclines, sighing. He frowns as if he's just recalled something unpleasant. He throws out his long legs and puts them on the vacant seat opposite him, still keeping my suitcase underneath his legs. I take the cue and do the same. A little white boy, about four years old with blonde hair, stares at me, standing and holding onto his mother. Then he gapes at my stretched-out legs and skitters towards me. He smiles, gazing up at me, the frills of his blonde hair almost covering his little eyes.

"Boy, how are you?" I mutter, beaming at him, too.

His mother grabs his hand and forcibly pulls him back to herself.

“Oh, no, take it easy with him,” I tell the mother, looking up at her. “He’s just a child who wants to play with everyone he sees outside. He knows nothing.”

“I don’t allow him to play with strrrangers,” the mother says, frowning, her R echoeing.

I fold up my legs, wondering why she’s had to yank the little boy backwards.

Deji laughs. “Madam, you almost detached your son’s hand from his body. It’s true all of us on this train are strangers, but we don’t bite one another.”

“Sorrrry,” she says.

She doesn’t even sound British, broiling her English with a tongue that seems so used to the Cyrillic alphabet that her R trembles. Perhaps, like me, she’s even a refugee. Perhaps, her parents brought her here when she was a teenager, having escaped from the disaster of the Chernobyl power station and saved from radiation poisoning. It’s a fact that refugees are always angry. No matter how you reform their mindsets, no matter how you refurbish where they live, their fury remains intact, radiating like a nuclear power plant. I can’t be the reason why she misbehaves. I guess she’s struggling with a more devastating demon.

The conversation has happened so quickly that most people didn’t even notice it. Some have fallen asleep, earpieces and headphones plugged to their ears, while others are busy reading—or pretending to read—newspapers and novels and magazines. But even those who have witnessed it, standing, have neither said nor done anything, not even something as little as a grimace. They’ve all kept straight faces, an indication they’re neither surprised nor concerned, all of them putting on an it’s-not-my-business attitude, which disappoints and annoys me.

When Deji and I disembark, we make our way out of Farringdon Station. It’s so busy and noisy that it reminds me of Lagos. We find the street that leads to his house. We’ve walked for about ten minutes when I begin to find Islington adorable for its order and tranquillity. Cars line the streets on both sides. I see no Toyota brands, which are so common among working-class Nigerians who go crazy with noisy parties whenever they manage to buy a second-hand one. But there are Peugeot brands, the symbols of power, incompetence, and corruption among Nigerian politicians and top civil servants. There are Fords, common among Nigerian returnees who remain at a loss in perpetuity as to why they left America and can’t go back. The Nissans here are quite many, in different shapes and sizes, a brand for Nigerians who detest paying their

mechanics or going to the filling station. In one or two places, I've seen my favourite, the Range Rovers that squat like frogs about to take a long leap. But I mute this thought of admiration for the Range Rovers so as not to trigger once again my thoughts of killing myself. All my lost pleasures of the past should remain in the past because I want only happiness in London.

Most houses in this district are multiple storeys, although not skyscrapers, and have no balconies. I wonder how the residents manage to stay in the rooms when the weather goes hot. Maybe they roast indoors or go to parks. There are trees, though, tucked between the buildings. Some streets sport really huge trees, but most of them are bare at this time of year. The few pigeons on the roofs look gloomy, seeming to mourn the loss of their green homes in the trees. Sometimes, they hop from place to place for a moment and wait, turning their necks.

Deji keeps bouncing as he walks, towing my suitcase behind him. "Ah, Tulu-Tulu, my Aristoguy," he enthuses, his voice rumbling. "Tulu-Tulu, I can't wait to show you around London. It's a gorgeous city, and I hope you enjoy it."

"I hope so, too," I say, walking by his side. "But I'm afraid it has many shades of people."

"You see, eh? Every country has its fair share of bad people. Your job is to brush them aside or stomp hard on them and keep moving." He pats my back twice with his left hand. "Tulu-Tulu, don't worry. You'll acclimatise, I'm sure."

He turns left into a wide street with flower gardens in front of the houses. I nod, delighted that one of them might be his apartment, freehold, not rented. But it doesn't look like he wants to slow down, the way people do when they're nearing the front doors of their homes. He paces ahead instead, even faster, and I can even hear his breath as I try to match his swift pace. At a junction, he slows down and presses the traffic button for pedestrians, and we await our turn.

I ask, "Deji, how many minutes remain until we get to your house?"

"We're going to my car, not to my house," he says.

"Oh, really? That's wonderful. I'm getting tired of walking for so long."

Crossing the road, he points to a large carpark. Behind the carpark is a gym with CROWN FITNESS CLUB emblazoned in bold white letters on a large red overhead board. On getting there he unlocks his car, a Nissan Armada, with a remote control that beeps twice. It's really a minibus, neither new nor old. He throws my suitcase into the large boot containing his hefty suitcase, as if he's about to embark on a distant

journey. His shoes are strewn on the brown-carpeted floor. His trainers are jumbled on top of his dusty boots and unpolished office shoes that might otherwise have been pristine if properly displayed on a shoe rack. A large plastic bowl by the corner contains his square mirror, two toothbrushes—one has shrunk thistles, the other new—combs, hair and body creams. There's an uncapped tube of Colgate toothpaste flattened in the middle. On his suitcase is his dark-blue towel, so thick that I worry briefly if he sweats in winter. But looking at his huge Afro hairstyle, I understand his need for the assured absorbency of his towel. I imagine the Nissan has a spacious interior, big enough to contain about eight people comfortably or ten when the occupants are compressed. I'm wondering if he does a delivery business with such a spacious bus when he asks me to get inside.

"Nice vehicle," I say, not meaning it because bit by bit something is coming undone in my mind.

"Nothing is special about my car, but thank you anyway."

As I swing around, about to climb onto the front seat, he strides to the driver's side. Inside, he's on my right-hand side, which looks strange to me because in Nigeria the driver would be where I am. But this is Britain where everything I've known and become all my life is being put to question as seconds morph into minutes and into hours. Even an ordinary British car has the audacity to rearrange me, forcing me to sit on its left side. Leftness is a sign of negativity, a destiny going the wrong way, according to the people of my village. To my shock, it hits me like electricity that there are no other seats behind me. Instead, there's a thin mattress on the car floor, humiliated by overuse, two pillows thrown at one end, blankets and duvets ruffling into one another at the centre. It looks as if he hurried out of bed this morning without glancing behind him. I can't imagine where he's moved all the backseats to. He holds the steering wheel now but doesn't turn on the car engine so that we can leave this Crown Fitness Club carpark.

"I can't wait to get into bed after a warm bath, and sleep tight," I say, placing my head firmly on the headrest, my face tilted upwards.

"You see, eh?" he says, and I turn my face to look at him. "I have to enrol you in this gym." He's pointing straight at Crown Fitness Club, which is about one hundred and fifty metres from where we're both sitting.

"That's good, Deji, but first I have to rest. Take me to your home."

"This is where I live."

I cringe. "I don't understand what you've just said. Repeat yourself."

"My home is this car," he stresses, pointing at the floor.

My heart freezes, my intestines churning. "How? What do you mean?"

"Tulu, you see, eh? I lost my job three months ago, and I'm yet to find another one. I used to live in an upscale flat in Knightsbridge. But in order not to embarrass myself with the expensive monthly rent in that area, I quit my flat on Basil Street and moved to this place."

I sit upright, unhinged, staring at him. "But you gave me an address on Charterhouse Street in this Islington, didn't you?"

"Yes. Actually, that's a Nigerian restaurant where I eat. I've told them to watch out for letters with your name on them."

"Deji, what's gone wrong with you? Why didn't you run back to Nigeria, to your mum? Aunty Bimbo has a mansion that's empty of humans, and she's alone and lonely. Are you not missing her?"

"Don't talk to me like that," he snaps. "Don't open your smelly mouth and fling garbage at me."

"Ahh-Ahh, Deji, calm down. You shouldn't be angry with me. Aren't you supposed to understand me?"

"I'm not only angry but also disappointed with your manner of reasoning. If Nigeria is so good, why didn't you stay there after your father was killed? Why are you in London?"

I sigh, realising my battle has just begun. "I'm sorry, Deji. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You see, eh? I don't need anybody to stress me out now." He exhales loudly. "Do you hear me? Don't give me an unnecessary headache now."

"I'm really sorry, Deji," I say again, patting his shoulder twice, trying to assuage him. "Deji-Power, calm down, naahh. So where do I take a bath?"

He sighs. "That's why I'm about to register you at the gym. And I'm giving you a premium membership that offers you unlimited time and access to the top-notch facilities inside. The gym operates twenty-four hours every day. At any time, you can go in there with your membership card, brush your mouth, shower, and do your business. Feel free to exercise there also, if you want."

"What about food? Don't you cook?"

"There are restaurants everywhere in Islington. This borough has Chinese, Mexican, Italian, Thai, Turkish, and Indian eateries, you name it. Delightfully, that Nigerian restaurant on Charterhouse Street is fabulous, a twenty-minute walk from here. A woman owns it, and she cooks African delicacies, especially the Nigerian ones."

My head feels woozy, so I shut my eyes and open them again. "And laundry?"

"Launderettes abound on all corners, Tulu. They wash, iron, and hand the clothes back to you." He points around the park, at the scores of cars. "All the vehicles you see here are for lodging. People are inside all day and night, stinky homeless chaps and even toffs avoiding the extortionate London rent."

"That's so smart of them," I say, still struggling hard to understand why someone would live in a car.

"Yeah, you're spot-on. In fact, the combined cost of parking, laundry, food, and gym membership are far cheaper than an average Islington rent. People move out of the park only when their lives have improved in some way. I'll also do the same in due course. But until then, I have enough savings to take care of the two of us."

"Okay, we'll manage it like that," I say, recalling the high level of unemployment in Nigeria, and how difficult it appears to get a good job, a plague I've never experienced even once in my entire life. "How soon do you think you'll get another job?"

"Yeah, I'm optimistic, knowing my Oxford degrees will stand out."

"Degrees? Do you have more than one?"

He shakes his head. "I completed an MSc two years ago."

"Ah, that's laudable, Deji," I say, extending my hand to shake him, and he takes it. "Little wonder you've nicknamed yourself Deji-Power."

He smiles now.

I wonder why he lost his job, which I imagine must've been a good one. Asking him to explain the job loss might upend his mood again, so I remain silent. But I marvel at how easy it feels to go to school in the UK and get a degree with no interruptions of the academic calendar, the result of long months of industrial action by university teachers. And this also makes me recognise his grouse with Nigeria. Every Nigerian feels the same animosity towards the country. But when I try to weigh up why he's so incensed about turning to his mother for help, a satisfying answer fails me because Aunty Bimbo calls him all the time, laughing with him. So I've assumed there's a

mother-son bond between them. Being Deji's mother, she gave him a lot of financial support during his undergraduate days.

Notwithstanding, as I've heard, Oxford graduates have been bred like proud peacocks and ostriches—arrogant, haughty, unpredictable, unreasonably intelligent, and bullish. I guess there's something they're taught at that university that triggers a flimsy cocksureness in them. I went to Afronoble University. It's ranked as the best private higher institution in Africa, according to the NextGen Ranking of World Universities. Now, an Oxford graduate doesn't even respect my views. Sadly, if Deji's Oxford education couldn't guarantee him a permanent job in this country, mentioning my degree from Afronoble would sound like a sheet of toilet tissue to most UK employers. Besides, I'm still jittery about whether my Application Registration Card will give me the right to work or not.

Later in the day, after I've completed my enrolment and had my shower at Crown Fitness Club, Deji and I walk to Charterhouse Street for us to eat at the Nigerian restaurant. He doesn't drive his car all the time. To save petrol, he tells me. But he warms up the engine every morning, so it doesn't go rusty.

On arriving at the restaurant, a large neon sign, SHARON'S KITCHEN, flashes its green and white lighting. The interiors have the same green and white décor, so the chairs and tabletops wear green leather with white outlines at the edges. But the walls are sealed from top to bottom with the Union Jack. The tablecloths are green, too, the napkins white, the flooring grey wood that gleams. It begins to feel like there's a cloud from Nigeria hovering on the ceiling, compelling me to relax. The air I breathe here calms my hungry stomach. The room is also warm, even warmer than Deji's Nissan minibus.

Deji and I are seated opposite one another. We've now been served two plates of tomato-sauced jollof rice steaming on the table between us, alongside a plate of fried plantain diced like checkers, yellowed and oiled and sprinkled with shredded basil and parsley. The rice is so red that the chunks of fried beef atop are also red. Flavoured with curry, thyme, bay leaves, the pot seems to have been burned at the bottom on purpose, giving the rice a smoky aroma so delicious that it yanks my alimentary canal open. The food is also garnished with a yellow sauce stuffed with small cubes of chicken breast, onions, slices of red and green bell peppers.

When we're done with eating, the woman proprietor comes out of what looks like the kitchen, wearing a Knorr-branded apron that covers her chest and stomach down to her knees. Sweating, she smiles at her two white waiters, one of whom has already cleared our table. Of course, she already knows Deji.

"Deji, is this your brother?" she asks him, standing beside us and pointing at me. She wears a nose ring that glints on the wing of her pointed nose, two big circles like the steel wheels of a mountain bicycle dangling from her ears.

"Brothers?" Deji and I chorus, exchanging staggered glances. "Madam Sharon, go and put on your reading glasses," Deji says, and sniggers. "It seems your eyes are getting old, your eyesight wearing off."

"I'm serious. You both look so alike that white people might mistake you for twins."

"Madam Sharon, you see, eh? White people mistake anything Black, so you have no point," Deji says, and all of us burst out laughing. "Not only Black people, but also Black arts, Black history, Black studies, and many other things related to the Black race. I call it racial distancing, which also applies to Black people who know nothing about white people, so I don't blame anyone."

"Look, I'm serious about your sameness," Madam Sharon insists, but she's wrong. "Your resemblance is striking. The same shape of beards. The same dark skin tone. The same thick lips. The same bushy set of eyebrows, and plump cheeks. I could go on and on. The uniformity is delightfully shocking."

I feel a little shiver, as if I were a needle trembling between the true north of myself and whatever, whoever Deji is.

"I shouldn't even be surprised because you now behave like white people," Deji tells her. "That's the risk of living in the UK for more than twenty-five years. You now reason the way white people do. Everything Black amazes them."

"Honestly, nobody has ever told us this before, Deji—not even when you came to Lagos years ago," I say, gazing at him. "Madam, we're not brothers, please."

Deji waves a dismissive hand. "Please don't mind her."

"I'm Sharon Chukwuma, by the way," she says, patting her chest and looking at me. "What's your name?"

"Tulu."

She narrows her eyes, as if confused. "Tu-what?"

"Tulugo," I add quickly.

"Ah, great. I was wondering where the name came from. How long have you been in the UK?"

"I arrived this morning."

"Wonderful. Welcome to Queen Mama Charley's fine country. Deji, his bill is on me. You can pay for just yours. I still remember what an isolating experience it was the first time I arrived in this country many aeons past. The strangeness of everything here can be jarring."

I breathe in and out, starting to feel at home. "Madam, I appreciate what you've just done in more ways than I can count. Thank you very much."

"My pleasure."

As she collects £5 from Deji, she asks, "Any tips?"

Deji chuckles. "You're asking for a bribe. This is a typical Nigerian."

"And that's exactly my problem with our people in this city." Her voice is rising. "When they visit non-Nigerian restaurants, they'll offer them nice tips there. But when they come here, I get only complaints of joblessness and too much rents and high utility bills."

"Ahh-Ahh, Madam, I'm not complaining," Deji says, bringing out his wallet. He drops a thick coin on the table, gazing up at the woman. "Now take it."

"Better," Madam Sharon says, picking it up, and turns to leave.

Deji shows me his empty wallet, opening it to form big O, in a mock display of his poverty, and we both laugh. He'll pay with his card anyway, he says, if I would like to eat something in addition, and I shake my head, saying no. When he says we should go, standing up, I hesitate, harbouring a sense of fellowship and reception in this place. Even the aroma of cooking wafting from the kitchen takes me back to Lagos, to my mother's kitchen full of white-clad chefs. This restaurant itself feels so pleasant. It blends itself with my current mood of repose, making me feel as if I've already spent several months in London. I'm drowsy now, wanting to put my head on a pillow in this building, willing myself to wake up here tomorrow, if possible.

When we both finally step out of the restaurant, around five o'clock, the day has suddenly become pitch black and I recoil, asking what's gone wrong. Deji says early nightfall is normal in winter. Short days and long nights, he calls it, adding again that I'll have to get used to it.

The interior of his car emits a calming floral scent from the air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror, but the entire interior still feels lifeless, as he

spreads the crumpled duvets over the mattress for us to sleep. He offers me one of the two pillows, and I accept it.

I stir and wake up suddenly around 11 p.m., because Deji is already up, scrolling through his phone and laughing with himself, the phone-screen light revealing his bold face and squinting eyes. I'm still miffed that he snapped at me in the afternoon, so I shut my eyes and turn my back to him, wanting to fall asleep once again. All of a sudden, he taps my elbow, and I swing around, propping up my head on the pillow.

"Deji, you've ruined my sleep enough tonight. What's your problem?"

"Tulu, my guy, forgive me. I'm so sorry. Tulu-Tulu."

"And I'm still unhappy with you for raging at me this afternoon."

"My apologies, my guy. I didn't mean it like that, but I know I overreacted so I'm sorry for everything. I promise never to do that again."

I snort with relief. "Why are you so excited now?"

"You see, eh? My girlfriend says she's on her way this evening."

"Your girlfriend?" I ask, making a face meant for him to see. "Anyway, I'm not surprised. I know lots of jobless people in Lagos who manage their unemployment with slapdash romance. I see you're their London representative."

He breaks out laughing. "She'll be here in about three minutes."

"White or Black?"

"White, of course. Dasha from Russia. Please when she arrives, you should go and stay inside the gym. I'll text you when I'm done with her."

"You want to have sex inside this car? And she agrees?"

"This isn't her first time here, naahh. Look, this is a continent where people fall in love everywhere and kiss everywhere and make love everywhere."

I frown. "Ahh-Ahh, Deji, that doesn't sound like a nice thing to say."

"I'm serious, but what I mean is that the people here are very simple. They're not like our people back home who prepare for sex as if they're about to attend an interview or some board meeting. In this country, sex is sex and so casual, no taboo attached as long as the partners involved are of age and in agreement."

I shake my head. "Is it convenient or even pleasurable to do such a thing inside a car, though? Are there no hotels around?"

"You should understand I'm conserving my little savings, Tulu." His voice is low, as if begging me. "And car sex is very pleasurable. Don't worry. When you fall in

love with a white girl in this city, I'll also let you fuck inside the car. Then you'll be able to confirm it's enjoyable."

I hear three taps in quick succession on the rolled-up glass window. Deji grins, punching the air with his fist. A female shadow, with long hair rippling down her shoulders, presses her face on the glass, trying to peep into the interior of the car. But she can't see us due to the opaque nature of the glass. I zip up my winter coat, force my feet into my trainers, and grab my iPhone, Instagram on my mind. Deji opens the door for her with the remote control, and she climbs inside, smiling at me. He must have told her that I'm around.

"Hi," she tells me, kneeling and moving into the space between Deji and me. "Good meet you."

I wonder how she communicates with Deji, given her poor command of the English language. Anyway, it's clear the only language they both understand and speak fluently is their frequency of sex.

"Hello, lovely to meet you," I say. "Tulu, here."

"Nice, nice," she says, turning to sit on her flat arse.

I push the door open, climb outside, slam it shut. After taking about ten steps away from them, I turn around, only to be confronted with a minibus that's already bouncing and bouncing and bouncing. Don't people in the UK engage in foreplay, for goodness' sake, that romance starter before the main meal? I wonder if Dasha is in such a hurry.

As I sit on a yellow couch in the gym's reception hall, waiting to be called back into the car, I shiver at the affront of living in an open parking lot, sleeping and waking up in a roomy car, in London. London of all cities? My thoughts swing backward and forward. My previous life and experiences in Nigeria unfold before me like the sheets of a mushy onion as I scroll through my Instagram page, through the Lagos pictures on my phone. The city kidnaps my mind, torturing it.

For a long time, my life has been sporadic, my present and past exchanging unpleasant signals between them. My past is never resident in the past, always meddling with my mood, in fact contaminating it. Laura, my girlfriend, once accused me of being absentminded, unpredictable, non-linear, detached, and irrational, describing me as living spatially. I know, yes, I know. Something often upsets my soul, catapulting it out of my body to a time and space that hold me unconscious. Some

people, even my parents, complain they find me too frantic and incomplete to inhabit my behaviour fully as though I were supposed to be magnetic.

However, I've come to accept my restlessness, my aloofness, my precarity, my back-and-forth existence. And I hope that henceforth anyone who comes in contact with me, in the UK or elsewhere, would understand my instability and bear with me and not judge me. Now, I'm breathless as I recall the day when this turmoil seemed to have begun. The turmoil was in Lagos and Lagos was the turmoil.

LAGOS, NIGERIA

2014

CHAPTER TWO

The man suspected to have murdered my father stormed into our house one quiet morning, with his bodyguards who wore scary sunglasses. Their beards were huge, their faced so frowned and dark they daunted the eyes that attempted to look at them. I felt like grabbing my father's shotgun. Why would some humans behave like bullish animals? My fists were swollen with rage. The man paced up and down our sitting room, chewing biscuits. I wondered how he managed to get past our security team. Because my father was a judge of the Federal High Court, our Lagos mansion in the upscale district of Victoria Island was built in a secluded cul-de-sac. It was so quiet and well-guarded that even birds would have been afraid to perch and cluck in the surrounded trees.

On this public holiday morning when I was supposed to sleep beyond six o'clock because I wasn't going to work, the man had forced me to wake up restless. Besides, I donated my blood yesterday evening while returning home early from work, to save the life of a pregnant woman who had been scheduled to undergo a caesarean and had nobody willing to give matching blood. So the last thing I needed at this moment was this rowdy man taking away my well-deserved rest. I guessed he must've compromised our security men in some way because he said he was a politician. A Nigerian politician? Let it be known that he was an intruder, no matter what he called himself. I asked him to leave immediately with his men.

"You have no business here," I hissed, pointing a forefinger at him.

He was spitting out biscuit crumbs, demanding a cup of tea from me. What audacity! He announced he was the Duke of Lagos, the Grandmaster of Nigerian politics, a Senator of the Federal Republic, the Senator for Life, The Godfather of Godfathers, The Senate Majority Chief Whip, the Carrier of the People's Mandate. His lips quivered as he waited to see my response, perhaps expecting me to cower and sing his praise, but his highfalutin ranks didn't impress even a bump on my agitated skin. He switched to making the more annoying gesture of fingering every item of interior decoration in our sitting room.

"Man, man, that's a big chandelier with slivers of glass and diamonds." He actually spoke to that chandelier, staring skywards. "I've got that in my hotel in Dubai. You see these leather sofas? My Abuja mansion is incomplete without them. And this type of ceiling is so perfect; it's what gives my Lagos home its touch of class. This is

Spanish marble, right? I have it in my Kensington edifice, and the beauty of those marble pieces gives my heart an orgasm anytime I'm in London. My white neighbours are even jealous of the marble each time I throw a party there."

He burst out cackling, the laughter bulging his cheeks, shoving his head backwards, and breaking the serenity of the morning apart.

"It's indeed a dazzling mansion, sir," a bodyguard muttered, nodding.

"Man, man, the top judiciary officers of this country know how to spend money, especially this judge, so flamboyant," the senator said, pointing to my father's portrait on the wall. "The panache of these learned men brooks no rival, I tell you."

My heart was beating furiously, my bones bursting with energy, ready to fight. Why was he riding a dead horse and where was he going to land?

From time to time, he grabbed the excess fabric of his roomy kaftan that concealed his arms and chucked it over his shoulder, revealing wrists tattooed with a cobra's head, its tongue sticking out. His bodyguards flexed their huge arm muscles, their chests surging up and down. I admired their thick denim trousers and long-sleeved army camouflage and giant boots. But then I remembered that these hefty young men had condemned themselves to a life of self-disgrace by following the fart and arrogance of a politician around. These men were tall enough to grate the ceiling, and they were suitable for playing basketball and earning pounds and dollars overseas. Two of the bodyguards were in the sitting room, standing without moving an inch, while the rest were downstairs, guarding the senator's black Mercedes Benz and another flashy car I'd never seen before. He insisted he must have a chat with my father who had yet to come out of his bedroom.

"Mr. Senator, you can't see my father because you have no prior appointment with him," I said, unfazed, holstering my fists in my pockets. "It's too early to welcome visitors. Who let you into this house?"

The man glared at me as if I was expected to be silent. "Young man, it seems you have no respect."

"Respect? You yourself haven't obeyed a simple protocol. Period! My father's job is risky, and you know that very well, so we don't allow strangers like you into our house."

"I'm not a stranger. I'm a distinguished parliamentarian of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Everybody knows me. Haven't you seen me debating important national

concerns on television? I argued for the granting of amnesties to kidnappers and armed robbers as a way to curb crime."

"All the more reason to keep you at bay."

He plonked down on our sofa, flattening the furniture with his bulk. "Ah, your bay reminds me of my beloved daughter's bay. She lives in California and runs a big company called Bay Perfumery. Her seven designer perfumes are named in honour of the seven major rivers in Africa: Nile, Niger, Senegal, Congo, Orange, Limpopo, and Zambezi. I wear all the fragrances at the same time."

"And so fucking what?" I yelled where I remained standing. "Do you know who I am and what I do?"

I sat beside him. He smelled really nice, I must confess, as he moved this way and that on the sofa. Every direction he turned, he oozed a different fragrance, cancelling out his odorous reasoning. I'd used one of the perfumes from Giorgio Armani, a blend of long-lasting orangey rose. But I stopped using it because my girlfriend, Laura, had complained it smelled feminine. Whatever that meant.

"Look, I have a son your age who has an MBA from Harvard and works for Microsoft, and my coming here will benefit you. Just calm down."

"I don't care. Do you hear me? I don't freaking care. Go flush your entitlement down the drain."

"You're very rude."

I jumped to my feet again. "Rude? Me, Tulugo Okoye, the only child of an accomplished Lagos judge being called rude? Please leave this house right now."

He glared at me again, speechless for a moment. Shocked or offended, I couldn't tell which. He removed his rimless eyeglasses, which had a metal bridge and were gilded, their thick temples embossed with slanting stallions. All the while, his bodyguards hadn't still moved a scratch from where they'd been standing all morning. One stood near the front door, clutching a black suitcase, the other by the alcove with our two Panasonic speakers behind him. The men looked as irresponsible as their boss, jiggling the burly muscles on their arms and bulging chests, which I imagined had been kept afloat with steroids.

"Look here, young man," the senator said. "You seem to have forgotten that this is Lagos, a city under my control. Moreover, in this genteel district of Victoria Island, the residents even worship my spit."

"Except my father and myself surely. This is my father's house, and you're powerless here."

He smirked. "Powerless? Your father's position as an eminent judge in this country shouldn't give you the confidence to be uncouth."

I covered my face and exhaled loudly into my palms, and bellowed, "Fuck off, Senator, fuck the fuck off. Get out of this place with your men. You're not welcome here."

Our hallway door opened behind me, and my father walked into the sitting room, his face wearing some breadcrumbs of astonishment. He was putting on an orange T-shirt and black jeans. My mother, looking terrified too, sashays closely behind him. She was dressed to go out, in elegant trousers and high heels. She never observed public holidays because she ran a boutique of designer clothes and fashion accessories for top-class Lagos women, on Awolowo Road.

"What's going on heeere?" my father asked, knitting his eyebrows together. He often talked slowly, each word drumming its own clarity. And sometimes he drawled his final word, as if measuring its length. I'd come to accept this as a kind of British accent for people who schooled in Britian and whose tongues were working hard to forget their local dialects. For my father, this matched with the natural slowness of his speech. But his gradual breath alone had the power to shove a criminal behind bars for a lifetime or unbolt a prison gate to let off an innocent captive. "Is my house under some siege?"

The senator stood up from the sofa. "Chief, Chief!" he hailed my father, bowing down, a show of humility and respect, which I thought was totally counterfeit. His bloated kaftan puffed up as he prostrated, concealing his head on the floor and exposing his sofa-ruffled trousers. "Chief Justice Obiora Okoye. I greet you, sir."

"Senator Duke, am I correct?"

"Yes, that's me," he said, still lying flat, his face touching the floor. "The Duke of the Whole Universe. I'm loyal, sir. Very, very loyal."

"Stand up, please. What's the meaning of all this?"

"You mean I should stand up?"

My mother's expression changed from terror to something close to a smile. She flipped glossy strands of her hair extensions out of her face and dabbed her well-painted red lips on my father's forehead, one of her legs raised behind her in the attempt to reach his forehead.

"I think I should rather be going," she muttered to my father. "I'm running late already."

"That's alright, honey; I can handle this," my father told her.

It was only an outbreak of war or disease that could force my mother to stay at home, and not open her high-street shop. She even went there on Sunday evenings, after the service at The Church of Advancement, which mandated its members to submit their monthly bank statements for a special pastoral blessing of financial breakthroughs. Her driver was already inside her Toyota Camry in our garage downstairs, teasing the engine.

Senator Duke scrambled to his feet and glanced at me. "Chief, you have such a beautiful home and a stubborn son."

"I won't accept that crap from you, Senator," I snapped, scrunching up my face. "You can't walk into my father's house and order me around."

"That's enough, Tulugo," my father said, coming towards me. As he made to sit down, he pulled my wrist and I sat down next to him.

I'd boomed and stomped hard on the floor to impress it upon my father that being his only child wasn't a shortcoming, that I was equal to seven children put together. I assumed he'd heard my screeching voice from his bedroom, perhaps fascinated, perhaps not, and I expected him to tell the man off and send him out of the house at once. But it seemed there was an ongoing activity they were both entangled with, or a profit-sharing formula they'd not yet agreed on, which gave Senator Duke the temerity to misbehave here. I was sure my father didn't tolerate any form of impunity.

"Chief, Chief!" Senator Duke exclaimed again. He raised one leg sideways like a dog having a pee and shouted, "Twale!"

I couldn't even tell what that meant.

"Stop it," my father snapped. "What's the meaning of that?"

"It's an SSS."

"Meaning what?"

"Special Senatorial Salutation, sir."

"I detest such greetings, and I'm uncomfortable with your presence in my house."

"Don't worry, my chairman. The chairman of the most competent electoral tribunal in the world. If you agree to do me the favour that I'll ask of you, I can make

the President of this country sack the current Chief Justice of the Federation and put you in his position. It'll be a very lucrative appointment for you."

"Thank you, but no. Why did you choose a bank holiday to upset the peace and quiet of my home?"

His saying bank holiday often made my mother laugh, as if it was only banks that closed their offices on such holidays. She'd once asked why he couldn't say court holiday instead. But having schooled and lived in the UK for many years, my father couldn't leave the British and their brand of mannerism alone. He seemed to be the only one in the whole of Nigeria whose diction didn't have the tedious weight of Nigerian English sounds. Even Senator Duke found the words interesting as he'd muttered them several times already: "Bank holiday? A holiday for bankers?"

"I'm sick of you already," I said to the senator.

"That's enough, Tulu; calm down," my father said, patting my knee.

"My chairman, I've got a cheque of one hundred thousand dollars here for you," Senator Duke said. His bodyguard opened the suitcase and handed him the cheque. "I believe in doing what I say." He paused and surveyed my father's utterly shocked face. "Chief, would you rather prefer having the funds transferred electronically? My bank doesn't go on bank holidays. I'm told their records and accounts live in the cloud."

My father recoiled, frowning. "That's preposterous. Stop trying to obstruct the wheel of justice. The members of my panel will soon conclude the examination of all the evidence before us, and we'll announce who truly won the senate seat."

"Why should you even bother yourself with the petitioner's evidence, Mr. Honourable Chairman?" Senator Duke asked. "Are you not a Nigerian? Why do you behave like white people, upright and law-abiding all the time? You should have understood my lawyer's body language and dismissed the petitioner's case based on technicalities, citing some reasons like unsigned documents or incomplete respondents."

"Oh, is this why your counsel took me to the court's backyard a fortnight ago and presented me with a cheque of one hundred million naira, which I turned down?"

"That's why I'm offering you dollars now. A top gun like you shouldn't be spending naira, our worthless currency. It's got no prestige."

My father sighed, staring at him. "Senator Duke, you're the incumbent senator with all the privileges and benefits that position offers. You have the Certificate of Return from the electoral commission. Why are you so desperate?"

“Because that idiot from another useless party is disputing the certificate,” he shrieked.

The wind had changed, and I’d begun to see the butthole truth of this cockerel cavorting in front of me. My father had been appointed chairman of the election petitions tribunal in Lagos some time ago, and he was about to conclude the job. But to him, serving justice wasn’t just a job; it was a necessary role for the advancement of humanity. The appellate and supreme courts had never nullified his judgement because he was always as accurate and thorough as a calculator. When he walked into the court, he sent a chill down the stomachs and spines of lawyers. Some of them peed in their pants before him, and they called him either the Aristotle of Justice or the Socrates of Jurisprudence. Perhaps, given my father’s pedigree, Senator Duke had got an inkling of the shape of the upcoming verdict and felt uncomfortable about it. He looked withdrawn now, standing, hands akimbo. He glared at my father for a long time, saying nothing.

I took out my iPhone and swiftly crept online to let out my frustration and anger, also seeking the opinions of internet oracles—the postmodern equivalent of consulting African deities for solutions.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Hey, lovelies, given the current crop of lawmakers in Nigeria, is there any hope for our country?

@pasox: Nigerian lawmakers are scumbags—political scallywags.

@foq: Hope lives only in the heart of Oxford Dictionary, not in the heart of Nigerians.

@ganyadol: Slightest chance I get, I’ll fly out of this hell, to Italy straightaway.

@toocool: France looks more promising. Polishing up my French at the moment.

@gozbarry: Delighted to get my desired IELTS score. I’m on my way to Canada.

@worldmax: Nasty lawmakers, but I’m a global citizen, emigrating to Luxembourg.

@dr.frank: The UK is on my mind. Working hard and praying hard to join the NHS.

@txtx: There are no lawmakers in Nigeria—all lawbreakers. I’m off to America.

@jeyeye: If I don’t settle in Germany soon, I’ll delete myself. Simple as that.

@paryo: Botswana is the new Europe, to be very honest. I’m going there already.

The senator coughed aggressively, and I looked up from my phone.

My father sighed. “So, what are you saying, Duke?”

"I need to know if your judgement will be in my favour."

My father shook his head, his usual signal of deep disappointment. "That's prejudicial. I'd never do that."

"Do you prefer a briefcase of cash, instead?"

"I've got no need for it."

Senator Duke nodded bitterly, frowning, the smoke of sadness coating his face. He then burst out shouting. "Look here, Justice Okoye. I've seen your mulishness, which your son has sadly inherited from you. But let me warn you. You'd better not overturn my re-election. I can make your life very difficult."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Justice Okoye, nobody can remove me from that senate seat. Do you hear me? It's a fact that I've occupied it for many years, and only death can dismiss me from there."

"Disgusting," my father muttered.

The Nigerian senate had been a hospice for pathetic Nigerian politicians, a retirement home where they made sick laws that sickened the entire country. Senator Duke turned to the bodyguard holding his suitcase and collected an A4-size envelope. He flung the document on the glass table in the middle of the room.

"Here's important information for you," he roared, pointing down at the document. "It's one of the numerous emails I sent you previously, but you refused to respond. I've printed this one for you. You must read and digest it properly to aid your tribunal's verdict. Henceforth, watch out for more emails from me and ensure you read them."

"I have no business with emails," my father retorted.

"Then let your saucy son read them for you."

He stormed out of the sitting room, his bodyguards following suit. My father shook his head again and rose to his feet, turning towards his bedroom. He said he would go to the Elite Club of Victoria Island to relax and clear his mind. I was sure he would never read the senator's document. But I picked it up, feeling it might reveal something important.

Suddenly, I brushed the document aside for now and hurried downstairs to find out from our security guards how the senator had gained access to our hallowed compound. The culprits would face the wrath of the company my father had contracted for our security.

The guards told me the senator's bodyguards had arrested them, threatening them with their pistols, forcing them to open the gates. I doubted their words, but only time would reveal the truth. On returning into the sitting room, about ten minutes later, I picked up the senator's sheet of paper to read properly, my curiosity at its peak.

From: Duke Momo<dukemomo@nass.gov.ng>

Sent: 8 January 2014 10:31

To: Justice Okoye<justiceokoye@judiciary.gov.ng>

Subject: SENATORIAL ELECTION PETITION

FOR THE ESTEEMED ATTENTION OF:

Justice Obiora Okoye,

Chief Judge of the Federal High Court, Lagos Division,

Chairman, National Assembly Election Petitions Tribunal,

Sitting in Ikeja, Lagos.

Your Excellency, Sir:

Let me start with a bit of my medical history. I was admitted to the Yaba Psychiatric Hospital years ago, in 1996. I stayed there for two years before I was later discharged. Afterwards, I became a Nigerian senator despite my mental disease. But I've been visiting my psychiatrist regularly since then, still taking my drugs today and always, because my severe condition relapses from time to time with no control. Some people with call me a gasbag, but I don't care that I talk nonstop. My mouth spits out anything that comes in contact with it: words, saliva, yawn, and vomit. Perhaps that's the upshot of my severe schizophrenia.

Justice Okoye, we don't have a country, so stop trying to build one. Working hard to be different in a country that's not set up to be different will only make you a scapegoat with a difference. What's wrong with you, Justice Okoye? To start with, how much is your salary as a judge? And when you retire, what will be the weight and regularity of your pensions? You're not the first judge in this country to head an election tribunal where my

victory has been challenged. All the previous chairmen dismissed every petition before them and affirmed my victory because they understood they must survive outside the threadbare salaries from their judiciary assignments.

I guess you're trying to sustain the spirit of the constitution. But let me ask you: which constitution? That contraption which Nigerian soldiers rigged up inside their barracks as they conducted the 1999 general elections, booting us into what they called baby democracy that year? I've been a senator since then without fail, suffering from acute schizophrenia.

Please do not annul my ongoing electoral victory. This is 2014, and I have more years to serve Nigeria. Let the petitioner wait and try his luck during another round of general elections in the future and see if he can defeat me. Justice Okoye, don't disgrace me, please. I beg you this in the name of the Almighty Allah!

FROM THE MOST ELEVATED DESK OF:
Honourable Senator Duke Momo, MPA.
National Organizing Secretary, Democratic Action Alliance Party (DAAP).
Senator Representing Lagos Central-West Senatorial District.

CHAPTER THREE

My father wanted me to become a chartered accountant. The day I received my exam result from the ACCA in London, I stared at my iPhone, perversely happy that I flunked all my four modules. I'd taken the exams sometime ago. Standing in the middle of my bedroom, hands on my hips, I scanned my bookshelves full of tomes and tomes of chartered accountancy textbooks. They were junk and claptrap that I would never read again: *Financial Reporting Rubbish, Corporate Fucking Taxation, Cost Accounting Trash, Business Law Nuisance, Auditing Bullshit,* and *Business Economics Nonsense.* It was high time I dumped these vexing volumes. Seeing them in my bedroom hurt my eyes.

I'd now ruined this arsehole career my father had planned for me. He'd thought it would be the best training to help my family, but I hated the discipline to an endless abyss. I'd rather be a plumber, messing around with excrement and sewage, than become an accountant. Even though I graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Banking and Finance, I also detested that discipline at university, but I'd played along because I didn't want to disappoint my father.

The first time he told me of his intention to have me qualify as a chartered accountant, it sounded like scattered accountant, because I didn't want to hear it. I was never interested and would never be. One of the consequences of being a child of rich parents with successful careers was that I was often confused and intimidated about what to become in life myself. My father was stinkingly wealthy and owned a telecoms company, AtlanTel, beside his high-profile job as a high court judge.

I currently worked in his telecoms business as a customer service manager at the company's Ikeja branch in Lagos. I hadn't written a CV or gone for any interviews. My father made just a call and the company sent their former customer service manager to another position, creating the opportunity for me. The company trained me on the job. Now my father also wanted me to become a chartered accountant by any means so that I could be moved from the branch to the headquarters of AtlanTel to work in the accounts department.

Before my ACCA exams, he'd ordered those books from London. He didn't even let me, his only child in this world, know of his plans to buy the books, those items of garbage. Instead, he invited his friend, Theophilus, to our house one day and asked him. The white-haired Theo, expired in body and outdated in soul, ran a one-man,

one-room audit firm that depended solely on two loss-making clients. The auditor suggested those bound sheets of irritation and recommended that I, Tulugo Okoye, should sit the exams of the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants in the United Kingdom. He discouraged my father from enrolling me in the exams of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria because ICAN's influence on global jobs was limited. The acronym came out of the auditor's mouth sounding like *I can*.

"ICAN certification is only useful in Nigeria," auditor Theo had told my father that day, sitting opposite him in our sitting room. "The ACCA UK has a universal appeal that will allow your son to work in any part of the world."

"Oh, really?" my father burst out, and adjusted his thick-rimmed glasses, crossing his legs as he sat on his imported-from-Britain leather sofa.

"Yes, of course, Your Lordship," the auditor said, his mop of white moustache flipping, almost hiding his upper lip. "The ACCA exams are even easier to pass than the ICAN's. If your son registers for four ACCA courses and fails all but one, he can return months later to try the three failed courses again."

"I didn't know these things before," my father said, amplifying his British accent. "Tulugo must sit those exams and get an accounting qualification."

Sitting near him, I chewed my thumb and frowned, gawping at the marble wall displaying his graduation portraits, which he snapped at Oxford and Cambridge.

"Oh, if that's what you want for him, the ACCA training is equal to the task," the auditor said, nodding. "Their syllabus is up to date, complying with the International Financial Reporting Standards."

From the passion in the auditor's voice, I guessed the ACCA might have paid him for advertising. He can't have been promoting them in Nigeria for nothing.

"You mean the ICAN isn't good?" my father asked the auditor. "I know their members are eggheads."

"Your Lordship, I'm a member of the two bodies, but the ACCA training is unbeatable," he said, and pulled at his pair of elastic suspenders, which instantly landed back on his wiry chest with loud claps, one after the other. I concluded the ACCA had definitely paid this old man, and the payment was speaking. I couldn't find any other reason why he was endorsing a foreign body whose expensive exams were annoyingly priced in pound sterling and pence, not in naira and kobo.

Surprised like a brain surgeon after a successful operation, my father slowly narrowed his off-white eyes, conditioned to pore over the tiny, long-winded passages

of the Nigerian constitution and statute books. "Theophilus, why didn't you tell me all of this before?"

"You can't know everything, Your Lordship," the auditor said, "even though you're a learned man."

"Does Tulugo have to fly to the UK for the exams?"

"No, he can do them here in Lagos, at the British Council's exam centre. Let him start weekend professional lessons straightaway at Ledger Associates, which is also here in Lagos. It's more convenient and cheaper doing the exams here."

"I don't care about the expense."

"Let him do it in Lagos, Your Lordship," the auditor insisted. "In fact, the white examiners even serve green tea, sweets, and chewing gum to everyone on exam day, and they also allow several visits to the toilet."

When the auditor stressed, folding his fists, that the ACCA qualification was more prestigious because of the white and British people who awarded it, my father—the incurable anglophile—started clapping and smiling and nodding.

"I'm convinced, Theo, my good friend," he told the auditor. "Say no more."

One week later, DHL delivered those crappy accounting texts.

Now I looked at my ACCA result again, excited, and flung myself onto my spring bed, feeling no single self-disgrace to announce my failure to my online fans.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Massive congratulations to myself! I've got four perfect fails on my ACCA result slip. There's strength in failure.

@emkroll: Hearty congratulations, Tulu. You flunked it so perfectly. Well done!

@tulu: Thanks, man. I couldn't be happier.

@dajonz: Ah, those ACCA exams are too difficult. They're monsters and demons.

@tulu: Shout it louder! Louder please!

@kristophix: Guy, are you celebrating failure publicly? Shame on you!

@tulu: LMAOOO! I don't give a toss! Bless you.

@antiwestman: Hey, Tulu, I thank God you survived the British exam attacks.

@tulu: LOL! Thanks, bro. You can say that again. I'm free at last.

@ayoandrews: Hey, my man! Are you going to write that shit again?

@tulu: Never! Over my corpse. Never!

CHAPTER FOUR

I was busy in my AtlanTel office, stacking up files and folders on my desk. Later, I would let them rest in peace in my cool, silvery drawers. Laura, my lovely girlfriend and co-worker, came forward and told me that a Nigerian man with a doctorate in Analytical Chemistry had just travelled to the United Kingdom to wash white people's toilets and bathrooms for a living. My brain wobbled, wondering why. She said her friend had seen the Doctor of Chemistry last weekend at Lagos Airport, and the man was excited, singing and clutching his huge portmanteau, as he pranced happily towards the departure lounge. The two of us burst out laughing.

"Keep your laughter low," I told Laura, even though my own voice was loud, because I doubted the story. "You know we're still at work. But that's not a laughing matter, babe. I find it very demeaning for people to leave Nigeria, only to end up in Britain. What's the attraction there?"

"Yeah, you're spot on, Tulugo," she said, sitting calmly on my chair. "That man has an empty skull, educated but ignorant. I can't even bear to imagine the pungent smell of those washing-up chemicals overworking his nostrils as he scrubs daily."

"Of course, you know that like attracts like. Maybe the employers also have PhDs."

She nodded. "Or the toilets and bathrooms have obtained PhDs, too, deserving a PhD cleaner."

We broke into laughter again, and she ran her tongue along her shimmering lips. "The man even attended three different levels of interviews via Skype," she said. "Can you imagine?"

"Just so the white employers could verify his ability to wipe up their mess, right? Well, I'm told that most foreign employers are always generous with that kind of international scheme, which they extend across what they call the third-world countries, from Nigeria to India to Jamaica and to elsewhere."

She knitted her thick eyebrows together. "Generous with what? International mess?"

"International talent hunt, Laura. International jobs. Ha, do you want to get me into trouble?"

She paused, incredulous, staring at me for a moment. "Tulu, say exactly what you mean. I don't want cliff-hangers. You mean messy global jobs?"

"I didn't say that, Laura." I burst into a snigger. "You really want to get me arrested, don't you?" I glanced at my Rolex watch, still sniggering. "Ah, our closing time is fast approaching. You should go back to your cubicle and get ready to go home. I need to clear my desk and lock these folders away."

She frowned. "But I have no customer to serve at the moment."

"Don't worry, Babe. Let's chat later. OK?" I shot her a begging smile and winked. "My workload is too much, as you can see."

"Alright, if you say so," she said, shrugging. She climbed to her feet and sashayed towards her cubicle.

I pitied the doctorate cleaner. It must've been difficult for him to earn a living in this chaos baptised Lagos. I didn't know his age, but my people say that a frustrated old man often bends low to place his hands on his knees whenever he can't find somewhere else more comfortable to put the hands. When you can't catch an eagle, try to catch the nearest grasshopper instead.

Laura and I were lucky. We both attended an elite university and got good jobs without a hassle, by standing on the shoulders of our wealthy parents. Every graduate of Afronoble University knew we would never write a CV to get jobs in Nigeria. It would be such a massive insult for big companies to expect us to list our personal abilities on a mere sheet of paper, after our parents had paid those insanely high tuition fees. We didn't attend job tests and interviews as well.

And what was this nonsense that people did, writing fancy profiles on LinkedIn? They would update their job experiences regularly on the career website and present their photos the way models would do, just to catch the attention of strange recruiters. Those busy folks wouldn't even read the CVs but shove them through a recruitment software package.

No, we the Afronoblers would never go through all that rubbish.

But working in telecoms put my head and heart and veins to tedious use, robbing me of my appetite for food and fun, but I didn't complain. I was lucky I could rely on my father who acted like my perpetual rock of ages. At times, I managed to grab only an incomplete breakfast of half-cut sandwiches and forget about lunch because I couldn't find the time. Every day I would activate new phone lines and answer calls and queries from customers. I would engage in live chats with them and wade through a never-ending wave of emails. I would even respond to several calls from my

Customer Service Director, my superior at the Head Office, where I also went for quarterly customer-service briefings.

At present, I was making photocopies of customer application forms and invoices. I stapled them together and scanned a few other documents. After filing the originals and copies in their respective drawers, I locked the cabinet. I hated that photocopy machine, the way it turned originals into fakes. It reminded me daily of the way I put on the façade of loving this customer-service job. I wished I could stop pretending, but my father's surveillance forced me to have a duplicate self. At the break of every dawn, I yawned, prepared and left for work, my real identity and ambitions suppressed.

I pulled a misty bottle of water from the fridge, took a sip, and exhaled. I then gulped down the entire bottle, looking up at the high ceiling, lit with bright bulbs in golden casings. I sighed with relief, and I was glad it was Friday evening. A long, uninterrupted workout inside my father's swimming pool awaited me this weekend. I could even go sailing on his yacht. I'd got to grab every form of relaxation I could, until the next dreadful and monotonous Monday arrived.

My iPhone rang, and my father was on the line. I imagined he was calling from his tribunal office, perhaps asking if Senator Duke had sent him another email. Since his encroachment on our house several weeks ago, my father had given me access to his email, telling me to read whatever load of trash the senator sent over.

I quickly prepared my thoughts. Anything I wanted to tell my father must always be logical and backed by good evidence. Otherwise, he would tell me that my opinion had no right to creep into my mouth. I yawned loudly before speaking.

"Dad, how has your day been?"

"It's been great, Tulu." He paused. "You sound sapped."

"Too much work and not enough time to relax here."

"Must I remind you that office work doesn't involve pressure and pleasure at the same time? Anyway, you're still too young to understand that. Should I take you somewhere to have therapy?"

I shrugged, dazed. When would he stop putting me down? When would he stop hand-holding me like a toddler and also stop micro-managing me? Just when? At this age, I regret that I was still living at home with my parents, but I did so just to make my father happy, because of being his only child. To be honest, having a lawyer as a father was such bother—a plague.

“Dad, I wonder why you’re calling me at this time.”

“You must not eat on your way home today.”

“Why not?”

“I’ve instructed your mother to cook me special goat-meat pepper soup tonight, including cow-liver sliced into chunks and deep-fried with spiced flour. Roasted chicken, too, marinated in a mixture of garlic, olive oil, basil, and turmeric before roasting. And sweet potatoes fried crisp, and peppered.”

I sighed. Eating chicken killed a lot of people in my ancestral village during my great-grandfather’s time, around 1880. He was the first warrant chief the British colonial masters chose for the village. Many villagers were against his appointment because they felt he was always in a foul temper, so he wasn’t the best qualified for the post. People flung stones at him during meetings and at the market square.

Incensed, he procured poison one day and called all the opposing men and women for a party in his compound, to beg and apologise to them. He and his wife laced the basketful of chicken they fed the villagers with the poison. They all ate it and died on the spot, foaming at the mouth. Some cursed him and the future generations of his family before they breathed their last. Since learning about that event from my father’s younger sister, Aunty Patience, I feared to eat chicken. The thought of it terrified me as I imagined that all chickens in the world were already poisoned.

I yawned again. “I hear you, Dad.”

“You are really tired. Come home soon and eat, my son. Your mother is also making me assorted smoothies and juice tonight, including my favourite, overripe pineapples with a dash of ginger and lemon, as well as watermelon, lime, and mint leaves.”

“Are you already back home from the election petitions tribunal?”

“No, but I’ll be heading home soon. Let me also remind you that your mother is making the meals herself tonight, not our house chefs. At times, I don’t even understand what those expensive chefs from Liberia and Sierra Leone are cooking anyway. Their meals are so tasteless it seems I’m paying for the chefs’ inefficiencies. I want my own wife to take back the kitchen from them, at least for this weekend.”

“Oh, has Mum returned home already, from her boutique?”

“No, but she’s heading home with her driver as I speak. They’re still on Awolowo Road, will be heading to Victoria Island soon. If there’s no traffic jam, that is.”

“Alright, Dad. I’ll call to ask her to make me a mango juice instead.”

“Don’t bother yourself with that. I’ll call her myself on your behalf, and she’ll stop by the roundabout and pick up some fresh mangoes for you. And let me repeat myself: you must not eat outside tonight. Have I made myself clear?”

“Noted, Dad.”

I was about to shut down my desktop computer when a shaggily-bearded customer stormed into our massive office. He started screaming, the only customer in the building now. He stood still near the front door and looked around our hall with enclosed offices, which were squarish cubicles demarcated with glittery aluminium boards along one side. The cubicles represented departments, labelled in ornamental gold lettering. Each cubicle was topped high with see-through glass so that workers, when they stood up, could see their co-workers. Although I didn’t work inside a cubicle because our customers had to see me first as they streamed in every day, I could see all my colleagues from my desk on a raised platform opposite the front door that led to our foyer. It was wide and furnished with ornate leather chairs for customers and visitors, a huge chandelier sparkling from the high ceiling. This latest customer didn’t look like he wanted to sit down. He continued yelling and raining curses on everyone: “You’re all idiots, useless animals! Do you think money is easy to come by?”

I wondered why the man was so angry.

All the staff were alerted, necks craned, watching him. And despite the intense air conditioning that drained the Lagos heat, draping everyone in calming coldness, the man’s neck still remained stiff with irritation. His entire body was wrapped in veins as thick as my index finger. He was gripping a black suitcase. His face was wet with sweat, which stained his armpits. He stomped to the middle of the vast foyer and stood still for a moment, frowning and panting, his shoes and trousers coated in brown dust.

The company’s security guard directed him to the appropriate department, which was mine. But the angry man brushed the guard aside, darted his eyes around as he read, mouthing the words that labelled every function inside the hall. And then he steered himself to the right, towards our Internal Engineering Unit. He pulled his weather-beaten Nokia 3310 out of his pocket and pushed it through the square hole before him. It slipped across the desk, like a half-used bar of black soap, towards Laura, who was inside the cubicle. She was the head of the unit responsible for fixing customer phones.

“You’re welcome, sir,” Laura said, taking the phone. “Did you buy your phone from any of our distributors?” Laura wore a pleading smile, holding a red-headed screwdriver. “If so, could you please show me your warranty paper?”

“Is that why you’re smiling?”

Laura wrinkled her face in an instant. “I’m sorry, but I have to establish how best to serve you.”

“Serve me? Are you a whore?”

I cringed. This man’s slurs had become a little too much, far beyond the barefaced cheek we got from customers every day.

Laura sighed and shook her head slowly. “Sir, you know this isn’t a whorehouse.”

“I’ve suffered today, trekking miles to get here because the commercial buses can’t find fuel.”

“My apologies for your stress, sir,” Laura said, one of her fingers partly pressing down her nostrils. “But my department can only repair our company-manufactured phones for customers.”

“But I use *your* SIM card, so I’m one of your customers,” he barked louder now.

“You’re correct, sir. However, some of our customers put our SIM cards into third-party phones, and that also works perfectly.”

“Woman, your mouth is stupid. You belittle me, just the way those silly executhieves and senators abuse all of us. Those parliamentary fools. They’re busy stealing our money, buying themselves brand new Range Rovers and Toyota Land Cruisers when the Nigeria Labour Congress have already gone on strike over the new pump price of petrol.”

I couldn’t find any link between his phone and the politicians, but most telecoms customers in Lagos held bullets in their mouths, shooting at whoever they saw across our service counters.

“Sir, my apologies once again for what the country has put you through,” Laura said. “But, if I may ask, what’s wrong with your phone?”

“It’s people like you who spoil this country, I tell you. Look at you, an artificial yellow papaya wearing red lipstick. You think you’re beautiful? You may have a fair-complexion, but your character is dark. You misbehave because you think you have a corporate job and you can afford to buy anything you desire and—”

"Sir, could you please just go straight to what brought you here?" Laura said, interrupting him, her voice rising. She seemed to be losing her cool now. "Otherwise, I'll alert our Security Unit."

The man boomed, "I topped up my airtime early this morning, but my call credit still remains zero. I've checked it over and over again, dialling that annoying star-four-two-four-hash several times, but nothing is in my account."

"Oh, that's what our customer service can rectify," Laura said, pushing the phone back to him. She pointed at me. "Tulu, over to you please."

"Come over here, sir," I said, gesturing to the man, my hand up in the air waiting for him to turn around and see me.

He jumped down from the stool. "Uncouth women of nowadays. None of you is good, as awful as my wife, so I'm not surprised that you're this rude."

He turned around and charged towards my desk as I peeked at my Rolex again and found it was 4 p.m. already. I couldn't dismiss him unserved because he'd arrived before our closing time.

When he sat down, the sour smell of rotten fish gushed into my nose. No wonder Laura had placed a finger across her nostrils while talking to him. I gave him a service request form to fill in his details. I took my fragrance bottle from my Louis Vuitton backpack, sprayed into my palms, and rubbed them together.

"That smells really nice," he said, without looking at me.

"Thanks," I said, turning my nose up at him and looking at my computer screen.

He handed me the form, and I verified his details on our customer management software. Yes, I could confirm that he'd tried to top up his account at six-thirty this morning, with only fifty-naira worth of airtime, but the transaction had been marked as incomplete. I checked his other particulars, trying to find out what might've caused the incomplete transaction, so I could create a work ticket for our IT Services Unit to resolve the problem immediately.

"What's your name, sir?"

"Huh?"

"I mean your full name."

"What do you see on your screen?"

"I need you to confirm what I see."

He frowned, hissing like a king cobra, and shook his head. "I can't even imagine how four greedy senators stole our money, went to America, and bought this telecoms

franchise to cheat us here. Pitiless thieves. Now they've put you on that seat to receive air conditioning from morning to evening, and that's why you have the audacity to ask me pointless questions."

I was tempted to correct him that the AtlanTel franchise hadn't come from America but from the Middle East. My father, a part-owner of this company, wasn't a senator but a federal high court judge. He was one of the three, not four, investors who brought AtlanTel to Nigeria some years ago. I chose to stay mute instead, focussing on resolving his top-up problem. But beneath his brash exterior, beneath his shaggy beard, I could detect his genuine concern to be happy.

"I see there was an attempt to buy some call credit this morning, but I need your help so I can better serve you."

"Is James Volta written there?"

"What's your date of birth?"

"27th October, 1958."

I stamped his form as completed. "Mr Volta, in less than thirty minutes you'll receive your top up."

"So I should go?"

"If there's anything else I can assist you with, do let me know, please."

He lifted himself from the chair and surveyed the entire hall, nodding and nodding.

"Check out lucky people enjoying their lives inside this elegant office with flat screens on the walls, so heavenly," he said. "Just look at their smooth skin and happy faces." Later, his phone beeped loudly, and he stared at it, walking towards the front door. "These idiots, they've refunded my money," he said, nodding. "Cruel armed robbers. Daylight fraudsters. Anyway, I'll now be able to call my nasty wife to let her know this suffering is going to be over soon. No regrets, I must end everything."

As he turned towards the front door, the security guard directed him to use the backdoor, pointing at it, because the front door had been shut to signal the end of the day's work. Mr. Volta obeyed, hurrying outside and not cursing him.

Like Mr. Volta, many customers stretched the limits of our tolerance every day, but we couldn't strike back because we must always be civil, the kind of pretence that made us dizzy with anger.

Laura shut her cubicle door and came to my desk. I took her hand and tickled her palm. She smiled, slinging her handbag over her shoulder to go home after such a tedious day. I asked her to wait while I tidied up my desk and finally shut down the computer. She nodded and sat down, packing her long hair into a bun on top of her head. I would love to take her out tomorrow, but I hadn't verified if she would be free.

"That man, what's his date of birth?" she asked.

"Who?"

"The man who just blustered out through the backdoor."

"27th October, 1958."

"Ah, he's a freaking Scorpio, so I'm not surprised at his fiery temperament. Most Scorpios are choleric, also stubborn, indignant, and bossy. They really sting like the scorpion depicting their zodiac sign. But they can also be courageous, go-getting, and upright."

I burst out laughing. However, I was always surprised at the ease and speed with which Laura determined the appropriate zodiac sign as soon as she got to know any date of birth. I'd asked her several times to honour her first-class degree in Electronics Engineering and stop thinking about the stars. If she'd studied a humanities discipline like philosophy or religion at university, then it would've been acceptable, maybe forgivable, for her to be so obsessed with the celestial signs. I wished she could use her horoscopic skills to predict when my father would set me free from his constant control and surveillance.

"Stop it, Laura. Your forecast is never watertight, has never been."

"Yep. Same as soccer prediction, but people still do it."

"Soccer is better and more accurate, because it's real."

"You mean the stars aren't real?"

"Astronomy or astrology. Choose one."

"Can't I take both?"

"Let me pick one for you."

"Hey, don't try that. I predict for fun, and it's nothing serious. Tulu, leave me alone, please."

"Every addiction often starts off as fun, and you know that."

"Don't worry. I'll never be as addicted to the stars as my mum is."

She'd learned the horoscopic habit from her Spanish mother, a medical microbiologist, obsessed about the daily forecasts. Her father once depended on her

mother's reading of the stars and missed his international flight, and the disappointed man chewed his thumbs, incensed.

Laura added more lipstick now, amplifying the redness of her lips and looking into the round mirror she'd taken out of her handbag.

"What's your weekend going to be like?" she asked me.

I sighed. "I just want to get far away from my dad once again."

"Lucky you, Daddy's boy. I wish I could be you, an only child."

She winked at me.

"Laura, my father thinks I'm not yet a man, that I can't think for myself. He even wants to know how the food in my stomach is digesting. And he calls it love. Can you imagine that? I need to escape, draw the shapes of my own polygons, and calculate my own angles. That's why I've been learning computer hacking on YouTube, without telling him."

"Yeah, I know you're passionate about that."

"Very much. Would you like to spend time with me tomorrow? We could go and see places, like the Lekki Conservation Centre or someplace else. I promise it'll be fun."

"I can't. I'll be locked up in my basement studio, painting the portrait of President Goodluck Jonathan. Making it hyper-realistic. I should finish it on Sunday."

She'd painted the portraits of many creative artists and world leaders, past and present, all of them hung around her studio walls. They were so real they looked like images out of a digital camera: Barrack Obama, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chinua Achebe, Angela Merkel, Wole Soyinka, Queen Elizabeth II, Nelson Mandela, and many more. I imagined she might put them up for public viewing sometime in the future. But I'd noticed that one important person was missing from her work.

"You haven't even painted your beloved dad yet."

"Nope. Vice Admiral Clarkson is too real and too close, not able to inspire a dialogue of pencils, brushstrokes, and colours. He's unreachable. I only paint distant entities, to make what's far near, to put body and soul on the people I may never meet, and that makes a conversation with them possible. I play God, you know."

She smiled.

"Laura Clarkson, you scare me with the way you roll your eyes and talk like a siren mermaid in Nollywood movies, that fish-shaped woman that can charm both sailors and fishermen. Let's go home, please!"

Outside, the sky was dark and cloudy. I hoped it would bucket down to cool the high temperature so that people who couldn't afford air conditioning would stop sweating. Laura and I hugged each other, and she let me kiss her glossy lips. She pulled away first. We stared at one another for a moment and burst out cackling. Office romances were the best. She swung around and climbed into her Toyota RAV 4. As she drove away, she waved at me, grinning. I smiled back, waving with my left hand. I turned around and walked towards my Range Rover Evoque, my father's birthday gift to me last year.

I put my backpack on the backseat, slammed my car's backdoor shut, checked my tyres, and climbed onto the driver's seat. It was drizzling already as I drove towards the company gates. Our uniformed security guards, Solomon and Jama, two muscular men old enough to be my father, stamped their army boots on the wet ground, saluting me. They pulled the gates open. Nearing them, I crawled to a stop, turned on my wiper, and rolled down my glass halfway. The rain was wetting my left hand and thigh. The men rushed closer as if they had important information to pass on to me.

"Oga sir, any goodies for us, your servants?" Solomon whispered, scratching the back of his head.

"Like what exactly?" I asked, pretending not to understand.

"The usual something, naahh," Jama said, standing so close that his chest prodded Solomon's left shoulder. "Oga sir, anything for the weekend?"

I smiled, shaking my head. "Ah, you mean my usual weekend tithe and offering to you?"

"Yes-o, Oga sir, you know we've been very loyal to you," Solomon said, taking off his cap and putting it back on, his way of showing me he was loyal. "Forever loyal, sir."

I chortled and handed each of them a crisp bundle of five thousand naira. Jama sank to his knees in thanksgiving, ignoring the wet interlocking stones, as Solomon prostrated.

"You don't have to do that," I told them. "Stand up, please."

"No worries, Oga sir," Jama said. "I can even tumble on the ground in your honour."

As I rolled up the window and pulled away, I overheard Jama inform Solomon, "It's only God who can bless this man for us, I tell you."

I loved that they called me a man, and I wished my father would do the same. When Deji Williams visited me in Lagos previously, he told me that British parents would never infantilize their children. But African parents, no matter how educated and exposed, would never be British parents. And, of course, Lagos would never completely westernize itself, like London.

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

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2015

CHAPTER FIVE

Some days after my arrival in London, I receive my Application Registration Card from the Home Office. Terrified about its content, I stare at the envelope, my hands trembling inside Deji's car. He grabs the envelop from me and rips it open, saying that nothing can compel the eyes to shed blood when they see a shock. He can say that. Of course, he's not the one facing the guillotine.

"Ha, they haven't given you the right to work-o."

"What?" I gasp, grimacing. "That's a worthless ARC. As a refugee with no right to earn a living, how do I survive?"

"This is ridiculous," Deji says. "Those Home Office people can sometimes be nasty, though they're generally nice."

I've started shivering with a sudden fever and a headache. "Deji, this is such a callous decision by the Home Office. How can I stay alive in this country without working, with no other source of income? How? This is a calamity."

He sighs loudly, shaking his head. "Don't worry, my guy. You see, eh? There are ways to outwit this problem. Although the ARC is no proof of identity, at least you might be able to open a bank account with your Nigerian passport."

"And fund the account with what? With the British snow, cold, sand, and stones?"

Sadly, my Nigerian debit card stopped working as soon as I landed in London. I sent an email to my bank in Lagos to give me access to my money, but they refused to reply. Besides, I can't access the money from my father's estate either, because his lawyers have embargoed every asset, asking me to wait for my mother, the joint signatory. But she has been sick and incapacitated. She went into a coma once again on the quiet night when I departed from Lagos. I hope she's regained consciousness by now. I'll call Aunty Bimbo to find out, but I'm ashamed of asking her for money, deeply ashamed.

"No matter what, my guy, let's try to get the account opened first, and then we'll work on how to get funds into it," Deji says. "At least you now have evidence that shows you've claimed asylum. Maybe when they call you for the main interview, you'll discuss with your caseworker why the right to work is important for your mental health. Whenever you mention mental health to white people, it scares them, and so they listen. It opens closed doors, mental health."

I shrug, totally downcast. “Well, let’s hope the Home Office will grant me the asylum quicker than usual due to my ineligibility to work during the waiting period. I’m optimistic that their final decision letter will be in my favour and will reach me sooner than later.”

“Yeah.” Deji sighs. “But waiting for that decision shit can sometimes take years.”

“Ahh-Ahh, are they that slow?” I ask, trembling with worry.

“Well, in fairness to the Home Office, they’re swift in processing information and serving both citizens and foreigners. But when it comes to processing asylum, it seems they all become human snails, crawling around all year, frustrating the lives of migrants and destroying their fragile dreams, especially the uncertain aspirations of asylum-seekers.”

I grab my handkerchief to wipe away the water gathering in my eyes.

“Don’t worry, my guy,” Deji says, patting me on my shoulder. “You might be lucky to get the letter quicker than expected.”

I breathe out loudly, saying nothing. What else can I say or do?

For many days now, I’ve been trying to reach Aunty Bimbo in Lagos to inquire how my mother is, but the calls haven’t been successful, my anxiety worsening. Meanwhile, living in the car for weeks feels like shackles and causes acute pain in my knees and ankles. On extremely cold nights, Deji turns on the car heater, warms the interior for about an hour, and turns it off to preserve fuel. On other nights, we’ve had to conceal ourselves inside many layers of blankets and duvets, hugging a warm water bottle, which Madam Sharon helps us to refill the next morning. Afternoons are less stressful as the gym offers us all day warmth. And a little respite excites my body and mind when I go swimming in the Olympic-size pool. Although the pool’s warm water is comforting, sometimes unexpected boredom sets in, so I switch to speed-walking on the treadmills or riding the exercise bikes.

The gym also has board games: Monopoly, Scrabble, and Chess, indulgences I’ve come to associate with distant fantasies and stunted advancement. Nonetheless, Deji and I binge on them from day to day, occupying estates and territories on the Monopoly. And we condescend a lot, calling one another maggot and pupa, when we can’t form winning words with the Scrabble letters. But Chess turns me off after a few minutes of play. Trapping a king bears a resemblance to a loss of autonomy, the way foreign dictators many centuries ago ambushed King Jaja of Opobo and King

Ovonramwen of the Benin Kingdom, deposed, and sent them to faraway lands. They were neither seen nor returned. Chess also reminds me of my great-grandfather's atrocities. He trapped and captured village kings and queens. He killed some, who tried to resist his tyranny, and pawned others to slave traders. And he didn't mind about their statuses as the local knights or bishops or priests, disregarding the castles and forests they controlled. As long as he had the backing of the far-off empire, he was free to play his Chess of barbarity with all the impunity that came unchecked.

I detest Chess.

Instead, to make time go quicker, I often buy used books, both fiction and non-fiction, from Oxfam and YMCA charity shops, read them, and post a scanned page on Instagram, drawing comments as usual from my thousands of followers. But this isn't sustainable. I wish Instagram comments could be a source of income for me, each comment sending pennies to my new bank account, so that I could become a force that stands alone and independent. And, as a man, I'm also ashamed to ask Laura to send me money from Nigeria. In any case, nobody does that. It works the other way round, despatching cash home to help those in need. Internally displaced Nigerians are perpetual receivers of everything, including polio and guinea worm vaccines, clothing items from the Red Cross as well as rice, millet, and sorghum from local food donors. And I'm also thinking of sending donations to them. The government is also a criminal pauper, receiving funds from the World Bank and the IMF and looting them dry. It's all a bazaar of acceptance and consumption. The few Nigerians who, on the contrary, send money overseas are mostly Big Men and Big Women paying tuition fees of foreign universities for their children. I wish I could turn the tide and normalise sending money from Nigeria to the dishonoured migrants abroad, those hurting wanderers in the West.

For how long will I have to depend on Deji? I don't know. Even though he doesn't moan about feeding me all day, I pity his depleting savings and his struggle to get a new job. He's been applying and attending interviews and lab demonstrations. His previous job was in a big medical facility at Westminster where he was a senior laboratory scientist. As an Oxford braggart, his unwillingness to put his Nissan Armada to commercial use worsens our dire situation, yet he won't swallow down his pride and crawl to see low-lying opportunities. When I mentioned this last week, he laughed cynically.

“May God forbid that,” he shouted, beating his chest inside the car. “Me, Chudeji Williams, to become a taxi driver in London with my Oxford education? God forbid.”

“You don’t have to spell out the names on your Oxford certificates for your passengers,” I said. “They won’t even care. Driving them safely to their various destinations is all that matters.”

“Tulu, you see, eh? I can tolerate anything but unreasonableness. Don’t you know I wrote the best undergraduate thesis during my time at Oxford, and I also won an award there for the best research dissertation during my MSc in Integrated Immunology?”

“I’m aware of your excellent academic exploits, Deji, but hardship doesn’t care. It’s the brain that produces certificates, but it’s money that dictates the quality of both the brain and the certificates.”

I find it strange that I’ve become a career counsellor all of a sudden, even with no job of my own.

“Don’t worry about me, Tulu. I’ll find the best job available in my field in this city,” he said, nodding his assuredness. “I attended a lab demo at MicroProbe, a research company at Canary Wharf, two days before your arrival, and I emerged the best. So I’ve been hopeful they’ll take me on. In fact, eh, I’m going back there this week to find out why they haven’t called me.”

“Why don’t you call them instead?”

“No, such things are better done in person.”

I’ve never written an application letter before, never refreshed my email, scanning for an invitation to an interview. I’ve heard people say they jump to pick up a call because of an expected offer of employment after attending a supposed remarkable interview, but these experiences sound bizarre and remote to me. I can’t picture Deji’s struggles with joblessness with the accuracy it deserves. But there’s a restlessness to the way he fiddles with his phone these days that scratches the heart of my empathy. Most times, he scrubs his arms, complaining they itch, his skin etched with lines inflicted by his long fingernails. I find it difficult to talk because my lips have broken, showing reddened cracks from the dryness of this long winter.

I’m lying face down on the car mattress when my phone rings, highlighting Aunty Bimbo’s name on the screen. I heave a sigh, relieved, as I’ll now be able to ask about

my mother's health. Deji stretches out beside me, shrouded from shoulder to toe in his off-white duvet, only leaving his head uncovered. He flings his eyes open, waiting for me to pick up my phone. Aunty Bimbo calls him more frequently than me, and he often creases his nose, piqued, while answering her numerous questions about his health, career, and dreams. He regales her with nothing but cringeworthy tales:

"Yes, Mummy, I've been promoted recently at my company and, yes, I've got the best radiators in my exquisite flat and, yes, I have the best health in the world and, yes, I'm still a virgin at twenty-eight, and yes, I'm keeping my sacred body for the Lord, and no, I'm not yet thinking about marriage, not even anytime soon. Ahh-Ahh, Mummy, you should know that bachelorhood is a long-lasting degree awarded to every man and, no, I'm not yet ready to part ways with it. But, Mummy, you're not married yourself, after all. Please, Mummy, be honest with me. Do you have a secret husband that I don't know?"

He would break out laughing, his phone almost falling off his portly fingers, his wrists so full of hairs they're almost jarring. Aunty Bimbo assured me in Lagos that she would contact me only if she had anything important to tell me, so now I wonder why she's calling me so early this morning. Is my mother dead?

"Tulu, Darling. I trust you've settled in well in London."

What does the world expect me to reply her? "Aunty, yes, it's the best city on earth."

"Oh my God, I'm so excited to hear that. I told you so, didn't I?"

"You did, Aunty."

"Still in bed?"

"Yes, Aunty."

"Oh, sorry to disturb you this early morn. And I hope you're getting on well with Deji."

"I'm trying to cope, but he irritates me sometimes."

"Who irritates you?" Deji pipes up on the mattress.

I grab his mouth shut, but he shoves my hand away and sits up, glaring sideways at me.

"That must be Deji's voice?" Aunty Bimbo asks.

"He's here with me, Aunty."

"Do you both share the same room while living in an entire flat with several rooms?"

"Of course, not, Aunty."

"Then why are you still together? He should have left the house by now and gone to work."

"Aunty, he's on leave. We're actually in the most exquisite suite of a five-star hotel in Kensington. Deji lodged us here last night, just for us to relax. We're about to have our breakfast in bed."

Deji nods, smiling and giving me an excited thumbs-up.

"Ah, that sounds so delicious to hear, and Deji is forever the hedonist." She pauses, and I hear fingers tapping on a laptop keyboard. "Listen, Senator Duke, your father's suspected killer, has been charged to court and returned to Ikoyi Prison, and the investigations continue. Your father's murderer can't be roaming the street free while his corpse rots away at the cemetery."

I sit up, feeling myself stiffen, adjusting my duvet and blanket around my midriff with one hand. Her voice comes across with a firmness that mystifies me. Why is she so invested in the murder trial? What does she gain if my family receives the judicial favour of getting the killers jailed? What does she lose, if we lose? Maybe she's just being human, curious, trying to demystify the killing.

But as I mull over the trial, I'm not convinced that we'll ever get justice, not with the kind of lopsided judiciary that Nigeria has. The judges will kill the case with their never-ending adjournments, and the judicial workers will go on strike forever. And that's if money doesn't exchange hands to kill the case first. Out there, everything is for sale, and anyone is buyable if the price is right and comes in dollars or pound sterling. My father had tried to disinfect these judicial pollutions but got trapped in the process.

"Aunty, are you serious about what you've said about Senator Duke, or is this some red-carpet razzmatazz?"

"Darling, I can't spend my time and international call tariffs to spew trash on you. I, Dame Abimbola Williams, do solemnly swear to get Justice Okoye's killers jailed. Trust me."

Her emphasis on being a dame is often her sign of deep-seated seriousness and honesty, and her words are always apt.

"Aunty, may you be rewarded by the forces greater than you."

"Oh, gracious me. Thank you so much." Another brief rattle on the laptop. "Tulu, darling—"

My heart spins, and I place a palm on my ear. “Aunty, my mum is dead. Just tell me that.”

“That’s not why I called, but your mum’s health has indeed gone downhill.”

I cringe, some hot, rattled air pouring out of my nostrils. “I’m worried, Aunty. How can I lose both parents within months of each other?”

“Don’t worry, darling. Sickness is clearly different from death.”

“You mean?”

“Your mum will heal from grief and survive, and I can I assure of that. Even if this means flying her abroad to give her access to the best doctors, I’ll do exactly that.”

“Aunty, how can I thank you enough?”

“No worries, darling, as I understand your speechlessness.”

I’m dizzy, as I put my phone down. My tongue is so tied that I can’t even roll it to force saliva down my throat. Deji notices my sudden descent into sulkiness. His probing eyes expect me to say something, but I won’t. My mother’s medical history is long, and he doesn’t know anything about it, and I’m too debilitated to relay it to him at this moment.

“What’s happened?” he asks, lying back on the mattress.

“What if your mum visits London today and wants to spend the night in your flat?”

He laughs, coughing at the same time and covering his mouth with his fist. “So that’s your worry, eh? On the contrary, she prefers for me to leave whatever I’m doing to come see her in whichever hotel she’s staying in, wherever it’s located in this city. She considers such conduct a sign of deep love and respect. My mother is a typical African woman.” He bursts out laughing and coughing again. “You see, eh? That woman can never leave her meetings with the editors of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*, to go in search of her fatherless son.”

I break into laughter, too. “Does it ever bother you that you don’t know your father?”

“Nah, never, never! If the randy man is interested in seeing me, let him show his face. Otherwise, I don’t fucking care.”

He unrolls his duvet over his head and lies back on the mattress.

CHAPTER SIX

Several days later, Deji wants me to go to MicroProbe with him, despite his ongoing struggle with diarrhoea, his stomach shredding him so much that the pain forces him to bend down. Wincing, he coughs and sneezes. He's rushed to the gym four times now and returned, each time cupping his two hands under his abdomen as though pregnant. As he continues to spit and belch, I've become worried about my own health. If his sickness is infectious and I catch it and fall sick this moment, I'll be doomed to die, as I don't have an NHS registration yet, so no GP will attend to me.

He takes his over-the-counter drugs—paracetamol, Imodium, and other anti-diarrhoea tablets, including a pink syrup—which he bought from Boots nearby, and says he'll see his GP if the problem continues. We're going to Canary Wharf by his car, he adds, putting the syrup bottle into the glove compartment.

"That's good," I say. "At least, I'll see another part of London today. But why don't you visit your GP first? What if your problem worsens on the way to Canary Wharf?"

"I have a lidded bucket inside the car just in case I have to use it."

I pull my face away, repulsed, turning to glance at the back. "That's revolting Deji. I've wondered why you put that plastic container there."

"It seems you're too idle, Tulu. That's why you notice everything I do, questioning all my decisions."

"You don't have to tell me that. Isn't my idleness obvious?"

He quickly combs his hair and beard, looking through the window into the car's side mirror, and then tosses the comb into the glove compartment. "You see, eh? You have to join the Afropolitan Union. At least, they'll keep you busy when you subscribe to their weekly email newsletters. I'm also a member, and those guys do an excellent job of updating all Black migrants in this island country."

"Afropolitan?" I ask, spraying what remains of my designer perfume into my armpits. "Someone on my Instagram timeline said something like that some months ago, but back then I considered it trivial. Now that you've mentioned it again, what do you mean by Afropolitan?"

"An Afropolitan is simply an African immigrant, but it's more complicated than that." He turns on the car and starts warming up the engine. "Don't worry. I'll forward you one of their e-newsletters to peruse for yourself. For now, just do yourself and

myself a favour, please. Hop over to www. afropolitan-union.com, register for free, and subscribe."

"Deji, I'll do that later." I'm combing my beard now, looking into the side mirror. "I'm still getting myself ready to see the London financial district."

He coughs twice. "Okay. Whenever you do, you'll start receiving their articles, pieces of advice, and stories about the experiences of many migrants from across the UK and even beyond. You can also read the numerous eye-popping essays on their website. If you have your own migrant story, you can send it anonymously to the editors or with your real name on it, and they'll share it with the group."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, really. Those guys are doing a fantastic job." He takes his iPhone and starts scrolling up and down, his foot on the pedal pestering the engine. He taps the screen and turns his face towards me. "My guy, I just forwarded you one of the most informative newsletters from them."

"Thanks, man. I'll read it later."

He noses the car out of the car park, turning into the street. "Time and again, they post job opportunities if they think that a Black person has the slightest chance."

"Do they look at CVs and offer feedback on what's good or bad?" I ask, even though I've never written one in my whole life.

"Yeah, they do. I really love the people running the Afropolitan Union: the editors, the counsellors, the lawyers, and the trustees. In fact, when I lost my job, they offered me free counselling on the phone, and the voice I heard stabilised my distress a great deal. The AU is such a home away from home but still within reach."

"That's cool. But who pays them?"

"It's a registered charity. Members make donations, any amount. And I think the administrators in turn invest the donations in stocks and shares. I used to donate one hundred quid every month until I lost my job. I'll resume when I find another good one."

He hasn't told me why he lost the employment, and I've not developed the courage to ask him. Probing him won't bring back the job. Whether he gets this new job or not, he's found kinship in the Afropolitan Union, our fellow Black folks who try to understand his problems without judging him. I can infer from what he's said that he gets some relief from the AU. It's a kind of therapy that comes from knowing that one is vulnerable when domiciled in a distant country, the very opposite of one's

birthplace, but there's someone else acknowledging the anguish genuinely in both written and spoken ways.

I imagine a similar result for myself, even though I hate belonging to associations. Some people thought I was too proud in Lagos for not taking part in activities that involved many people at a go. But this is the UK, and it's become necessary that I join the Afropolitan Union. It's an online league, after all. Although I imagine the organisers might call for in-person meetings from time to time, I'll have to shift my stance, accepting the instability of both my mind and body. It's the same way I've adjusted to the frosty weather here, to the fact that my heart and lungs now work twice as hard to generate enough warmth to keep me alive.

In Nigeria, I was never conscious of the rise and fall of my chest, but the UK has compelled me to become alert to everything I do, including the way I walk and talk, knowing that someone in another type of skin might interpret my everyday behaviour as abnormal and, as a result, heave an eyebrow. Even inside the gym, anytime I pull off my shirt, I get strange stares from the white men around. Sometimes, I wonder if my chest has bulged so big that it's become misconstrued as breasts with thick nipples stuffed with milk. But my breasts are normal, sleek and flat with nipples that don't announce themselves.

After his card payment, Deji pulls up inside a multistorey parking lot, near MicroProbe at Canary Wharf. His phone beeps. He picks it up, scans the screen, and hisses loudly. He shakes his head, and his grimace suggests a bleak prospect ahead for us. He looks lost and devastated in an instant. Has he finally received a message from this research company, saying his application hasn't been successful? He empties his pink cough syrup into his mouth and lies back on his seat. His shut eyes portend a serious headache. Because he doesn't prod his stomach as he sometimes does, I guess his worry doesn't emerge from there.

"Deji, what's the matter?" I ask.

He hisses. "It's from Crown Fitness Club."

My heart summersaults. "What are they saying? That we can no longer use their facilities and services?"

"No, it's their notice of renewal. Mine is due in seven days, and I don't have enough money in my account for the direct debit renewals for both of us."

"So mine is already due?"

"No, it'll be due in eight days, so tomorrow I might also get a notice for yours."

A worried yawn flees out of my mouth, but I control myself, trapping the air with my hands, as if it's a valuable gift, but it fizzles away through my trembling fingers. The passage of time is mysterious. So the earth has been rotating and I didn't even notice it.

"Let's hope you get this job, Deji."

"Yeah, I'm upbeat about it," he says, nodding. "But you see, eh? I think you should also start looking for a job. It's become necessary."

"But I can't work yet and you know that, don't you? I don't have the required papers and permits, especially a National Insurance Number."

"That's not a problem. You'll use mine."

"How? I'll change my name to Chudeji Williams?"

"You're not changing your name. You're going to use *my* name. A recruitment agency has just advertised on indeed.co.uk on behalf of a white family looking for a nanny for their five-month-old baby, and they need a person from an underrepresented background, which is fancy code for Black. I think you can start from there."

My bladder expands, instantly filled up with bubbling water, and I feel like grabbing the plastic bucket behind us. But I sit still and try to allow the storm under my belt to settle down. What does Deji take me for?

"I can never do that job."

"Why not?" he retorts.

"That's a woman's job, and I'm not a grandmother who takes care of her little grandchildren."

"Calm down, Tulu." He pulls at my beard, smiling, and I push his hand away. "I understand how you feel. But you see, eh? Here in the UK, there's nothing like man or woman. People do whatever they like, go wherever they please, eat whatever they admire, work the job they cherish, as long as it's legal. Nobody gives a toss about what's male or female because people feel it doesn't matter and shouldn't matter."

"But I can't babysit."

"You can't or you won't?"

"I won't and I can't."

"Look, I know you haven't done it before but they'll give you little training. You'll work for only a few hours in the day and come back in the evening. Because I

now use my British passport for everything I do here, you'll use my Nigerian passport, which I renewed recently."

I feel cold and warm at the same time inside the car. A poignant shower of light prevails over me, the light of revelation for a drive towards responsibility and self-reliance. This idea of caring for a child disorients me, but I discern there's a sense in which Deji's suggestion rings true and generous. He's a British citizen, but he's thrown his reputation towards the edge of fire by offering me his NIN, a possession that other people lease out to desperate migrants for monthly returns of good cash. If I don't take up this lucrative opportunity, I might end up worse than I have been since I arrived. Some revelations don't require further scrutiny to establish their worth.

"What if they realise that I'm not the genuine owner of your documents?"

He looks pleased. "They won't find out. I've come to believe that we really resemble each other. When we get back today, you'll apply with your CV."

"Why do they require a CV for a mere babysitting job?"

"White people love documents a lot. They crave documentation like chocolate bars."

"But I don't have a CV."

He giggles. "My posh Aristoguy, that doesn't surprise me, so I'll put one together for you."

We climb down from the car and walk hand-in-hand into one of the busy streets, flanked by glittery high-rise buildings on both sides. When we reach a green location full of well-tended flowers and shrubs, he asks me to sit down, like the tourists that brandish cameras on one of the sculptured benches, and wait for him until he returns.

"I'll be quick," he adds.

"Good luck."

I take a seat. Crossing my legs at the ankles, I open the Afropolitan Union's e-newsletter he forwarded me a while ago.

To: Chudeji Williams <dejiwilliams@gmail.com>

Subject: INTRODUCING THE AFROPOLITAN UNION

Dear Chudeji Williams,

We thank you for becoming our member and subscribing to our weekly newsletter. Afropolitans are Africans who are outside the shores of the continent to seek better means of livelihood abroad. Some of us were born here. Either our parents or grandparents migrated. As a result, our lineage can be traced back to the continent.

The Afropolitan Union, therefore, is here to help all African migrants in the United Kingdom, irrespective of class, age, sexuality, gender, religion, among other exclusions and biases. We're proudly Black, and we also feel the pangs of living in the UK. This union became necessary, founded a few years ago, because there was an urgent need for all of us outside Africa to articulate our opinions with a uniform voice and be driven by a shared vision.

Please find out the various services we offer on our website (www.afropolitan-union.com) and consider donating, if you can, using the DONATE button there. Our telephone number is (+44)7482154783, and you can call us at any time. Our social media handle is @afropolinion, across the following channels: Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

We don't know the type of Afropolitan you might be, but we're thrilled to have you. There are many strands of Afropolitans. On our website, there's a diagram that shows the many variants and sub-variants we've identified to date. Inspect it to see which category you belong to. One person can identify with multiple categories. For example, an Anglophone Afropolitan can also be an Academic Afropolitan, which means an English-speaking migrant who attends an educational institution here, who can also be a Legitimate Afropolitan, allowed to work. The diagram is like a board game. We call it the AfropoliGame. Play around it, and interpret the groups the way you wish. Please let's know if you disagree with the classifications or if you have spotted a category not there at the moment. We update the diagram regularly.

Finally, we're eternally grateful to our originators, Achille Mbembe and Taiye Selasi, for founding and popularising us Afropolitans.

We're postmodern and postcolonial, modelling Afropolitanism to serve travelling Africans, whether exploring the cities within the continent of Africa or outside of it. This Afropolitan vibe has enabled us to express and celebrate our individuality, hybridity, and diversity, as we traverse the megacities across the developed world and beyond.

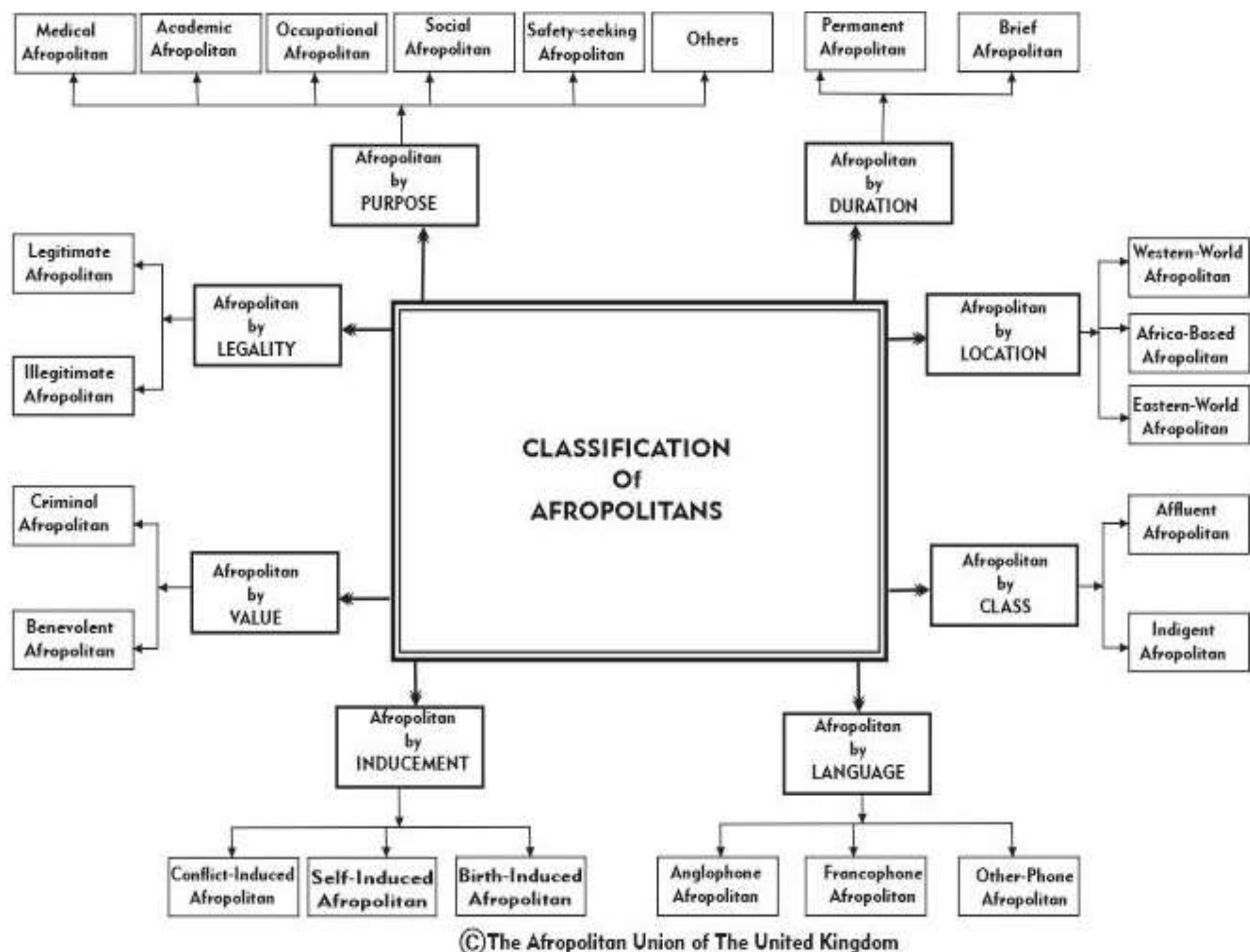
We warmly welcome you, Chudeji Williams!

Yours sincerely,
The Editors,
The Afropolitan Union.

Rattling around the internet has been my pastime, so I hop on to the website. Because I'm first confronted with a commercial selling a love potion from Ghana to every visitor, I grow wary, given that the charm is meant to attract only white people to Black migrants. I click on the "cancel" button and land on the main page. It uses orange buttons which create a cosy ambience that alleviates the doubt in my head. I become awash with optimism, gripped by a desire to explore. The website is responsive and soft, wrapping perfectly around the portrait screen of my iPhone. In the background sits a faded map of Africa, which takes my mind back home, but the psychic flight pales as quickly as it began because of the flurry of winter cold hitting my face, jolting me back to London. The faded map, after all, appears like my dwindling memory of the bustle of Lagos and the unsung vastness of the African continent itself.

But something about the website evinces seriousness, professionalism, and care. Deji is right. The union can be trusted, and their online platform looks similar to a bank's website in its layout and easy navigation. Its interactive robustness feels authentic, too—several links, buttons, and images reacting to my finger-touch with an efficiency that can only be genuine. As I fiddle with the security padlock icon on the address bar, I remember my surreptitious training in ethical hacking and cryptography in Lagos. I don't want to shake my head, as my brain hasn't gone missing, but I'm increasingly becoming ashamed of my academic and occupational past, feeling sorry for myself.

Although there are sections with articles on African fashion, food, education, medicine, music, and the occupations, I make my way towards the link that opens the classification of Afropolitans. It's just a plain image for now, not yet interactive until I've been authenticated as a member and allowed to play the AfropoliGame. I must know my categories and sub-categories before registering and subscribing because I have to tick the appropriate checkboxes on the registration form. Inspecting the chart, I'm certain my group is absent, pessimistic about finding any category that matches me and my state of affairs, something that perfectly describes my sojourn in the UK. Very few Africans have had to rush to Britain because their judge father was murdered in cold blood in the city of Lagos.



At the bottom of the chart, **Afropolitan by INDUCEMENT** first catches my attention, and I scroll down, guided by the arrows, to the sub-categories. **Conflict-Induced Afropolitan** doesn't do it for me. I'm a citizen of a no-war nation, although thousands of Nigerians flee the country every year. I scroll up again and find **Afropolitan by PURPOSE.** What are my purposes in the UK?

1) To become a British citizen who runs a permanent business, a start-up—that's the buzzword now, start-up.

2) To buy my beloved Range Rover, again, and get a mortgage.

3) To bring my beloved Laura here.

Deji discourages the third reason, saying it's better for me to marry a Bri-eesh girl, a fast track to Bri-eesh citizenship. In his words, "A Black man falling in love with a white woman uplifts the man, a formidable achievement that takes his Blackness to a higher level."

I move up the chart again, taken aback seeing **Safety-seeking Afropolitan.** I zoom in, making it bigger and pixelated on my screen, and stare at it for a long time, feeling discovered, represented, and validated. I've yet to receive any support from this union, but their wide-ranging brilliance holds me captive, my shoulders puffing high in admiration.

I pull up the registration form, type in my details, tick the "subscribe" checkbox, and submit. Once registered, I grab the interactive diagram in my account to trace my Afropolitan pattern, playing the AfropoliGame using the digital pencil provided. It's a game where I'm expected to produce a map of my own country.

I scour the sub-categories for my various groups, starting to sketch from one group to another. I belong to the **Anglophone Afropolitan**, **Indigent Afropolitan**, **Western-World Afropolitan**, **Permanent Afropolitan**, **Safety-seeking Afropolitan** dreaming to join the **Occupational Afropolitan** later. Then I choose **Legitimate Afropolitan** and **Benevolent Afropolitan**. To draw the exact base of the Nigerian map, I decide to include **Conflict-Induced Afropolitan**. Nigeria sleeps and wakes up in awkward peace, after all. As I join the line back to the **Anglophone Afropolitan** again, a complete map of Nigeria emerges, splashing stars on my screen and congratulating me on completing the game. I save it and imagine that nobody would choose **Criminal Afropolitan**, even if they're criminals indeed.

I join the Discussion Board, the most active section of the website. It's live and alive with people arguing in real-time, posting pictures and making their products and services known. A woman advertises bunches of yellow plantain and Cameroon yellow peppers. A man showcases cosmetics to grow lustrous beards. Someone is offering a discount on organic palm oil from Warri in Nigeria. The Discussion Board spreads across multiple threads, including politics, culture, identity, business, religion, tourism, and much more. You click on the thread that interests you and follow the

discussions. It's like another brand of social media, but for only African immigrants. I receive emojis of hugs, kisses, and smiles, saluting and welcoming me to the forum.

Someone says America is risky for African immigrants because the streets are lined with careless guns. Another argues why Britian and Canada are the best destinations for Blacks to raise their children while still adhering strictly to the moral dictates of their native cultures.

I'm engrossed in these discussions when a hand roughly scrubs my shoulder, and I look up. Deji stands unsteadily, his face scrumped up. His usual chubby stomach looks flattened, like he's had his intestines scooped out inside the skyscraper. I get up, locking my phone. I try to hug him, but he appears lifeless, his breathing swift and noisy.

"Let's get out of here immediately," he snaps, already stepping out, fog gushing out of his mouth.

"Relax, Deji," I say, catching up with him. "What happened? Did they say they were no longer employing anybody?"

"On the contrary, they were doubting if I'd actually graduated from Oxford, saying it was so out-of-the-ordinary for people from my background to come out with a first from such a prestigious university."

My chest feels heavy. "They told you this?"

"Point blank, Tulu. Can you imagine such bollocks? Those people are Asians-o, Arabs and the Middle-Easterners, not even white British people."

"That's nonsense," I say. "Why didn't they verify from the university?"

"I was told they'd sent an email, but Oxford hadn't yet replied. I'm furious."

"Maybe they'll still call you after they've heard back from the university."

"No, they won't, as I'm not even sure they sent anything. Oxford doesn't delay replies. It's been a long time since I attended their assessment centre."

This reminds me of the awful attitude of the Lebanese, Chinese, Indonesian, and Indian employers in Nigeria towards Nigerian workers.

"An Asian man in Lagos often told his unpaid domestic workers that they were eagles who didn't need money because they were already high-flyers and accomplished," I tell Deji, shaking my head.

He stops walking and turns to me. "I didn't get that; repeat what you said."

"At month-end, the Asian boss would hail his long-suffering workers, calling them super eagles, super-super eagles with green-white-green wings. And the workers

would laugh broadly and continue working the following month with no payment for their previous toils, although he fed the workers free of charge in his house."

"You mean the Asian man did that nonsense to Nigerians in their own country and went scot-free?"

"Not only scot-free, but he was also rewarded with pharmaceutical import concessions by the federal government just because he posted our green-white-green flag in front of his house. Look, just because Chinese engineers have yellow skin, the Nigerian government awards them the most lucrative construction contracts, and those Chinese people think Nigerian engineers are a little more intelligent than goats and dogs."

Deji sniggers and coughs. "What a country!"

"The paler your skin, the more privileged you become among Nigerians, who think Asians are pure whites and so worship them like demigods."

"You see, eh? In the UK here, the real white people lump Africans and those Asians into the same unfortunate POC basket."

"POC? What's that?"

"People of Contamination, and I hate that. There's also the BIPOC, which is an acronym for Biggest Idiots are People of Contamination. That's the way some pure whites see us Blacks and other racially powerless people."

"That's disgusting," I say, knitting my brow. "That means people with skin that destroys the immaculateness of the whites, right?"

"Look, I think Asians are even as bigoted as some Europeans and Americans, but people aren't talking about Asian racism and discrimination at all."

I sigh. "Anyway, you should forget the research job at MicroProbe. The closure of one door surely leads to the opening of another."

He nods. "Yeah, I've already put it behind me. But I was so outraged up there that I asked to use their loo. And when they showed me, I entered there and sprinkled my diarrhoea on the floor. I shut the loo door and fled."

"Ahh-Ahh, you shouldn't have done that, Deji," I say, clutching his shoulders tight on the sidewalk. "Their cleaner is very likely to be Black, and you might have succeeded in punishing someone of your kind."

He shakes free, turning to step out. "Then let the Black person call the Asians to inspect my diarrhoea, too. All my life, I've been poking my fingers into people's blood, cough, menses, breastmilk, puke, pus, semen, and peeping at shit, snot, spit,

sweat, tears, urine, and phlegm, just to detect a medical problem and earn an income. This is the most appropriate time for other people to have some romance with my own excretion and get paid for doing so."

I shudder, pacing faster in order to reach him. I want to ask him to think about ways we can both make money without working for other people. We could, for example, cook jollof rice and sell on the streets. But that would require us to live in a proper house with a kitchen and utensils. As an alternative, we could peddle spinach from house to house, blowing whistles. Starting small and growing bigger has always been the most common gospel to alleviate the joblessness in Nigeria. But it seems the UK doesn't promote small-small businesses. Nobody hawks anything on the streets here, no snow-encrusted kiosks in the corners selling Pepsi, Coke, and doughnuts. It's either you're working or you're rich enough to be worked for, and I wonder if the rich established their enterprises without starting out small and growing large. I don't have an answer for this right now, but I'll, the longer I live here. I don't ask Deji anything about founding a little enterprise. And we say nothing to each other as we near the multistorey parking lot.

On the drive back to Islington, I let him know I've registered with the AU and how ingenious they are. He looks appeased now, smiling, and stops the music playing on the car stereo. For him, the AU appears to be an acronym above every other acronym, soothing his wound and pacifying his mind. It sounds like a name that repays his losses.

"What type of Afropolitan are you?" I ask.

"You see, eh? I began with the **Academic Afropolitan,** and now I've gone on to the **Occupational Afropolitan**."

I've discovered there should also be a **Jobless Afropolitan** sub-category included in their game diagram. I might later send an email to the AU administrators to include it.

"Do you think all your sub-categories can produce a map of Nigeria?" I ask.

"I'm much more interested in drawing a map of Ghana. The news from that country gets me excited all the time. I can even go there, live, and work with my Oxford degrees."

"Really? You sound like a lady I saw on one of the discussion threads on identity. She's aggressive in renouncing the union, saying she's not Afropolitan because the term neither aptly describes her nor applies to her peculiar situation."

"Then what's she doing on the website? Did anyone force her to enrol?"

"I wonder-o."

"You see, eh? Any African in the UK or elsewhere who tells you they're not Afropolitan, just know they're mixed race. They were born and bred here by either a white mother or a white father, and they have some pink-skin privileges that core Black migrants like us don't have. You know all Blacks aren't equal, but Black remains Black."

I'm nodding because he seems to make a lot of sense. "Yes, actually, she looks biracial. Her picture shows a fair-complexioned lady with turmeric-coloured hair like wet spaghetti lounging around her pale face and shoulders."

"I know her," he says. He glances at me and looks ahead again, gingerly holding his steering wheel. "She was born in Birmingham. Her parents are Nigerian and British, and she's always the loudest and angriest on that AU forum. She always writes in capital letters and sends rage emojis to everyone who disagrees with her."

The lady in question behaves like an online troll, common across the social media. I feel the AU administrators should block her from destroying the good work they're doing. But on second thoughts, I realise the AU might've considered their inclusivity promise and left her unchecked. Perhaps, she's afflicted or displaced in some way, and although I wonder the nature of her problem, she should identify with the **Birth-Induced Afropolitan** group, having been born and raised in the UK.

"But what do you imagine she wants?" I ask, looking at Deji.

"She wants nothing," he says, smoothing his beard with his left hand. "You see, eh? She's just one of those angry African intellectuals, especially women who tear down their fellow women's achievement. They're all jealous of how the union is for making us Afropolitans a worldwide movement."

"How?" I ask.

"You know, some African writers are faux intellectuals who are always jealous of other people's accomplishments."

"I didn't know."

"Those shysters practise Pulling Hills Down, the PhD syndrome, pulling high-profile people down. That's what that Birmingham lady does."

"But the union hasn't offended anyone by popularising the Afropolitans."

"Let that Birmingham bozo start her own concept, gather other biracial people, and form an association. She should maybe call themselves Biracialpolitans, since she doesn't want to give the union its due credit."

"Deji? Take it easy."

"I'm serious, Tulu. She's a vile, upcountry lady, full of bad blood. White people have rejected her because she's not really white. And now that Black people have graciously accepted her, she's busy talking gibberish. She keeps shouting, 'The notion of being an Afropolitan is for rich African migrants, not for me. It doesn't capture my peculiar situation in Britain and the realities of the poor, rural populace. I'm not an Afropolitan. Blah, blah, blah.' If she's not an Afropolitan, which is decent and prestigious, then she must be an Ashawopolitan, trading her biracial body for cash in the red-light districts in Birmingham. She's so troublesome!"

"Ashawopolitan?" I say, and burst out laughing. "Deji, your bad mouth is becoming unbearable these days." My ribs ache now.

He too laughs along. "But I always speak the truth. Always."

He's mimicked the lady's imaginary broken voice, sounding like a rooster gripped at the neck. In my view, biracial people are very intelligent, gorgeous, and extremely creative. I might be biased because I've fallen in love with one, Laura, who's Spanish-Nigerian. She's the happiest personality I've met outside my immediate family, and so hardworking that she hardly rests. I wonder why the Birmingham lady is angry with everybody. Besides, I haven't yet understood why biracial Africans living outside the African continent always-always identify as Black. Why not white? With my Nigerian eyes, I see the biracial skin to be attractively white, which I truly, truly adore.

Deji crawls to a stop at a junction leading to Islington, waiting for the traffic light to turn green.

I say, "But it's not every biracial African who thinks or behaves like that Birmingham lady, right?"

"Yeah, many others are more reasonable and sensible, even here in London," he says. "In fact, the AU's Director of Publicity is biracial, a happy woman, always proud to identify as an Afropolitan."

"That's fantastic," I say, swiping my phone screen. "Choice is such an important apartment with uncountable rooms of freedom."

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: What privileges do biracial Africans have?

@posky: Advertisers use their pictures on the cosmetics for Black people.

@charz: No, it's the cosmetics for Blacks who want to bleach their skin, @posky.

@kemb: I can never buy such whitening products, proud of my chocolatey skin.

@grix: They're pretty people with commercial appeal, especially here in Durban.

@teru_: Yeah, skin power, even here in Ghana. They get American visas easily.

@syoth: In Nigeria, biracial women marry super-rich politicians only.

@moem: They secure mouth-watering movie roles in the Nollywood of Nigeria.

@cherl: I'm British biracial, but my kind has no access to good jobs in the UK.

@adop: Some Lagos women whiten their skin to look biracial—not my concern.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Days later, I shift from one side to the other where I sit inside Deji's car, scrolling on a social media page, reading and smiling at some funny comments. Deji is in Crown Fitness Club to bathe and brush his teeth. My phone vibrates in my hand. A text message from Laura.

—hi tulu. sorry to tell you this, but AtlanTel has gone out of business.

My heart tumbles, goose bumps all over me.

—what went wrong, Laura?

—bankruptcy. But another telco has bought it over.

I knew my father's death would spell the end of that company. For the few months I worked at the headquarters, I saw how the directors awarded bogus contracts to their cronies, friends, and firms who knew nothing about cell-tower engineering. Those directors inflated Local Purchase Orders, padded budgets with extraneous expenditure, and over-invoiced procurements. They abused both financial regulations and what my father used to call corporate governance. I'd begun to plug these loopholes and stop the recklessness, but the bloodthirsty monsters forced me to flee after murdering him.

—what about the jobs?

—all of us have been asked to leave.

—what? leave?

—don't worry. i'll be fine, although I've been very sick, vomiting.

—ah, that's awful, Babe, and I'm terrified already. it must be malaria, right?

—oh, no, don't be so shocked. I'm getting better every day.

—alright.

—PS: your zodiac star is still bubbling in the sky. so stay cool and calm!

—stop this zodiac rubbish, laura. can't you be serious for once, naahh?

—lol.

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I put two hands on my face and exhale loudly into them, but I don't burst into tears. I brush the awful news aside and stay calm. Deji storms back to the car from Crown Fitness Club, gripping his membership card between his thumb and forefinger. He

looks dismayed, his winter-shredded lips hung slack as if he also inhales with his mouth.

"I've been locked out of the gym," he says, gasping for breath.

"What?" I burst out. "That's a tragedy."

He plunges down onto the mattress, the car springing up and down, some bolts rattling. My own card still has twenty-four hours of validity before I'm locked out too. I offer it, but he refuses. The CCTV and the IT control room have already captured his declined attempt, and the cockeyed lady with blonde hair at reception must have also seen him, even though her deceptive eyes might have portrayed otherwise. He belches and gazes up the car roof. Yesterday, he was due to renew the card, but didn't because he couldn't renew for both of us.

"Deji, please, don't be annoyed. Before any more damage is done to your lifestyle, I suggest you call your mum and explain what's happening."

"I'll never do that," he retorts with a rising voice, turning his back to me.

"Why not?"

"You see, eh? Since graduation, I've never asked her for any help."

With the overbearing heaviness of his two Oxford degrees, it's going to be a very difficult task for him to open up to anyone about his stifling sadness. Sometimes, it feels like getting good degrees from top universities is an obstacle when life doesn't work positively as planned. It might even be worse talking to white people about his agony as they won't understand that he has spectacular limitations, despite his spectacular education, being a migrant. Some of them might not have suffered such migrant alienation in their entire journey through life.

"I believe you should change your mind and talk to Aunty Bimbo now. She's your mother, no matter what."

"And I won't. If I let her know my true condition here, she'll want me to return to Lagos this moment and run the magazine business with her."

"Which would be a good offer because the mag is prestigious and doing well in Nigeria."

He rolls around and gawps at me. "If I go back to Lagos right now, how would you survive in London?"

My throat tightens, my tongue flattening with wordlessness. How can I carry on alone? In this strange place? A bloodless silence strikes me, decluttering what seems to be my murky thoughts. I feel feathery, realising I have no power, no easy answer,

even though there's something untidy about his question. I can't convince him to return home. How will he cope going back? What if his mother's magazine business fails like most Nigerian businesses? What would he do then? Would he ever forgive himself for going home?

"Honestly, I think that going back to Nigeria is a wrong decision at the moment," I say. "Please forgive me for suggesting it."

"Now you're talking some sense," he says. "Look, I'd prefer to starve in London than live a sheltered life in Lagos. It's going to be a sordid privilege in any case, my mum's staff prostrating each time I cough or fart or sneeze. But when I'm absent, they would transform their mouths of fake respect into gossip machines that would strip me of both my dirt and dignity." He yawns, placing the back of his hand over his mouth. "Tulu, let me tell you, eh. There's a method to London's flux that makes it bearable, and I'm ready to wait until it calms."

"And in the meantime?"

"No worries. You see, eh? There's this white guy I met the other day at the gym, a weightlifter, who wants to move permanently to Norwich where he bought a new house. He said he was looking for a roomy vehicle to carry his bits and pieces to that place, and I offered to do that for fifty pounds."

I want to snigger, but as I imagine this must have been a distressing decision for him, I allow myself to squirm instead. "Really? And he agreed to pay that much price?"

"Yeah, seems like a rich guy, but I don't know if he's serious. We exchanged numbers."

"Did you let him know you're an Oxford-trained taxi driver?"

"Tulu, just shut up; you're full of mischief," he exclaims and chuckles, kicking my feet. "You're so useless."

"I'm trying to help your mission, naahh."

He jumps up from the mattress. When our eyes meet, he bursts out laughing, shaking his head. His phone slips out of his pocket and drops on the mattress. As I giggle, too, stretching my hand to pick it for him, he doubles over and grabs it, as if afraid I might read his text messages and watch some of the porn movies that keep him busy all day.

He climbs out of the car, goes round, and yanks the boot open. Some moments later, I hear the rapid pitter-patter of water dropping into our plastic bucket. I rise,

bending under the car roof to peek at him. He's brushing his teeth vigorously, the lower part of his beard daubed with the toothpaste foam. The speed of his brushing is intense, the friction brutal, coming across like the sound of a metal brush scrubbing thick jeans with stubborn stains at the hems. I worry his gums might bleed. He hurries with the bucket to a hole by the roadside and pours the content into the gutter. He's on a call when he's returning.

Back inside the car, he says, "The gym has just ordered me to remove my car from their premises as soon as possible today."

I gasp and sit upright, feeling my nerves prickle. "What are we going to do?"

"I've just called Madam Sharon and explained to her. She said we could park in front of her restaurant, just within her own premises."

I sigh, relieved a bit. "Are we going to be sleeping inside the car while parked there? Where do we take our baths henceforth?"

"She has toilets and bathrooms for her customers."

He exhales and leans back on his pillow. The prospect of using Madam Sharon's toilets and bathrooms appears to have embarrassed him. It seems like an admission of disgrace and failure, an ignoble anticipation. He would've preferred not to have said it, and yet he's had no option but to persuade me that things weren't getting any more deplorable.

"Are you sure she'll allow us to use her facility for free?" I ask.

"We'll try to win her over." He hisses. "By the way, when are you going for the babysitting interview today?"

"At one-thirty."

"OK, good. I'll drive you there. If those white recruiters see you come out of the car, they'll assume you're not a pauper and therefore respect you."

"Of course, I'm not a pauper."

"Can't you just shut up, Tulu? I'm not saying you are, but the way some white people think about Blacks can be quite unpredictable. They can conclude you've never watched the telly since you were born, especially if you tell them that you've just arrived from an African country, which they think is one small, prehistory village with no pipe-born water."

I applied for the job previously, as soon as we returned from Carnary Wharf, and the recruiting agent emailed back two days later, saying she found my application exciting. Obviously, I explained in my application that I've been a trained caregiver in

Nigeria with eight years of experience looking after physically challenged children, and that no other job gives me more satisfaction. I enjoy helping the so-called disabled children to navigate their infancy with excitement through my compassionate care and empathy. I believe I was born to live with children of all abilities and nationalities, regardless of race or gender.

Now I cringe at my own fibs as I peruse my very first newsletter from the Afropolitan Union. The bulletin is so customised that it is addressed directly to me, with a salutation that delights me, making me feel seen, included, and honoured. I admire the way this newsletter is personalised as if it's not been mass-despatched to the other subscribers as well.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 13 February 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: POSITIVE DECLARATIONS FOR IMMIGRANTS

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

We understand the power of inspirational words to arouse aspirations and cheerfully uplift the dispositions of dreamers such as Black immigrants. This week, we bring to our members the following eight positive thoughts and motivational affirmations, which we believe will help them to keep their pursuits in excellent perspectives. Some of these pronouncements may sound hyperbolic, unreachable, but if you shot yourself to the sky and failed to reach it, you would land atop the tallest, most prestigious skyscraper. So, here we go!

1. Immigrants will become passport-holding British citizens, owning houses and estates across the United Kingdom.
2. Immigrants will occupy at least 60% of the seats in the UK's Houses of Parliament.
3. Immigrants will administer at least 60% of all universities in the United Kingdom as Vice Chancellors.

4. Immigrants will capture at least 60% of the top editorial positions in the UK's publishing industry.
5. Immigrants, the children of immigrants, the grandchildren of immigrants and so on will produce successions of British Prime Ministers in the future.
6. Immigrants will dominate at least 60% of the top managerial positions in the British media, manufacturing, professional service industries, conglomerates, and banks.
7. Immigrants will capture at least 60% of all the topmost decision-making positions in the British military, including the Army, the Navy, and the Airforce.
8. Immigrants will occupy at least 60% of the highest leadership positions in local councils across the United Kingdom.

If any of the above appeals to you as your future accomplishment, please go for it! There's absolutely nothing stopping you. It's our responsibility as immigrants to make the United Kingdom the most powerful nation with the strongest military in the world and the most economically buoyant with the highest GDP—an irresistible haven for discerning investors. We also have an obligation to transform Britian into the most technologically advanced country, making it the best reputable nation that attracts tourists from around the world to explore the diversity of happiness and efficiency existing here.

We've limited this list to only eight declarations, but there could be more. Stretch yourself and become whatever, whoever you wish to become legally. Be the best of Britain. The future is a destroyer of all obstacles, enabling you to soar. The only barrier standing between you and your future feats is your imagination.

Imagine it, grab it, celebrate it, and keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,

The Editors,

The Afropolitan Union.

Deji pulls out his big folder, which contains all his documents and certificates, from his suitcase in the boot and offers me his Nigerian passport and a paper containing his National Insurance Number: RK631925V. He's meticulous with the papers, each one neatly sealed in a see-through cellophane, which isn't hot-laminated to stick permanently to the paper, making it easy for separation and replacement later.

"Tulu, make sure you have your new name at your fingertips," he warns as he hands me the last of the numerous papers.

"I'll always remember it. I'm Chudeji Williams henceforth," I say, collecting it and nodding.

"If you're successful, the recruiters may also need you to fill in some forms for the HMRC."

"HMRC, what's that?"

"Hunting Machinery for the Revenue Cabal. It's a government agency responsible for taxation and other public income in the UK."

"Okay."

He texts me his Barclays Bank account details, in case the recruitment agency asks. After I've had my bath in the gym presumably for the last time and taken some photos with the heart-shaped swimming pool in the background, I fill up our bottle with warm water from the faucet, so that Deji can at least wash his armpits and some other odour-prone parts of his body. He combs his hair and spays perfume on his shirt. To give the impression of freshness, he says and laughs.

He noses the car out of the park, turning slowly onto the highway. It feels like I'm losing a holiday home when I look behind me at the big frontage of Crown Fitness Club, the automatic sliding door, and our car-neighbours who've been kin since my arrival. Some of them regularly say hello, waving and smiling, and I return the greetings with the camaraderie of people who are jailed but are free to leave at any time, no questions asked. There exists this slippery familiarity of strangers that feels like authentic friendship, but it's not, because we can't hug each other, and yet their smiles provoke my smile. There's an off-the-cuff emptiness that hurts me now when I imagine that I may not meet them again. It feels strange, this longing for strangers.

But then there are other kinds of people who behave as if they own the carpark themselves. They often put on foam-padded jackets, their shoulders puffed high, as if they always receive better pizza discounts from Pizza Express than we do. They're all by themselves every time, their ears plugged tight with music cables. These are the people who aren't aware that tortoises thrown into the same smelly pit can't outwit one another, after all. Class doesn't exist in a dungeon.

Deji has just turned into the beginning of Liverpool Road when he receives a text message. He huffs and slows down, pulls up to the roadside. He reads the text, narrowing his eyes.

"That weightlifter is asking if I can come today at one o'clock and move him to Norwich," he says, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Ah, that's magical, Deji. You have to go now?"

"Yes, of course, but it means I'll no longer be able to wait for you throughout the interview session. My apologies."

"No worries, my good friend; I'm confident about the interview," I say, even though I've been jittery since we set out. This is my first ever job interview since I fled my mother's womb. "I'll wait at Madam Sharon's until you're back from Norwich this evening."

He types, his hands trembling as they grip his phone. He's slowly mouthing what he's typing: *My-guy-I-will-be-there-in-a-mo-ment. Please-wait-for-me-Thanks*. He stares at the screen, rereading silently now, perhaps making sure there's not a single typo.

"Yeah, I've just sent it," he says, turning his face to me and seeming to pant, his breathing faster than normal. "You see, eh? You'll alight from my car in front of the agent's address, and I'll leave immediately. You und'stand?"

I nod. "I wish both of us the best of luck."

He pulls out of the roadside and zooms up Liverpool Road. Once he slows at the address, I hop out and slam the door behind me. He waves, puts the car back into the road, and speeds away as if the weightlifter is about to change his mind if he doesn't drive so fast.

I walk up the stairs, following the labelled arrows that show visitors the way to the recruiter's office on the third floor. Everywhere is so silent that I wonder for a moment if I'm inside the wrong building, but I keep climbing, holding on to the smooth metal

banister. Arriving on the third landing, I ring a bell and wait. There's a steady hissing sound of air that seems to be leaking out of a punctured tube somewhere around. About ten seconds later, the door opens a crack, revealing a man dapper in his blue suit. He narrows his eyes like someone who's used to listening to people's agonies every day and recommending an effective solution. He's also wearing a red necktie that looks like the one I'm wearing. I switch on all the British mannerisms I've rehearsed for weeks, having learnt so much from Deji and from watching YouTube lessons on "How to behave compellingly British."

"Hiya, I'm here for an interview," I say, standing to attention, my two hands sticking to my sides, one clutching my folder of documents. I'm clad in my pair of Prada shoes, and I'm also smiling, which is what I'm told the British admire so much. The British love to see happy faces.

Stepping aside and leaving the door to open wider, he says, "Oh hi, come on in." His Adam's apple is sprinting up and down his neck.

"Thank you very much, sir," I say, properly enunciating the words the Bri-eesh way.

I walk into the hall and stand, motionless for a moment on the floor sealed with a brown carpet, waiting until I'm told to sit down, which is another British etiquette. The reception is full of light that beams from the white ceiling, reflecting on a mahogany desk and bookshelf. The hall has so much space for movement, making it even splendid in its sparseness. He shuts the door softly, and I imagine it's still not locked. He swings around, running his five fingers through his well-cultivated hair, which amazes me, as most British men his age are bald, and I don't know why. Maybe he's not British, after all. He looks Australian, so tall. He gestures for me to sit on a two-seater sofa beside a tall, green plant in a huge ceramic pot painted a glossy white. The leaves are so long and thick they look plastic but appear like the growing verdure of an overfed aloe vera.

"My partner Sara will be with you in a shor' while," he says. "We're still expecting one more person for the session."

"I'm happy to be here, sir," I say, although I'm already disappointed to hear there's another competitor for this job. "Thank you."

He goes into an inner room and shuts its aluminium door gently. I feel submerged in the ensuing silence that seems to mess with my hearing and, as I try to get myself accustomed to it, the doorbell rings. The agency's man walks out of the inner

office again and opens the entrance door. As soon as I hear the visitor mention something about an interview, my jealousy quotient triples, and the rate of my heartbeat reaches a crescendo.

Another Black jobseeker walks in and sits beside me, a man wearing a weather-beaten sweater that sags around his neck and wrists, his black jeans ridden with holes on the knees. The soles of his stained trainers are halved by an obvious destitution. The man appears to be in his forties, but his head is already afflicted with what I assume is a hunger-induced alopecia. He's so thin, like a stick figure, that the few strands of hair remaining beside his ears appear to be shoehorned in there. Should he participate in the Olympics for hairless men, he would win a gold medal, beating even the British men in this contest of baldness. It looks like he's an aftermath of interminable uncivil wars in his native country, someone who escaped through the scorching temperature of the Sahara Desert to reach the UK with nothing in his wallet.

I've never been this competitive before, never been so envious of my fellow Black man, but I'm now as jealous and heartless as a Nigerian politician because this job must be mine. A Nigerian pastor preaches that one must be aggressively selfish to achieve one's aims.

"In a moment, my partner Sara will invite you in, one after the other," the agency's man tells us, holding down the knob of the inner door.

I nod. "Alright, sir."

But the latest interviewee says nothing. The agency's man then disappears, leaving us alone. As patient as cocoa farmers, we both wait, but we don't speak to one another for a long time.

"Hello there," he groans suddenly, startling me.

I roll my eyes at his big, black nose and acne-punctured cheeks and forehead.

"Hi, I'm Tulugo," I say. "From Nigeria."

He doesn't say his name, and I'm not remotely interested in knowing. I assume he's as jealous as I am, considering the earnestness of those eyes. With his five parched fingers that seem to beg for petroleum jelly, he scratches through the middle of his bald scalp, leaving white lines in its wake. When he says the name of his African country, I tell him I've never heard of it before, which is true.

"Oh, it's a small island, one of those countries begging Britain to come and save them," he says, and smiles. "You know Britain loves protecting islands, and we'd love to be called the citizens of the Commonwealth. It sounds so prestigious, doesn't it?"

“Make it clear to me. You mean your country wants to surrender its sovereignty to Britain in the twenty-first century?”

“Actually, it’s a bilateral partnership that benefits both parties, as long as my people get some money to import food.”

His oral prowess contradicts his physical shabbiness, and I’m already flabbergasted by his self-assurance. “Interesting. When is that going to happen?”

“Sadly, Britain has already turned down my country’s application because our few resources are scattered hither and dither under a rocky mountain with access difficulties, worsened by armed insurgencies.”

“Then why are you in the same country that’s not interested in your country?”

“I ran away because I’d opposed the proposal, receiving various threats to my life. I’m a human rights lawyer who condemns every inhumane government policy.”

So this is another man of asylum sitting here to tug a nannying job with me, another reason to tighten my fighting belt and make it even tighter. “You *should* be practising as a lawyer here in the UK instead.”

He sighs, shrugging again. “I arrived in this country five years ago with both my LLB and LLM, but I was told I wasn’t educated enough to defend the rights of white people, that I must study law again in the UK if I must practise law in the country. And at forty-eight, that’s a proposal in bad taste, and I’m not getting any younger.”

My jealousy quotient dwindles a little. His words emerge with what I consider an effortless honesty, an openness that softens my stiffened nerves. Even though I pity him, he’s not going to take part in my own suffering if I fail this interview. I must secure this job. He shouldn’t.

The door to the inner room clicks open and a lady in stiletto heels and pencil-thin black trousers struts into the hall, holding a paper and pen. She looks tentative at first, eyes blinking, but she’s resplendent in her black suit, underneath which her white shirt shines around her chest and neck.

She smiles, coming towards us, and says, “Hiya, I’m Sara Henshaw.”

I sit upright, showing my best British-approved smile for job interviews, a bit of the upper rows of my teeth and a bit of the lower rows, a combination that strikes that perfect balance of formality and casualness expected of a confident jobseeker.

“Hello, Sara,” I say.

The man beside me doesn't even move his reclined body to acknowledge the arrival of the almighty Sara Henshaw.

But later, after Sara has finished squinting at her paper, he spits out, "Good afternoon, Sara."

"I welcome you both," Sara says, gazing down at us, her bobbed blonde hair swinging. "It's not going to be something too serious or formal, although I do wonder why underrepresented people don't want professional jobs these days."

"Are there no underrepresented people working as doctors, engineers, nurses, or even bankers in the UK?" I ask.

Sara tucks her long hair behind her ear. "That's amazing to know. However—"

"I'm interested in working as a lawyer, but I haven't been lucky," the man bursts out, now sitting up, maybe thinking Sara might help him in that regard.

"That's amazing as well, but I mean people from *your* community who are keen to do domestics professionally, if that makes sense. We've been advertising for this particular role for the past few months, expecting many applications but only five people applied, from which we shortlisted just the two of you."

She doesn't make any sense to me, maybe she does to my colleague, but she's only succeeded in warming me up to her candour. If wiping the buttocks of babies, changing the diapers of old people, pushing prams along the streets, and doing domestic dishes are professional jobs in this country, I have no objections.

"I'm excited to be shortlisted," I say.

"That's amazing," she replies, now peering at her paper again. "And your name is—"

"Chudeji Williams."

"Amazing."

"I thought you told me Tulu-something some minutes ago," this nosy Black man beside me points out.

I swing my face and smile at him, although my heart and fists are swelling up with rage, ready to pummel his stinking mouth to shut up and mind his business. "Oh, you know, where I come from, children are named according to the circumstances surrounding their births, so we have multiple names, each matching one of those circumstances. Tulugo is the temple name my grandmother gave me. All temple names in my village start with a T." I take a deep breath to ensure that what I'm going to say next will sound persuasive enough to wipe out every doubt Sara might be having. "In

fact, my parents have names they call me in the morning and another set of names for afternoon and evening. I also have a name I use when go farming and another one for when I participate in the processions of masquerades."

"Amazing," Sara says, nodding. "And you're Emmanuel Mohammed?"

"Exactly, Emmanuel Mohammed LLB, LLM," he says, raising a forefinger.

"Amazing, I'm going to start with you, Emmanuel, because Mohammed comes before Williams when sorted by surname. Shall we proceed now?"

"Yes, of course," the man says, and scrambles to his feet.

"Amazing," Sara says, turning around.

As she leads him into the inner office and shuts the door, I question the authenticity of his name, concluding it's even suspicious. I worry he might be a terrorist. This Muslim-Christian mix isn't only syncretical but also inflammatory, like blending petrol and inferno together. It's burnt many families and nations across Africa. Who knows the true reason why he fled his country?

I stand up and tiptoe to the door, gumming my ear on the hardwood. If I could overhear their conversations, the interview questions and his answers, I would consider myself lucky to go in after him. But everywhere is silent, everywhere sealed up. I sneak back to the sofa.

When he comes out about fifteen minutes later, he exhales like a camel relieved of several loads of cement after a daunting journey across the desert. He bids me a farewell, waving and treading towards the exit door, the edges of his trainers chaffed around his ankles.

✈

Sara Henshaw pokes her swaying-bob head through the door and asks me to come forward. Inside, I sit opposite her at the white desk. The agency's man takes all my Chudeji Williams documents, creeps to the white photocopier in the room, and duplicates them. Returning my originals to me, he perches down beside Sara who has been fiddling with my Chudeji Williams CV and jotting down some copious details on her sheet of paper. Her fingernails, daubed with an ominous scarlet, remind me of my wicked primary school teacher who dug her blood-red fingernails into my neck, her teeth bared, to remind me that three raised to the power of two isn't six but nine. At some point, Sara's fingers patter on her MacBook keyboard. Then she clicks the mouse, peering at the screen.

Now whe gazes at me. “I understand you’re from Nigeria, but is there something else you’d like us to know about you?”

“I’m a hard-worker. I can inspire generations of lazy people to see the hidden potential in them. I won an award for the best caregiver in a hospice for challenged children in Lagos.”

I’d read up these things and memorised them from the internet, changing some parts to suit my purpose.

“What’s your greatest weakness?” Sara wants to know.

“My perfection,” I blurt out straightway. “I hanker so much for perfection that perfection only becomes perfect when I’ve perfected what I’ve always hankered to be perfect.”

“Amazing,” she croons and nods, scribbling on her paper. “Why do you want to do this job, knowing it’s challenging?”

“Curiosity,” I declare. “I’m curious to learn the difference between caring for a disabled Black child and a disabled white child.”

“What would you do if you’re presented with a melancholic child?” the man asks.

“I would cuddle them, singing lullabies to them,” I reply.

“Amazing,” Sara croons again, spinning her MacBook around to show me the screen.

A video is showing a white boy, about two years old. He’s playing around a wide green garden, yelling and yelling really mad. He picks up a plastic football and throws it away and then runs after it, shrieking either his joy or fury. He catches the ball again, tosses it once more, and howls his surprise again, repeating this over and over. Then the video stops.

“What do you think is wrong with the child?” the man asks me.

I watch the video again, confused, scrabbling around my beard for an answer that’s not even there. The man glares at me the whole time. Sara pins her eyes on me and keeps tucking her disobedient bob behind her ear, waiting for my response with a reckless attention that scares me stiff. My lips are already trembling, some uncomfortable sweat sprouting on my forehead.

“Nothing is wrong with him,” I say. “He’s just a happy boy who enjoys his childhood.”

They both exchange inquisitive glances.

“Alright,” the man says, nodding and spinning the MacBook around to face them again.

Sara shakes my hand, rising to her feet. I get up, too, still holding on to her soft, petite hand. I’m awash with an insecure excitement that my brain hasn’t yet understood, but my heart is already dancing that I’ve got this job,

“You’ll hear from us within the next twenty-four hours whether or not you’re the right candidate,” she says.

I bristle, but I manage to conceal my disappointment as I beam at them both. Then while gripping her hand, I catch a whiff of strawberry—maybe it’s her brand of designer perfume—and say, “You smell really gorgeous, ma’am.”

She jerks, blushing all of a sudden, her hand quivering. “Ah, thank you,” she says, placing her left hand on her chest and rolling her eyes at the same time.

“I’d appreciate the opportunity to be of service,” I say, slipping my hand from hers.

I twirl around, shut their door gently, and find my way to Madam Sharon’s where I find a comfortable seat to relax my nervous mind from the job interview. To kill time, I slip out my phone to reread a previous week’s newsletter from the Afropolitan Union.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 27 February 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: VULNERABILITY & PRECARITY OF IMMIGRANTS!

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

There’s absolutely nothing wrong with being white. What’s wrong is being malignantly white. In the same vein, being Black doesn’t make you faultless and sacred by any means. What’s wrong is being dreadfully Black. However, as a Black immigrant, it’s commonplace to suffer from psychological insecurity in the presence of whites because of the combined effect of slavery and colonialism on your mind. It’s such a heavy load to carry at all times, everywhere you go. A person who was once enslaved or colonised, although now freed and

independent, is often entangled with the recurring predicament of questions and answers in respect of the skin, the looks, and the thoughts of not being white.

But please don't ever dispense with your Blackness in the face of threatening racial hate. Cowering under the enormous weight of Blackness-shame, you stand the risk of missing the most exciting opportunities in Britain, no matter how much time and effort you invest in coveting or objecting whiteness. Stop expatiating yourself to the traducers who aren't remotely interested in understanding you. Your persecutors have normalised your afflictions because their lives run on automatic pilot of advantages. Destroy all the Blacksplainations. Racial prejudices don't care what it means to occupy a marginal Black existence in a world of domineering, whitening existences that may suffocate others.

The implication is, of course, the self-deception common with the privileged, especially whites, many of whom refuse to acknowledge the inequality and racism springing out of their actions and inactions. We all have a duty, as immigrants or natives, to reproach mental vices such as greed, narcissism, racism, colourism, sexism, and ageism, among other human stinks, targeting regressive attitudes in individuals and institutions.

Sometimes, it's difficult to detect this stinking suffocation because it's so nuanced that it's thorny to expose and subvert the layers of bigotry against Black immigrants, an anomaly often perpetrated by non-Blacks using political correctness and pretended courteousness in their use of language. How then can the oppressed feel uncomfortable and complain when their oppressors have masked their oppression in a language that is pure, innocuous, harmonious, and acceptable?

Non-Blackness often entails deploying covert efforts to supress or stigmatise the existence of melanin among Blacks, an act that often leads to racial tensions. It's such a disagreeable situation that breeds nothing but cosmopolitan dysphoria for all Black immigrants. It's your

responsibility to peel the lid off this covertness and expose how the excess comfort of some non-Black people can also become their source of embarrassing weakness. Although you're vulnerable to losing everything if you misspeak, let them know that beneath their affluence and influence lurks a certain kind of fragility because no privilege stays permanent forever. Death and disease are the most common denominators underneath all human beings.

Every plagued minority in Britain has an adorable acronym associated with it. POC. BIPOC. BAME. LGBTQ+. Etc. Yes, these are all great, necessary, and well-intended, but sometimes it feels as though they provide the easiest means of gathering rotten apples into a trash bag in order to dispose of them in one fell swoop. We stand to be corrected, but the white minorities in South Africa have no such acronyms. They're the powerful minorities who need no acronyms to exert their influences. We're working hard to make Afropolitans formidable and controlling minorities everywhere in the world, determined to bring to light the triumphs and perils of leaving the familiarity of our delicious African homes to take on the migratory oddities of living elsewhere. We're always vigilant about catching how a superior authority excludes the so-called inferiors using effulgent euphemisms of exclusions.

Be ambitious, but avoid desperation and gullibility. These foibles can predispose you to a peculiar kind of behaviour that might end in regret, which comes from living a delusionary existence, that insatiable hunger for something you're not yet qualified to achieve, and yet you spend awful loads of time pursuing it, sometimes committing infractions of laws, which might ultimately lead to your deportation. Always remember that this country has a dreaded middle name, which is the United "Deportation" Kingdom. Please don't ever allow the Home Office to fling the stone of that middle name at you.

Please keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,

The Editors,

The Afropolitan Union.

Deji hasn't yet returned from Norwich, and it's evening now, around nine-thirty. I've been waiting at Sharon's Kitchen since afternoon, after my interview. I've called him, sent messages to him, but he hasn't yet responded, and for hours his phone has been turned off. I've stood up, sat down, gone outside, walked up and down the street, and returned to the restaurant. I'm hungry at the moment. Although Madam Sharon gave me soft semolina and spicy egwusi soup in the afternoon for free, I don't expect the same kind gesture again this evening. I'm in a corner inside, almost invisible, busy with Instagram, as her customers come in to gobble down the curried goat-meat pepper soup with an aroma that's heavenly. The beefy aromas of okra soup, egwusi soup, ọgbọnọ soup scrub my nostrils, and I sneeze from time to time. But I swallow my saliva to calm down the rage of my stomach.

Her restaurant is always busy with Nigerian customers all day, but they multiply in the evening, thronging to the tables often in ones, doubles, triples, fours, or fives. When they're scanning the menu, they verify the kind of meat or fish used for every type of soup, raising their voices for Madam Sharon to hear from the kitchen, even though her white and Asian waiters are standing nearby with a pen and paper to write down their bespoke combinations.

I've heard people say, "Madam Sharon, please mix egwusi and ọgbọnọ soups together for me, and add the meat and fish from your stew." Or "Madam, I want pure onugbu soup as my main course—no mixing, please—but you can add a little extra caramelised and white onions to the pepper-soup, also including fresh ginger and garlic."

After eating, most of the customers lean back on their chairs and start to gossip, a typical restaurant habit in Lagos. They natter about friends who've been deported, about those who do disgraceful jobs, about those whose fake documents have been detected by the Home Office, and about relatives who are still preparing to arrive in the UK in the next few months, using similar fake documents.

Now a group, sitting around the same table, has just finished eating. A man among them, with a neck so long it looks like a giraffe's, complains about two African

students, one at Royal Holloway University, the other at Queen Mary University, who turned down his marriage proposals at different times because they felt that marrying him wouldn't help them to secure British citizenship straight out of their student visas.

A bespectacled man opposite him frowns. "So you mean those Black girls consider you a bad market?"

"Aswearugod," the giraffe-neck man replies.

After hearing him say "I swear to God" with such a tedious Nigerian accent, the bespectacled man says, "Maybe they thought your tone of voice is too inelegant for them. Do you know their backgrounds?"

"An NHS doctor like me inelegant?"

"Well, despite your good job, you've spent only two years in this country."

"And so what?"

"It's called the immigration genotype. Yours doesn't match up with what those girls are looking for, so you can't marry them with your current genotype, which is still temporary. Those girls want men, especially whites, with permanent immigration genotypes to secure British citizenship."

"Nonsense," the doctor snaps.

"Besides, I suppose your arse is still severely limited as there are some British chairs you can never sit on. And you're so ugly. Your nose is as flat as a wall. I wonder how those white patients allow you to examine their bodies with your stocky fingers."

"Look at who's talking," the NHS doctor says, and laughs. "Are you not a black-market gardener who smuggled himself through the Mediterranean Sea and the English Channel and landed in a Kent village? You've been cutting backyard flowers for years. Now you're in London, still cutting backyard shrubs. Try cutting front yard hedges and risk exposing yourself to immigration, detention, and deportation."

They both giggle.

The only woman among them chuckles and says, "Well, for me, I don't blame those African girls who rejected you. Everyone wants a guaranteed future in this country. An Indefinite Leave to Remain is of utmost importance to all of us, innit?"

"That's true," the NHS doctor says.

"No African girl in this UK wants a charity-shop boyfriend that has only a second-hand value," the woman adds.

The bespectacled one sighs. "Sadly, that's why I'm still single. I hope to fall in love with a white British lady."

“I hope you know that white British ladies call their husbands by their first name, an attitude I find very offensive as a Nigerian man,” the NHS doctor says. “I wonder if those white ladies don’t have proper home training. Don’t expect your British wife to wash your clothes and underwear. As the husband, you can’t have sex when you want it. You can have it only when or if she wants it at all. Marry an African girl to avoid that kind of nonsense.”

“I just need a British lady just to get those precious papers, that’s all,” the bespectacled one says. “We can divorce later.”

They all laugh.

As they stand up to leave, after paying their bills, they’re sticking toothpicks between their teeth. I’ve been so enamoured in their conversation that I didn’t even know that a new text message from Deji arrived about a minute ago. It’s a quarter past ten now.

—sorry, tulu. I just saw your texts & missed calls. car broke down. phone battery down.

I reply immediately. —sad 2 hear dat. r u in Norwich now?

—no, but almost there. i’m at Thetford, a small town near Norwich. Hope u r ok.

—I’m good. been waiting for you, worried about where 2 sleep 2nyt.

—talk 2 madam Sharon. she myt help u.

—what if she doesn’t?

—talk 2 her first.

—ok. r u going 2 sleep on the road?

—no, d white guy has paid 4 a guesthouse 4 d 2 of us.

—gud 2 hear dat. he seems nice.

—he is, indeed. how was ur interview?

—it went well. expecting result 2morrow.

—ok. gudluck.

—10q.

Madam Sharon comes to my corner when she’s about to close and go home, asking what I would like to eat for dinner. Her customers and waiters are all gone, everywhere now silent. But her three daughters, who help her to prepare the meals, are all around, listening as their mother talks to me. I shake my head, refusing to eat. I hope she’ll insist. My dissension is of the type necessary for preserving one’s dignity, but it’s a

risky behaviour tonight. Also, I find it difficult to demean my self-esteem in front of her beautiful daughters to reveal that I have nowhere to sleep tonight.

"Please eat something, Tulu," Madam Sharon says, with an emphasis that shreds my shame, exciting me. "I'll bin some of the meals tomorrow, after all, even if you don't eat anything."

I heave a long-drawn sigh. "Okay, bring me a plate of okra soup and garri."

"Good," she says, turning to her daughters. "Queen Victoria, go and warm up the okra soup in the microwave while Queen Elizabeth boils some water to prepare the yellow garri, not the white one, which is always more difficult to stir on the fire." She belches, covering her mouth with her right hand. "Please, be careful not to add too much water or it goes too soft. In fact, I don't even understand the kind of fake cassava they use in making London-bound garri these days. A little hot water on it, everything becomes waterlogged, sticking to the fingers. Queen Mary will get the pepper soup ready as a side meal for you, Tulu."

"Thank you for everything, Madam," I say.

"Oh, always my pleasure, Tulu."

The daughters scamper to the kitchen, giving me the chance to have a more important conversation with their mother. She has four daughters, no male. The last girl is about eight years old, named Queen Anne. She's asleep at the moment. About an hour ago, I heard Madam Sharon ask the oldest daughter, Queen Victoria, to go check on the little girl who's asleep inside the changing room upstairs.

I swallow my spit. "Madam, may I ask you for a small favour?"

She braids her brow, drawing a chair to sit near me. "I'm all ears."

"I have nowhere to lay down my head tonight."

Her frown squeezes her face more intensely. "What about your friend Deji's house?"

"Deji isn't around. He travelled to Norwich with the house key. His car stopped working on the highway, and he hasn't repaired it yet."

"Ah, that's serious. But I can't take you to my house. My senseless husband is around tonight. Although he'll leave tomorrow, he might think I'm bringing boys home to sleep with my daughters."

I've always wondered about her husband, have never seen him in the restaurant since Deji and I started eating here. But I've heard that she and her husband seem to be at daggers drawn with one another.

"Please you have to do something for me, Madam Sharon."

She bites her forefinger, looking around the walls "Would you like to sleep in the restaurant instead?"

"I wouldn't mind."

"Alright. The changing room is always warm. But it's a mess at the moment, littered with old cartons, rusted plates, dishes, bottles, plastics, burnt pots and pans that I no longer use. So I don't know how you'll manage in the room tonight. My little daughter only takes a nap there for a few hours, but no one has ever slept there overnight."

"Still, I don't mind."

"OK, I'll let you have it."

I exhale with a relief that empties my lungs, loosening my tight stomach of anxiety. "Thank you, Madam."

The daughters arrive with my meals and place them on the table nearest to me. As I start eating, she instructs them to clear some rubbish out of the changing room and make enough space for an adult to lie down there and sleep. As they all nod, leaving, I catch the wind of pride blow across their mother's face. That brief smile of approval and admiration was so fleeting but significant. The profound love of her daughters is apparent.

I've learnt the first daughter is a student of Cambridge University, on a full scholarship. She's so charming that the first time I saw her I couldn't control my gaze, my heart thudding. I think I also enchanted her because she staggered a bit on seeing me and quickly regained her poise, although I couldn't confirm how deep her mind had captured my persona. She came home recently to see her mother. The second daughter is at an A Level college, and the third one is preparing for her GCSE.

In my estimation, they're all taller than five feet six, with long natural hair that stands upright, and looking the same age like triplets. Their noses resemble their mother's, long and pointing down at their perfectly cut lips that shimmer under the bright lights. The smooth and shiny hue of their skin is the type that makes you want to fall in love with a Black girl. But, no, I'm not going to fall in love with any of them; I'm only window-shopping and admiring. They've all attended The City of London Academy in Islington and won prizes in both Arts and Sciences. But I've heard that their father isn't proud of them, not happy with their achievements, and I don't why he resents his daughters.

After they're all gone, I spread a plastic sleeping mat on the floor in the changing room upstairs and shroud myself in a blanket. The whole room reeks of dust and rotten food, but I shut my eyes nonetheless, shut hard enough for me to doze off in no time.

At midnight, however, trouble starts like I'm in a dream. Something bites my toe and scuttles away. I see it first inside my dream and ignore it, but another nibble on my finger yanks me awake. I scamper from the mat and turn on the bulb. There's no movement at first, but moments later I notice four-legged animals scuttling underneath the dusty tables and chairs.

As I beam my iPhone's torchlight, many rats with lipstick-coated mouths stare back at me, their whiskers trembling. Maybe they've just finished licking some canned tomatoes Madam Sharon part-used and binned nearby. Many cockroaches with big, red wings flutter about the floor and walls, unhindered by my presence. It's their time to play at midnight, they seem to tell me, as they fall on their backs and turn up again, flying to the ceiling before plunging to the floor.

I remain half-awake and half-asleep throughout the night.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning, I find Madam Sharon's broom and sweep every corner. I brush the entire floor, hoover and mop the staircase and the kitchen. I dust the restaurant seats and tables, and scrub the toilets and bathrooms until everywhere sparkles. I take a warm shower and go downstairs to sit down, waiting for her to arrive and open the entrance.

At 9.30, I receive an email from the recruitment agency, and my heart jolts, and my lungs tremble, truncating my breathing. Afraid of tapping my iPhone screen to read the email, I grip the phone and stare at the ceiling instead, imagining the possibility of working and earning an income. Finally, I tap.

From: Sara Henshaw <s.henshaw@brookesandhenshaw.co.uk>

Sent: 5 March 2015 09:28

To: Chudeji Williams <c.w@gmail.com>

Subject: Re: Interview

Dear Chudeji Williams,

We immensely appreciated your presence and participation at the interview yesterday. However, we regret to let you know that you've not been successful at this time. We'll keep your details on file in case we find a more appropriate role for you. We wish you the very best.

Many thanks.

Kind regards,

Sara.

Sara Henshaw,

Director, Tests and Interviews, Brookes & Henshaw Talent Acquisition,

Address: 42B Liverpool Road, N1 2RW, Islington, London.

Office Hours (9 a.m. – 5 p.m.) Mon – Fri. **Tel:** +44 7452186623

Website: www.brookesandhenshaw.co.uk

If this had been a letter, I would've torn it to pieces with no dot of regret, but I resist the urge to smash my iPhone on Madam Sharon's floor. My frown burrows so deep that I feel the pain of my forehead shrinking my skin. The instant dryness of my face makes me rub my hand several times over it. I notice another painful sensation of fever around my chest and spine. My stomach tightens. Then my heart explodes, wobbling from side to side, my bladder bursting.

I rush into the toilet and fill up the white bowl with such foaming urine that startles me. I'm retching to vomit as I pee, but there's no food left in my stomach from last night. I stare at the rising, bubbling lather, puzzled. I often hear that it's only when many people urinate into the same bowl at the same time that this huge mountain of foam gets produced. My self-made foam is abnormal, but I can't believe it. Even my heart, oh my heart, which would've assisted me to believe this, is already shattered. I imagine hollowing it out of my chest and dumping it into the bowl before flushing everything away, down the drain. Whoever has any use for a crumbled heart?

On returning to the hall, the crown of my head pulsates, the type of headache that accompanies disappointment when hope is absent inside the brain, when hope is murdered and buried by a motherfucker in power. I put my phone on the table and glare at the email again, befuddled. Then I phone up Deji.

"Hey, my posh Aristoguy," he enthuses.

I lessen my voice, as low as it can go. "Deji, I lost woefully at the interview."

"What?" he screams. "Did they give any reasons?"

"They say they'll keep my details on file just in case—"

"That's outright daft, one of the most annoying trumperies of the UK's corporate world. Don't believe that crap, please."

"Should I go back there and beg them?"

"No, the opportunity is gone forever. You see, eh? I thought you were overdressed for that interview, but I couldn't bring it to your notice. I regret not telling you, and I'm deeply sorry for that."

"Please, how was I overdressed?"

"Look, from the viewpoint of those recruiters, your body clad in a TM Lewin shirt and tie, your legs in Prada shoes, didn't portray you as underrepresented. In fact, I'm sure you looked overrepresented to them. Remember you also wore a Rolex watch." My bladder explodes again, and I'm dashing to the toilet with the phone

pressed to my ear. It seems Deji has heard a plopping sound because he asks, “Where are you?”

“Inside Madam Sharon’s loo, struggling to pee and puke. I don’t understand what’s wrong with me this morning.”

“Take it easy, my guy. I’m delighted you found somewhere to lay your head last night.”

“What should I do about the interview?”

“Just calm down, Tulu. Did you speak good English to those agents?”

“Yes, of course, excellent Queen’s English, and I spoke it with a British accent that kept my tongue in the middle of my mouth, not letting it scrub my teeth in any direction, the twang I’ve learnt over the weeks.”

“That might be the problem, Tulu.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. In fact, they prefer to employ semi-literate Black people for such roles, non-fluent Blacks who won’t be able to report accurately in English if the agency’s client maltreats them.” He breathes out loudly. “Anyway, the English language aside, was there something else significant that transpired between you and them?”

“They showed me the video of a toddler roaring crazy while flinging a ball ferociously and asked me if the child was sick.”

“What did you tell them?”

“Ahh-Ahh, the child looked excited, hale and hearty, and I told them so.”

“Ha, Tulu, you fucked up.”

“What, fucked up?”

“Yes, big time, one hundred percent screwed up! You see, eh? They expected you to say the child had autism.”

“But the boy I saw looked wholesome, very healthy.”

“Yes, you might be right, but those agents wanted to know if you’re current with the trend in the health sector in Britian. In this country, something as serious as autism is considered glamourous by some people. They use it to claim all sorts of benefits from the government. As soon as children appear to be over-happy or over-melancholic, they’re instantly branded as autistic.”

“Even before they’re tested medically?”

"Look, some of these white people are alarmists; they always speak in hyperboles, hyping every little thing. The mother might storm the child's school to warn the teachers about the poor health of her child, shouting and gesticulating."

"That's serious, Deji. I didn't know this."

"I understand. Our people don't give a hoot about autism in Nigeria, after all. In fact, when children become hyperactive, a typical Nigerian mother will hammer them with fiery slaps that instantly return their brains to normal."

"Slapped back to the natural setting, in fact."

"Exactly. Autism has no name in most Nigerian languages. But in the UK here, it's got a surname, a first name, and a middle name: Autism Spectrum Disorder."

"But why didn't you reveal these things to me before the interview?" I ask, miffed, returning to the hall to the sit down.

"I apologise again, Tulu. Please forget both the job and the agents. They're always looking to employ Black lickspittles. You see, eh? If those agents can find any other Black person who looks tattered, they would rather take them. That's just the gospel truth."

"Yeah, there was an African man that I met there yesterday, and—"

"From which country in Africa?"

"One of those little islands unknown on the map. The guy looked like a rat that survived poison, running out of a scruffy hole, browned and foul-smelling. He came to the interview, appearing so ramshackle I didn't even give him a little chance."

"Don't be surprised he's the one they've given the job."

"You can't be serious, Deji."

"I'm serious-o." He coughs, tidying his throat. "You see, eh? I started to understand this country as soon as I lost my job."

"I'm still at a loss myself."

"No worries, Tulu, but I'd advise you join LinkedIn with your real CV, not the one that has my name on it. You'll find other opportunities."

I frown. "But I hate LinkedIn."

"Why?"

"I just hate it."

"You must force yourself to like it-o."

"No," I insist, bid him farewell and hang up, slamming my palm on the table.

Deji said I needed a new name and he gave me his, and my expectation for that job was great but now a personal disgrace. I've become an eagle with clipped wings, a bird caged after migrating to the north during the season when the road at home is famished, toothed sharp and bloody, almost chewing me up like a grain of wheat.

The lock on the restaurant's main door rattles from outside. Madam Sharon enters. She stands still for a while, scanning the entire restaurant, her face breaking out with a smile after we've exchanged morning greetings, a grin accompanied with the bulging eyes of astonishment.

"Tulu, did you mop here?" she asks, staring at the floor.

"Not only here, but also the entire apartment. I swept, brushed, hoovered, and deodorised everywhere."

She claps several times, nodding, her big-circle earrings swinging forward and backward. She's gazing at me with that hasty admiration reserved for generous outsiders.

"You've amazed me, Tulu. Honestly, words fail me."

I say nothing at first, the kind of brief and baleful silence that represents a glint of jeopardy. "Madam Sharon, I did what I had to do for you, to refund your kindness towards me."

She starts to seem puzzled suddenly. "Thank you so much, Tulu, but I can see that you look worried, right?" she asks, her eyes getting smaller and smaller, peering down at me. "Anything the matter?"

"Nothing, Madam."

"That's not true. Just tell me, Tulu. I'm ready to listen."

"I mean it, nothing."

Her indulgent glare unnerves me, and her face goes stagnant, emotionless. It embarrasses and dumbfounds me in equal measure. You can talk to me, she keeps repeating, as she pulls a seat and sits down. It unsettles me, this caring nosiness, trying to coerce me to peel off this uneasy mask I've worn for several weeks. But my people say that a patient who keeps hiding his sickness from an attentive doctor is only doing a spontaneous death an unmerited favour.

"Madam, this is who I am," I start.

Everything I say to her uncorks me, undoes me, degrades me, festering the wounds in my mind, but I say them nonetheless. My words are raw, solicited, and the

discomfort is strictly mine, detached from my listener. My dishonesty waters me down, although I guess that Madam Sharon, having orchestrated this chat, this uncovering, still sympathises with me.

"Tell me more about Deji," she says.

I keep mute, pretending calmness. Thus far, I've focussed only on narrating the incidents that pertain to me, saying nothing about him.

"Deji is just a good friend," I say.

"On which street does he live in this Islington?" she asks.

"He lives on Hornsey Lane," I lie and pause, shutting my eyes in a mock display of deep thinking. "Oh, I've forgotten the exact street number, but I can take you there."

She nods, looking persuaded. She doesn't, and will never, have the time for physical inspection. She's not renting the address, after all. Even if she insists on viewing, I'll take her there and point at any house that looks believably rented.

"Does his boss know he's gone to Norwich?" she probes further.

"Actually, it was his boss who sent him there."

I've already emptied my truths into her ears, but I have to defend Deji at all cost, even if the inconvenience shreds my chest, burning up the centre of my brain. I'm sure he himself knows what to put forward to ratify my lies when he returns, even deepening them to have a semblance of truth. He's good at doing that; it's what he's always been doing.

"Whatever your challenge, let me know henceforth, and I'll see what I can do," she says, rising. She shrugs, going towards the hallway to the kitchen, her long braids reaching her big bottom, which bounces as she walks.

Afterwards, I glide online and share a photo of me, in which I wear an enchanting smile and stand in front of the Crown Fitness Club's heart-shaped swimming pool that dazzles with its wavy, blue water, photographed some weeks ago.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Hey folks, I built myself this magnificent swimming pool in the UK. Life's been so excellent since I left Nigeria.

@funky_fey: Woohoo, wealthy at home, wealthy abroad. Congratulations.

@tulu: Much appreciated. Wealth will also find you wherever you live.

@piepal: The UK is such an enabler of dreams. I'm coming to join you soon.

@tulu: I can't wait to see you. Many opportunities await you here!

@t_mark: Not me working so hard in Nairobi and getting nothing in return.

@tulu: LMAOO! Shillings and pound sterling are distant relatives.

@gicox: But how's this possible, @tulu? You left Lagos not too long ago, right?

I hate being reminded of Lagos, but social media is such a toxic space where every idiot is an advocate of good behaviour. Sanctimonious fools. Digital dunces. Keyboard activists, amplifying every little slip-up into a worldwide backlash. I'm saddened that I now contaminate my feelings and imaginations with the regrets of my futile past, of what I've missed, and of what I should have achieved or the errors I shouldn't have committed. I seem to have become a counterfactual, a false adaptation of my true self, a fake soul, an immigration counterfeit. Things and situations, including expected incidents that have failed to occur, have joined forces to turn my thinking upside down. Although these things contradict my moral standing, they equip me with an unusual means of dissecting my dire situation and magnifying my consciousness to keep dreaming ahead.

But now my gloom is back, worsening and shredding me to pieces. My thoughts travel to bring back the memory of whom I used to be in Lagos, of what I used to do and enjoy. It's such a raw and stinging memory that reminds me of the processes and plots that led to the day unknown gunmen slaughtered my beloved father like a worthless cockerel in Lagos. I shut my eyes, shocked and frozen, flipping through the rough pages of my mind and releasing the dangerous impulses of recollection—the debris of my glorious past. Lagos, oh, ruthless Lagos…

LAGOS, NIGERIA

✈

2014

CHAPTER NINE

One day as I drove home from work, it was raining. I noticed there were few commercial buses on the road, probably due to the lingering petrol scarcity. Long and never-moving queues blocked the petrol stations, some drivers sleeping inside their vehicles for days. The bus stops were overcrowded with anxious commuters who flagged down every passing car.

It'd stopped raining when I arrived at Sheraton Bus Stop. I drove slowly, manoeuvring my car out of the flooded potholes and bumps in Ikeja. I intended to help someone to get home tonight, only one person who would sit in my front seat. I would've loved to take more people, but my backseat and boot were full of those irritating accounting textbooks I'd removed from my bedroom bookshelves, intending to dump them somewhere or to burn them to ashes.

"One lucky commuter," I muttered to myself.

Helping commuters during fuel scarcity was common in Lagos. Many commuters would hop inside free-of-charge vehicles, too desperate to consider they might be robbed, or even murdered. Laura used to call me Mr. Philanthropy because I used my father's wealth to help others.

I pulled in a few yards away from the bus stop recently refurbished with new paint, two rows of metal benches, and aluminium steel railings. All the commuters thronged towards me and gathered around my car. As I rolled down the glass on the driver's side, they were all shouldering and pushing and cursing one another to get my attention. I managed to hear a voice choked with pain and tiredness saying, "Please, Oga sir, carry me to Mile 2. I'm heavy with child." That was the sort of person I would've loved to help, but I wasn't going to Mile 2.

"I'm passing through the Third Mainland Bridge," I shouted, amidst the din.

"That's where I'm going, sir," a man's voice said.

"That's my route," another man yelled.

Already, some people had started leaving the spaces around my car because I wasn't going to be useful to them. I gestured for the two men to go to the other side of the car. The luckier between them would occupy this vacant front seat. As soon as I leaned to my right and flung my door open, a man jumped inside.

"I can take only one person, sorry," I shouted again, apologising to the unlucky man standing outside.

"Thank you, sir," the lucky one burst out and slammed the door shut, panting and oozing a familiar odour. "May God bless you, sir."

"Mr. James Volta?"

He flinched and gaped at me, wide-eyed. "The man at Atlantic?"

"AtlanTel."

"What a coincidence!"

"They say the world is a small circle, a dot even."

I nosed the car forward onto the highway and sped away. Even though he smelled badly, I still rolled up my glass, knowing my car deodorant would do justice to his foul odour. He thanked me, once again. Between his shoes sat his weathered suitcase. I wondered what this restless man kept in the suitcase.

He coughed. "Before we go far, tell me how much you'll charge me for this service."

I beamed at him. "I'll let you know when we get to your destination."

"Tell me now-o, so that I can check if I can afford it."

"My charge won't stop your heartbeat, Mr. Volta, so fear not."

He mopped his wet face and head with a stained towel. The air freshener in my car made his rotten-fish pong bearable. I turned on my stereo. He frowned and said he wanted no noise, but his voice sounded polite this time. I humoured him, noticing something absent in his presence, something that needed to be talked about, but I didn't know what that was or how to start discussing it. He shook his head, as if in deep sorrow, and muttered something I didn't understand. When I told him to relax, he yawned aloud without covering his mouth with a fist and reclined into the seat. I wondered if he was hungry, willing him to poke at his stomach so that I could be sure.

Nearing St. Dominic's Cathedral, we met snail traffic. It moved about ten metres forward, only after every twenty minutes of standing still. Many hawkers swamped the highway, some pressing their wares on my windows. Some were selling chilled Coke and Pepsi in plastic bottles, Gala sausage rolls, bunches of yellow bananas spread out on enamel trays, and fried groundnuts wrapped in see-through nylon sacks. Others brandished pirated copies of Napoleon Hill's *Think and Grow Rich* and Zig Ziglar's *See You at the Top*, smartphone chargers, and memory cards. Mr. Volta sighed, scratching the crown of his head. He steadied his suitcase between his legs. Again, I wondered what was inside it.

"Anyway, these things can't continue this way," he murmured to himself, shaking his head.

"What are those? Are you hungry? Let me get you a Gala and a Coke."

"Don't worry yourself."

"What about those fried cubes of beef and red bell-pepper stuck along wooden sticks," I said, pointing at the woman hawking the beef on the crowded highway.

"Don't bother yourself. I'm mostly a vegetarian, eating only fish."

A vegetarian who ate only fish? Was there something I'd missed from the very beginning? Was he a vegetarian-lite or what? Did he mean he could only afford fish because beef and other meats were too expensive for him? I struggled to understand this.

"Mr. Volta, are you sure you don't want anything?"

"Only those sure to see the sunlight tomorrow morning should impress their bellies with food today."

This sounded like a line out of an amateurish poem.

"Meaning what exactly?" I asked.

"You won't understand."

"Make me understand, please."

He shrugged and remained silent for a moment, staring at my dashboard. "You see, I want to keep my brain quiet, but it won't let me. I can't even sleep at night, despite taking lots and lots of sedatives. My horrible wife ran away with my three children. The Chinese company I work for hasn't paid me for fifteen months now. My landlord served me a notice two days ago due to my overdue rent."

"Oh, those things can be quite frustrating," I said, imagining how he rolled around in his bed at night, searching for sleep that wouldn't come.

"Even my brother, a medical doctor in the UK, has refused to send me money."

"Why not?"

"Because he's married a white woman who won't allow him to send money home to his siblings."

"Are you sure?"

"Don't doubt me, young man. Look, the woman has refused to give him a child because she says pregnancy scares her. Can you imagine that kind of nonsense? I'm sure she's up to no good."

"That's unbelievable."

“You see, my brother spends all his money on her. Marrying an Englishwoman is like marrying a Calabar woman—they monitor their husbands too much, putting them in a cage they call love.”

Because I imagined he’d never been to the UK before, I wanted to prove him wrong—that he wasn’t sure the white woman was responsible for his brother’s wickedness—but instead I asked, “Is he older than you?”

“No.” He coughed, adjusting his body strapped on the seat. “This was a young man whose university tuition fees I paid in full while working as a despatch rider for The Deliverify Express many years ago.” He coughed again. “I suffer from severe asthma, and I can’t even afford a common inhaler.”

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear that, Mr. Volta. Please take heart.”

He sneezed all of a sudden, appearing calm and relieved afterwards. I wound down my window and called out to a man selling Gala sausages, but five hawkers rushed towards me. There was this uncanny familiarity among them, the type that didn’t give room for competition, but each hawker still intended to outsell the other. When I asked for Coca-Cola, they hailed the appropriate hawker from far away.

I bought six rolls of Gala and two bottles of Coke and kept them in the compartment between us. He snatched one Gala, tore the wrapper open with his teeth, and started to chomp and practically inhaled the sausage. When I told him to take a Coke, too, he grabbed it and gulped down half of it in one go. He burped, his mouth releasing a puff of both fish-smelling and beef-scented gasses soon afterwards. I covered my nose and shook my head, thinking about this vegetarian who ate fish and sausages with a deep beef filling.

After paying, I asked the hawker what had caused the never-moving traffic jam.

“The road is broken-o,” he told me.

“But the Lagos State government repaired it only last month,” I said. “I pass through here all the time.”

“HAN broke it again.”

“HAN? What’s that?”

“Hawkers’ Association of Nigeria. We broke it so that motorists, these big-big men with flashy cars, can slow down for us to sell our wares.”

Every activity had an association in Nigeria: Tomato-Potato Sellers’ Association, The Confraternity of Coffin Distributors, Sex Workers’ Union, The Cart

Pushers' Congress, The Society of Shit Conveyers, The Rainfall Monitoring Group, The Sorority of Married Women, among others.

I rolled up my glass window, pressing a button. Mr. Volta took another Gala and ate it. He'd finished drinking his Coke, so I asked him to take the second one. Now he slowed down his eating speed, chewing without making a noise.

"You heard what that man said, didn't you?" he asked me. "This country is hopeless. Anyway, everything will end today."

I didn't understand what he meant. Perhaps, there would be a war that would split Nigeria into separate tribes, which would bring better welfare to his tribesmen and women.

"I strongly believe in this country, and I don't know why," I told him. "Some of my friends have travelled to the UK, the US, and Canada, but I don't think I'll ever consider doing that."

"You don't know why?" he howled. His surprise, I supposed, was from the new Gala-Coke energy inside him. "I don't blame you."

"Why not?"

He stared at me. I refused to look him in the eyes. It was gradually getting darker, about half past six. I worried this traffic wouldn't move anytime soon.

"My friend, I imagine it's because you switch from the air conditioning in your house to the one in your car and to the one in your office. Look at your burnished skin that has never suffered the Lagos burning sun."

Although my skin used to shimmer, sometimes it went so dark like raw charcoal that I wondered whether my great-grandparents had migrated from a part of Africa darker than Nigerians.

"What's so special about my skin?" I asked.

"A lot. It's the evidence that you have no worries, that you're healthy, calm, and secure. You see that lady in your office the other day I visited? Her skin is a tourist site. I can pay a fee to gaze at it all year long without getting tired."

"Whose skin?"

"That one, naahh. The woman engineer in your office."

"Oh, Laura. She's my girlfriend."

"Really? She looks young."

"She is, indeed, only twenty-two."

"Ah, that girl is a charm. Little wonder she charmed you."

"We enchanted one another. Am I not handsome myself?"

"You are, for sure, but she's so white."

"No, she doesn't consider herself white, but her mum is from Spain. Her dad is a naval officer from the Niger Delta region of this country."

Mr. Volta slammed a palm on his chest. "I'm also from Niger Delta-o. I tried several times in the past to get out of this horrible country. But I didn't get a visa."

"That's so disappointing. What caused it?"

He sighed. "I used travel agents who said they could get me a UK visa, but they took my money and disappeared. I wanted to live in the UK because gold and silver grow like trees on their streets."

"You sound like a poet now; you didn't in the office the other day."

"I'm a confirmed poet-o," he exclaimed. "I even won the poetry prize of the International Authors' Union of Nigeria, way back in 2007, but they refused to remit my prize money. Now, many years later, I haven't yet been paid."

"Why not?"

He paused to chew his Gala and sip the Coke. "They told me the Governor who'd sponsored the prize the previous years failed his election for a second term and refused to make the poetry prize money available. To be honest, poetry spells povertry."

"Povertry?" I said, and burst out laughing, but he didn't laugh along. "That's a new one for me."

Suddenly, the traffic began to crawl forward. I started the car again and moved. Mr. Volta hauled up his suitcase, kept it on his thighs, and clicked it open. He pulled a paper-wrapped bundle, the colour of cement, out of his suitcase. I was looking straight ahead, conscious of the other road users. But I noticed when he slipped a booklet out of the bundle.

"Have a look, my friend," he said.

"What's that?"

"My prize-winning poetry book."

I turned my neck, looked, and saw *The Tendrils of Twilight at Noon*. "What an exciting title!"

"Exactly," he said, stamping his shabby shoe on my posh floormat.

He enthused that the judges described the book as the work of a genius, the best thing to happen to the poetry world since Seamus Heaney, Wole Soyinka, and Dereck Walcott. Despite the praise, no bookshop in Lagos wanted to stock and sell his book,

and that was why he was peddling it around the city. But nobody had bought it yet, not even a copy.

"Mr. Volta, I find your name deeply curious," I said. "How did you get it? From your parents?"

"No." He shook his head and sighed. "You see, as a poet, I love sonnets. A volta is that point in a sonnet where there's a sudden turning point, an outset of disruptions. The point where vicissitudes begin. The sun sets or refuses to set. Life twists and turns, with ups and downs assured. Finances and fortunes dwindle. Living becomes cancerous, vaulting with near-death experiences. Life veering unpredictably." He hiccupped. "I've witnessed many variants of this volta happen to me personally. Hence, not too long ago when the volatility of my life became legendary, I decided to drop my family name and put Volta in its place. Now I wear my turmoil like a cloak."

"Fascinating," I said, although I found it difficult to relate to the picture he was painting, as I hadn't experienced such obstacles in my life, except my father's strictness and surveillance over me. "I'm sorry for your upheavals, Mr. Volta."

He nodded.

Mr. Volta's face creased like a flung blanket as I approached the Third Mainland Bridge. The dark and dirty lagoon water was heaving and lowering itself. Some fishermen cast nets from wooden canoes. We were in the middle of the bridge, where it seemed the lagoon was deepest, when Mr. Volta suddenly asked me to stop the car. He unclasped the seatbelt he was strapped in and snorted. When I refused to stop, he started squealing with fury. I pulled up and turned off the engine. He tried to fling the car door open at once, but I had control of it, so he sat back unsteadily.

"Let me out of here," he snapped.

"Where exactly are you going, man?"

"I've come to the end of my life's journey."

"You live inside the water or on top of this bridge?"

"You've done your job, mister. Let me go and do mine."

"Explain to me exactly the job you do here. You look vulnerable."

He snorted. "Young man, leave me alone. What have I done to you?"

I pressed the button to let him open the door. He leapt out and started darting towards the cliff of the bridge, leaving his suitcase and Nokia 3310 behind on the seat. A wet wind began to blow as the evening became even less bright.

"Take your belongings with you, please," I said.

He didn't turn. I started the car and chased him. I pulled up, pushed my door open, and hopped out. He was holding an aluminium railing, about to plunge into the lagoon water, when I grabbed his leg and dragged him backwards. He fell hitting his forehead on the tarmac. He was yelping, tossing about like a crocodile. His clothes were now wet from the rainwater on the bridge, as he rolled around. Two cars stopped by, and their drivers dashed out to assist me. As we took him back to my car, he kept sobbing.

"Please, let me die," he said. "I'm tired of this world, tired of myself. Let me die, please. I've already told my useless wife to take care of my children. It's over for me."

We made him sit on the pavement near my car. I softly beat wet dirt off his clothes, huffing. He huffed, too, leaning on my car tyre, his face tilted up, his eyes closed. After about three minutes, he opened his eyes, shaking his head. He was muttering the words of a language I didn't understand.

As he sat quietly, the two other men watching over him, I walked around my car, opened the door, and took out my iPhone. I hefted his suitcase from the passenger side, put his bundle of poetry booklets back inside it, and returned to the men.

Again, Laura's voice echoed inside my head: *Look at you, Tulugo, so privileged and yet generous. Please don't stop helping the needy.*

When I asked Mr. Volta for the details of his bank account, he hesitated for a moment.

"Why do you need them?"

"Let me have them first."

He mouthed at first, and then he spoke up, calling the details slowly, as if he'd forgotten them, while I typed into my phone. I verified his account details and transferred some money to him.

"I just paid three hundred thousand naira into your account," I said, handing him his phone and suitcase. "Check your phone and see if your bank has alerted you."

He took the phone and sighed. I understood it would take him a while to snap out of his suicidal crisis, so I waited. He exhaled loudly and stood up, leaning on my car. As the two other men returned to their cars, I took a photo of him with my phone. I also snapped a selfie with him, both of us standing. While I smiled into the camera, he didn't, the lagoon catching the headlights of speeding cars and shimmering in the background.

Some minutes later, Mr. Volta sneezed and stared at his phone, showing an uncomfortable smile. His expression crept into a new facet of trauma, and he burst out crying. I put my hand across his shoulders, petting him.

"You see, Mr. Volta, you're not the only one with this fatal urge. Sometimes, I want to kill myself, too."

He recoiled and peeped at me, as if I were a dot. "A wealthy man like you? Do you have any problems?"

I chuckled. "Everyone has a wrinkle, Mr. Volta. My father's elder brother killed himself with rat poison some years ago. His elder sister also took her own life with a rope years later, leaving only my father and his youngest sister to mourn for them."

"Really?" he said, shivering, his eyes bulging.

"In fact, several men and women of my lineage died generations ago, by deliberately putting a stop to their own lives. I've heard there's a family curse, an unbreakable one, which my great-grandfather orchestrated in my ancestral village many eons ago."

Looking shocked, he folded his hands across his chest and began to snap his fingers, heaving his shoulders up and down. When he suggested that we should exchange our contact details, I obliged him. Flagging down a commercial motorcyclist, I led him to the other side of the road going back to where we'd come from. After he'd climbed onto the backseat and I gave him an extra ten thousand naira in cash, he burst out crying.

"Mr. Motorcyclist, please don't ever stop anywhere on the road until you get to his house," I said.

"I hear you, sir," the motorcyclist said, nodding. "What happened to him, an accident?"

"It's a long story," I said.

"Mr. Volta, don't try that nonsense again. Do you hear me? Call me if you need anything."

He nodded, wiping tears from his eyes. The motorcyclist kickstarted the engine and zoomed off. As Mr. Volta turned his neck and waved at me with one hand, holding his suitcase with the other, I waved back. I watched the motorcyclist and the sound of the motorcycle recededing into the distance. Mr. Volta was shaking his head, waving and smiling at me.

Seated in my car, about to start it, I saw a Toyota Corona screech to a halt on the other side of the bridge. A tall man rushed outside, leaving his car door open, the headlight beaming. He staggered towards the edge of the bridge and plunged.

My neck buckled, and I felt a numb sensation in my chest. I told myself it wasn't good to die this way, but this was exactly how I would love to die. Only one thing still kept me from doing it though—as an only child, I didn't want to break my parents' hearts.

CHAPTER TEN

The public display of affection between my parents sometimes made me want to cover my face and shout, "Stop it; stop it." I didn't understand how two people who'd flattened many mattresses of lovemaking wouldn't frown at one another, even once. Every day, they did something silly, like plucking ixoras and sticking them in one another's hair. I held my mother responsible for this irksome behaviour.

One day, I was so exhausted from work that I didn't need to see both of them cooing over each other. They were seated at the dining table as I walked in. My mother was busy feeding my father with a chunk of fried chicken, holding it close to his lips and smiling. The table was packed full with food—jollof rice, salad, fruit juice, among others. She poured watermelon juice into a glass cup and took it straight to his mouth. She pulled a paper napkin out of a pack and dabbed his wet lips and beard while hailing him, "The Law, The Law," her fond name for him.

I once believed that love could become meaningless when drunk in excess, but my mother would disagree. She used to be a Lagos cosmopolitan butterfly addicted to the London *Cosmopolitan* aesthetic. Her bedroom and high-class boutique were overwhelmed with copies of *Cosmopolitan*, which she only flipped through, looking at the glossy pictures of white women in glittery dresses and lingerie, nodding and beaming at them. These attractions kept my mother enthralled because she only paid attention to the current trends on the international fashion scene. She often recreated these styles while attending weekend parties. Yet, my father neither questioned nor curtailed her excesses.

"My children, what a surprise," I said, pulling out a chair to sit down. "Are you having a banquet?"

They both burst out laughing, always amused whenever I referred to them together as "my children."

"Tulu, darling, you've returned home at exactly the right time," my mother said. "You've fallen into an ocean of marvellous meals."

"They indeed look amazing, Mum. How was your day?"

"Fantastic."

My father patted a seat near him. "Don't sit too far away from me, Tulu. Come and sit here."

"Dad, I don't want your trouble tonight. I'm comfortable here."

“Why do you always take yourself away from me, Tulu, my son? You know you’re the most valuable entity I’ve ever produced. You know I love you so much.”

I got up and sat closer to him, not on the chair he’d indicated. But I was close enough for his hand to reach my back if he wanted to pacify me. I saw he’d had a new haircut, his hair dyed, his beard trimmed, his mood festive. Why couldn’t I be insanely happy like him?

“Mum, have you won another contract to supply peep-toe heels to a new bride and her bridal train? I’m wondering why you’ve prepared so many meals. Who’ll eat them?”

She giggled, and my father joined in, both of them gazing at me. They became silent for a moment, as if an unseen conductor had asked them to pause. And then they were hugging and kissing in front of me.

I burst out laughing and looked away. “You children are so naughty,” I said. “Shouldn’t you be ashamed of yourselves? You’re polluting my morals, and you know I’m still a virgin.”

Mum broke off from the kissing and rolled her eyes at me. “As if I don’t already know who you’re dating and your love secrets. When are you bringing my daughter in-law home? My peers have started rocking their grandchildren.”

“Tulugo has a fiancé now?” my father asked, bulging his eyes and opening all his fingers. “And I didn’t know? Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“The Law, please calm down,” my mother said, and chuckled. “You didn’t hear fiancé from my mouth, I’m sure.”

“You haven’t answered my question,” I said, sniggering. “Why have you made food so big it can feed a refugee camp?”

They both placed their hands together on the table, holding one another’s palms tight, and chorused, “We’re celebrating our thirtieth wedding anniversary today.”

“What excellent news!” I said, launching to my feet to hug them one after the other. “Why did you hide it from me?”

“Because we’re your little children,” my mother said, laughing, “so we forgot to let you know.”

“My son, I wanted it to be a surprise for you,” my father said.

There was a delicious aloofness in the intimacy that existed between my parents, a kind of unawareness that made their relationship seem to be on autopilot. They weren’t conscious that they were in love, and yet they were swamped in profound

fondness, a cultish obsession with each other. My mother was always grateful to him for marrying her without minding that she wasn't a university graduate, despite the more educated women seeking his attention many years ago.

It was a story she told me often. She attended Sacred Hill Commercial School in Ogemba village where she learned shorthand, typewriting, bookkeeping, commerce and, of course, English and maths. She couldn't sit her GCE O-level in the village because the school wasn't accredited for such an exam. But her uncle in Lagos registered her as a candidate in a private college, and she left for the city.

She scored 110 words per minute in typewriting and, after the result came out, started working for my father as a secretary in the law firm of Okoye & Okoye Chambers, Legal Practitioners and Notaries Public. It was there she fell in love with my father, in front of her Olivette typewriter. She literally collapsed in affection, she once told me, and she'd not awoken from the love-coma ever since.

But she wanted more than love. She'd her eyes set on cosmetology and fashion design, and she didn't want to attend university or join the long Lagos unemployment queues. Working on my father's advice, she resigned from the law firm and enrolled at the Lagos City Beauty Training Institute. There, she discovered *Cosmopolitan* and got addicted.

"People thought your father was crazy to marry me," she told me one day. "How can a learned person with big-big degrees return from England and marry an illiterate woman? They said I must've used a talisman to catch him. Did he not see beautiful white women in England?"

However, my father didn't mind. She sent her to Meyer's Finishing School for thorough training in locally acquired English etiquette in order to behave like the white woman he didn't marry.

"Marriage is a process, not a product," my father said often. "Get the woman you want, and make her become what you want, what she wants." And my mother didn't mind that he was from a family with a dented history of suicides.

When my mother was unable to conceive a child, for several years, the rumours multiplied that the atrocities of my great-grandfather had caught up with her. But she clung to my father and proved the rumourmongers wrong upon my arrival. It was then the people began to adore and praise their union, calling my mother a halogen bulb because of her extreme fair complexion that mirrors a white woman's.

In the end, everyone concluded that she was a perfect fit for my father, that she complemented him, diluting his embarrassingly dark complexion, as dark as powdered charcoal mixed with liquified bitumen.

Now sitting under the golden-yellow bulbs of the dining room, my father's skin looked lightened, his hair lustrous.

"That's your favourite mango juice in the jug," he told me, rising to push it closer to me.

"No, Dad. Leave that alone. I'd like to have a shower first."

"Just have a sip, Tulu, dearie," my mother said. "I prepared it specially for you."

"Drink it, please, my son," he said. "When the guests arrive, it may be difficult for you to get even a pint of it."

Only now did I discover they'd invited a select group of friends and family members, and there was going to be a party by the poolside later tonight. Our household staff, from the chefs to the cleaners and the drivers, the gardeners and the guards, would turn up in muftis and be treated as special dignitaries who would gorge on the meals.

I'd never opened up about my love affair with Laura to my parents. I would've loved to invite her to this dinner and introduce her as my co-worker, not my lover. But I suspected my mother already knew about my deep fondness for Laura. When both of us had visited my mother's boutique one day and I'd introduced Laura as an acquaintance of mine, my mother had narrowed her eyes, looking suspicious. My relationship with Laura had been so strong that my heart hit my chest every time we were together, enmeshed in shockwaves of anticipation, wonder, and elation.

However, our love hadn't become like my parents' long-simmered love that had deboned itself, leaving only the softness of flesh behind. Maybe it was because we were still both young and our relationship was only six months old at that time. I guessed if we allowed it to cook well, we'd become unaware that we loved each other and started to smoulder ahead. A fish doesn't learn to swim, isn't conscious that it swims; it just swims. I'd hankered to kiss Laura without knowing that I was kissing, to be naked without noticing it, and to have sex with her without realising what I was doing. I wanted our relationship to float, gliding forward and forward, oblivious of any efforts applied to keep it afloat.

I poured myself a glass of the mango juice and took my first sip. When my mother started to hug and kiss my father again, I jerked and choked on the drink, splattering it on the table through my nostrils and reaching for a paper napkin.

"It's time to shower," I said, as I got up and walked down the hallway to my side of the mansion.

I was getting ready for the poolside party, dressed in my pair of Christian Louboutin black trainers. I tucked my white V-neck T-shirt from Gucci into my black Prada slim-fit chinos. I heard my aunt's voice carry from the sitting room—Aunty Patience, my father's younger sister, his only sibling who hadn't killed herself, despite what she often called a constant urge to go under the rope or drink poison.

When I returned to the sitting room, she was perching on the edge of the sofa like a frightened owl, as if afraid her cast-off dress might scratch the chair. My mother sat beside her. Instead of Patience, my mother called her Payshay because she didn't ever pay her debts, must be goaded and shaken before she made an attempt. The nickname had stuck because that was what I also called her. Sometimes even my father's tongue slipped it out.

"Payshay, Payshay, please shift to the middle of the sofa naahh," my mother pleaded with her, smiling.

Aunty Patience frowned. "Why?"

"To benefit from the rich softness of the leather."

"Chinyere, I don't have your time for nonsense. Leave me alone."

My father was seated opposite them, engrossed in the NTA's Network News at 9 p.m. Our domestic staff had moved all the food from the dining table to the poolside to set the stage for the party kicking off at ten o'clock.

Aunty Patience lived alone, a long distance away from us, in Tedi, a riverside community on the outskirts of Lagos, and she didn't visit often. After bowing in greeting to welcome her, I sat near my father, staring at Aunty, wondering how he'd been able to convince her to come tonight.

Aunty Patience refused to shift back on the sofa. A born-again Pentecostal Christian, she was always fighting against the unseen devil, the antithesis of God, wearing her black second-hand pleated gown. It looked thick and tatty, covering her entire legs so as not to attract men to commit sin with her body. She'd never given her

dark face, even darker than my father's, a chance to benefit from the transformation that lipstick, brightening powder foundation, and eye pencilling could offer a modern woman. What was the point? She'd already passed her marriage sell-by date.

Since her arrival, she'd not said much, but once in a while she pulled up the turtleneck of her white long-sleeved blouse, to ensure that her thread-thin neck wasn't exposed to tempt sinful men. And because every new outfit portended a horrible omen, an invitation for the devil to wreak havoc on the world, Aunty Patience preferred hand-me-downs, for she and the devil were arch-rivals. On top of her blouse is a bright lemon-coloured pinafore announcing a forthcoming crusade of her heaven-conscious church, Jesus Evangelical Tabernacle. JET for short.

"Payshay, Payshay, please relax naahh," my mother pleaded again, beaming.

Aunty smoothed her skirt. "Chinyere, I'm okay. Don't worry. Leave me alone."

"Ahh-Ahh, how can you be okay sitting like that, like a scared dove?"

"I'm a dove of Jesus Christ," Aunty Payshay snapped. "Chinyere, you don't visit me. You don't even care if I'm still alive."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that, but you're not always at home," my mother said, giving her a brief side hug and smiling. I knew my mother was lying. "You're always travelling away for church programmes."

Aunty Payshay brushed her aside. "Chinyere, please stop touching me, stop touching me. Don't you have a phone?" She glared at my mother's tight trousers. "Meanwhile, go and change those devilish trousers. It's a sin for a woman to dress like that. Revealing your womanly shape invites the devil. Stop satanizing yourself."

My mother burst out laughing. "Payshay, I'm so sorry for not calling you, so sorry."

"That's alright. At least your husband still remembers to send me money. If not for him, the devil would've defeated me in this battle called life. I'm lucky to have a brother like him."

She used to teach in a primary school where she was paid only ten thousand naira every month, a salary that was less than fifty dollars at that time, but the payment was neither enough nor regular. So, after school, she would slice papayas, pineapples and watermelons, and sell them on a wooden table near the main bus stop in Tedi. At fifty-six, she couldn't catch a husband. Her own fault, according to my father. She used to find a shortcoming in every suitor when she was young, either the man was too short for her or too thin or too poor or too hairy or too muscular or too dark. Now she blamed

her grandfather, my great-grandfather, our entire ancestry, for her extended spinsterhood.

“But, Payshay, you often say you don’t need money,” my mother reminded her.

“I don’t need too much, just a little something to get by until Jesus Christ arrives again and takes me to heaven. Are you ready to meet him?”

“Of course, I am,” my mother said, slapping her chest.

“Not in this way, Chinyere,” Aunty Payshay moaned, looking my mother up and down. “Look at you. Jesus Christ has no business with artificial nails and hair attachments and lipsticks and eyeshadows and eye pencils and designer perfumes and all sorts of jewellery.”

“Ahh-Ahh, what’s wrong with these things, naahh? In fact, I’m travelling to Spain for plastic surgery to enhance my hips and butt, and also get a nose job.”

“Stop it, Chinyere, stop it,” Aunty Pashay yelled. “You’re a gem the way God has made you, and he doesn’t make mistakes, so stop destroying yourself.” Aunty Patience pulled out a big dog-eared Bible from her peeling handbag, which was propped up beside her leg. She flipped the book open, searching for suitable verses, her mouth already discharging a volcano of Bible passages. “Trust in the Lord, Chinyere. According to my holy book, our body have been constructed whole and God’s righteousness is our healer.”

If she continued with this preaching, our party might not take place tonight. I wouldn’t let that be the case.

“Aunty Payshay, should I bring you something to eat?” I said, interrupting her gaping mouth, which was already full of Deuteronomy and St. Luke and St. John and St. Mark and Revelation and Leviticus.

“Stop calling me Aunty, please,” she snapped, knitting her brows. “It makes me feel like I’m too old or too fat.”

“Oh, but you *are* my father’s sister.”

“Good. Say that instead. I’m also the precious sister of Jesus Christ. Call me Sister Patience henceforth. That’s what all my sisters and brothers in Christ call me.”

“Alright, Aunty.”

She scowled at me. “Sister Patience!”

My father tapped me and pointed at the television. “Look at this man.”

On the screen was the despicable Senator Duke addressing journalists who were shouldering against each other to get their labelled microphones closer to his restless mouth—Channels TV, NTA, AIT, Galaxy TV, Silverbird, MITV, SuperScreen.

"My court victory is certain and unchallengeable, and my achievements in this country speak for me," he told the newsmen and women. "I belong to the ruling party, so these mushroom petitions from mushroom parties are sheer empty barrels of noisemaking. I have confidence in the members of the judiciary, and I'm sure they'll do what's just and allow me to continue serving my people. Nobody can beat the reach of the Democratic Action Alliance Party, the biggest party in Africa, and we're sure to rule this country for the next one million years."

"What a stinking clown," I said.

My father sighed. "I'll keep saying that the best form of citizenship is to vote during an election and make sure to vote for the right person. I don't understand how this man has managed to stay in the senate for so many years."

One of the perks of having a judge father was I got to hear every court verdict even before it went public. But, in this case, my father hadn't revealed much.

"Dad, that man sounds more interesting in the emails he sends over. I think you should read those emails."

"No, I won't. He thinks he can intimidate me with his braggadocio. I've made it clear to the Ministry of Justice that the government needs to jack up the remuneration of judges. Hungry, poorly paid judges won't safeguard their conscience."

"We don't have politicians in Nigeria," I said. "We have reprobates empowered to lead instead."

"The entire political atmosphere stinks horribly, and I'm determined to help cleanse it through an unbiased dispensing of justice. We can't continue this way as a country. If we can get the judiciary to do the right thing, every other sector will fall in line and do things the right way."

Sometimes, my father sounded utopian, like one in a faraway dream, even though the sincerity of his thoughts was striking. I loved Nigeria, but I often felt its multiple rots were irredeemable.

"What do you mean, Dad?" I asked. "With senators like Duke Momo making laws for the country, many people have given up on the country, especially young people."

"We need only two pivotal sectors to get Nigeria working again, and those are the justice and the electricity sectors. That's all."

"Obiora, my learned brother," Sister Payshay butted in, startling me. "I cover you with the precious blood of Jesus Christ, whether you believe in him or not. God is your strength and protection."

I thought she'd been reading her Bible, not paying attention to the television, after my mother had left her and gone indoors, perhaps to change into another kind of dress that would please Jesus Christ.

"Thank you, Patience," my father said. "I was born to be a man of the law, and if I lose my life for it, so be it."

"God forbid," Sister Patience yelled. "That will never happen to you. But I'm sorry to say this-o." She paused and sucked her teeth. "There are too many fake lawyers in this country. They need to be pruned. There's this lawyer on my street in Tedi. He's so hungry and shifty that his signpost reads Estate Agent and Divorce Consultant. He's so confused."

"I encourage those multiple services as long as the lawyers in question are mindful of their reputation," my father said.

"Whatever you say, Obiora, that Tedi lawyer doesn't appear genuine to me. He makes me imagine that if I had a son, I would never encourage him to become a lawyer."

I wanted to tell her to catch a good husband first before dreaming of a son, and I wondered why she wouldn't want a daughter instead, but I swallowed my words.

My father didn't align with any religion, but he was curious about the supernatural. He used to say there were still a lot of things beyond human explanations, like the beginning and end of the world, the occurrence and meaning of dreams, and the finality of death. He studied philosophy, poetry, history, psychology, fiction, and metaphysics, comparing them. He called himself an objective enquirer, and I once thought that I inherited my book-loving chromosomes from him. Despite my busy work schedule, I would read at least three novels each week, in addition to *GQ*, *Made-Men*, *AristoFemme*, and poetry collections.

Even though, he didn't attend church services, my mother always did. But I knew it was only to flaunt her latest clothes and designer shoes and handbags and jewellery, and to gossip with her best friend, Ms. Bimbo Williams, about women whose bad make-up turned them into funny caricatures.

I heard voices, rustling, and sounds of cars downstairs. I parted the curtains and looked outside. The guests had begun to arrive, and our staff members were showing them to the seats arranged by the swimming pool.

Some minutes later, my mother glided into the sitting room and beamed, wearing another dress, this time her party outfit, a long red gown that covered her legs. The gown swept the floor. She had to hold the front to walk without stepping on it, plenty of yards following behind. I spent some time watching her movement to find out she was in flat shoes. She clutched a silvery Hermès purse. The gown was tight around her torso, sparkling with all sorts of stones and gold sequins around the neckline and across the entire dress, an eclectic patterning of lace and satin. Her presence freshened the sitting-room air with a new fragrance, a lemony smell that didn't overwhelm the nostrils. My father got to his feet, hugged her, and sat back on the sofa. But Sister Patience pinched her nose and looked away, turning her back to us.

"Payshay-Payshay, I hope you approve of this one," my mother said, poking her cheek with her tongue and chuckling, her face a testimony of fresh make-up.

Sister Patience swung around and regarded her for a moment. "This gown is way too big, too flashy, and too much wastage. Ahh-Ahh, everything on you glorifies the devil to no end."

As the rest of us burst into laughter, the door opened. Ms. Bimbo Williams pranced inside, packaged in a white T-shirt and blue hot pants, short and tight, and white-sole sneakers. Her hair extension was so straight it must've been pressed with a red-hot electric iron.

"Hey, here comes Ms. B," my mother said, flicking her hands and dancing transfixed on the spot. She struggled with her gown to move forward and meet her midway.

"Chi-Chi, the Golden Babe," Ms. Bimbo Williams hailed my mother. "Chi-Chi, the Most Happening Babe."

On coming closer to one another, they slammed their palms in the air and hugged.

"I told you this gown speaks volumes," Ms. Bimbo Williams said, and grabbed a part of the billowing fabric on the floor and let it tumble back down and unroll like waves. Her fingernails were the pink-painted talons of an eagle. "This gown is worth all the dollars."

"You can never go wrong with these things, Ms. B," my mother said. "But you know I've never worn Indonesian before."

My father strolled towards them and placed a hand around my mother's waist. "Bimbo, it's such a mighty honour to have you here."

"Oh, Justice Okoye, the pleasure is mine," she replied, whipping her phone out of her front pocket. My father stood aside, and she snapped my mother. Click. Clack. Click. "This is going on the front cover."

"Aunty Bimbo, you're not looking bad at all," I said, still sitting on the sofa, near Sister Patience. I called her Aunty as a mark of respect, even though weren't related in any way.

"Wow, Tulu, darling, I'm blushing, thank you," she enthused, fanning herself briefly with her fingers, her cheeks chubby and rouged. She looked across to Sister Patience, her head tilted to one side in a kind of question. Her extended eyelashes flapped like wings. I didn't think she'd met Sister Patience before.

"Madam, I'm so happy to meet you," Aunty Bimbo said.

Aunty Patience turned her face away, saying nothing.

"Hello, I'm greeting you," Aunty Bimbo said again, even louder this time.

Sister Patience still didn't respond.

"Wo'rever is her problem?" Aunty Bimbo snapped, swinging around to leave the sitting room. Her hair extensions reached her rotund bottom, bouncing as she walked.

My father then stood behind my mother and lifted the gown, following her slowly, on their way to the poolside.

Sister Patience pinched my thigh.

"I'm sure that woman is a prostitute," she whispered.

I cringed and frowned. "Ahh-Ahh, Sister Payshay, she's an editor of a lifestyle magazine for top-class women. Haven't you heard of *AristoFemme* before? She owns it."

"Does she have a husband?"

"Her only son Deji lives in London."

"I'm asking about her husband. Any prostitute can have a son."

"As you're not making any sense, Sister Payshay, I must join the party now," I said, making to stand up. "Are you coming with me?"

“Sit down,” she shouted at me. “I can never be a part of the sins that I condemn. I wouldn’t have accepted your father’s invitation if I’d known that this wedding anniversary party was going to be a gathering of the sons and daughters of Jezebel.”

“Sister Payshay, I’m afraid I have to leave you now.”

“I said sit down and listen to me,” she shouted again, grabbed my belt and pulled me back down on the sofa. “Obiora knows the curse that runs in our family. It’s destroyed generations of men and women, but he refuses to acknowledge it. Jesus Christ intervened in my life, and that’s why my suicidal thoughts have receded. Instead of following Jesus Christ, your father is instead running after Jezebels.”

I sighed, lacing my fingers into one hard fist under my jaw. I had been curious of dying suddenly, desiring to kill myself. It’d been so tempting to die because I always thought of poison and ropes around my neck, including touching a naked electricity cable. I’d found nothing interesting anymore, including my job, despite the obvious comfort around me.

“Sister Payshay, how do you manage to stay so strong when the curse won’t let up?”

“Ahh-Ahh, so it’s finally passed down to you?”

“Yes, I’ve told my father about it, and he says I should go for therapy.”

“You see now?” she yelled. “You see what I mean? The curse is transcending to a new generation. You don’t even to go church, like your father. Look, you have to follow me to JET church, and Jesus will save you.”

I just shrugged, saying nothing more.

The poolside party was almost at its peak when I strolled in. A DJ was playing music so soft it could only be heard in the background. I nodded at the quiet ambience that my father had chosen. I could almost count the guests on two hands, about fifteen of them, men and women standing and clinking champagne glasses, laughing and greeting, “Cheers, cheers, cheers!”

From a distance, I could recognise Chief Hyacinth Ude, the Chairman of Legacy Assurance & Actuaries. My mother often said the man couldn’t cope without illicit affairs with Lagos women. “Once that man sees a bra, eh,” she would say, “his body will be shaking like a rooster that has seen a naked hen. He won’t rest until he finds himself melting between the legs of the poor, helpless fowl.”

Brandishing her bejewelled fingers was Lady Pricilla Yusuf-Thomas, the Director-General of the Nigerian Investment Promotion Commission. She was so large that my father's auditor friend, Mr. Theophilus, had to orbit her. He stood almost ten metres away from her as they both chatted.

I lifted a champagne flute from the tray and approached my parents, who were standing in front of the giant cake. Together, they were holding the knife stuck into it. Behind them were our domestic staff, grinning and hugging my parents, the first time I'd seen them come so close. To my shock, they were all stepping on the excess fabric of my mother's Indonesian gown, crumpling it. Did they know they were stomping on $2,500? Well, I shouldn't be bothered because my mother would throw the gown away after the event. She never wore anything twice.

"Tulu, come and stand at my right-hand side," my father told me.

"No, The Law, let him stand in the middle of us both," my mother countered.

I choose to align with my mother's choice. She showed me her finger. A new ring sparkled on it. My father had just slipped it on her finger to renew his vow. She leaned her mouth to my ear and whispered, "It's diamond, ten carats," and chuckled. I hadn't yet checked out the new ring she'd also put on my father's finger. It seemed a lot had happened before my arrival.

After cutting the cake, we all scattered in different directions. As some guests took to the dance floor, gyrating to Oliver De Coque's *Father-Father*, which the DJ had just switched to, our staff divided the cake into cubes and took them around.

I glanced up at our upstairs windows and caught Sister Payshay peeping down through the parted curtains. She was dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, perhaps weeping for all the goings-on among the sinners by the poolside, all qualified to perish in hellfire.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Lagos was humid, the air sticking to my nostrils. As I woke up this morning, darkness billowed in my head. My chest heaved, and I felt so heavy that the combined weight of my ribs bended my torso, slanting my neck. There was custardy puss in the corners of my eyes. Tears sprouted out of nowhere and crept down my cheeks. As I wiped them, I realised I was wiping off the remnants of my happiness. I stopped and watched the water drench my chest. I couldn't explain what initiated the tears but there was a horrific battle in my head, involving two sworn enemies. One side was winning, the other side losing, but I belonged to both sides. When the losing side suffered a blow, a gunshot, or an arrow, wailing and moaning, I crumbled. When the winning side burned their fireworks, celebrating their victory, my chest shed its heavy weight and my flattened mood rose.

But then there was something like a sprinkle of an extra-hot chilli in my throat, and I burst out coughing into my moulded fists. An invisible slap landed at the back of my neck, and the pain tingled down my spine and sent me reeling back onto my mattress, which felt thorny to my skin. I kept still and let it atrophy. Then I yanked up myself, refusing to be overwhelmed, but the sounds of guns and grenades and bows and arrows continued to bang and boom and rumble and tumble inside me.

I ambled up the attic, wondering why I was so troubled and disturbed, despite my flashy car, my well-fed bank account, my designer clothes and shoes, my cash-thick wallet, and the possibility of acquiring even more. Like my father, I chose not to believe it was the victims of my great-grandfather's brutality who were coming back to fight me—local men and women who had been murdered over a century ago. Sister Patience often said the victims would continue to attack us because they hadn't been put in caskets and buried in graves, like normal humans, and given funerals full of songs, incantations and drumming and eating and dancing. I found her story incredulous, but what if it was true that unburied humans always remained restless in the world of the spirits, disturbing their relatives in the human world.

I slid open my attic window and stared far afield. I watched the Atlantic Ocean undulate in the far distance, bringing me its water-soaked sound that finally overpowered the sounds of depression in my head.

I decided on going out to hunt for joy because I wasn't going to work. AtlanTel could wait. My job could wait as well. Instead of being behind the wheel, I asked one of our security guards to drive me to the street a few kilometres from my house.

About a month ago, I'd joined HackAfrica, a community of aspiring ethical hackers, to acquire the requisite knowledge to build cybersecurity infrastructure and defence mechanisms against the continent-wide cyberattacks. I'd already learned the basics of some advanced computer programming platforms from YouTube: Java, Python, ASP. Net, C-sharp, JavaScript, Hypertext Markup Language, and Cascading Style Sheets. But HackAfrica offered courses in resilient network systems, complex software architecture, construction of supersonic websites, advanced database programming, and other sophisticated ethical hacking tools. The school placed a lot of emphasis on building attack-proof computer systems, although almost all the students there had a different vision.

"Where do you intend to work after your studies?" I asked one of the students after the day's class.

"To work for someone else?" the student retorted, scrunching up his face. "Meaning what exactly?"

Four of them were gathered near my car. My driver was sleeping behind the wheel, his head thrown backwards, his mouth open, his throat playing the vuvuzela. I tugged him awake and gave him money to go and eat somewhere nearby. He bowed and left.

"I mean, you'll have to put your HackAfrica knowledge into practice, won't you?"

"I want to be my own boss," he exclaimed.

"Oh, entrepreneurship. That's fantastic. Becoming a hacking consultant, protecting vulnerable systems. It's what I'd love to do myself, targeting multinational companies."

"That's not what I mean." His frown grew even filthier. "I'll hack all the Automated Teller Machines in this country, I swear. My brother trained here two years ago. Today, he doesn't work, but he withdraws money daily with a special debit card.

"Your brother?"

"Are you doubting me? You see that First Equity Bank, eh? They're just big for nothing; their network system is a mere basket. Their cash machines vomit money anyhow, with just a simple master key. My brother transferred my HackAfrica tuition

fee, 1.2 million naira, from their cash machine on Ozumba Mbadiwe Street, and he doesn't even have an account with them. He built an app that can extract bank account numbers and other customer details."

Another boy held up his hand as if he wanted to make a solemn pledge or ask for permission. He was almost done with his studies at HackAfrica. "Look, I use the Internet Banking platform of Global Capital Bank," he said, bringing down his hand to show me his phone screen. "See, I have no account with them, but that bank is just a borehole that gives me cash on demand."

No wonder HackAfrica, despite its extortionate tuition fees, was always jam-packed with students, young men and women not older than even twenty-five. Each of them came to class in flamboyant cars.

"But, guys, you're being trained to become ethical hackers, to protect systems and not harm them."

"Not in this country," yet another boy butted in with the self-confidence of one used to shoplifting, a rising vehemence in his voice. "When our politicians steal our money and put it in a bank, I'll use my hacking app and steal the money from them."

"We want to be like you," another boy said, pointing at my car.

I shrugged. They didn't know my background. I'd spent barely one month at the training school, coming to class mostly on weekends, but they'd already placed me among the moneybags, based on what they imagined was the value of my Range Rover. They didn't know my struggle.

My driver came back, still licking his lips from whatever he'd eaten. Because he'd returned too early, I was certain he hadn't spent the entire money on food, saving some. Not my business anyway. I bade the boys goodbye.

When I climbed onto the backseat and the driver pulled away, I lost interest in going home and started to doze off.

"There's this private clinic on Adeola Odeku Street," I told the driver, straddling between wakefulness and sleepiness. "I don't know the name, but I know where it's located on that street."

"Alright, Oga sir. Let me get to the street first so that..."

I slipped into a dream where the most notorious tabloid newspaper in Lagos, that pathetic *City Spanner*, had published a scandal about my father's infidelity with a former beauty queen. "Judge sets sights on Miss Nigeria," the caption said. In the

image that accompanied it, the dried-up beauty queen with the flat cheeks of a dead stockfish, sat on his thighs, hugging and kissing him. Later, they were married after he'd divorced my mother, sending her out of our mansion. I saw my mother crying and thrashing about outside our gates, her clothes sullied.

"Oga sir, wake up."

This sounded like it was coming from my dream.

"Oga sir, this is Adeola Odeku-o. Wake up naahh!"

"OK," I blurted out, regaining complete consciousness. "Please help me to shout God forbid."

"Oga sir, God forbid."

"Shout it again."

"God forbid-o."

"And again."

"God forbid-o."

I looked around and ahead in search of the clinic. Victoria Island was just a slum for millionaires—smelly gutters and roads littered with potholes, highlands of garbage on every corner. I showed him the clinic, a three-storey building, and he nosed the car into the compound. He waited in the car while I got into the ground floor to seek a solution to my problem.

From the scratches on the floor, I imagined the place must have plenty of patients visiting daily, although scanty at the moment. A lady was filing her fingernails as I stepped into reception. I greeted and told her that I wanted to see the doctor.

She ignored me, continued inspecting her nails.

"Hello, I'm talking to you," I said.

"Please, you have to wait because this is my one-thirty tea break," she said, leaving abruptly.

I stood near her desk, reading the framed quotations on the wall:

- *The bigger your dick's size, the bigger your sexual smile.*
- *Your sexual satisfaction comes only when you plunge the biggest size into the deepest downstairs available.*
- *A big cucumber can poke through a tight hole, but a short cucumber can never try that.*

I wondered what these passages meant. *A dick's size? A cucumber? Downstairs?* Really? Where was I? Later, the receptionist pushed the front door open,

looking suspicious as her head sloped to one side. She narrowed her eyes, gazing straight at my face.

“Please let me quickly see the doctor and go home,” I told her. “I’m really tired.”

“Oga sir, are you the owner of that car outside?”

“Which one?”

“The Range Rover.”

“Yes, any problems?”

“Oh my God,” she burst out, jerking and hitting a hand on her chest. She rushed to the desk and shoved her nail-filing set into the drawer. “Sir, you must see the doctor immediately. I’m so sorry to have kept you waiting, sir. So sorry. Please forgive me.”

What had suddenly changed?

“I’m not a knight,” I said. “Stop calling me ‘sir’.”

“Yes, sir. I’m really sorry, sir.”

She grabbed a pen from the drawer, dropped it back, grabbed it again. Slamming a brown card on the desk, she told me to fill it in swiftly and sign. She squirrelled into the hallway and banged the door shut. Later, she scuttled back with a white flat file in hand, panting. She asked me to follow her, collecting my completed card.

“I thought I had to pay some registration or consultation fee. Don’t you need any payment from me?”

“No, sir.” She smiled and winked at me. “But if there is, I’ll tell you later, sir.”

Inside the doctor’s office, a bespectacled woman was sitting at a desk, looking at a glossy magazine opened to a page showing vibrators and dildos. She didn’t look like the kind of professional doctor in white overalls I’d imagined seeing. Maybe she would wear one when it was time for her to examine my problem.

“What’s your name?” the doctor asked me, collecting the file and card from the receptionist.

“He’s Tulugo, ma,” the receptionist said, bowing and pointing at my name on the card.

I swallowed the words already forming in my mouth.

The doctor looked up at me. “Have you paid the consultation fee?”

“Yes, ma,” the receptionist said. “That’s not a problem. He’s very capable, ma.”

“Maria, why don’t you just shut up and keep quiet for a second?” the doctor yelled. “I’m not asking you.”

“I’m sorry, ma. But I’m only trying to help him because he says he’s tired and drowsy, ma.” She drew a chair closer. “Please sit down, sir. She’s going to treat you very well, sir.”

The doctor asked me not to sit. Instead, she told me to go into the cubicle covered with a blue cloth by the corner, pointing at it. When she added that I had to take off my clothes once hidden inside, Maria winked at me again and turned to leave. She was rolling her hips and swaying her buttocks from side to side as she walked.

The cubicle had a narrow bed with a stiff mattress, waiting. I stripped naked and lay down, wondering what was going to happen. The doctor towered above me, wearing white gloves. Her fingers were greased, looking like ten condom-coated penises. Was she going to massage me or what? She took a white measuring tape from the cupboard.

“What new length would you like to attain this time?” she asked, tugging at my manhood, stretching it with one hand and pointing at the dildos with the other. “Ten inches? Twenty inches?”

I hauled myself up, frowning, still seated on the bed. “That’s not what I want, Doctor!”

“Would you like to enhance the thickness instead?”

“What thickness? What exactly do you do here?”

She paused and glared at me. “This is a performance enhancement facility. Otherwise known as a Penis Enlargement Clinic.”

“No,” I yelled. “I’m here to see an Ear, Nose, and Throat doctor.”

“But Maria has said you’d love to have your sexual organ extended,” she growled. “The ENT clinic is upstairs, a different establishment entirely. Why didn’t Maria direct you properly?” She beat her head with both hands, her face aghast. “Maria,” she shouted louder, “will you come here right now? Maria!”

As the doctor dashed off, I climbed down and put my clothes back on. Walking out of the cubicle and targeting the exit, I saw Maria as she kept bowing and gesticulating before her boss.

“Maria, what’s gone wrong with you today?” the doctor shouted.

“I’m so sorry, ma,” Maria said, warbling. “I assumed he needed some penis expansion because men so dark in complexion often have short penises, ma. I’m speaking from experience, ma. Please forgive me, ma.”

Worn-out from the confusion, I forced myself to ease up, even though I was still unable to define what was wrong with me.

I then visited the Ear, Nose, and Throat clinic upstairs. As I walked through the door, I was blinded by the blue light beaming off the receptionist's head. He was hunched over his desk, wearing black trousers, his legs crossed under his desk. His prominent muscles strangled the short sleeves of his white shirt. The sleeves looked as if they were about to burst open from the pressure exerted by the thick muscles. I pictured him on a treadmill, skipping up and down in a gym. Although he was bald, his beard and moustache were huge, covering half of his face. There was no single space on his cheeks and under his jaw that was spared of his glistening dark hair.

He stood up, smiling, and asked me to sit down. He looked like a man who put a lot of kindness into his work, like someone who'd lost a good job before and was now eager to keep the current one.

A workman was pulling out an air-conditioning unit from the wall, cracking the concrete with a hammer and sending the broken pieces scattering on the floor and dust curling around the hall. I wondered why they hadn't chosen another day, maybe a Sunday, for this renovation.

"You should make a separate neon sign for yourself and place it directly on your balcony," I told the receptionist, adjusting myself on the aluminium chair that looked cosy, but it jabbed my backside because it was so hard that I twitched. The other chairs had been stacked, and another man was moving them to a van downstairs.

"Why do you suggest the neon sign?" he asked

"For new customers to find this particular office without a headache."

"What's the point?" he said without parting his upper and lower rows of teeth, but his lips had moved, his voice the sound of a power bike. The spurt of wind that couldn't depart through his clenched teeth seemed to have bulged his Adam's Apple for a moment and it snapped back.

"Instead of that joint sign standing outside, advertising you and a dozen other firms in the building together. It's confusing."

He shrugged. "We used to have our own independent sign, but the Lagos State Signage Agency is a toxic government parasite."

"What happened?"

He exhaled. “The annual bill for signage could pay the salaries of many people for two years. If you’re unable to pay, their enforcement team will compel you to stuff their palms with the liquid god of possibilities every month, or they will pull down the sign. So my boss decided to team up with the rest of the tenants for the signage.”

He took my name and photograph, everything done with his laptop and phone, including my signature, which I signed on an electronic pad. He generated a number to track my treatment progress on their online portal.

“The consultation fee is $100.”

“You don’t accept our local currency here?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

He smiled, scratching his eyebrow with his index finger. “You can pay with your card and the POS will do the conversion.”

“How long do I have to wait until I see the doctor?”

“There’s no waiting. You’re going in straightaway before she leaves,” he said, pointing to a white door with a red sticker on it. The words in white said, “Private Consulting Room.”

I stood up. The doctor was pregnant, zipping shut her leather handbag on the desk when I opened the door. She wore white coveralls and had the air of someone who’d read too many books. The name plate in front of her said, “Consultant Otolaryngologist,” which I’d never seen or heard before. She grinned and gestured for me to sit down, squinting at her laptop screen.

“Your name sounds nice. What does it mean?”

“Doctor, you ask like those white people on CNN. Have you lived in America before?”

She broke out laughing. “Well, I went to Johns Hopkin in Maryland, although I’ve never had the time to watch CNN.”

“My name means Towering Triumph.”

“That’s gorgeous,” she said, nodding and smiling. “I’ll give my unborn child your name.” She pointed at her stomach. “I’ve been searching for such an excellent name for a first child.”

“Was that why you decided to return to Nigeria after studying in America, to search or a name?”

"No, but I'm moving back in one month's time, and I'll hand over the clinic to someone else. It'll be a disaster to give birth to a child in Nigeria. My son needs an American citizenship and upbringing."

It gladdened my heart that a second human being would share my name, a privilege to be the first, but her words shocked me. "Why are you in such a hurry to return to America?"

"Do you know how long doctors have been on strike at the Lagos University Teaching Hospital?"

"Oh, you work at LUTH as well?"

She nodded. "The Minister of Health has told us to become farmers if we'd love to remain satisfied doctors."

"So America has the best farmland?"

A moment's silence. "I should think so."

"You mean you'll never come back to Nigeria again?"

She smirked. "There's no prestige in returning. It's only departure that brings respect."

I yawned to douse the fiery war raging inside my head. "Doctor, my throat itches, although I think it's my brain pulling a fast one on me."

"Your throat?" She pulled on a pair of white gloves, walking round the table. Her palms placed on my neck bought me some relief, even though I wasn't sure if my pain was physical or traceable. "Do you have a sore throat?"

I sighed and sneezed from the strong Dettol smell in the room. "It feels like a noose, a tight necklace."

She unrolled tissue paper and handed it to me. "Have you had a continuous cough?"

"No, Doctor."

She asked me to sit upright as she sprayed some medicine from a bottle all over my throat, and it felt numb after about five minutes. She didn't spray it into my mouth. Instead, she coated my tongue with a silky gauze, nearly translucent, holding my tongue in place with one hand. With the other hand, she slipped a mirrorlike object into my mouth, peeping into it, until two waterfalls of my saliva drenched the sides of my mouth, trickling down my collarbones.

"I can't find any strange object inside your throat," she said, slowly pulling out the mirror and setting my tongue free. She dried my saliva herself with the tissue,

saying I needed to provide my sputum, ear swab, and nose swab for further investigation, and I'd have to come back later.

"When?"

"Next week, but you won't see me here. Instead, you're going to meet Dr Robert who's taking over the practice, to run it for a short time before eventually closing it down. Dr Robert himself is emigrating to Qatar six months from now. But I'll ensure to update your health records for him."

After dropping the samples, the nose swab proving the prickliest which intensified the weight of depression in my head, I bade her farewell. Tumbling out of the door, I knew this was my final visit. Downstairs, my driver was asleep inside the car as I checked for my father's email, sitting on the backseat.

I tapped my driver awake. "Please take me to the Third Mainland Bridge."

"Okay. Oga sir."

I'd scribble my suicide note and leave it in the car for him to show my parents. The driver gazed at me, incredulous, pinching his nose, but he didn't ask any questions. He yawned and started the car.

Twenty minutes later, we were on Third Mainland Bridge. The lagoon water underneath was surging and beckoning me to plunge in. He pulled over by the sidewalk and turned off the engine. As I tried to climb down, he asked, "Oga sir, any problem?"

I remained silent, getting out.

"Oga sir, do you want to go a-fishing?"

I said nothing, inching further away from him and the car, targeting the edge of the bridge, getting ready to jump into the body of water. He hopped out of the car and followed me at a distance.

"Hello, Oga sir, I don't understand you again-o," he said.

As the lagoon water rose and fell, my head and chest also rose and fell. I was about to climb over the railings and end my misery at once when my phone rang. My heart froze.

Caller: Ms. Bimbo Williams.

The ringtone: Elton John's *Sacrifice*.

Time: 3: 05 p.m.

Weather: 27° C—Cloudy.

I sighed and said, "Aunty Bimbo, what's popping?"

"Tulu, Darling. Just a quick one."

"Okay?"

"I'm planning to feature a handsome man on the cover of *AristoFemme* for our November 2014 special edition to commemorate the anniversary of the magazine. And I would like to have you."

"Ahh-Ahh, Aunty, how can a man appear on the front cover of a strictly women's magazine? People will mock me."

"Exactly the stereotype I want to smash to pieces. Nobody will mock you. My magazine is above reproach."

"Besides, my skin is too dark for that kind of glamour. You should at least find a man with some fair complexion: white or yellow skin. It'll sell the magazine better."

"You're exactly the spec I want, Tulu. You're my model of an Aristoguy. Come to my studio on Ahmadu Bello Way at your most convenient time to sign the contract, and we'll then schedule a day for the photo session."

I grumbled, pulling a face. "Moreover, your make-up artist will come and be putting lipstick and powder on my face, drawing dark lines with pencils on my eyebrows and under my eyes."

She burst into laughter, and laughed some more. "I'm afraid that's inevitable, darling. Nobody wants to look at an eyesore on a magazine. Anyway, the make-up will be mild and unnoticeable, I promise."

Ms. Bimbo William's offer hit me like an elixir, straightening my crumpled mood, igniting sudden bulbs of excitement in me. Perhaps, if I featured on the cover, all the victims of my great-grandfather's wickedness would forgive and stop haunting me. Although I didn't believe they were the roots of my misery, there had never been any better explanation for it. However, I concluded that I'd be beyond reproach if I smiled on the cover of a magazine that was beyond reproach.

"Aunty Bimbo, I'll be on my way to Victoria Island."

"Oh, no. Take your time and think, darling."

"I've decided, Aunty."

"Great, but you can't come today. It's late afternoon already. Ikeja and Victoria Island are two worlds apart in Lagos. I don't want you to contend with the countless smoky taxis that block the highways, bent on preventing serious people from achieving their daily goals. Besides, the rain is coming."

"Don't worry, Aunty. I didn't go to work today."

I turned around and headed back to my car, my sour state sweetened. The driver said, “Oga, it’s one-way now-o,” while making a quick U-turn on the bridge. He drove on the same side we came from, braving the fierce wind that competed against the crazy vehicles that horned and roared and whooshed past. With both of us inside the Range Rover, no traffic police could arrest us. In Lagos, a Range Rover could turn all wrongs into rights, lawlessness into lawfulness, illegalities into legalities.

At Falomo Roundabout, a newspaper vendor flashed the front cover of the *Noon News* near my window: **LAGOS TRIBUNAL SACKS SENATOR DUKE MOMO**. I grabbed it, looking at the header to ensure that it was the day’s newspaper: June 24, 2014. Sliding up my window, I called my father to check if he was already at home, but he said he was on his way.

On the streets, thousands of people had broken into wild jubilations, letting off fireworks. Groups of women and men had erupted into boisterous singing, jumping up and down, dancing with bands and loudspeakers, and halting the traffic. A woman near my window shouted, “Baby steps, slow and steady. One rotten fruit at a time.”

“Yes-o,” they all chorused.

“Every bad politician must be disgraced.”

“Yes-o.”

“All their penises must decay and flatten.”

“Yes-o.”

“Every bad politician must perish.”

“Yes-o.”

Sadly, for me, this euphoria on the streets spelled a slow journey to get home to hug my father for his judicial bluntness.

I walked up the flight of stairs to our sitting room, and I heard my mother shout, “I can cook for myself, but who’ll attend to my many pots of peperomia henceforth?”

“Anyone can do it, ma,” a voice, which I supposed was the gardener’s, replied.

“Oh, my poor peperomia, my lovely peperomia, who’ll care for them?”

My mother had spruced up several corners of our house with this plant whose leaves made me crave for watermelons. The petals reminded me of the zebras skipping away in the safari. I could understand my mother’s fascination with the plant, although I couldn’t figure out how looking after it proved more difficult than cooking. Perhaps

she didn't intend to get caught contaminating her dainty fingers with organic fertilisers and compost.

"What's going on here?" I asked, approaching them.

My mother bounded up and hugged me. "Thank God you're here, Tulu. It's better you hear this rubbish for yourself."

I shook hands with my father who sat cross-legged, his attention more to the television than to the people around him. Our chef smiled at me. The gardener stood before my parents, as if on trial, the way an accused person would stand shivering inside a wooden box in my father's court. The two domestic workers weren't even dressed in their usual work uniform branded with our family's insignia—a whiskered tiger's head on the breast pocket. The chef used to wear all white from head to toe, a green apron for the gardener. I wondered what had gone wrong. This was the first time I'd seen the chef's long braided hair. She was wearing a flowery gown while the gardener was dressed in jeans and T-shirt.

"Tulu, these two women have said they're leaving us," my mother growled, and coughed, parking herself on the sofa and holding my father's left hand.

"That's good, Mum," I said, taking a couple of steps to sit by my father's right-hand side.

"Is that what you have to say?" she exclaimed. "Tulu?"

"Ahh-Ahh, Mum, this presents a good opportunity for other people to find jobs here and be paid well. I can't wait to see the lucky persons who'll start earning a living through us."

"I'll no longer have women employees in my house. They're so unstable, either travelling or getting married. The previous chef went off with cramps. I'm tired of their excuses."

"I'm sorry, ma," the chef said. "But I just have to get myself a husband. I'm tired of staying single."

My mother pointed five painted fingernails at her. "So of all the men in the world, it's Chief Hyacinth Udeh you want to marry, eh? Is that one a good husband?"

"I don't mind, ma, even if he's a demon and I'm number forty-five in his wife-queue," the chef said. "At least, he'll give me the title of Mrs. after our wedding. Ah, nothing is sweeter than men in this world; they're scarce angels."

My father chuckled and reclined on the sofa, saying nothing.

“Alright, Hyacinth has plenty of money, but he doesn’t mind having sex next to a mound of excrement inside a public toilet,” my mother said. “He’s a community billy goat with a public penis, a dangerous one. *Oke mkpi!* He’ll use you now and divorce you later.”

“But he can’t divorce my Mrs. title from me. Once he bestows it on me, it becomes my personal property, to be cherished forever, bringing me the honour I deserve from my fellow women, even from men. A woman who has no title of Mrs. is useless, disrespected everywhere she goes.”

“I regret inviting Hyacinth, that filthy man, to my thirtieth wedding anniversary party.”

I snorted with a giggle. “What about the gardener? Found a husband, too?”

“No, sir,” she drawled. “I’m moving to Arizona.”

“Can you imagine?” my mother said. “She’s moving to the arid zone, that American desert. Can you compare the dryness of Arizona to the freshness of Lagos? Are you out of your mind?”

“No, ma’am,” the gardener said.

My mother turned to my father, patting his thigh. “The Law, you still remember the last time we visited Phoenix and Tuscan. Did you love them?”

He shook his head. “No.”

“My apologies, ma’am,” the gardener said. “But let me first try it. Sierra Leonians in Arizona send foreign currency home regularly.”

“Am I not paying you in foreign currency here?” my mother asked.

The gardener shook her head. “No, ma’am; it’s the Nigerian naira.”

“The naira to a Sierra Leonian in Nigeria is foreign currency, isn’t it?”

The gardener shrugged, speechless.

These women had decided to leave. I didn’t know why it bothered my mother so much, and she embroiled herself in arguments that wouldn’t stop the staff from leaving. My father’s drivers resigned all the time, and he’d never tried to hold any of them back, had never even said anything more than, “Thank you for your services,” while collecting his car key from the outgoing worker. The gardener, I was sure, had sold the idea of the peperomia to my mother, and she’d bought and accepted it with all her gullible heart. She needed to learn how to manage breakups and heartbreaks and let the Sierra Leonian move on to her dream country. Of course, I couldn’t say this to my mother, not while the workers were still around.

My mother sat unsteadily, looking frustrated. She shoved her fingers into her new Afro hairstyle, like a bloated halo on her, and shook her head.

"You came to Lagos as a war refugee from Sierra Leone many years ago," she told the gardener. "I picked you up from that flea-infested camp in Iddo. You were very sick, about to die. I took you to Lifeguard Hospital, an opulent medical facility where they cleaned you up, treated you, and I fed you back to health. Is this how you want to pay me back?"

"I'm very sorry, ma'am," the gardener said, bowing. "My deepest apologies."

"Sorry for yourself," my mother snapped, scowling. "Do you think America is going to treat you like a citizen, the way I do?" She paused, taking a breath. "Now will you both get out of my sight? Ungrateful fools!"

The two women proffered their bent-knee salutations one after the other. "Thank you, ma," the chef said.

"Thank you, ma'am," the gardener said.

These weren't greetings per se, I could tell, but something said to someone kind enough to be appreciated for the past's sake but not kind enough to be treasured for the future's sake.

Scuttling away, one was muttering, "Sorry, ma," the other, "Sorry, ma'am."

My mother, huffing and panting, rested her head on my father's ready shoulder. She then softened and moved further back, like a rejected peperomia leaning its broad leaves on the lid of its pot, abandoned, weary, and downcast.

As my father scratched his eyebrow briefly, watching the television, I started to nod, admiring his enormous judicial power, as if I'd just met him for the first time. Justice Obiora Okoye, the man whose legal pronouncement could squeeze tears from even the most influential politicians. The man with degrees in history, economics, philosophy, and psychology, in addition to his law degrees. The man whose wife worshipped as a god by prostrating every morning to greet him, hailing him, "The Law, The Law."

"Dad, I've read your tribunal's verdict this afternoon in the *Noon News*. That's awe-inspiring and commendable."

"Thank you, Tulu." He bobbed his head twice. "My panel had no other choice, despite the pressure we faced. So it's made news?"

“Not just news, but wild jamborees across the city. Don’t you know Senator Duke is a Big Man? He’s very popular.”

“Well, I don’t look at personality or popularity. I only look at evidence and—”

On the television, the next segment of the news featured Senator Duke and his lawyer standing in front of the court and surrounded by restless reporters. The lawyer in a white shirt was speaking, his voice shaky. His bowtie hung loose on his neck.

“We’re going to appeal this verdict,” he said. He didn’t sound convincing. “I’ll consult with my client. That’s all I can say for now.”

Senator Duke himself began to address the press men and women. Although he looked calm, his voice trembled. “I lost at the tribunal because I’m a Muslim,” the senator said. “All the members of that panel are Christians. I knew it would come to this. The panel has favoured their fellow Christian who challenged my mandate, and I must appeal against the ruling. From the very beginning, I protested against the composition of that tribunal.”

“Good luck to you,” my father said, gazing at the television.

“That man should just go home and rest, *abeg*,” my mother snapped, frowning. “Doesn’t he ever get tired of controversy?”

My father chuckled. “Tulu, how was work today?”

“Work?” I winced, shaking my head.

“You’re not even dressed like you’re coming back from work,” my mother said.

“I resigned a few days ago.”

“You what?” my father said, frowning and sitting up. “Are you sure?”

“Dad, of course, yes.”

Although he was a part-owner of AtlanTel, I wasn’t surprised that nobody from the company had told him about my resignation. Everyone knew he was too busy in his court to be bothered about trivial company matters. But I was shocked to see his eyes popping out in irritation now.

“Tulu, let me understand you clearly.” His voice was rising. “Are you really sure of what you’ve just said?”

“Yes, Dad. I’m very, very sure. I’ve resigned.”

“Why?”

I was speechless.

“Why did you resign?” he screamed.

Silence.

He hammered his left palm twice in quick succession on my right cheek, with a thud that stopped the movement of blood around my face and head. He was about to go a third time, but my mother caught his hand. I staggered to my feet but fell back onto the sofa, dizzy. Everything in the room seemed to turn round and round. I held my face in my hand, feeling blood burning in the interiors of my eyes, which I believed were turning red. What a no-nonsense man! His force knew no end. He used to beat me round the head with university books I hadn't read until I bled.

He rose, pointing down at me. "You're very stupid and dreamless. Why would you resign from my company without first letting me know? What do you really want out of life, Tulu? What have I not done for you? And yet, you've refused to become an accountant for my sake, for the sake of our family."

"The Law, calm down, naahh," my mother said, dragging him down into the sofa. "Take it easy. Do you want to kill him?" She rushed over to me, removed my hands from my cheek, and felt my face, asking, "Tulu, are you OK, eh? Nna m, talk to me please."

I nodded quickly. "Yes, Mum. I'm OK. No worries."

My father dashed towards the hallway door, going to his bedroom. And then he swung around, pointing at me. "No way. You're going back to AtlanTel. I'm calling the HR right away to discard your resignation letter. What despicable nonsense!"

He shoved the door open, taking out his mobile, and stormed off. My mother darted after him.

Three hours later, around 10 p.m., I was in my bed, still smarting and shivering from the fiery slaps, even after a warm shower. I was trying to summon up some sleep when my door mewed open. The bulb suddenly came on, startling me, and I saw my father walk inside with a shameful smile that annoyed me.

I sat up. He appeared frightened, like a façade of his former self, holding an electric clipper and an old gavel he'd used in the past to conclude his judgements in his court. He looked almost unrecognisable, darker than usual, despite wearing his usual orange pyjamas. I wondered what the gavel and clipper were for. He loomed before me, beaming and staring down at me.

"Tulu, my boy, I'm so sorry. That wasn't me, totally out of character."

"You still have the effrontery to call me a boy? Get out of here. You're an idiot."

"Yes, I know. I'm even worse than that, and I'm so sorry."

"You're not my father."

"Argh, that stings my ears, Tulu. Please don't say that again. I'm *your* father, and you're my real son and blood."

He bent down and tried to hug me, but I shrugged him off.

"Leave my bedroom right now, you aged fool, and let me sleep."

He collapsed himself on me, lying face down, his hands outstretched sideways, startling me.

"Old man, what's amiss with you?" I asked, pulling myself from under his weight. "Are you crazy?"

"Tulu, your mother is utterly disappointed in me, and I'm ashamed of myself. You deserve to smash me. Clobber me without mercy. If you don't punish me, I won't leave your bedroom tonight. Your mother is outraged, locking me out of her bedroom, until I get enough comeuppance from you. Take this gavel and bash me—my head, my shoulders, my back, my knees, wherever you please."

I stood up and surveyed him from head to toe, the first time he'd come under my control. This was the only chance to pour my pent-up venom on him. I was certain that soon afterwards he would climb back up to his high pedestals: the Lagos tribunal chairman, the executive director of AtlanTel, the partner at the Okoye & Okoye Chambers, the husband of my mother, the tough-no-nonsense father of Tulugo Okoye.

However, as soon as I gripped the gavel, my mind changed. "Dad, please could you stand up?"

"Alright, if that's what you want," he said, jumping to his feet.

When he stood, gazing at me, my love for him overwhelmed me. My nerves softened as my anger plummeted down. I no longer felt like damaging his body with the gavel. If I battered his back with this small hammer, I might injure his spine because he turned sixty not too long ago. He was already aging significantly.

"Dad, I've forgiven you. You may now leave my bedroom."

"What did you say?"

"Go back to my mum and sleep tight."

He was struggling to take a first step. "That makes me feel really good," he said. "At least your mother will be happy with me now. But let me cut your beard, my son. It's grown too much, tangled and unattractive, not looking nice at all."

"You can't do it, just go!" I said, pointing at the door. "I'll cut it myself tomorrow."

“It’s shaggy, Tulu. Allow me to cut it, please. I used to cut people’s hair for money when I was a teenager, and I know your beard style.”

I stood still, watching him plug the wire to the socket and bring the clipper to my face. For almost twenty minutes, he was busy cutting and cleaning my face with my towel, telling me how handsome I was, nodding as he did. Done, he brought my wall mirror and showed me.

“Why don’t just smile for your beloved dad, just once?”

I looked into the mirror and started smiling. “Good job anyway.”

“Tulu, just tell me something good, anything heartwarming.”

I sighed. “Dad, I love you.”

He kissed my forehead and smiled, and I hugged him. Finally, he turned around to leave.

“Goodnight, Tulu. I love you so much.”

“Goodnight, Dad. I love you even more.”

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Hey, lovelies. How does your dad apologise when he offends you?

@haxy: Mine keeps going to the mall to buy me things that I don’t even need. LMAO.

@tanso: My dad is such a bully, never apologises.

@roby-lady: Mine once said he was going to wash my underwear for a year. Lol.

@kira: He keeps staring into my face as if he’s planted apples there. LMAO.

@yadson: Sadly, I lost my dad when I was just one year old. RIP, Dad.

@marylynx: My father goes silent and speechless for days on end, remorseful.

@tofboy: Is my father out of his mind to offend me? He can’t try that rubbish!

@sababe: My father always sends my mum-o. He knows she knows my soft spots.

CHAPTER TWELVE

I visited Aunty Bimbo in her office after my breakfast. I asked, sitting shakily before her, if I could still continue with the photoshoot, considering my bruised temple and ruddy eye. She said there was no problem, revealing that her photoshop staff could right all wrongs on my face with the software. She was seated calmly, clicking a wireless white mouse so flat it could have been an ordinary sheet of paper, and squinting at the screen of her silver-coloured MacBook that glistened like a wetted mirror.

"But what happened to your face and eyes?" she asked, scrunching up her expression.

"It's conjunctivitis, Aunty," I lied.

"Conjunctivitis?" She raised her faultlessly pencilled eyebrows. "What kind of conjunctivitis also leaves your temple and cheek in wheals, eh? They weren't like this the last time I saw you."

"I used a cream some nights ago in preparation for today's studio session, and the rubbish cream burnt my face."

She shrugged. "Even though you knew we were going to use cosmetics on you here? It seems you haven't even understood how complex and fully equipped my magazine business is, right?"

"My apologies, Aunty Bimbo."

"Oh, that's fine. Let's move downstairs to the studio in the backyard."

Behind the building was a wide mown lawn, like a green carpet on the ground. We turned towards a burnished drum-beating statue, girdled by a variety of blooming carnations with red, white, and pink blossoms. The statue towered above the three young palm trees surrounding it.

"Aunty, this place is an art emporium par excellence," I said. "It's a museum of native renaissance with global relevance, a gallery of creativity. Great thinking spins great innovations, indeed."

She laughed. "Thank you, darling. My creative workers have to work in creative spaces."

Taking me through a leafy area near her vine-laced wall, where a circular kiosk with a cone-shaped thatched roof sat, she pointed to the middle of the backyard. There, I saw another kiosk. A large flamboyant tree with red flowers stood in front of it. Each kiosk was made from glossy mud, donning large glass windows of aluminium frames,

but there was full air-conditioning inside. On seeing us in front of the centre kiosk, a man with gorgeous dreadlocks, wearing skinny jeans and bright-red T-shirt, flounced outside and smiled at us.

“Ah, Aunty Bimbostic,” he exclaimed, gesticulating with his yellow-painted fingernails, as if seeing her for the first time in years. His eyelashes were full and extended, his flashy pink lips wide and thick. The speed with which he chomped his chewing gum worried me. He might bite his lips any moment, although his mouth must’ve acquired the efficiency to be accident-free while working on chewing gum.

Aunty Bimbo smiled back. “Alloysius, this is—”

“Oh, purleeease, stop it now,” he yelled, interrupting her, his hand in the air, twirling around like a ballet dancer. “I’ve always told you to call me Alloy-Bae instead.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Aunty Bimbo said, giggling. “Alloy-Bae, this young and handsome man here is our cover for the November 2014 special edition. I suggested him during our creatives meeting previously, remember?”

He grabbed his chest tight with two hands, bulging his eyes at me. “Oh my gah! You look stunning, man. I love you, man.”

“I love you too,” I said.

“Such a beautiful dude. So deliciously dark. So edible. In fact, I’m jealous already. I thought I was handsome, but you take the trophy! He’s the best choice of cover you’ve ever made, Aunty Bimbostic.”

“I’ll be back in thirty minutes with my camera,” Aunty Bimbo said, and turned to leave.

Alloy-Bae pecked at my cheeks, smelling of orange juice, and offered me a big foam-stuffed chair to sit under the flamboyant tree. I guessed because the day was bright and sunny, he’d arranged his make-up table in front of the kiosk, with a few brushes, jars of powder, a small bottle of methylated spirit on the table. But looking inside the kiosk from where I was sitting, I could see it was a volcanic eruption of make-up products and devices.

Still chewing his gum, he covered me from my shoulders with a yellow polythene apron and tied it behind my neck. He bent down and studied my face, staring at it. He gripped the crown of my head, throwing my face up. Then he snapped his fingers when it seemed he’d discovered something marvellous. He dried off my face with tissue paper and finished up with dabs of cottonwool immersed in methylated spirit. He swaggered into the kiosk, his hips swaying from side to side. Holding a

cordless battery-powered hair clipper and a liquid lipstick in a transparent bottle, he returned, throwing his legs out front as if on a catwalk.

"Your face doesn't even need much powder and painting, so much awesomeness," he said. "No acne pimples. No blackheads. Just a bit of foundation to conceal the welt between your temple and cheek."

I said nothing.

He combed my hair and reshaped my hairline, beard, and moustache. Still, I said nothing. He shaved off my nose hair, tingling me. As he dressed my eyebrows, there was a hum in his throat, perhaps an unsung song, and then he picked up an eye pencil. I felt brief scratches on both eyebrows. He covered my face and sprayed dye on my head. After swift dabs of another spirit-wet cottonwool, he brushed my face with a brown powder foundation and applied pink wet-lipstick to my lips.

"My darling, could you please rub your lips together?"

I did, even several times.

"Oh, that's purrfect."

As he untied the apron, Aunty Bimbo came bounding towards us. She held her camera, dragging a black suitcase behind her on the lawn. Alloy-Bae showed me a large square mirror, and the person I saw staring back at me was a transformed Tulugo, transporting me to a kind of self-love I'd never experienced before. Was make-up the reason why my mother was always happier than the rest of us in the house?

"You deserve a plaque for this make-up transformation, Alloy-Bae," Aunty Bimbo said, nodding her satisfaction for my new face.

"Oh my gah," Alloy-Bae yelled, gripping his chest again and rolling his eyes. "You flatter me. Bimbostic Bimbo."

She clicked the suitcase open and brought out designer clothes: suits and kaftans and jeans and T-shirts and eyeglasses and shoes. Alloy-Bae helped to tear the crinkly nylon packaging off the items while Aunty Bimbo prepared her Nikon camera.

"Tulu, darling, you have to be quick in putting on these things one after the other," she said. "The items are expensive to rent from Men-O'clock, and I'm paying them by the hour."

"Ahh-Ahh, Aunty, you should've asked me to bring my own items from home. I've got better designer clothes, all imported from known brands overseas."

“Don’t worry. I wanted them all from the same indigenous brand, which I encourage everyone to patronise. I support local enterprises as much as I can. You should do the same, Tulu.”

I nodded, walking into the kiosk, and kicked off with the kaftans and posed in front of the palm trees, followed by the suits and jeans. As she snapped, capturing every angle of the green backyard and flowers with each new outfit, Alloy-Bae held a hand-fan, standing a few metres from me, ensuring that I didn’t sweat. With each snap came an eruption of stardom and delight, my brain swelling with pride. I felt iconic as if I was in the midst of camera-wielding photojournalists.

When we finally returned from the shoot, Aunty Bimbo and I sat down, facing the kiosk. Alloy-Bae packed the clothes back into the suitcase. She was looking at the Nikon screen, showing me the photos, nodding and smiling.

“I’ve been pondering the headline that would sit comfortably with the cover photo,” she told me. “I’m thinking something like this line would be fine.”

“What is it?”

“Telecoms Tycoon Tulugo Talks Technology, Talent & Training.”

“Ah, that’s fantastic, Aunty Bimbo.”

“Thank you. I’ll email you the interview questions later.”

She removed the memory card and threw it into her shirt pocket, asking Alloy-Bae to remind her to hand it over to the production crew. As she directed him to arrange the clothing items so they could all fit into the suitcase once again, I slid over to the Internet.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Hey lovelies, I’m appearing on the cover of AristoFemme in November. Subscribe now or pre-order.

@seutfall: Wow, congrats, Tulu. More wins.

@tulu: Thanks a ton, darling.

@judedav: Aristo-what? Are you a man or a woman? That mag is for women only.

@tulu: LMAOOO. I don’t give a toss. Bless you.

@smety: I kinda love this idea.

@tulu: Absolutely.

@radiatejane: I can’t wait to see your glossy smile on the cover, @tulu.

@tulu: Thanks, my dear. Me neither.

My phone rang, covering the Instagram screen. It was my mother. She didn't often call me in the afternoon because she said frequent afternoon calls could be disturbing and even annoying. She would rather call my father who never complained about her recurring calls. Besides, her afternoons were always busy in her boutique. My lungs shook as my breaths increased, and I wondered why I felt so nervous all of a sudden. Maybe it was because I was thinking about what would've happened to my corpse inside the lagoon water if I had plunged into it that day. I bobbed my head, twitching my lips without a sound, regretful.

"Hello, Mum. Back home already?"

"Not your Mum, Oga sir; it's your new chef. Your father has been assassinated."

I froze. "What? Where?"

"On the way to his office this morning."

My heart summersaulted. "How?" I screamed. "Why?"

Aunty Bimbo and Alloy-Bae shuddered at the same time and turned, fixing curious gazes at me. Waterfalls of tears deluged my face, washing off the powder foundation and wetting my phone.

"You must come home quickly before we also lose your mother," the chef said.

I could hear my mother weeping in the background among a cacophony of other voices. "Leave me to kill myself," she shouted. "Leave me alone. They've taken away my life already, haven't they? Leave me be."

"What's amiss?" Aunty Bimbo asked me, grimacing.

"They've murdered my fa-father," I wept.

"No way!" Aunty Bimbo burst out, and the camera slipped out of her hand and hit the ground. "No way!"

Alloy-Bae bellowed, "Oh, shit," waggling his dreadlocks. "That's horrible."

"Who could be behind this disgusting deed?" she asked.

She covered her face with two hands and broke out sniffling. Alloy-Bae set his hands on the table, bending down his head, his dreadlocks brushing the table and covering his face. He was already panting.

I was certain to become an orphan because my mother would never survive this brutal death. Even if she did, she'd forever be half-broken, half-complete. I wished I'd seen my father this morning. The last time I saw him was days ago, after his apologies for slapping my face. I wish I'd seen him this morning and hugged him. I wish I'd

admired what he was wearing, perhaps his favourite black suit and white shirt. I wish I'd died instead; that way, my mother could've survived after grieving my passing, because she would still have had my father, her personal earthly god.

Now, we'd lost our family's gantry!

Aunty Bimbo hugged me sideways. "We must get to the roots of this assassination and secure justice for him," she said, wiping away her tears with her left hand. "Justice Okoye can't have lived gloriously just to die in vain like an ordinary citizen. Never."

"He'd always wanted a Nigeria where the rich and the poor could fetch justice from the same river of laws," I snivelled, my tears creeping on my chest.

She sighed, patting my back. "Perhaps, we should suspend featuring you on the magazine cover until you're stable in the mind and body. Maybe ten months from now. Is that right for you?"

Too late, I'd already announced this magazine feature on Instagram. I grunted and coughed, losing my balance even while sitting down. My father had gone. Even if I cancelled the magazine contract, his death was irreversible. His previous counsel echoed back in my head: *Tulu, my son, try to be a strong man. You've got lots of responsibilities on your shoulders.*

Henceforth, I'd go back to AtlanTel to assume directorship, replacing him. I'd waddle into his shoes, big and uncomfortable shoes indeed. Not being a lawyer myself, I'd only head the Okoye & Okoye Chambers, as a sleeping partner. I'd continue his philanthropy, the Justice Okoye Education Foundation, which awards annual scholarships to indigent students from my ancestral community, Ogemba, and Lagos. Protecting and perpetuating all his legacies would become my top priority from now on. I'd transform into a new Tulugo, perhaps wearing my father's Gucci Eau de parfum, dress like him, and continue to work at AtlanTel

"I think you should go ahead with my cover feature," I told Aunty Bimbo.

She patted my back again. "Please, don't bottle up your emotion. Cry loudly. Don't engage in an unhealthy maleness. Weep openly. Let out your tears. Allow them to flow freely. You'll emerge stronger. Do you hear me?"

I nodded and sneezed, discharging the rains of my eyes. Alloy-Bae darted into the kiosk and returned with a pack of tissues. I pulled out one to mop my face.

"Thank you very much, Aunty," I said.

“Stay strong, my man, and time will heal your grief, I’m sure,” Aloy-Bae told me.

“Thank you, brother,” I said, sniffling.

“Alloy, you’ll have to return this suitcase yourself to Men-O’clock on Ligali Ayorinde Street,” Aunty Bimbo said. “I must see Tulu’s mother immediately. Every other thing can wait.”

On the way home, I sat on the front seat beside Aunty Bimbo who was driving my car as I couldn’t see and think properly. I told Laura on the phone, and she burst out crying. As Aunty Bimbo and I ran into a slow-moving traffic, a *Noon News* vendor was already brandishing copies with the bold headline: **LAGOS TRIBUNAL CHAIRMAN ASSASSINATED**. Of course, I wasn’t going to buy it. It might contain the details of the assassination with gory photographs, and I couldn’t stomach them at this moment.

At home, my mother was drenched in her own tears, thrashing about the sitting-room floor and upturning the cushions, her hair dishevelled. She was surrounded by our entourage of domestic staff. The men gripped her hands, the women wiping away her tears, but they were unable to bring her under control.

“Ms. B, they’ve broken my pillar and crushed me,” she told Aunty Bimbo.

“Chi-Chi Babe, you’ll survive this,” Aunty Bimbo said.

“No, I can’t,” my mother cried. “This is too much for me to bear.”

“Mum, don’t worry; I’ll be your husband henceforth,” I said, holding her hand, and bursting out sobbing again.

About one hour later, Aunty Bimbo and I calmed her down and she fell asleep on the sofa, but from time to time she howled with a start and rose up.

Sister Payshay arrived later, wailing, her eyes bloodshot. She clasped her hands around my mother for a long time, telling her that every widow had a husband in Jesus Christ. Aunty Bimbo dabbed my mother’s face with a handkerchief. Then Sister Payshay stood up and parked herself far away from the rest of us sinners, still crying and wiping her tears. She was talking to herself, and asking who’d henceforth take care of her.

“I told Obiora to embrace Jesus Christ, but he rebuffed him,” she lamented. “Obiora knew the curse that runs in our family, but he refused to acknowledge it. Now

the devil has won, but Jesus Christ doesn't ever lose. It is sins that killed my brother, not assassins."

I wondered if she blamed my father for his own death.

Later on, my father's lawyers arrived from the Okoye & Okoye Chambers, three hefty men in black suits, black ties, and white shirts, all the men exuding laws and stiffness. They'd come to reveal to us a copy of my father's will and the many photographs from the assassination scene. They showed only me the pictures, refusing to reveal them to my mother. The bullet made a huge impact on his neck, almost decapitating him, splashing his blood all over the back windshield, his side window shattered. His driver and police escort were also killed, all of them taken to the same morgue.

According to his will, he "must be buried quietly within one week, without any flamboyant funerary activities." I was at a loss about this instruction. "Without flamboyant funerary activities" wouldn't mean I had to bury my accomplished father in a termite-infested coffin knocked together by a roadside carpenter. I decided to order the most expensive mahogany coffin from my father's beloved country, the United Kingdom.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Before my father's burial at Eternity Heritage Cemetery, we drove his body to the premises of his court where he lay in state, surrounded by the members of the bar and the bench, all dressed in wigs and gowns, bearing stiff necks and faces starved of joy. Government functionaries, family and friends had also accompanied us to pay their last respects. People walked around his coffin, stealing looks at his expressionless face, his nostrils plugged with balls of cottonwool.

Even while spewing tears, my mother still coated her lips with fire-red lipstick, dabbing a designer handkerchief on her eyes, overburdened with eye pencil and mascara. Yesterday she'd asked that her hair be shaved clean as a mark of respect for her earthly god departed. Now she covered her head with a hat so wide it might as well be used as an umbrella. Ms. Bimbo Williams stood by her side, both of them dressed in black suits and tight trousers, which they'd ordered by express service from Milan. Aunty Bimbo's eyes were covered with broad sunglasses, and my mother held hers in her hand.

Laura, also in a black suit and trousers, stood beside me, her grief-shivering right hand clasped in my left. I was hot, sweating in my black suit and tie. The heat and discomfort I felt were grief-induced, although I wasn't accustomed to dressing this way. I used to go to work in jeans and a light T-shirt. Aunty Payshay, standing by my right, was wearing an off-white gown that covered her legs and arms against contamination from sins. She'd bought that gown way back in 1973 when her Jesus Christ gave birth to her, and she became a born-again Christian. She kept muttering perpetual curses, wishing hellfire, and brimstone of suffering on my great-grandfather, even while grieving the death of her own brother.

At the Eternity Heritage Cemetery, death looked attractive and prestigious with all the handcrafted graves in gold, silver and marble sprawling across a wide hectare shaded by neem trees with white doves, pigeons, and squirrels. The hearse, conveying my father's body, moved towards a white bungalow inside the cemetery and stopped. I wondered why they hadn't gone straight to the awaiting grave we'd paid exorbitantly for. My heart smashed against my chest, which was heaving.

"Something isn't right over there," I told Laura, who sat beside me inside my Range Rover, pointing at the pallbearers.

"Let's scuttle towards them before it's too late," she said.

As the pallbearers, six men in long black suits, took the coffin inside, Laura and I climbed down from my car and dashed towards them. The door slammed shut before we arrived. We both banged and banged on it until we heard the key turning.

Inside, the men had turned my father's body over inside the coffin. I shuddered, holding Laura, who was shivering and heaving hot.

"Why have you done this?" I asked the men.

"Because he was a lawyer, a senior judge," one of them shot back.

"Meaning what exactly?"

"When lawyers and judges die, we turn their faces down before lowering them in the ground."

I snorted with rage. "Why is that necessary?"

"Because lawyers and judges lie too much in the course of their jobs."

I burst out shouting, "Look, if you don't turn my father's face up right this moment, I'll sue your arses off and claim damages. And I won't pay your company the balance of the contracted sum for your funerary services. What nonsense!"

As they were exchanging glances, I whipped out my iPhone to call their Funeral Director, the owner of the company. While searching for his number, my phone rang, Aunty Bimbo on the line.

"Tulu, darling, what's holding up you guys?"

I sighed, not wishing to rile those waiting outside. "No problem, Aunty," I whispered. "They're giving my father a final dressing."

"Oh, fantastic."

I hung up and continued to search furiously for the Funeral Director's phone number.

"Staff of Eternity Heritage, why are you guys so archaic and diabolic in this day and age?" Laura yelled. "This is so disgusting."

"Don't mind them," I boomed in support. "It's how they hack off the penises and breasts of corpses and sell them to witchdoctors who use them to prepare diabolic charms and talismans. Heartless idiots, all of you."

"Oga sir, calm down," one of them told me, patting his chest, a sign to pacify me. "We'll abide by your wishes."

As they turned my father's body over again, Laura burst into tears and looked away. I watched the men closely, anguish evaporating out of my nostrils. One man's

hand caught on the bandage around my father's neck, revealing the gunshot wound. He quickly bandaged it back again. I sneezed out of shock and wiped my face with a handkerchief. We both followed them, foot to foot, as they bore the coffin on their shoulders, going towards my father's final resting abyss.

We carried out the dust-to-dust rites with a stainless-steel shovel moving from hand to hand, the heap of mud thudding on top of the posh mahogany coffin, now six feet under. My mother, tormented by distress and tottering with intense sobbing, almost fell into the grave while throwing in her mound. But some men and Aunty Bimbo caught her in the nick of time.

At home, my mother was seated upstairs in the sitting room, switching from one spot on the sofa to another spot on the same sofa, moaning and coughing. She was girdled by her committee of top-society Lagos women who wore heavy gold bangles and necklaces and big earrings and carats of diamond on their fingers but knew nothing about cuddling and consoling the bereaved. Only Aunty Bimbo was busy handing my mother new wiping pads all the time, patting her back.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: I'm so upset to have buried my lovely father. Nigeria murdered him.

> **@mildbody:** I'm so heartbroken to hear this, @tulu. My sympathies.
>
> **@seteon:** Bro, accept my heartfelt condolences. I'm weeping, frustrated about this.
>
> **@yxoreal:** Take heart, my man. A Nigerian life has no value.
>
> **@ssodaily:** Nigeria slaughters its citizens like chickens? What a callous country!
>
> **@mytey:** Let's divide this country to prevent further carnage. Divide it now!

I took a seat outside, under one of the canopies erected in our wide compound to accept condolence visitors. Behind me were the fellows from the Elite Club of Victoria Island and the Ogemba Village Development Association. My father was a legal adviser at some point for both organisations, serving them pro bono. I shook hands with the members of the National Judicial Commission, the Lagos State Governor and his entourage. The Governor said he was representing the president who'd travelled to Germany for yet another round of medical treatment. The Governor had set up a coroner's inquest to look into the assassination, seeking to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Later on, a bus loaded with Okwumma Masquerade and its praise-singing members screeched to a halt inside our compound, stunning everyone. The members were all muscular men, tying yellow palm fronds round their heads, necks, and wrists. They were braying an angry song and banging their feet on the ground.

Onye akpakwana agụ aka n'ọdụ,
ma ọ dị ndụ, ma ọ nwụrụ anwụ.

Nobody should dare tug at a leopard's tail,
whether it's dead or alive.

The masquerade itself, wearing a black mask and large slivers of dry reeds that reach down to its sack-covered feet, climbed down from the bus, squawking and squawking. Its voice was guttural, and it had the height of our gates. The reeds were painted brown, red, and yellow. Its members were blowing their flutes loudly. My father was their patron and used to attend their meetings at night whenever he visited my grandmother's village. But its members, who'd left the village to live in Lagos permanently, met from time to time to invoke its spirit and enact its activities, especially when a member died in the city. It used to be a night-only masquerade way back in the village, but because of the cosmopolitan nature of Lagos, its members had stopped the night outing. The masquerade was notorious for ridiculing offenders at night, gossiping and divulging secrets, and for talking in plurals.

"I know the assassins," the masquerade bellowed, pointing its whip at the Governor of Lagos. "Should I reveal them?"

"Tell us, father, tell us now," the energetic members chorused, banging hands on their chests.

"You mean I should crack the secret coconut open?"

"Crack it, father, crack it. Nothing will happen to you and to us."

The masquerade ran round and round, coming to a standstill in front of the Governor. "I know our government is an abode for the deaf and dead snails. But I'll reveal the killers of the judge, if the Governor will be willing to go after them. Should I continue?"

"Continue, father!"

“The killers are tall like palm trees, and they eat and sleep and talk and—. Should I continue?”

“Continue, father!”

“The killers have white hairs on their faces, on their heads, in their armpits. Even their pubic hairs are white. They love all things flowing with money—receipts and payments, income and expenditure, the custodians for old invoices and cleared cheques, watchdogs for the treasury—debits and credits. And they’re even looking at me right now. Should I continue?”

“Continue, father!”

“This is all I’ve got in my mouth today. May peace and love be with you all.”

“Yes, father, yes, yes, yes!” the members chorused, stomping on the ground.

The masquerade jumped back into the waiting bus, the members following suit, and the bus stormed out of our gates.

Several weeks after my father’s burial, my mother fell seriously sick. She started having swollen legs, suffering from acute weakness all day. We’d begun to notice her symptoms and thought they were the abnormalities that came with sudden grief. Now she looked totally emaciated, cheeks stretched taut and her eyes sunken, as if she was no longer the goddess of the red-carpet Lagos I used to know. Over the years, it’d been a taboo to let worry lines or aging lines appear on her body, but now her vats of anti-wrinkles serum had stayed quiet for weeks, receiving no nightly patronage.

I was in her bedroom. She scrunched up her expression, producing thick wavy lines on her forehead, even finding it difficult to rise from the bed. This morning, I was prepared to drive her to Lifeguard Hospital again to see the doctors who’d signed her test results previously and stamped “Consultant Nephrologist” and “Consultant Cardiologist” in blue-squares at the bottom of the papers. They’d assured us that with time she would recover, adding that her grief intensely traumatised her, which was expected given her excessive love for my father.

She sighed and groaned as I helped her to sit up in bed and put her feet on the marble floor. I poked my finger into her puffed-up foot, and it swallowed my finger and left a dent. I was terrified, debilitated. Henceforth, who would wear the more than three hundred pairs of her designer shoes in her shoe closet, high heels that were already filmed over? Now she struggled to wear ordinary flipflops, preferring to toddle indoors barefoot, clutching a walking stick.

Now, we were both sitting at the dining table, not eating, but waiting for her to gather enough strength so I could lead her downstairs into my Range Rover. She asked me to bring down one of the framed Oxbridge photos of my father from the walls. As she embraced it, tears started creeping down her cheeks once again. I thought of removing these photos and hiding them inside the drawers in my bedroom. If there was nothing to remind her of her beloved husband, I believed she'd start to forget him, quickening her healing process. I'd already locked his bedroom, including his study, and seized the keys. Since then, she no longer shoved it open every day to slam her palms on his desk and bed, shouting his fond name, "The Law, The Law," and crying.

The front door opened, and one of our security guards came in, followed by two police officers, a man and a woman in black uniform and big belts worn tight around their waists. They'd been visiting us since the investigation began. The last time they came was two weeks ago.

"Have you caught and confirmed my husband's killer?" Mum cried.

"No, ma," the policewoman said. "You know Senator Duke is a big man, ma."

"And because of that, he's untouchable?" I shot back.

"No, sir," the policeman replied. "Investigation is still in progress. For now, he remains a suspect. We're here to pick up a photocopy of the document you promised us, sir."

"Oh, I thought you'd never come again," I said, rushing towards my bedroom.

On returning, I dumped in front of them a printed and bound copy of Senator Duke's previous threatening emails to my father. Another copy was in my car. I'd even scanned and stored it on my Google Drive. The policewoman picked up the document and flicked the first page open. Then she glanced at the second and third pages, and shut the document. I wondered if they'd even read the pages thoroughly.

"Go and peruse all the rubbish that idiotic senator sent to my husband," Mum snapped. "How could they have elected such a lunatic as a lawmaker? Just how? A man who spent many years living on the roadside and eating from dustbins, a former patient at Yaba Psychiatric Hospital?"

"He's not the only mad man, ma," the policewoman said. "All Nigerian politicians are mad, making mad laws, ma."

"Anything is possible in Nigeria," the policeman said. "Didn't you know, ma?"

I glanced at my watch, and it was 10.30 a.m. already. "Officers, my mum and I must leave you both in the hands of the guard now. We need to see her doctor, as she's a bit under the weather."

"Sir, please before you leave, can we have that type of coffee drink you gave us two weeks ago?" the policeman pleaded.

I jogged my brain. "Which one?"

"I don't know the name, sir," he said. "But it has a lot of sweet soap lather and milk and chocolate on top."

"That would be cappuccino?" my mother blurted out.

"Yes, cappuccino," the policewoman confirmed. "And some money, ma."

As my mother made to open her handbag, I snatched it.

"Don't do that, Mum," I said. "They're doing their job."

She grabbed the bag from me, pulled out a bundle of crisp currency notes, and slapped it down before the police officers. They both seized it at once and chorused, "Thank you, ma."

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Is it right to give money to police officers on duty?

@nehy: That's if you want to get the job done quickly.

@olamaz: Yep, it's like a tip to waiters and waitresses at restaurants.

@otobepet: Nope. That's awful. I'll never do that.

@kelyysop: Nigerian police officers are mad people, seedy and rotten like politicians.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Every time I was on my way to visit my mother in the hospital, I always saw a car tailing me. I hadn't driven for a few days now, as it was getting too dangerous. Unfortunately, I hadn't yet perfected my hacking skills, so I couldn't use it to find out who was on the prowl, seeking to snuff out my life.

I was returning from the headquarters of AtlanTel in Lekki, another posh Lagos district. The traffic from Lekki to Victoria Island crawled like a sick snake. It sidled from time to time and then stopped. From my rear-view mirror, I caught a dusty Honda Civic with a cracked windshield trying to manoeuvre the lines to come closer to me. I'd noticed this anomaly for some time now. The hair and veins behind my neck stood up, and I was terrified. Even after I'd negotiated the Chevron roundabout and nosed my Range Rover forward, the Honda still increased its speed, trying to overtake me. Two men were inside it, the driver and one other guy who kept craning his neck out of the window to glare at me.

When I made it through the Lekki Toll Plaza and zipped towards Ozumba Mbadiwe Street, the Honda Civic chased after me. I zoomed off, sliding up my four windows. I now looked like a rare eagle targeted by common hunters. As I dashed into an adjoining street, swerving, a gun roared, three quick BANG, BANG, BANG.

One of the bullets shattered my side window glass and penetrated through the other side, damaging it as well. I sped up, as did the other vehicles, as all the nearby shops slammed their doors shut. Pedestrians ducked under the trees and shrubs, running to safety. I glanced back, panting, but could no longer see the car pursuing me. It seemed the hoodlums had whizzed straight down the highway when they realised that they couldn't beat my Range Rover's speed.

I called Aunty Bimbo immediately to let her know what had happened. Informing my mother might worsen her health as she was still struggling with treatment at Lifeguard Hospital. She'd not returned home since I took her to the doctor some weeks ago.

"Tulu, darling, this has become life-threatening," Aunty Bimbo said. "Three similar incidents have occurred within one month, and you've survived unhurt. I hope the bullet missed you again."

"Yes, Aunty, but my car is torn to pieces."

She sighed. "I hate to say this, but I think your father's killers are also after you."

"But what have I done to them?"

"Heartless people don't reason that way. They can't tell right and wrong apart. They can wipe off an entire family just to avenge a little mistake."

"Is it because I've appeared on the cover of *AristoFemme*? I mean the exposure."

"No, darling, I don't think that's the reason."

"What should I do, Aunty? How can I protect myself since the police are nothing but uniformed toys?"

She sighed again. "I'm afraid you'll have to leave this country before they kill you, darling."

I cringed, rolled my car over to the sidewalk, and stopped. "Ahh-Ahh, Aunty, sometimes you talk as if you hate me. How could you even think of that kind of rubbish travel?"

"Tulu, if I'd hated you, I wouldn't have featured you on the cover of my magazine. What I've suggested may not make any sense to you, and it's only a suggestion, but it's the best solution to this problem."

"And travel to where, if I may ask?"

"You can move to the UK. My son Deji lives in London. He can accommodate you until you can stand on your own feet there. If you're ready, I'll call him to assist with your visa application. Apply as a tourist, a visitor, or something along those lines. Once in the UK, you can upgrade to other visa categories. I'll also put word across to the British High Commission, and they'll direct us appropriately. I wish this had come to light yesterday because the British Commissioner and I were at a party together at Eko Hotel just last night."

"And I'll abandon everything my father worked for and travel abroad?"

"What's more important to you: your life or your father's businesses and property?"

"Who'll take care of my sick mum if I leave?"

"I will. Don't worry about her."

I was even scared of returning home tonight. What if the assassins stormed our mansion at midnight and slaughtered me like a Christmas cow?

"Aunty, can I sleep in your house tonight? I'm no longer comfortable in my home."

“I’m still in my office, but I understand, darling. I’ll send two codes to your phone now, one to allow you through my estate’s main gate, the other for my main door.”

“I deeply appreciate this, Aunty Bimbo.”

“Oh, that’s fine. Meanwhile, have you seen your mum today?”

“I saw her this morning, but she was still in a partial coma. The doctor said she’d regain her full consciousness later, but I’m scared.”

It shocked me that my mother could no longer eat the expensive pizzas she imported every week from Italy because she used to moan that the ones in Lagos weren’t delicious enough, tasting like pulverised sawdust mixed with salt. The Lagos pizzas didn’t pack enough mozzarella cheese and tomato base, not enough peperoni, no cubed pieces of chicken, no anchovies, no chubby prawns and lobsters, not even enough onions and some sprinkles of oregano. Oh, my beloved mother! May nothing bad happen to her.

“Don’t worry, darling; you should trust the doctors,” Aunty Bimbo said. “They know what they’re doing.”

“That’s what I also believe, Aunty.”

“See you soon in my house, darling.”

I hurried home and took my certificates—for presentation to AtlanTel’s board of directors—papers nobody had asked for when my father was alive. I picked up many shirts and trousers from my wardrobe, stowed them away in my black suitcase, hopped back into the car, and drove away, bidding the guards goodnight.

After several weeks of hospital care, my mother was now able to recognise me, but her weakness unnerved me, and I lost sleep every day. This afternoon, Aunty Bimbo and I were returning from seeing her. I was driving her Range Rover, since mine was still with the maintenance company. My phone rang in the middle of the highway.

“Oga sir, it’s security man-o. Where have you been since? The mansion has been bombed.”

A sudden gas spurted out of my mouth. “What? How?”

“We were at the gate when we saw a helicopter hover above the house, so we ran. The next thing we heard was BOOM-BOOM, which blasted our ears. Everything is on fire now, and sadly the new chef is still inside.”

“What the heck is this?” I cried, pulling the car up to the roadside.

“What’s it?” Aunty Bimbo burst out.

“They’ve bombed my house, and nothing remains as I speak.”

“That’s rubbish,” she shouted. “Who’s even behind this utter barbarism?”

“Are the police there?” I asked the security man.

“No, sir.”

“What about fire service men?”

“Not at all, but many people are here, wailing and splashing buckets of water into the big fire. Oga sir, it’s God who saved me today.”

I asked Aunty Bimbo to come over to the driver’s seat and take the wheel, as tears crept down my cheeks. My heart was beating fiercely, and I was shivering. I started to lose my eyesight as if there was an opaque film stuck in front of my face. When I pressed my fingers on my eyes, only aches and pains surged up.

“Look, we must begin your visa application tonight,” Aunty Bimbo said, pulling out. “It’s now online and easy. I’ll check if we can purchase a priority service. I’ll call Deji later tonight to explain the dire situation. But first let’s see the extent of the damage done to your home.”

I’d never made a visa application before, so I didn’t understand what she meant by the priority service, but she must know what she was talking about.

“Aunty, I don’t want to continue to live,” I sobbed out. “It’s distressing to be alive and witness my life crumble. I want to go and—”

“Great, you must go to the UK,” she said, getting me all wrong. “It’s a beautiful, well-administered country, one of the richest in the world. Go there and save your life as well as rebuild it.”

As we approached my home, about forty minutes later, a pall of black smoke, thick with the smell of burnt tyres, engulfed Aunty Bimbo and me. I started to imagine what my parents’ cars in our garage used to look like, including my father’s Bently. They’d now been reduced to ashes, my anguish worsening by the second.

I asked Aunty Bimbo not to drive any further, amidst the unending din and smog, amidst a multitude of water-flinging people scattered about our cul-de-sac.

“Aunty, reverse, please,” I said.

She turned and looked at me. “You no longer want to go?”

“What’s the point? You’ve already taken my mind out of this country. Let’s go and begin the UK visa application.”

At Lagos Airport two weeks later, I announced my departure online while waiting for my flight. Aunty Bimbo sat beside me, busy with her iPad, but she had no business with the social media, so unlike me. Her iPad was one of the deities for running her magazine business.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: I'm relocating permanently to the UK. Goodbye to Nigeria.

> **@sedrasop:** The privileged are leaving the country for the poor. So sad!
>
> **@rimtrain:** Joining you soon, brother!
>
> **@yory-yory:** Remember us-o. Bro, please do a giveaway before moving.
>
> **@letmox:** Go away. Nigeria will rise again. A star nation.
>
> **@palacelily:** It'll rise only in your lopsided dreams, @letmox.

Aunty Bimbo nudged me and I jolted, yanking myself out of the opium of Instagram. She asked why I'd got so many mosquito bites on my skin. It happened that after submitting my visa application, I went to stay in Aunty Payshay's ramshackle two-room apartment in Tedi. I'd run there to hide because a helicopter had hovered over Aunty Bimbo's mansion. She became afraid and asked me to find alternative accommodation, until it was safe to be back in her house again, or my visa decision was out, whichever happened first. I'd sold my car the previous week at a price the new owner never imagined was possible for a Range Rover, a quarter of the original cost, and he broke into a vigorous dance, jiggling his hands and buttocks.

Aunty Payshay had smiled on seeing me. Her surroundings were riddled with hungry mosquitoes, and it was the first time I fought with the insects. I swatted them on the unpainted walls. It was raining, too, drumming on the rusted roofing sheets, a part of the roof leaking, pattering on the floor. She put a bucket there to gather the puddle.

She stared at me. "Tulu, it's good you're moving to London," she said, sitting opposite me in the larger room she'd converted to her sitting room with two sofas facing one another, a low table in between us. A red candle was flickering on it.

"Why do you think so?" I asked.

"I'm sure the family curse won't follow you abroad. The Igbo say that if a family curse crosses an international border, it becomes powerless. When you succeed in London, you'll come and take me, and that will end the generational curse forever."

I covered myself with her thick blanket against the annoying mosquitoes. “Sister Payshay, what are you even saying? I’m confused.”

“Don’t get yourself muddled up. You’ll attend Jesus Evangelical Tabernacle Church with me tomorrow and JET your journey into the sacred hands of Jesus Christ.”

I frowned. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Tulu, don’t be like your father. Too much book without salvation will perish you. Now he’s gone, and his mansion demolished. And take a look at your mother’s dire condition. The curse is more powerful than you think. I’m told the people in London don’t like going to church. Don’t be like them when you get there. The secret of surviving overseas is Jesus Christ.”

“Mosquitos are too many here.”

“Sorry-o. They’re my children, so they no longer bite me. You’ll sleep inside my bedroom tonight. They won’t bite you there. I’ll sleep here, my precious sitting room.”

After some days, I carried my suitcase and boarded a commercial motorcyclist who took me to the airport where Aunty Bimbo was already waiting for me. When it was time to board, I hugged and bade her farewell, tears creeping down my cheeks.

“Tulu, darling, always hold your head high,” she told me. “Always keep your eyes up, no matter what. Optimism is the best drug, ever. Do you hear me?”

I nodded. “Thank you, Aunty Bimbo.”

“I’ll always be here and everywhere for you, I promise.”

Finally, I stepped towards the immigration clearance desks, waving back at her, to board the very first flight of my life to London.

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

✈

2015

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I miss my mother so much. I've now stayed away from her for too long, and I think about her all the time. I wonder if the medical trip to Singapore has been successful. When Aunty Bimbo called weeks ago, telling me that they were both going for what she teasingly called medical tourism, she laughed and advised me not to fret. She added that the trip would even be sugary, and I nodded, smiling. They would be back to Nigeria after three weeks, she said. But since that time, I've not heard from her.

Whenever my phone rings in London, I grab it, thinking that Deji is calling from Norwich. But as it rings now and I see that my aunt, Sister Payshay, is on the line, I cringe. She calls me almost every week since I left Lagos, an odd call at an odd hour, always around 11 p.m., when I'm already deeply asleep. She always reminds me of my previous promise to bring her to London where she would live with happiness and plenty of cash and spread the gospel of Jesus Christ to white people who are happy sinners. And have I forgotten that the family curse has no effect on us abroad? She's not aware of my mother's medical travel abroad because Aunty Bimbo doesn't know her well and so will never call her. They saw one another only once, during my parents' thirtieth weeding anniversary, and they didn't strike a good chord.

Now, as Sister Payshay's call heckles me, I hover between wakefulness and sleepiness. In an instant, I feel that cross-boundary desperation from those at home harassing close relatives overseas, wheedling them to be generous, to extend sympathy to those suffering at home. She's done this before, coasting from soft pleas to mild reprimands to outright condemnations. My first impulse tells me to press my red button, cutting off the call. But I desist, imagining how she might sit upright on her torn couch in Lagos, staring at the wall, curious to hear my voice, her small Nokia phone crushing her ear. I'll never let her know that I've been living in an attic, a restaurant's changing room, for a long time.

That I've become a washerman in Madam Sharon's restaurant and a cleaner of customer toilets, because I have no money to pay for London rent, is an unnecessary piece of information as far as Sister Payshay is concerned. She deserves to hear only uplifting accounts of my flashy cars and the big houses I've bought in London. I've been doing this over the past few months, feeding her ears with the stories she wants to hear, so many exploits of mine that will also be of benefit to her. As I defend my

agony and joblessness, I must recall the things I told her previously in order not to contradict myself with my current porkies.

Nevertheless, I must now devise a way to make her stop calling me altogether, to cut ties with her, and to infuse her with the self-containment she requires to grow the courage to forget me completely.

I pick up her call, yawning.

"Ha, Tulu, have you slept already?"

"Yes, Sister Payshay, very much asleep."

"Sorry-o, but I'm still waiting for you here," she says, and chortles. "I've been anxious with my luggage, waiting to join you there. My heart lives in London now, not in Lagos anymore."

I exhale, yawn again, fighting with my insistent sleep. "Sister Payshay, you won't like it here. London isn't good for born-again Christians like you."

"Why not?"

"London is the capital city of prostitution, and I'm sure you don't like prostitutes, do you?"

"No, I don't like them one bit. They're all going to burn up in hellfire, and anyone who associates with them is also going to hell."

"Good," I say, nodding. With glee, I turn around on my sleeping mat, facing the other side, and my sleep recedes. It seems this trick is going to work in my favour. Let me manipulate her and rescue myself. "Thank you for saying that, Sister Payshay. Everybody in London is a prostitute. I'm sure you know that."

"No, I'm not aware-o."

"In fact, prostitution accounts for ninety-five percent of the UK's Gross Domestic Product. They also export prostitutes to other countries where those men and women pretend to teach the English Language during the day. But at night, they become prostitutes who'll send foreign exchange back home." I yawn. "When you come here, Sister Payshay, you must also become a prostitute to earn an income and contribute to the growth of the UK economy."

"God forbid!" she yells. "God forbid! Tulu, you're a joker."

"I kid you not."

"So you're now a prostitute over there?"

"Yes, I'm a confirmed whore, a shameless harlot. I completed my prostitution training sometime ago. Now I've become a registered prostitute. I've set up my own shop with good mattresses, pillows, and cartons of condoms."

"Jesus Christ, Jeeeesus Christ!" she yells again and again. "Tulu, that sounds so lewd. Is that how people change so quickly when they move abroad? I'm no longer interested in coming there. Just send me money." She yawns. "You know your lovely father, that wonderful brother of mine, used to send me money frequently. Now that he's no more, I expect you to step into his generous shoes and be sending me money all the time. Please, Tulu, behave exactly like your father."

This desperate aunt of mine wants to subject me to what one might call an immigration tax, which African immigrants are expected to pay to relatives back home on the continent, but I must evade the illegal taxation.

"I can't send you money either," I say.

"What?" Her voice is frantic and desperate. "Why not?"

"Because even the British currency and its name are products of prostitution, so touching the British money will also contaminate your holiness and send you to hellfire."

"How?"

"You know the name of the British currency, don't you?"

"Is it not pounds?"

"You're right, but do you know where the name comes from?"

"I don't know. Please tell me."

"A man *pounds* a woman when they're naked in bed."

"May God forbid such bad money," she exclaims.

"Yes, Sister Payshay, may God forbid it," I say, smiling. "As a matter of fact, a man called Field Marshal Pound was a soldier who also worked as a prostitute during one of those Anglo-Saxon wars while trying to infiltrate the British enemies. Field Marshal Pound could penetrate everywhere."

"Really?"

"Yes, really, and that's what many Nigerians who haven't travelled to Britain don't know."

"Wait," she says, and pauses for a short while. "But I think the full name is pound sterling."

"That's it, exactly. Sterling was the beloved wife of Field Marshall Pound. She was also a prostitute, and she died while another man pounded her on duty. So the British parliament at that time passed a law to immortalise the hardworking couple. Sterling was a high revenue earner for the economy throughout her long period of prostitution."

"Tulu, that's so lecherous," she says. I can imagine her creased face. "I no longer want their stinking money. Please, don't send it to me. Let me continue to suffer in this world so that I can inherit the riches of heaven."

"Yes, Sister Payshay, you're right. Please do exactly that." I almost break out laughing, but I hold back. "I concur that the pound is so filthy."

"Jesus Christ of Jesus Evangelical Tabernacle," she roars. "Now listen to me, Tulu. You have to leave that country immediately and come back home. It's better you lose the United Kingdom of Great Britain and gain the Sacred Kingdom of Greater Heaven. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Of course, I get you. And thank you for that suggestion, Sister Payshay. Please, let me think about it."

I hang up and keep my phone down, hurling out a loud sigh of reprieve. Good riddance! I feel insomniac soon afterwards, so I keep myself busy with the latest newsletter from the Afropolitan Union.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 13 March 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: BEWARE OF THE SAME-RACE RACISM

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

We'd love you to be aware of this cankerworm, which we have termed **The Same-Race Racism**. This means a Black person marginalising another Black person or Black experience abroad. This can manifest in the following ways and even more:

1. A Black owner of a company abroad who promotes only white employees and pays them lucratively well, disregarding Black employees.

2. A Black person who sends job opportunities to only white friends.
3. A Black person who always feels they're more beautiful than other Black people, looking down on them and refusing to take photographs with them. The problem here is that white people consider this Black person ugly and unsightly because white people don't ever use Black beauty as an example worthy to copy. So, what exactly is the point of this Black person's silliness?
4. A Black person who never posts any pictures with their fellow Blacks online, but this Black person is always excited posting their pictures with only white people and prattling effusively about their connections to white people and their communities.
5. A Black person who feels they're more educated than other Black people, always fishing around for grammatical errors, and frowns, sneering with lips turned down like a pesky horse during conversations. This Black person uses a highlighter to reveal mistakes in documents written by Black people.
6. A Black person who doesn't ever respond to the greetings from their fellow Blacks at supermarkets, on the streets, and in waiting halls of hospitals and pharmacies.
7. A Black person who discards their African name thinking it sounds uncivilised in the ears of white people.
8. A Black person who adores non-African food overseas and eats only in white people's restaurants, refusing to eat African delicacies abroad and thinking they aren't classy or prestigious enough for their migrated taste buds.
9. A Black person who refuses to attend social functions organised by Black communities abroad just because they're Black.
10. A Black house-owner who rents to only white people because they look nicer and cuter. In addition, renting to Black people will make it difficult to find prospective tenants, who are majorly whites, to occupy vacant rooms because those white people are frightened of

living in the same house as the existing Black tenants, sharing the kitchen, toilet, and sitting room together.

There could be several other subtle manifestations of this anomaly, so we'd urge you to be vigilant. Also, don't ever be a same-race racist yourself. Please keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,
The Editors,
The Afropolitan Union.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Spring in Islington is the colour of ripe tangerines, and the air warms up my nostrils, smelling like mint leaves. The street is full of sun-seeking residents, previously imprisoned indoors by winter. They sit down in open spaces or loiter about for a suntan. The blooms bursting between the green leaves adorn the previously winter-torn hedges with pockets of dazzling yellows, whites, pinks, reds, and blues. And the birds, bees, and butterflies pulsate from the wide trees to the shrubs and the flowers, blown away by the graciousness of the sunshine.

The warmth clings to my skin, as I park myself in front of the restaurant, playing Solitaire on my phone, a bottle of water by my side. It seems spring is a season of thirst, demanding lots of liquid. Although my suitcase is still inside Deji's faulty car, so far away from here, it doesn't bother me as I now wear second-hand shirts and trousers. I bought them from a charity shop with the little tips I received from helping out Madam Sharon in her kitchen.

But Madam Sharon's personal life worries me, even upsets me.

Deji calls me now. I'm about to convey my anxiety to him, but his tensed voice seems to carry a more serious concern. He says he's been able to tow his sick and broken car to a repair garage in Norwich, after moving its contents into another vehicle, and the white guy has been helpful all the way and patient throughout the ordeal. They now stay in the guy's new house, and the guy feeds him. Even though the white guy has promised to cover a part of the cost of repairs, Deji still wants to raise some funds by working in a care home for the elderly. It's one of the easiest jobs in Norwich, he stresses. He'll return to London as soon as the vehicle is up and running again.

"Tulu, you see, eh? I've broken up with my girlfriend Dasha," he bellows. His voice breaks from what sounds like a controlled huffing. "That dingbat infuriated me."

"What transpired between you both?" I ask, my heart shivering.

"She's such a bitch." He sighs. "She fell pregnant and told me. I was so excited that I jumped up and down, thinking I was going to become the father of a biracial child who wouldn't pass through my kind of experience. I'd started planning to marry Dasha officially, so as not to make the baby a bastard. I'd even thought about what would be on our wedding invitation cards, something as simple as Dasha Weds Deji."

For a brief moment, my heart stews as I consider how he would fund the wedding cards and other expenditure, but I ask, “So what happened next?”

“Dasha called me yesterday and announced with jollity that she’d aborted the baby.”

“Aborted what?” I blurt out, recoiling. “Why?”

“She’s ashamed to give birth to a Black baby, complaining that raising such a shocking child would be a huge, disgraceful burden on her.”

“A shocking child? Deji, that’s such a disgusting thing for her to say.”

“Tulu, I’m so furious right now that I would strangle her dead if I caught her. I could bludgeon her to an early grave, to be honest with you.”

I imagine his temperature rising and falling from his understandable rage, and he might also be feeling feverish from the unexpected blow. I can even hear his footsteps stomping around the floor as he splutters. In my attempt to assuage him a little, I say, “Keep your cool, Deji. Calm down, okay?”

“I’m trying to pacify myself, but it’s hard, so hard.”

“I understand.”

I catch myself thinking about their friendship. It was never viable, never a matching one, much like welding the wings of an aircraft to a car and expecting it to fly. As a Nigerian raised in Nigeria, my idea of compatibility and class entails attending exclusive private schools for the privileged, having parents who travel first-class, and the ability to speak posh English. I guess that neither Dasha nor her parents have any of these privileges. They were never in the same class with Deji who had to belittle himself because he thought the colour of Dasha’s skin was a privilege, beneficial to him. And she’s not even pretty. She walks zigzag-ish, almost a crab in motion, her flat face freckled like a rusted shovel. Even if she totally undressed in front of me, my own genitals would never take notice.

I don’t tell him these things though. Instead, I say, “Deji, if I were you, I would discard her like the sheet of toilet roll that she really is—used, stained, crumpled, and thrown away. You’ll heal with time, believe me.”

“I know, but it hurts deeply, destabilising me.”

“Soothe yourself, Deji,” I tell him. “Now listen, I’ve got important news, and it unsettles me.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about Madam Sharon.”

"Yes, what about her?"

"She divorced her husband recently, but do you know what perturbs me?"

"I'm not surprised by the collapse of the marriage, but what's your problem with it?"

"She wants to celebrate the divorce with a street carnival in Islington this spring."

"Ahh-Ahh, was the marriage so bad that its dissolution now calls for a celebration?"

"Deji, I don't know, but she's been in a festive mood, sending out invitations to all the divorcees across London and even beyond to attend the fanfare. She's requested the presence of the high and low in the society, including those still enjoying their marriages."

Deji exclaims, "Ahh-Ahh, that's serious-o."

"Very serious. Her restaurant will serve intercontinental meals to everyone free of charge on that day. I don't even understand this country at all. A carnival of divorcees? What a country!"

He heaves a loud sigh. "You see, eh? It's her life, her finances, and her fucking business. You shouldn't be bothered, Tulu. Divorce is a pop-culture here. Look, some white people often think of divorce on the very day they're signing their marriage certificates. Some of them are gold-diggers looking for wealthy partners to loot through divorce settlement. That's why divorce lawyers get more clients than criminal lawyers in this country."

When one travels, one sees a very different sky.

"But how can a Nigerian woman set up a divorce party in London?" I say. "Divorce is always shameful back home. It destroys the dignity and reputation of a woman."

"Yes, but this is the UK, which can also stand for Unprecedented Kinks or Untamed Kingdom. You choose what works best for you here, the way my ex-girlfriend chose to kill my unborn child."

I rub my warm palm around my beard and temple, contemplating the best way to ask him for a favour with a pleasing voice that might do the job well.

"Deji, I really need some money now. Please can you help me?"

"Why don't you ask Madam Sharon to pay you for your services to her?"

“No, I can’t do that, not after she’s offered me free accommodation and meals. Sometimes, she gives me some of the customer tips, but that’s never enough.”

“You see, eh? I’ve got nothing on me now. You know I still have my defective car to repair.”

After he’s hung up in what seems abrupt to me, I try to examine what Madam Sharon intends to achieve with her weird carnival, but I fail to weigh up something tangible, anything meaningful. Perhaps, I may be convinced later, in some way, during or after the event. The more one travels, the wiser one becomes.

Later on, Deji’s awful experience with his ex-lover reminds me of my passionate love for Laura and my unavoidable distance from her, and I think deeply about how to keep it abridged with constant communication. So, I remember to ask her about her current source of income, since losing her AtlanTel job. I ring her up.

“Babe, I dream about you every day. My heart has become a spacious garden, and only you are the vegetable, fruit, and flower growing and blooming there. The only bird crooning in my garden.”

“Ah, likewise, Tulu,” she says. “Most times, your distance from me is a torture I can’t allow myself to bear, so I’ve painted your portrait and hung your smiling face on my bedroom wall. You’re the first person I see every morning.”

“Oh, that’s so sweet, honey. I love you the way I love my own heart. And I’m so sorry you’ve lost your prized job in telecoms. Have you found another one elsewhere?”

“I didn’t even try looking,” she says. “I became a full-time painter soon after the AtlanTel tragedy. And since then, I’ve sold all the portraits I painted. I can’t even satisfy demand. I’ve been so busy, Tulu. Who says Nigerians don’t appreciate the pleasure of looking at beautiful arts?”

“That’s fantastic, lovey! And please take good care of yourself for my sake.”

“I will, but I bother a lot about your safety over there, Tulu. I hear there’s a pervasive fear of violence in London right now.”

“Yes, the British hate terrorists, and there’s a heightened rage here towards those evils at present.”

“Ha, that’s scary. No country in the world loves destroyers and murderers. Please, Tulu, be security-conscious.”

“Yes, I am, but there’s no reason to panic unnecessarily. I’ve been told there’s a special British government budget for fighting terrorism.”

“That’s cool and commendable. The Nigerian government doesn’t have such a budget to prepare against those evil contingencies.”

“Well, the Nigerian government itself is an evil contingency. Should an evil cabal prepare against itself?”

She chuckles. “I get your point. I hope every migrant in the UK isn’t considered a hazard anyway, that the British don’t assume you a terrorist by default until you prove yourself a saint with a white heart and spotless wings.”

“You know the British are generally not noisy people. They’re very quiet and can sometimes be as slow as a burial song, so I can’t say for sure if they consider every migrant a terrorist. But I know certainly that when they’re mentally exhausted, they go to therapy, and every therapist here has their own therapist. You understand that kind of thing, Laura?”

“Of course, I do,” she says. “They help one another.”

“Yeah, it then means one therapist depends on another therapist who depends on another therapist until the final therapist in the chain depends on the first. Of course, doctors must have people who cure them when they themselves fall ill. Besides, the British don’t engage in any prayers at all because the British God doesn’t even have a British passport and can’t travel to Britain to answer their prayers.”

She laughs and clears her throat. “What about racists?”

“You mean arseholes, Laura?”

She screams joyfully and continues laughing “Yes, those shitholes.”

“Of course, every country has arseholes, and the British have a fair share of them. You know what an arsehole does to you? It makes you shut your nose, frowning, but as a migrant you must pretend that you’re not offended because this isn’t your country. Please, let me sip some water and continue with you in a moment.”

I drink and put my cup down.

“Laura, are you still there for me, lovey?”

“Yes, Tulu, but I have to go now and help my dad in the kitchen. He’s cooking a special meal for my mum, as her birthday treat. Talk to you later.”

“Wonderful. Enjoy yourself.”

Back inside the attic, I receive an email notification—a free and fast WIFI connectivity is one of the advantages of living in the restaurant. Often, the subject of an email either compels me to read it without delay or postpone looking at it. It’s a subjective attitude,

I know, as some poorly written subjects can contain profound bodies. Much the same way an attractive face could be on a body that spells disaster when stripped naked. For a man, it could be a handsome face with a trimmed beard, nice eyebrows, and well-shaped hair that exemplifies self-care. Sadly, that's how the world works—you have to see the head first before you see the rest.

Nonetheless, when a newsletter from the Afropolitan Union arrives every week, it strikes me with an impulse to open it right away. The subject is often intriguing, so I read the body quickly, and the editors don't disappoint in any way. Most times, discussing the newsletter's content with Madam Sharon, who's also a subscriber, deepens our understanding of the challenges of other migrants. This week's subject is so riveting that I read the body at once.

From: editors <editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 27 March 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: THE MATHEMATICS OF MIGRATION

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

Living abroad is always mathematical, requiring daily additions and subtractions. Before you spend, you'll calculate what will be left afterwards. You'll often find yourself converting foreign prices into the values in your native country's currency to determine if you should buy or not. This is normal. Most of us indulge in it as long as we don't earn enough to stop the habit.

As an Afropolitan, you're an expert in calculus—differentiation and integration—without realising it. You'll often differentiate between where you used to be and where you are currently, interpreting every incremental or decremental step. Jobs, health services, landlords and their agents, among others, are up against you, so you'll always differentiate your options before you act. These small experiences add up to a huge total which will upset you, pushing you to the depressive cliffs of living abroad.

However, you must integrate yourself back into the society. You have to double your efforts. Whenever you're told that your place is at the margin, let them know you're a part of the main page. You're not a derivative, a societal spinoff. Never allow anyone to put you under any form of square roots. Shatter all the ceilings. Break the boxes of limits. You're the main formula, the almighty formula, the constant, never the appendage. We'll always value and honour your calculations.

Until we come your way again next week, keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,
The Editors.
The Afropolitan Union.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: If you live overseas and you often convert prices into your local currency before you buy anything, gather here. Let's talk!

@sandy_J: LMAO. I'm blameworthy of this; I won't lie. I'm a conversion freak.

@rosy-krus: LOL, that's so me. Guilty as charged. I've done it for 8 years now.

@jzy: I spent nothing when I first arrived. Pounds seemed so dear in kwacha terms.

@ella_k: I tell people to forget their local economies when they travel abroad.

@dins: That's difficult to do, isn't it? So hard to leave your past behind, @ella_k.

@mzy: LOL. Someone told me stop acting like a bureau de change at Tesco.

@tonify: I armed myself with a calculator during my early years in Canada. LMAO

@key4hi: Perhaps, I'm an exception to this attitude as I've never done it.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Madam Sharon's divorce festival comes up this Sunday, and we're in the kitchen today, a warm Thursday in April. The restaurant has been closed to the public all week in preparation for the event. Madam Sharon, her two grown-up daughters, and I are busy preparing some meals ahead of time. We'll keep them refrigerated until the scheduled time. Her first daughter, Queen Victoria, has gone back to school, but she'll return tomorrow to take part in the party on Sunday. The youngest, Queen Anne, meddles with her LEGO blocks, sitting on the bare floor in a corner of the restaurant.

I stand at the sink, dicing the assorted cow tripes and chunks of goat-meat, readying them for the pepper-soup, which I'm sure will tantalise the invited guests. Queen Mary sits on a low chair, pounding the mixed peppers, gingers, cloves of stripped garlic, and turmeric together in a mortar, also for the pepper-soup. At eighteen, her dark hair is dense, held on her crown with a string of white cowries. Her hair looks like a bird's nest with white eggs. She's so bosomy that I imagine she's no longer a virgin. You can never tell with these Black children born and bred outside the shores of their homeland. In my view, Queen Elizabeth has the most outstanding beauty, with her flawless skin the colour of caramelised onion. She's always in long braids, two of them adorned with three orange beads on either side of her forehead. A silver-coloured ring sparkles on the wing of her pointed nose. She likes eating mozzarella cheese with salt sprinkled on it. Now she hums quietly, her mouth shut, as she shreds the fresh leaves of coriander, basil, rosemary, and parsley, keeping each vegetable in a separate bowl. These things will all go into the pepper-soup pot at the appropriate time.

Madam Sharon stands at the wide stone countertop, decorating a mound of cake she baked yesterday evening. On the cake, she's already moulded the words **HAPPILY DIVORCED** in colourful letters. The smell of vanilla dwarfs the kitchen, wafting into my nostrils. To widen the culinary reach of the party, she's also outsourced the intercontinental dishes to three other restaurants, the Turkish, the Italian, and the Chinese, and all of them are her neighbouring non-competitors on the same street. They'll all deliver the food this Sunday and serve the guests outdoors themselves.

But this carnival still puzzles me anyway. "Madam Sharon, please, don't be annoyed with me, but why did you divorce your husband?"

She turns to me. “You see, since I married that man, I lost myself. He’s going to be crowned the next king of his village, because the former king died. Meanwhile, I’m not qualified to be the king’s wife because I gave birth to only daughters. They’re burdens, according to him, and he refuses to carry them or even acknowledge their presence in our marriage. He sneaked behind me and married another woman in Nigeria. Can you imagine?”

“Ahh-Ahh, that’s awful.”

“When he was in need of money, he wanted me to sell off my all my assets in the UK, including this restaurant, and bequeath him with what I’ve earned. Luckily, I bought all the properties in my name.”

“Doesn’t he have a job?”

“He used to work as an Admin Manager at the Islington Council, but he resigned some years ago to pursue his kingship dream. Since then, he must travel to Nigeria every three months for meetings with his kingmakers and kinsmen in his village. I was so stupid I even sponsored some of the trips.”

“Mum, those village people must have used a charm on him,” Queen Elizabeth pipes up. “I hear they do plenty of juju and talismans over there in Africa.”

“My dear, I don’t know about that,” Madam Sharon says. “But I’m sure I’m not going to live in a dusty autonomous community in Imo State because my husband is their king. I don’t take rubbish.”

“Are you not from Imo State yourself?” I ask.

“No, I’m from Anambra State.”

“But he brought you to the UK, right?”

“What? That’s a lie. I came here on my own as a qualified nurse and was already working with the NHS even before he arrived for his master’s degree.”

“Has his new wife given him the much-desired son?” I ask.

She pulls a face, her neck slanted, inspecting her cake. “I’m not interested in her whereabouts, but I wish her well. My daughters are equal to all men, not more, not less. Equal, relevant, valid. Soon after their birth, when their father refused to be pleased with them, I gave them British royal names to underscore their importance to me, to the world. I won’t trade my daughters for anything. They’re queens and will remain queens, forever.”

The daughters have never visited Nigeria. But, with a transitory courage, they try to speak a smattering of Igbo because their mother sometimes forces them to say some words in their indigenous language.

"You're not embittered, Madam Sharon?"

"Embittered? I lost nothing divorcing him."

"But I guess you might've had some good moments with him."

She sighs. "At the beginning, yes, we were joyous," she admits. "But as soon as I told him I was resigning from the NHS to pursue my restaurant dream, he frowned, feeling threatened, because he knew I was going to make more money than his council salary. So that fear turned him into a monster because my business has been booming since then."

"Mum, I still feel so bad recalling that day he wanted to beat you," Queen Mary says with a grimace. "I perfectly hate him."

"He raised his hand to smash you?" I ask. "Is that true?"

"My dear, he went berserk when I told him that I wanted to reclaim and rebuild my body, that I was never going through another pregnancy after the fourth one didn't turn out to be a boy. He was barking that I'd disrespected his manhood because we were both in the UK. Can you imagine?"

I nod. "Now I see why you want a carnival to celebrate your acquittal from his dreaded penis that produces only females."

She bursts out laughing, and laughs and laughs some more. She coughs and clears her throat. "Yes, you're right, Tulu. But beyond the festival, I want to join both the north and south poles together, if you understand what I mean."

"No, Madam, I don't."

"Tulu, this country makes me feel that human beings are just distant objects, existing alone, no cohesion, and it shouldn't be so. Separation, loneliness, and isolation have destroyed many, driving people to suicide. Men are infuriated. Women are maddened. Straight people are angry. Gays are upset, lesbians frustrated, and transgenders are at daggers drawn with their opposers. Children are cheesed off. I've invited every section of this human bedlam to come here this Sunday. Homeless people are coming to dine at the same table with the members of well-off families. Ahh-Ahh, is enjoyment a crime, eh? Is laughter a taboo?"

I shake my head. "No, Madam."

"Besides, it's an opportunity to promote my restaurant, making it even more popular than it is at the moment," she adds.

Later, around 2 p.m., we're sitting around a table in the restaurant, drawing up a list of top names, the most important dignitaries who'll be served special meals indoors. Other guests will be entertained outdoors, along the street, and be fed with the outsourced meals from the other restaurants. Madam Sharon is scrolling through her inbox, calling out the names of people who've indicated interest in attending.

Sitting opposite her, I clutch a pen and paper, eager, listening.

"We must get each guest's pronouns correct," Madam Sharon says, squinting at her phone.

"Mum, you should wear your reading glasses," Queen Mary says, looking at the screen of her mother's phone.

"Ah, that's true; I always forget."

"Let me fetch them," Queen Elizabeth offers, already dashing towards the kitchen. She hurries back, bearing her mother's leather handbag.

"British people love their pronouns," Madam Sharon says, putting on her glasses. "Some of those white people move around, announcing their preferred pronouns on tote bags. They engrave their pronouns at the bottom of every email they send, taking umbrage at anyone who gets the pronouns wrong." She pats the frame of her glasses. "Please, Tulu, as I call out these names and matching pronouns, make no mistakes writing them down."

"I hear you, Madam."

"And ensure you enclose the pronouns in brackets, separated by a forward slash, and please italicise them as well. That's the British practice, and compliance with this norm means reverence to them, so we must respect them for what they've chosen to be, for their culture. Dignified inclusiveness matters a lot."

"Alright, I hear you."

"Audery Dean *(She/Her)*, Greyson Heather *(They/Them/Their)*, Ian Patrick (*He/Him*), Jameson Oak *(Hex/Himx),* Amber Pope *(Shex/Herx),* Silverton Rays *(Theyx/Themx*), Gavi Golleys *(He/she/They/Him/Her/Them/Their/ Theirx/ Themx/ Theyx/ Hex/Himx/++Plus),* Winning Stone *(Spy/Spam)—*"

"Spy and Spam?" Queen Mary bursts out, making a face. "Mum, who're those ones for?"

"My dear, those are for people who identify as spirits or masquerades. Everybody is legitimate as far as I'm concerned, so I've invited all imaginable entities."

Queen Mary shrugs. "Okay, Mum."

"Kingston Cannon *(It/Item/Itemx)*—"

"What are those?" Queen Elizabeth asks, knitting her brow.

Madam Sharon gazes at her. "My dear, they're for human beings who've chosen to identify as inanimate beings, also a valid identity with all the perfections of humanity. They avoid arguments and all manner of controversy. Whatever anyone says about them, or provokes them, they stay mute."

"Oh, that's cool," Queen Elizabeth says, nodding.

"Tonston Pirusus *(Anon/Anex)*."

"Madam, this pair strikes me as special," I say. "For whom, please?"

"Yeah, Tulu, they're used by humans who identify as animals, also bona fide personalities with all their glories intact. No one has the right to invalidate anyone. We're not God who has put all of us here on earth to be different from each other. My dear, I'm training my children to be accepting of different sets of people, including those who reject them and their Blackness."

"Oh, nice," I say, nodding.

Madam Sharon continues. "Felina Vampers *(Meow/Marrs)*."

Queen Mary jolts back suddenly, looking utterly startled. "Mum, please explain this latest pair."

"Oh, these are used by humans who feel they're cats, a subset of the people considering themselves to be non-humans. But this latest subgroup is feline-specific. You should all know that there are as many pronouns as there are human beings."

"Oh, Mum, really?" Queen Mary blurts out, making a face. "Really?"

"Yes, really. As an obstetric nurse for years in the NHS, I saw lots of surprises and permutations. Look, a pronoun isn't about the water-passing genitals between our legs, not even about our internal reproductive organs. A pronoun isn't necessarily the same thing as the genitals, I dare repeat."

Her words remind me of the Igbo principle of *Biri ka m biri*, which implies that you must exist and allow the existence and dignity of others as well, no matter the perceived differences. She also seems to embody *Egbe bere ka ugo bere*, meaning kites and eagles should allow each other to soar and build nests in the trees of their choice.

But if either genus of birds hampers the comfort and liberty of the other in any way, the judicial winds of nature would shred the wrongdoer's wings.

Queen Mary shrugs, looking unconvincingly at her mother. "Alright, Mum, go on. Let's hear the others."

"Kamali Chakraborty *(Seem/Seer/Seen)*," Madam Sharon says. "This trio is used by prophets, clairvoyants, and mediums."

"Plus magicians, soothsayers, witch doctors, and people who foretell the future by pulling their filthy dreadlocks with two hands and screaming mad?" I ask.

Everyone turns their head, gazing at me, as silence falls suddenly. And then all of us burst out laughing and laughing, Queen Elizabeth coughing as she does.

"Let's continue," Madam Sharon says with a pleased face and tone. "Windy Waters—" She stops abruptly, staring at the screen, a wordlessness that suggests either an error or a confusion, her lips folded.

"What's the problem, Mum?" Queen Mary asks.

Madam Sharon sighs. "This one doesn't even identify as anything-o, an American living in the UK, and doesn't include any pronouns at all. I'll have to call to be sure." She dials, puts the phone on loudspeaker, and places it on the table. "Hey, Windy Waters. It's Sharon on the line."

"Oh, howdy, Sharon," Windy Waters replies. "You good?"

"I'm great, Windy. Please, what are your preferred pronouns for the carnival this Sunday? I have to assign you to a table with your desired pronouns."

"Fuck pronouns," Windy Waters screams, the phone jolting.

I write down what I heard exactly the way I heard it: Windy Waters *(Fuck/Pronouns)*.

After about thirty names, Madam Sharon stops, and we group the guests, making sure that each table contains a mix of all the identities. I'll type the names on her MacBook and print them out. On Saturday evening, we'll assign each group to a table, although I fear this mix and match might be ammunition for chaos come Sunday. As soon as I drop my pen, my phone alerts me about the arrival of this week's Afropolitan newsletter.

APPENDIX
VOLTA, A Novel—(*Cont'd*)

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 17 April 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: CONTROVERSY: ACCUSATIONS OF ELITISM & CONSUMERISM!

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

Afropolitans have often been accused of grand elitism and Western-induced privileges, of being consumerists who are crazy about the luxuries of life, international fashion trends, and global travels. Our traducers ridicule us for living or schooling abroad, for working in Fortune-500 companies, for looking well-heeled. These accusations are absolutely not true, coming from our haters. This is just sheer odium because we have both rich and poor members. Those who vilify one of our promoters, Taiye Selasi, also hate us. They're just jealous of Taiye Selasi's brilliance, flawless education, elegance, international connections, and astonishing beauty. Her haters couldn't match her excellent achievements, instead resorting to disparaging her empowering essay in 2005 about us Afropolitans. We love you, Taiye Selasi. Go, Taiye, go! Don't ever mind those haters.

However, let's demolish these unfounded accusations one by one. Every human being aspires to greatness, first by going to school and seeking good employment soon afterwards. When has it become a crime for Africans to work in top organisations like Google, Apple, Microsoft, top-notch engineering, accountancy, and law firms, as well as top universities and groundbreaking laboratories around the world? Is it un-African to be fashionable, to wear gorgeous shoes and perfumes that smell heavenly, to strut on the runways in Paris, London, New York, Lagos, and elsewhere? If it's criminal to be an African entrepreneur anywhere in the world, employing both Blacks, browns, and whites,

paying taxes and being law-abiding while changing flashy cars weekly, we urge our members to crave this sort of criminality. We don't celebrate poverty, and we shall never court sorrow and suffering.

The idea that Africa must be portrayed through the lenses of poverty, diseases, and despair is totally despicable. Like every other continent, Africa embodies both prosperity and penury, and both sides have to be investigated equally. However, it's natural for human beings to gravitate to where they feel they'll find comfort and joy, so if Africans seek such comfort in the West, so be it. If Johannesburg or Timbuktu or Banjul promises us solace and success, some of us will also move there and live.

Please don't allow anyone to embarrass you for being an immigrant in the West or anywhere in the world. You have only one life, so please go where you'll achieve your full potential. In fact, some of us left Africa to escape unemployment, to avert persecutions due to our political leanings, sexuality, and religious beliefs. We have no apologies to our wacky critics because we adore the fantastic things of life. If their idea of Africa is to live in mud huts and scruffy shacks, by all means they should go ahead and build many pigpens for themselves. We don't give a toss! If they wish to sew the raggedy cloaks of penury so as so to feel genuinely African, they should make for themselves one thousand-penury-laced cloaks. But Africa is far more than that, even far bigger and more glamourous than the sophistication being credited to it at present.

The Afropolitan model is all-encompassing and ever-expanding. It's never one thing, as far as African migration is concerned. Achille Mbembe, one of our promoters, promulgates the idea of Afropolitans who explore Africa and its cities while living in Africa or Africans who explore the world while being permanently sheltered in an African city. This is a valid and profound initiative. In fact, Achille Mbembe thinks that Africans are cultural crossbreeds even while they're still at home, before they migrate overseas, due to centuries of interactions with

non-Africans who visited and settled in Africa. This includes intermarriages as well. He opines that many African tribes migrated to other parts of Africa, traded, intermarried, and gave birth to bi-tribal children. Because of these activities, there have been lots of fusing and mingling and jumbling, so the idea of a native culture has become a fallacy. Taiye Selasi also alludes to this cultural and genetic hybridisation in her famous essay. Mbembe's Afropolitan version is in conformity with the postmodern reality of remote-working, which leads us to virtual Afropolitans who don't travel out of Africa, but they're in possession of high-profile jobs overseas, earning pounds, dollars, or euros while living comfortably in Accra, Enugu, Kampala, Rabat, or Windhoek. Conversely, the Taiye Selasi's model envisions Afropolitans living outside Africa and yet are working in Africa via the Internet.

We can make the Afropolitan universe work for everyone. Condemning it is downright stupidity, in our honest opinion. What these desperate faultfinders don't understand is that Taiye Selasi's and Achille Mbembe's Afropolitan renderings and visions aren't in competition with one another. Instead, they complement each other, one looking outside Africa, the other looking inside Africa, their overarching aim being to portray Africa and its peoples as truthfully and genuinely as possible. Please halt the controversy. African intellectuals are so good at disavowals and rejections that sometimes it feels as though they were all born ticklish, problematic, and angry at the world: "I am not this or that. The Afropolitan concept doesn't gratify my own experiences." Shut up and embrace the Afropolitans and your own Afropolitanness! If Taiye Selasi's version doesn't pander to your own experiences, Achille Mbembe's version should, perfectly.

On this note, we must recognise the revolutionary work our French counterparts are also doing to ensure that our African siblings in Paris aren't muzzled to deafness or suffocated to death by any form of racial oppression in that country. They're called Afropeans, which means authentic Africans who are also authentic Europeans. While

Afropolitanism works to ensure that English-speaking immigrants are well-represented in their host countries, Afropeanism replicates a similar vision for African immigrants in the French-speaking territories.

In addition, our profound gratitude also goes to our adorable siblings who are Afro-Asian, Afro-German, Afro-Dutch, Afro-Italian, Afro-Portuguese, Afro-Hungarian, Afro-Russian, Afro-Brazilian, Afro-Spanish, Afro-Chinese, Afro-Indian and Afro- *(please fill in this gap with your own identity)*. We implore you all to ensure that you make yourselves visible, valid, and validated—the three Vs of identity struggle—wherever you may be.

Finally, if any African immigrant tells you they're not Afropolitan just because they feel it's elitist, consumerist, or Western-oriented, please refer them to our website. If they still remain unpersuaded, ask them to stop being unfortunate and bitter about the progress of other Africans. Some African immigrants don't identify as Afropolitans—they don't have to. But if they themselves, their parents, or grandparents moved from their native countries to seek sources of livelihood in other countries (African or non-African), we dare say they're inherently Afropolitans, in our humble opinion. So, stop living in denial and disavowal. Stop wasting your precious time writing useless articles and essays on blogs, in journals and newspapers, to prove why you're not Afropolitan. We don't care because those crappy articles prove nothing. Nobody is forcing you to identify as an Afropolitan. But we care that you're happy, that you're healthy, and that you have access to all the opportunities you're qualified for. We aren't interested in the politics of identity. Instead, we're engrossed in the humanity and humaneness of identity. Denying you're Afropolitan doesn't automatically make the privileges of white people available to you. So, what's your point exactly? It's like a Black person saying they're not Black. When you deny your Blackness, you worsen your Blackness.

Join us and embrace your African siblings with love and care. As a matter of fact, many African immigrants don't even know that the word

"Afropolitan" exists, but they're immigrants nonetheless. Not knowing doesn't make them less of immigrants. In fact, our active and proud members don't print that fabulous word on tote bags and T-shirts to advertise their Afropolitan identity on the streets. Nobody does such a thing because being an Afropolitan is an idea that could be both latent and obvious, existing in the minds of those who recognise it and those who don't. However, we're working hard to make that elegant word "Afropolitan" as popular and compulsory as oxygen among Africans, both immigrants and non-immigrants, so that it's not only a buzzword but also a street-common word.

To be clear, there's absolutely nothing wrong about having access to opportunities. But it's wrong and distasteful to use your privileges to oppress others. That's awful. Human beings work hard to be financially independent, and that's a privilege we all hunger after. Poverty is devastating. Please don't romanticise it. When you have an advantage, please use it to uplift others, to add value to the lives of people in your country and community. Contrariwise, when you receive the assistance of a person, privileged or not, please appreciate that generosity profusely. Appreciation encourages privileges to multiply and spread to everyone and everywhere.

At the Afropolitan Union, we're big-hearted, adoring and promoting welfarism. Taking care of all African immigrants is at the epicentre of our activities. However, we don't claim to be African immigration experts or identity studies specialists, and we're not infallible. So if you notice anything wrong about what we've said, please email us immediately before you rush to the press or social media to attack us senselessly. If you know a lot about African identity and migration, get yourself a good job at a university in Africa, not in the West, and earn an income from talking about your expertise. Stop disturbing the peace of Afropolitans!

We thank you for your time. Please forward this newsletter to anyone who is aggrieved about Afropolitans. Until we come your way again next week, keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,
The Editors,
The Afropolitan Union.

Sleeping early evening in the attic, after Madam Sharon has left the restaurant with her daughters, I hear my phone ring. When I raise my head from the pillow and see Aunty Bimbo is on the line, I swiftly grab the phone.

"Tulu, darling, I guess you must've been worried about me."

"Aunty Bimbo, it's so thoughtful of you to call at this moment."

"I can imagine. We're back from Singapore, and our medical holiday was successful and joyous. Your mum is recuperating gradually, so you've got nothing to worry about."

I heave a long-drawn sigh. "Can I talk to my mum now?"

"You can, but she's asleep, and I don't want to wake her. Her recovery has been nothing short of a miracle."

"Oh, really? What happened in Singapore? Could you please update me?"

"Nothing much, darling. Your mum underwent advanced checks using the state-of-the-art medical facilities, and all her organs have been confirmed to be good and working, although she needs time to recover fully. Her problem is much more psychological than medical."

I nod, exhaling into my phone. "Thank you so much, Aunty."

"My pleasure, darling. Look, your mother was left to feel too alone and lonely after your father's burial. Every bereaved person needs intense distractions and close monitoring. But there was nobody to distract your mother from her wild and weird and worrying thoughts. That's why her health crashed."

This means I should have done more to comfort her. "I feel guilty, Aunty," I say, close the tears. "I didn't do enough to comfort her."

"That's unnecessary regret, and it's not useful at this point, darling. You're still so young and oblivious of many things about life. I sometimes feel guilty too, as I was

too busy in my office at the time, but I'm making it up for her." She coughs. "Your mother's sickness has taught me a lesson or two about grief, so I intend subvert such occurrences in the future."

"Aunty, what do you mean?"

"I'm establishing a grief counselling centre in your father's honour. It's called Justice Okoye Foundation for Grief Management, but its services will be absolutely free to anyone who suffers the loss of a loved one." She coughs again. "Funded by me and the donations I might secure from friends and organisations I am affiliated with, the centre will be fully equipped with top-notch medical facilities, beds and other furniture, as well as highly motivated and paid staff such as counsellors, therapists, physicians, psychiatrists, even much more. The day I told your mum about this new foundation was the day she recovered fully from coma and hugged me tight, shedding profuse tears."

The delicious shock that comes from the revelation almost knocks my phone off my hand, as I sit, trembling. There's no need again questioning her motive of doing all this goodness for my family. The obvious answer is that she's simply an angel in human form. A rare angel.

"Aunty Bimbo, I'll live and die for you," I tell her with my sob-laden voice.

"Oh my God, it's my pleasure, darling. All of us will die someday. But what matters most is what we do to help others to live meaningfully." She sighs, pausing. "What have you been up to in the UK?"

My tongue goes dry, stiffens, sticking to the roof my mouth. A curious silence falls between us, a silence observant of its own discomfort. Aunty Bimbo must feel my sudden silence, waiting for me to speak up, despite my attempt to disguise it by coughing and coughing. She would never mock me if I opened up to her, but the indignity of revealing that I share an attic with red-nosed rats overwhelms me.

"Tulu, darling. Are we still connected? Is there a problem?"

"No, Aunty. It's just a cough."

"Oh, sorry. What have you been doing?"

"I've applied for my asylum, Aunty," I tell her. "With Deji's assistance on transport and training, I've also attended the main interview."

"Oh, that's great. I wish you the best of luck, darling."

As I hang up, a fat rat creeps underneath the abandoned desks, cartons, and toolboxes, and waits, staring at me. I've poisoned and killed most of these annoying

animals, but they keep coming back. Madam Sharon has said they're bred in the adjoining house, which has been abandoned for years because of the legal battle over the property. The parties in dispute are all lawyers who, sadly, are also siblings. They've abandoned their love and brotherhood, to focus on suing and countersuing each other over the ownership of the house their parents built before they died.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Folks, what do you understand by Diversity & Inclusion (D & I)?

@barypeks: If all skin demarcations are removed, D & I would be achieved.

@_ep: Diversity admits disparities; inclusion accepts and tolerates those disparities.

@ryt_kin: That means straight people understanding that nothing is ever straight.

@statistimath: Ability + disability + sexuality + Blackness + whiteness = D + I.

@egy: Blacks should stop thinking they're victims and take control of their lives.

@bab: I think that implies whites marrying Blacks, and Blacks marrying whites.

@n_tot: Good decisions, not prejudiced in any way, uphold Diversity and Inclusion.

@x_sep: If whites admit they're privileged by default, aware of it at all times, D & I.

@mafakt: Competency without discrimination means diversity and inclusion.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

At the peak of the carnival today, I leave the indoor party to observe the goings-on outside, clad in my green trousers and white shirt, the restaurant's uniform for waiters. I also double as the master of ceremonies for the occasion. The air outdoors is heavy with sounds and colours as the carnival sweeps everyone along in a boisterous procession. The dancing people sway from one side of the street to another, singing alongside the live band of dreadlocked people, British-Jamaicans on a platform performing reggae songs. *Together, together; forever together, Jah-Jah folks*. The Sunday sun is generous, pouring down its yellow warmth on everything.

The staff of the Turkish restaurant are roasting chunks of lamb on a barbecue in front of their building. The chief chef, a lavishly bearded man with a bald head, is clad in a white apron, turning each side of the meat and holding it down with tongs and prongs until it goes dry and crispy on the surface. With every turning, the meat shrieks, aromatic smoke spurting out of the grill. Then he throws the roasted, oily meat on a wooden board in front of an aproned lady who dices it into squarish pieces and sprinkles bits of powdered chili for the queuing guests.

Opposite them is the Italian restaurant working with an electric oven on rusted wheels and an array of ingredients—cheese, ham, tomato puree, mushrooms, cubed chicken breasts, peperoni, sliced onions, olive oil, and salt—all spread out on a plastic tray, for bespoke pizzas. The chef kneads the dough and rolls them on a wooden board before his assistant spreads them out on a metal tray and adds each guest's chosen ingredients on top before tossing everything into the oven. When the pizzas are done, he puts each one in a cardboard box and hands it over. On the other side of the street is the Chinese restaurant, busy with steaming noodles, woks flaming high in the back. However, one thing is common among all the chefs: they've each won the British Chef of the Year Award sometime in the past.

Above the din of the voices and music, many people are chatting and hugging and laughing with their fellow strangers.

"Oh my God," one woman says, munching her pizza. "I thought I was an outcast until I saw this festival. Divorce is better than death and depression, innit?"

"Yeah, this fete is the first of its kind, I must admit," another woman responds, after sipping from her wineglass, her neck shrivelled like a sun-dried tomato. She looks sad, like someone who takes daily shots of caffeine to revive her dying mood. Her eyes

are alert now, although her body appears tentative and skinny, her legs in flat heels, as if her body belongs here but her mind is somewhere else. Her face is wrinkled, her hair startlingly white.

"I've been divorced for five years, looking to marry again, my thirteenth attempt," the pizza-munching one says. "How many years have you been free of those penis-bearing bullies?"

"Oh, no, I've just been let out of Holloway Prison. I was convicted of manslaughter because I stabbed my ex-husband with my kitchen knife when he wanted to strangle me at home."

"Wonderful news. What went down?"

The manslaughterer sips again and rolls her eyes. "I was a professional shoplifter until those motherfuckers invented the CCTV. I was never caught, but my ex-husband demanded that I stop forthwith and wanted to do it by force."

"His loss, not yours."

"Bad riddance, actually, because I now regret the whole incident," the manslaughterer says, close to tears. "I wish he hadn't died the way he did. I could've just walked out of the marriage quietly. I no longer shoplift, having renewed my life. I can't say I'm now religious, but I'm curious about the state of my soul hereafter."

Beside them stands an aged Black woman wearing a black hat, a black suit, and a black maxi skirt. She's hunched, clutching a walking stick. Her jutting-out shoulders are worsened by her lopsided pads, one of which has slipped down her upper arm, held in place by her tight sleeve. Her silver medal of the Guild of British Conquerors (GBC) is around her neck, its pendant bulky on her chest. Sticking out of her mouth is an unlit cigarette. Given her steady frown, she appears like someone who would return a book to Waterstones and demand a refund because the book in question contains American spellings: labor for labour, ass for arse.

She stretches her neck and lights her cigarette from the one smouldering out of the mouth of a red-haired man standing nearby. He carries a thousand piercings on his nose, ears, cheeks, lips and tongue, every opening stuffed tight with an item of scary jewellery. As he kicks up his heels to the reggae music, what's gushing out of his mouth is exactly what flees from the lips of lovers at the peak of sexual intercourse: "Uh-hu, uh-hu, ah-ha, ah-ha, yes-yes-yes!" He's in high-heeled black boots, and I imagine him to be a habitual borrower who would never pay back his debts, ranking his own needs first. Whatever cash he finds in his wallet automatically becomes his property, whether

borrowed or not. He's wearing white shorts with no shirt on, his nipples also heavily bejewelled. His entire skin is wrapped up in widespread tattoos—cringe-inducing shapes and drawings that appear to make no sense, even to the owner. It strikes me how many white people want to turn black either by tanning or by tattooing. To my surprise, the GBC woman allows him to embrace her tightly.

With her cigarette lighted, she takes a long drag of it, puffs out the smoke, and swings around. She smokes until the burning stick shrinks between her fingers, irritating me. I can't explain why I'm always annoyed whenever I come across a Black person smoking in London. Maybe because I don't smoke myself. She flings the cigarette butt away, ambling towards the manslaughterer and her acquaintance who still holds her box of pizza.

Smiling, the manslaughterer takes the GBC pendant, examines it, and says, "Congratulations, Ma'am."

"Thanks, my sister," the GBC woman replies. "I got it for my services to animal husbandry. I retired a couple of years ago. You seem to admire it."

"Of course, I do," the manslaughterer replies.

"Come closer," the GBC woman says, leaning her walking stick on her hip. Having removed her hat with her left hand, she holds the pendant, pulls the whole silver chain out of her neck, and puts it around the manslaughterer's neck. "Now, it's yours."

The manslaughterer looks puzzled, eyes bulged. "Mine?"

"Yes, do whatever pleases you with it."

They both hug, smiling. Then they stand side by side as the pizza woman takes a photograph of them.

"I feel so honoured," the manslaughterer says, fiddling with the pendant on her chest, her eyes misting over with tears. "As an ex-convict, I've never been so honoured, never had it so good, miserable in the prison for many years. I deeply appreciate this."

Does this mean she's just got a GBC for killing her husband?

"My sister, our past is a scam, deceitful, and it matters nothing," the GBC woman tells her, putting on her hat and clutching her walking stick again. "As a superstitious Black woman, I believe that connecting you to this medal means your future glory is nearer than you think."

The manslaughterer flinches, her handkerchief already drenched in tears as she dabs her face.

“I wonder when our blue-blooded royals will consider honouring women who’ve escaped from the clutches of bad husbands,” the pizza woman pipes up, sounding like an Italian who has mastered English, but whose tongue still harbour the complete memory of all the men she kissed in Venice and Rome many years ago, men who jilted her.

“You mean a GBC for being a serial divorcee?” the manslaughterer asks, sniffing.

The pizza woman nods. “Yes, marital survival is also a service to humanity, innit?”

“You *might* be right,” the GBC woman says slowly. “I think there should also be a GBC for pregnancy, a GBC for childbirth, for breastfeeding, for raising a child from infancy to adulthood. They’re all services to humanity, aren’t they?”

“They are indeed,” the pizza woman says.

“Absolutely,” the ex-convict adds, still touching her new medal.

The GBC woman moseys away, joining the other animated celebrants on the other side of the fanfare. The two remaining women stand transfixed, gaping at one another. Recalling that Deji once referred to the GBC as the Gains of British Conquest, I chuckle as I swing around, returning to the restaurant.

Indoors, the hall bristles with seated guests who are clapping alongside Madam Sharon. Most people in the room have dyed hair ranging from red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet or a mixture of these colours.

The baritone of the Grand Earl of Islington, sixty-five years old, reverberates across the room with delight. He’s a man in a civil partnership with another man, after divorcing his wife. They were both married for thirty-three years and had three children together. The divorced wife is also present today, but she shares a different table with her ex-husband’s newfound man-partner, both of them chatting and smiling at one another. The Grand Earl dons a cultivated air of gentleness, like someone who has never struggled to resolve his own worries, who has lived all his life aware he’s never going to work but must be worked for. He gesticulates slowly with a fork capped with a slice of fried plantain, saying he admires sharing his table with mere workshop mechanics.

“It’s so humbling,” he admits.

Madam Sharon smiles, resplendent in her red-fitting suit and trousers. She wears a gold cardboard crown on her long wig. The tight suit makes her bosomy now, her cleavage a curved gorge of skin. Across her chest is a diagonal strip of green ribbon, like a shoulder belt, that says, "DIVORCED & DELIGHTED." Her four daughters flank her, two queens on either side, their braids rippling down their shoulders as they sit in front of the dinning audience. Their green gowns are identical, flowing but white-roped at the waist. Each queen dons a plastic tiara, coloured differently, with a slim badge on the front announcing her name in an uppercase cursive that turns the Q into a dinosaur with a big head and a never-ending tail. Queen Anne, the youngest, smiles the widest, as if she has a solution to everyone's problems. Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth giggle from time to time, but Queen Mary is demure. She's always demure. Her siblings sometimes address her as Her Royal Shyness. Before them is a huge cake, speared at the centre with a ribboned knife, ready for the festive cutting. The green-white uniformed waiters have just distributed ofada rice wrapped in green leaves to all the tables.

Working on Madam Sharon's earlier instruction, I make the first announcement to the guests using my Bri-eesh accent, "Your next meal requires that *you* must eat with *your* bare hands—no cutlery *please*."

I've been careful not to prefix my announcement with "Ladies and Gentlemen" because Madam Sharon had warned that such a gender combination could annoy some people.

"But that sounds awful," a voice echoes from Table 10. "My bare hands have never touched my mouth before, and I did my nails yesterday."

"Wash your natural hands in the bowl provided and dig in," I say, smiling. I've avoided saying "God-given hands," so as not to offend some people, too. "Eating with bare hands makes food taste better. Try it once, and you'll be convinced. The human hand is an added condiment to food. In any case, I didn't ask you to eat with your legs."

A ripple of murmurs breaks out, ending with throaty laughter around Table 5 where some officials from the British parliament are seated, nodding and smiling, ready to dine and debate with some homeless people.

"I've just done it with my naked hand, and it's so freeing," a Table 2 voice announces with joy. "I love that it breaks all the pointless protocol of knives and forks at banquets."

“True, that,” a Table 16 voice exclaims in support. “It felt like an insult at first, but now my mouth has fallen in love with my fingers. Henceforth, I’ll eat my Japanese noodles with my nude hands.”

“The rice tastes so yummy and flavourful,” a Table 20 man says, licking red palm oil off of his bejewelled fingers. “I really love the strong smell of curry. Sharon, would you mind getting me an Ibo wife to make me this kind of delicacy at home? Tell her I’m from Brazil, and I’m delightfully sexy.”

“Hello,” I say. “It’s Igbo, not Ibo. And that’s not the aroma of curry, but efu, an Igbo flavour, more deliciously pungent than curry. Some Igbo women use efu to compel their husbands to lick flat plates with their tongues.”

“Ah, thank you for steering me in the right direction,” the Brazilian tells me.

As I look at his shaggy beard like an overgrown forest, my thought sways, wondering why he calls himself sexy. Some people rate themselves too high for no good reason. Unfortunately, for him, Igbo women love tidy and well-groomed men with efficient tongues that are capable of wiping their wives’ plates at midnight in the bedroom.

In the hubbub that has engulfed the restaurant, those reluctant to try with their hands initially are now washing them to make an attempt. But many people have already unwrapped the rice, tasted the food, swallowed, and continued eating with an abiding interest in the variety of fish, beef, and chicken hidden inside the wrap.

“If I may ask, are people still interested in marriage nowadays?” a Table 9 woman asks, half her hair daubed with yellow and the other half purple. She’s the President-General of the Divorce Lawyers Association of Great Britain, sharing her table with some officials from Islington Council. “I thought we were all here to promote breakups, as marriage has become an epidemic, killing all human beings.”

“You’re right,” a voice from Table 6 agrees. “Marriage is such a heterosexual disease. Such a burden of nonsense.”

“But these days, both homosexuals and heterosexuals are also getting infected by the same marriage disease,” an entity at Table 18 says.

“That’s because human beings find it difficult to ignore the imaginary benefits of cuddling and companionship,” someone at Table 5 pipes up.

“Can’t we just be companions who cuddle without a contract that turns both straight peeps and gay chaps into miserable bugs?” a divorced baroness from

Woolwich, asks. She has snow-capped spiky hair, sitting at Table 7. "We should stop being unhappy bugs with uncomfortable rings on their fingers."

Gawping intently at the baroness are six dogs on leaches whose owner is another guest at that table. The dogs appear to desire the ofada rice. Their pink tongues hang out of their mouths, drool lingering until it hits the floor. They stare at the baroness slurping and licking her fingers with a reckless passion that leaves a chirp as each finger departs from her lips. But the owner of the dog looks lukewarm, withdrawn, doesn't talk, doesn't eat, and doesn't laugh, arms bedecked with multicoloured bracelets.

Later, after the waiters have cleared out the tables, Madam Sharon and her daughters cut the cake, holding the knife together, amid loud cheers and many congratulations. Queen Victoria winks at me and I wink back, beaming. The thrilled guests pick up the cake cubes one after another. They dance out through the door to mingle with those celebrating outdoors.

"Make sure everyone outside gets a sliver of the cake," Madam Sharon pleads with her waiters who are taking the cake around. "It's important to me. Most people out there are in ruins, but this cake can sweeten and repair their lives."

She seems to think that some human beings are frustrated cathedrals that have totally refused to come undone, tagging on to the fantasy of resurrection. By sharing the cake, she's remoulding the torn pillars of the flesh together. She delights in the collective humanity that inspires understanding across different races, tribes, and cultures. I pick up a slice of the cake from the tray and leap out of the hall, singing and dancing alongside everyone: *Together, together; for ever together, Jah-Jah folks!*

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Today, in the spirit of pan-Blackness, I said hello to my fellow Black guy on the street of London, but he refused to respond. What could be his problem?

@ditop: He might be struggling with errors and omissions of immigration.

@zox: He might be fighting the h-demons: hungry, homeless, and hopeless.

@polla: Some Black folks need to do better, at least say hi in return. Simple.

@giro: Maybe he's got an Indefinite Leave to Remain, his shoulders puffing high.

@e_gong: He needs a psychiatric attention urgently.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I call Laura today on the phone to ask about her life in Lagos as I sit upright on my sleeping mat in the attic, my legs splayed apart. I sometimes fold them together like a praying Buddha. I've been miserable without Laura. I wish I could quickly break into some urgent fortune and bring her here so that she'll be by my side at all times. And I'm worried she might also be glum about my distance from her.

"Don't worry about me, Tulu," she says. "I'm happier than you can imagine, although it's been difficult not to have you by my side and watch you exhale into my nostrils, like you always did. You know I adore that fresh mint smell of your breath."

"Now, you're about to make me cry, Laura."

"I know, Tulu. But please focus on getting enough happiness for yourself over there. You're lonely, but I'm not, because my parents and siblings are all around me. The life of a migrant is the life of an isolated grass in a vast desert."

"Oh, Laura, your serene voice has calmed down my nerves, reducing my stress. Are you in a hurry to go somewhere? I'd love to spend hours with you today. I hope you don't mind."

"Hell, no. I can stay as long as you want. I've been meaning to ask you to tell me more about the British people. How do they behave?"

I smile. "The British are lovely people, brilliant and patient. One curious thing common with the British is they always say, 'Let me have a look.' So, anytime you call to book an appointment, the person on the other end will say, 'Let me have a look at the time slots we've got. Thank you.' If you apply for a job, your potential employer will say, 'Let me have a look at your CV and get back. Thank you very much.'"

She breaks out laughing. "Ha, are those words part of their National Anthem?"

"No, Laura, no."

"Okay, please tell me more, my love."

"The British also have no problem with eating lots of fish and chips from paper containers or plastic bags, strolling along the streets—no shame attached, no questions asked whatsoever. They're such confident people. They eat what they want and not what's available. As a result, they recognise their allergies because they can afford to recognise their allergies. Of course, you know that poor and starving people can't notice food that makes them sick."

"It's a difficult thing to do in the face of starvation," she replies.

"But the British aren't like that. They glamorise their ailments so much that you want to catch the same diseases, too. Fancy disease names abound here, and I hear them spoken of like one does an adored designer dress, many of which I never heard of before."

She chuckles. "Designer diseases?"

"Precisely, Laura. You won't hear of malaria fever, yellow fever, typhoid fever, Ebola fever, and the rest of it. Those are for Africans on the continent. The diseases for whites are more colourful than that, more wearable like a tag in a posh superstore, with new names given to them, and new associations established to advocate for the sufferers."

"That's laudable," she says.

"Meanwhile," I say, "you can be sure I've been able to classify two common British allergies: the lactose-intolerant group and the gluten-indigestible group. The way they talk about their allergies might make you conclude that it was these pains that Jesus Christ heard and wept on the mountain. Maybe it was their allergies that drove them to Africa in search of a cure, but they ended up colonising our ancestors, I don't just know."

"Oh my God, Tulu. You crack you me up."

"And the British love to walk their dogs, taking good care of them with specialist vets," I tell her.

"Really, that's sounds beautiful."

"Yes, Laura, it's lovely indeed."

Then I tell her that all sorts of pets prosper here, but dogs especially. All their dogs have human names, unlike the practice in Nigeria where dogs are named some rubbish like Bingo or Shansha or Pudede. You never find that here! Even the ugliest, most skinny of the dogs in Britain are dignified with hallowed names. You'll find the Matthews, the Marks, the Lukes, the Johns, and the Juliets. And the British also love pigs, but not in the same way they admire their dogs.

"What do you mean?" she asks.

"Laura, what I mean is that the British delight in slaughtering pigs and processing the flesh into salted pork, bacon, and ham. Sometimes, I wonder why a country with so much fondness for dogs will turn their backs on pigs and cattle, massacring them for protein. Shouldn't dogs, pigs, and cattle enjoy the same level of privileges as they're all four-legged, domestic animals?"

“Wow,” she says. “Please keep this gossip coming, Tulu. I enjoy it so much.”

In the winter, I tell her, the British troop into warm pubs with their beloved dogs to chinwag, hiding their lips behind beer mugs. They mostly chatter about mundane things, like why a particular traffic light is too slow to turn green. And why Essex women think they’re the most beautiful in the entire country and so they put on excess makeup and finery when they want to visit London. And how men from northern England and Scotland are the most promiscuous, recording the highest divorce rate in the UK, because their penises are the longest in the entire country.

“Oh my God,” she bursts out and laughs. “But are those things true?”

“I can’t confirm if they’re true, Laura.”

“But shouldn’t they be backed up with some statistical evidence?”

“Ha, please stop asking me about statistical proof here. I’m not talking about university research or some PWC studies or even KPMG findings. Ahh-Ahh, I’m telling you about some title-tattle in pubs, and you’re droning on about reliable data. What have good research and accurate data done in Nigeria? Nothing. So, just listen to me. Can I continue, lovey?”

“Yes, you can, my love.”

“Alright.”

Then I inform her that the British also have challenges like murderous taxation and extortionate energy prices.

“Of course, tax and energy authorities are hated everywhere in the world,” she says.

“I concur, Laura.”

“Those things must be frustrating the lives of the large community of migrants in the UK, right?”

“Frustration from taxes and energy bills is a daily occurrence here, Babe. Nobody wants to live on the streets and freeze to death, naahh.”

I pause, taking a breath.

“Keep the conversation going, Tulu, my love.”

Besides, I tell her, Vitamin D supplement is a compulsory Christmas gift in this country because their sun is snobbish, visiting only when it pleases their gatekeeping sky. Sadly, everyone in Britain suffers from back pain, including me, and I don’t know why. And the British are lovers of nature, the beautiful British. They have green

hedges, flower gardens, clean-water fountains, bees, and birds. Some people rear mighty frogs in backyard pools.

“Can you imagine feeding frogs like babies, Laura?”

“Frogs? Do they eat them?” she asks.

“No, they’re just aquatic pets.”

“Ha, that’s funny.”

“And the British don’t even kill their mosquitoes, which can be as big as dragonflies in the summer.”

“You don’t mean it, Tulu?”

“Yes, I mean it, Laura. Nobody kills insects here. Everyone fears the wrath and fangs of these insect-rights activists who eat only vegetables and flowers as food, looking anorexically healthy.”

“Wow,” she exclaims. “Tulu, that’s super cool. Please tell me more unless you’re tired or bored.”

“Bored? My Babe, I could never get tired of you. Your voice is my cream, and you make my life a goal that is achievable. Because of you, I’ve avoided sex since I arrived here. It’s not as if the AK-47 between my thighs has no bullets ready to shoot at a woman here—in fact, my bullets spill at the moment—but cheating on you is like cheating on my own destiny. I’ll never do that.”

“Oh, that sounds so sweet and wise of you, Tulu. I’m sobbing happy tears.”

I hear her sniffling. “Please don’t cry, Babe. I really love you.”

“I love you, too. And let me assure you that your star is healthy, sparkling, and growing. Very soon, you’ll see the tangible result of your labour, your honest efforts.”

What labour? What result? In this London? If she gets a peek at my condition here, I’m sure she wouldn’t talk about those blind and hidden stars in the sky anymore. She would instead associate me with a stationary snail, concealed like a bad idea, inside my own dry shell.

“Sorry to disappoint you, Babe, but I’d like to stress again that I’m not a fan of your skewwhiff horoscopes. I’ve not seen any evidence of that here. These predictions of yours are as useful as a mad woman’s teapot filled up with sand.”

“But I’m sure of the things I see with my zodiacal eyes.”

“I’m afraid those predictions of yours are as cheap as matchsticks. Thank you very much. Don’t you understand that horoscopes are reliable as Nigerian politicians?”

She chuckles. “Alright, let’s continue discussing the lovely people of Britain.”

Then I tell her the British are debating Brexit now, whether to leave or remain as a member of the European Union. A referendum will be held later, but the arguments around it have become fierce. The promoters of Brexit complain the British jobs can no longer go round because the people from the European Union have grabbed all the juicy jobs and milked the economy dry, leaving the real McCoy with nothing.

I'm regaling her with much more when Madam Sharon's first daughter, Queen Victoria, sneaks into the attic and leans on the wall. She's smiling down at me.

"I feel sad to tell you that I have to go now and attend to an important visitor," I tell Laura.

"OK, no worries, Tulu, my precious love," she says. "We'll chat again another time."

As soon I hang up, Queen Victoria's grin grows even broader. I think she might be interested in more than who I've been talking to. Her twenty-one-year-old eyes burn with a boldness that can only spring out of a desire deep in her stomach. Since the divorce party, she's been giving me winks, smiles, and other subtle signs of affection, but I've been avoiding them. She's always asked me out whenever she's home from Cambridge. She's taken me to many parts of Central London and British monuments, including the Big Ben, the Houses of Parliament, the Westminster Abbey, and the Tower Bridge.

She always calls me a wholesome dark dude, more than handsome, and tells me my skin is a magnetic film of charcoal. All her life, she's been surrounded mostly by white boys but she says, unlike her sister who adores white boys, she doesn't find them attractive. The few Black boys she fancies in both Islington and Cambridge have either turned out to be gay or have already found other girls.

Now she repeats herself in the most gripping way, embellished with an intensive sniffing that almost disables my resistance, but I shake my head, thinking seriously about my dearest Laura.

"Tulu, I'll be utterly disappointed in you if you don't love me back, despite the signs I've shown you," she declares.

The audacity.

"I hear you," I say. "But I'm afraid I don't intend to do what you're asking of me. I'm not just interested."

"Why not?"

I shake my head. "It doesn't look right, Queen Victoria, to sleep with the daughter of my benefactor. I'm an African, and engaging in such immorality is frowned upon, especially in my village. You're an African as well, so you should be wary of such iniquity."

"Well, on the contrary, I'm Bri-eeesh."

"But you're an African first before you're British."

"I don't care about ancestral sequencing, about such an unnecessary chronology of identity. But I'd love to have a man with skin as dark as yours for myself."

"But the man doesn't have to me," I say with such vehemence in my voice that stings my larynx, determined never to do anything distasteful that devalues my treasured Laura. "You can't have me, Queen V."

She frowns, thick lines of fury dividing her forehead into creases. "Now, I can strongly confirm that your genitals are dysfunctional. You can't perform. Such a shame, a disgusting shame."

The worst insult a woman can dish out to a man is to question his sexual abilities. Henceforth, she might sneer at me and quietly laugh, erroneously thinking about the infirmity between my thighs. She might even tell her friends on the street that this man from Africa, living in her mother's restaurant, is such an impotent waif.

"Queen Victoria, so you confidently think I'm suffering from an erectile malfunction, some glitch in my groin, right?"

"Then prove me wrong. Go ahead and prove me incorrect."

I churn out a loud sigh. With the lightbulb sparkling overhead, her chocolatey face glistens with a passion that ricochets off her forehead and lands on mine. I sigh, shifting on my sleeping mat. I remain silent for a while, thinking. I believe every known factor favours her being mine: her invitatory eyes; the guts to open up to me, to choose me in the first place from among other young Black men in London. My uncommon privilege of getting the green light from someone so intelligent and beautiful—and Cambridge educated. Her posh British accent always holds me spellbound. Her tall, gorgeous frame with flesh in appropriate places, especially her tempting tits and arse. The soft miniskirt that caresses her velvety thighs, spelling permission to explore. Besides, as a veil covering a priceless gift, she might still be a virgin. A virgin! What a rare find, what a dear treasure! I lack the courage to continue refusing. It's a Sunday afternoon. The restaurant is cool and closed to customers, after all, and her mother

isn't around. With heavy regret weighing down my heart about cheating on my beloved Laura, I ask Queen Victoria to shut the attic door and come down to my sleeping mat. She lowers herself.

Later at midnight, after she's left, my phone beeps loudly, letting me know about a fresh newsletter from the Afropolitan Union.

From: editors <editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 15 May 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: SOME SUBTLE RACIAL SYNDROMES

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

The following are the likely challenges you may face as a Black immigrant in the United Kingdom, and they're so delicate and imperceptible that you may not be aware of them.

If you call or visit any establishment to make an inquiry and the white receptionist frowns or groans, wanting you to hurry up without saying it, giving you snappy answers to questions that require details, just because you're Black, please ask the person to calm down and listen to you. That's because the same receptionist does the exact opposite when attending to a white inquirer. We call this behaviour the **White Hurry-Scurry Syndrome** against Blacks. Please, raise the alarm by letting us know.

If you notice that your white boss overlooks you and doesn't listen to your complaints of exclusion during the most critical decision-making processes, report them to the highest authority of the company. This is race-induced arrogance, and we call it the **White Reductivity Syndrome**. If the authority still refuses to pay attention to you, raise the alarm by letting us know.

If your organisation is always too eager to please Black people, afraid of backlash, or is too willing to place Black people into every role,

even if they're not qualified, tell them to find more competent Black persons. We call this attitude the **White Trepidation Syndrome**. If they still refuse to comply, raise the alarm by letting us know.

Also, beware of the **White Diversion Syndrome**. For instance, if you make a strategic suggestion to your employers, they ignore it at first. But later, your proposal manifests in another adjusted form through your white colleague with the fundamentals of your earlier suggestion still intact. We also call this the **White Pilferage of Intellect**. Ensure that you're acknowledged for all your intellectual contributions. But if your employer still remains stubborn, raise the alarm by letting us know.

If you discover that your company doles out huge sums to African countries only when there's news of war, terrorism, refugees, epidemic, and starvation from the continent, ask them to fund peace efforts, education, infrastructure, and technology as well. We call this type of patronising conduct the **White Performative Salvation Syndrome**. Please, also ask them to donate to us, The Afropolitan Union, to contribute to our endeavour of making the lives of African immigrants less stressful. However, if the organisation still disregards your advice, raise the alarm by letting us know.

Keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,
The Editors,
The Afropolitan Union.

About one month later, Madam Sharon is driving us back to the restaurant in her Ford Windstar around two o'clock in the afternoon. We've just gone shopping to replenish her depleted stock of kitchen utensils, raw food, condiments, and other consumables. Sometimes, she orders some of these items online, especially the rare ones, which the major African stores in Islington don't stock. It's cheaper to shop in person, she argues often. While shopping in person, she gets to meet other Africans, letting them know about her fine restaurant and the small finance company she founded recently,

although not yet registered. She wants to keep it that way, operating underground without letting the UK financial regulators know. She gives out small loans to Africans who want to embark on small projects. She requires no collateral, but borrowers must surrender their passports and resident permits to her.

"I charge a very small *shikini* interest as long as you pay back within the agreed time, usually six months, depending on the amount you've borrowed," she once told a short woman at the African store on Hoxton Street.

The woman sized her up and down for a long, silent moment. "You sound like a Nigerian?"

"That's because I am."

"Interesting, but I'm not interested," the woman said, shaking her head.

"So should I have sounded British for you to believe I'm genuine?" Madam Sharon's voice rose sharply. "I don't understand what you mean."

The short woman hurried away, dragging her long-handled shopping basket with her.

"Can you imagine that Black dwarf talking down at me like that, eh?" Madam Sharon snapped, her eyes roving from Queen Victoria to me. "That malnourished carcass like something rescued from a refuse dump."

"No, Mum, don't talk that way," Queen Victoria said, scowling, as she selected two sacks of Poundo-Yam flour, one in each hand, from the shelf.

Madam Sharon hissed. "Why shouldn't I? Didn't you notice her breath of insolence?"

"I think if you register this loan business, people will believe you more easily," I said, my two hands on the shopping cart, ready to push.

"But she didn't decline because of the unregistered business. She didn't oblige me because I'm a Nigerian. If you don't trust a Nigerian, who else would you trust in this world, eh? Look, white people have their peculiar problems, but none of them has ever doubted my integrity. Besides, I'm the one giving out my money and will lose if the borrower runs away or dies suddenly."

I nodded. "Yes, you're right in that regard."

Now as she drives, the outgoing summer heat smoulders inside the car. I'm reading a novel where I sit at the back. Queen Victoria is in the front fiddling with her phone. Her mother rolls down the windows, telling us how she grew her restaurant business from nothing, selling food from campus to campus. She would sell at UCL on

Mondays, City University on Wednesdays, and SOAS on Fridays, until she was able to rent where she is now. After a few years, she bought the whole property.

I put the novel I'm reading on the seat and start to worry about Deji. Why hasn't he returned from Norwich? A blend of annoyance and bleak expectation unsettles me as I reflect on his long absence from London and the muteness of his phone line for the past few months. I've made calls and sent text messages, but he hasn't replied, not even once. His benefactor in Norwich could have lured him to his house, disguised as a client, and meted out the most horrible racial cruelty to him, gagging his mouth and beheading him. It's a common crime. The man could also have pawned off Deji's car on the black market. I fret because, with no trace of his lifeless body, I don't know who the benefactor is.

Deji only told me, "He's a nice white guy." But a nice guy isn't necessarily a kind guy. He could be a monster wearing a brief coat of niceness to cover up his barbarity. Informing Aunty Bimbo at this moment may result in a false alarm, which may upset her, even though she's always optimistic about life. Deji is her only child, after all. What if he later turns up at the door? Nevertheless, these months of his silence have been both perturbing and alienating. His unavailability makes me restless in a way that blurs my eyesight when I read. He's away with my suitcase full of my designer apparels and academic qualifications. I have both his Nigerian passport and mine, but he has his British one, which is more important to him. I shiver, making an effort to fend off this scratchy feeling. I pick up the novel again. As I open to my bookmarked page, Madam Sharon turns her face to me and chuckles.

"Ha, Tulu, you read too much-o," she says, now looking ahead. "Maybe they'll give you a Nobel Prize for reading."

"Mum, there's no Nobel Prize for reading," Queen Victoria pipes up, and sniggers.

"Really? Why not?"

"Besides, it's not awarded to young people," I say.

"That's a lie," Madam Sharon retorts.

"It's true, Mum," Queen Victoria says. "It's only awarded to old men and women with browned teeth, people whose eyes are going blind. Some people win the prize and die the next day or week or month or, if they're lucky, the very next year."

"Ahh-Ahh, then what's the use of winning such a big lottery when you can't live long enough to enjoy it?"

Queen Victoria bursts out laughing, planting her loving hand on her mother's shoulder and looking at her. "Mum, I really think you should go to Sweden and ask these questions."

Madam Sharon shrugs her daughter's hand away. "Leave me alone; I'm not going anywhere," she says, and laughs along.

✈

When we reach the restaurant, the "**WE'RE CLOSED**" sign is still hanging on the front door, turning customers away. Queen Victoria dashes out of the car first. When I alight, she winks at me and I wink back, both of us smiling. We quickly steal two silent kisses, holding one another's heads, before her mother climbs out. We take the items out of the boot and stow them in the storeroom.

While waiting for Madam Sharon to prepare lunch, I continue to read, sitting near the alcove, completely engrossed. From to time, I glance through the top-to-bottom glass window at the always-busy Charterhouse Street.

"Tulu, come here," Madam Sharon says suddenly, startling me.

I shudder at her tone, dropping my book on the table. My heart stops and restarts, stops again but struggles to restart a second time, so I gasp, clutching my chest. She's coming out of the kitchen, her ebony face grimacing. Queen Victora is in tow. Is Queen Victoria pregnant? This girl must have put me in trouble. Avoidable trouble. I'd insisted on condoms that Sunday, but she refused, saying she wanted the totality of my Blackness, my unalloyed masculinity, no intermediaries, no obstructions, and no diversions of pleasure.

She and her mother sit at a table. I join them, my head throbbing and splitting into pieces inside.

"Is there any problem, Madam Sharon?" I ask, and my eyes hurt.

"It's not a problem in itself, but I guess it's not going to be good news for you," she replies, her trademark smile that dimples her chubby cheeks all gone.

I snort with fear, my fingers trembling. "What is it?"

"Where's your friend, Deji?"

I sigh, but I'm not yet relieved. "To be frank, I don't know. His phone has been turned off for months."

"Tulu, I'm afraid you'll have to leave this restaurant."

"What?" Queen Victoria bursts out, her eyes popping out. "No, Mum, you can't do that! You just can't!"

"Why, Madam Sharon, why?" I ask, fidgeting. "What have I done wrong?"

"My bookkeeper suspects I'm shielding you from tax and NI contributions. Since he saw you wearing a work uniform during my divorce party, he's become such an annoying nosy parker, because he doesn't see your name on my payroll. He's questioned your role in the restaurant several times."

"Mum, why don't you sack the stupid bookkeeper instead of asking Tulu to leave," Queen Victoria suggests, glaring at her mother.

"If I sack him, he might report me to the HMRC," Madam Sharon says. "I want to continue running my restaurant in peace, and I'd hate to be accused of tax evasion. You know what? Three months after Tulu is gone, I'll sack that useless man so he won't decode the game I've played against him."

I shut my eyes, covering my face with my hands, exhaling loudly into them. My appetite flees. My stomach flattens and falls sick, and I retch. As I can't afford a flight ticket back to Lagos, I'm tempted to open up to Aunty Bimbo about my misfortune here and return to Nigeria. But my father's killers might still be prowling after my shadow in Lagos.

"Mum, can Tulu return after the bookkeeper's gone?" Queen Victoria asks.

"He can, if he so desires, but I've made an arrangement with a close friend of mine in Norwich. His name is Chike. Chike Okafor. He'll accommodate him in the meantime, and I'm sure Tulu will be comfortable in that city." She slips into a lull, seeming to sniffle. "I don't want to be embroiled in tax investigations of any kind. White people can evade taxation for many years with no consequences, but being an immigrant and Black, a perpetual suspect, I don't have that luxury."

My phone beeps. I yank it out of my pocket and see a quick text message from Queen Victoria.

—Worry not, Tulu. Norwich's like a stone's throw from Cambridge. We're still 2geda.

—OK, Queen V, I reply, relieved finally, my appetite returning.

She turns to her mum. "You shouldn't be so scared of tax investigations, Mum. We're confirmed Bri-eesh citizens."

"My dear, that's what our papers say, but your Black skin screams African, African, African, Igbo specifically. The taproot of racial acceptance and assimilation isn't on paper. It's in the subconscious of our hosts. Citizenship isn't about what's written but about what you're allowed to become."

I sigh as Norwich beckons. It'll be a bittersweet coincidence if I come across Deji on the streets of that city. Tired of engaging in more conversations, I pick up my book and climb the stairs to the attic, waiting to be called for lunch.

The next day, the thought Deji's desertion frustrates me in a very deep way and becomes so unbearable that my restless heart thuds uncontrollably, prompting a sudden headache that my paracetamol can't alleviate. I find it hard to sit still to read or eat or do every other thing I always enjoy doing. Now that I'm about to move to Norwich without any trace of him in London, I decide it's become absolutely necessary to reach out to the Afropolitan Union about his disappearance. If they make a public appeal or even inform the police about his missing, I'm sure Deji will come across the information and rush back to me from wherever he may be.

About twenty-five minutes after emailing the Afropolitan Union, one of their executives replies me.

From: Moses Tuarayi<m.tuarayi@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 17 June 2015 02:16

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: Re: DEJI WILLIAMS IS MISSING!

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

This is such distressing news about Deji Williams. Our records show he's been one of our diligent donors, and we're devastated to hear about his disappearance for such a long time. Our urgent newsletter will go out shortly to our subscribers, announcing his sudden absence. We're also contacting the police with all the information we have about him. Hopefully, he's still alive and will be found hale and hearty very soon.

In the meantime, I'd urge you to call one of our distress lines—find them on our website—to discuss all the worries and challenges you may have as a result of your friend's vanishing. Please be open about your concerns and despair. Our counsellors and therapists are always ready to help.

We thank you for writing to us about Deji Williams.

Yours sincerely,

Moses Tuarayi,

Head, Counselling & Advisory Services,

The Afropolitan Union.

NORWICH, UNITED KINGDOM

2015/2016

CHAPTER TWENTY

Departing from London has been devastating for me, but I hope Norwich bodes well. As I arrive in the city, a strange man on the train hands me a colourful flyer that says, "Love is priceless. All of us can afford it, so make a purchase today." Although I shrug, not knowing why the stranger has targeted me, I nod at the truthiness of his message.

Alighted, I hug Chike Okafor at the Norwich train station, both of us exchanging greetings and smiling. His small teeth glitter. He's darker than I am, so dark in fact that his gums are also dark. He's a short man with thickset legs and hard muscles. There's a stiffness about him that makes him look as if his joints don't move, but they do indeed, with the eagerness of an energetic boxer. He takes my small suitcase, which I bought from a charity shop in Islington, and leads me to his Honda Accord in the expansive railway parking lot. He gives the impression of a man who takes kindness seriously.

Conscious of traffic regulations, he drives me from one clean street to another. Bursting into a narrow one, he says my new accommodation is at Magpie Road. We'll soon get there, he adds, and I nod. It's 10 a.m. Norwich looks adorably antique, sitting still like a quiet man in a quiet house, aging finely. Most houses have two storeys with red bricks and roofs.

"Chike, did you build the house at Magpie Road?"

"Me? No, my wife owns it, but I'm the one looking after it because she's very old. Neither of us lives there, but we live together in her house on the other side of the city. I visit Magpie Road only when it's necessary, like when a room is up for renting or when something needs repairing in the house. My wife hates using estate agents."

"A Black woman?"

He hitches up his eyebrows. "What shall it profit a Black man to marry a Black woman in Britain and lose his British residency? No, my woman is proper British. One hundred percent white. An undiluted Norfolk babe. She's a retired firefighter."

"Does she know you're giving out one of her rooms without receiving any rent?"

"No, she doesn't, but don't worry. I'm the one in charge. She doesn't even visit there. She has so many houses that she won't be bothered about a small basement room."

I don't like going from an attic in London to a basement in Norwich. This top-to-bottom slide looks like a regression. But in the absence of an alternative, I have to

accept it. Besides, Chike's honesty is disarming. He seems to have no air of pretence around him, a matter-of-fact man of thirty-five.

About a week ago, while I was still in London, he spoke to me on the phone. He said he'd completed his Master's degree in International Development at the University of East Anglia about two years ago, but he wasn't yet working. During that phone call, I wondered how he'd become so rich within such a short time after graduation, but I didn't probe him. Now, I know he's a beneficiary of a white woman's kindness.

I wish I could come across Deji on one of these clean streets of Norwich. I hope he's still alive. I just wish, but I now understand that the life of an Afropolitan is fraught with the instability of both the body and mind. Such migrants leap from one locality to another, dashing from scene to scene, giving no one enough time to understand them, and yet they desire to be understood, and yet they complain when misunderstood. Deji often says that Afropolitans are like characters in a dream. They come into your life and depart immediately, sometimes leaving no trace or notice. They're neither friends nor foes because they're all saddled with a lot of ambition they might not even achieve, quests that resemble fantasies. Because they chase facades that hold them captive, they sometimes lose self-agency and self-esteem, which are the issues displaced persons often battle with. Migrants flee their native countries and develop spectral depictions of their personalities and hopes, such as dreaming to eat green pastas in another country, something that may not even exist. But they purposely take part in manipulating processes and systems, aiming to turn their fabricated selves and ambitions into the proud accomplishments they aspire to become. Living in another country is a marathon of ups and downs for them. Those who work, overwork themselves. Those who don't work, over-worry themselves. Unfortunately, time and again, the goals of these travellers weaken as they continue to move closer to them. They sink their mental energies into pursuing impractical dreams, even though they are uncertain about what those dreams might be, in all honesty. But as soon as they seem to have the solid shapes of their achievements in hand, something unforeseen intrudes and disrupts everything they've accomplished. They return to the very beginning and start all over again, weeping and hoping. Travelling abroad seems not to be for those with the nerves of chickens. It appears like every beneficial move in this dicey situation comes with the potential for decline and even outright loss, although the reverse may also be true. Leaving home appears to revolve around chasing goals

that one might never catch. Sadly, for me, it appears that I now embody all these attributes.

"Chike, have you by any chance met a man called Deji in this city? Chudeji Williams."

"No," he says, shaking his head. "Who is he?"

"My former guide in London. He's missing. Although I can report to the police, I'm afraid to do so because I don't want anything to entangle with my asylum situation. But his absence frustrates me."

"Be focussed, my man; don't be distracted. Let dead people bury themselves. You're in Norwich now, and your only responsibility in this fine city is to make money and survive."

I nod. "Indeed, Norwich appears to have an ambience of class, ease, and solitude."

"My guy, you're very correct. I can't even live in London for free, considering its overpopulation, its hustle and bustle. Norwich is calm, a retirement city for hardworking people."

"Yes, but it appears a little too laidback."

"I love it that way. As I told you the last time we spoke, there are lots of old women here who are either widowed or divorced, and they have plenty of money. Most British women are silently rich, and rightly so. But they all need the services of good men with nice dicks. I told you to prepare yours to make huge money for yourself, but you've refused. Luckily, the horny white women in this city don't hide or pretend because they even advertise themselves online, wearing erotic lingerie."

"All of them?"

"Widows. Single mothers. Their children have all grown and gone away, and the women are left lonely and depressed. If you play your cards right as a man in this city, you won't have financial worries. You just have to make up your mind, Tulu, as I told you before."

He laughs, but I don't laugh along. I wonder why he's repeated this, pondering his suggestion for a long while. When he broached this line of work previously on the phone, I objected with an ear-splitting scream. So he promised to find me something else that wouldn't destroy my mind and morals.

"Chike, I'm still not interested in that line of work. Thank you."

"No worries. The domestic job you're starting today should suffice."

He's now found me an undocumented job that requires no paperwork, although he regrets that I won't make as much money as working in the sex industry, servicing rich British women. Notwithstanding, I'm going to start the new job at 2 p.m. today, on the same street as my new house. I love it because I don't have to bother about transport costs.

"I'll show you the new job location when we get to Magpie Road. You always have to be punctual-o."

"I'll note down the address," I say. "But, Chike, you don't even have a British accent, and yet you've immersed yourself in the British way of life."

He laughs. "All thanks to my hardworking penis, so I don't need an accent."

He pulls up in front of my new address and takes me inside, a two-storey property with three bedrooms, in addition to the basement. One room is on the ground floor, two on the upper floor. He walks me down to the basement room and turns on the lightbulb. The floor is dotted with a brown carpet. A single bed is in the corner, and a medium-sized radiator is near the head of the bed. The mattress is comfy, two pillows on it, all the walls sparkling white, although there are tiny dots of mould on the roof. I smile with my teeth hidden and thank him, shaking his hands. I'd thought I was going to be crashing on a cold, dirty floor. He hands me two keys in a ring, for the front door and for my bedroom, and swings around to leave.

In the sitting room, we meet one of the tenants, a lady who sprouts like a ghost in front of us, telling me she's from central Europe. She looks like someone who always needs to be reminded of things important to her, otherwise she'll never remember them. Wearing tight shorts, she's even whiter than the British, I'm sure, and so white it's hard to tell her skin apart from the white radiator behind her. When I let her know I'm from Nigeria, she squints at me, the kind of eye-tapering suitable for inspecting a wristwatch with an opaque glass face. She's the one occupying the ground-floor bedroom near the sitting room.

As Chike leaves, slamming the door shut, I return to the basement to glide online and catch some sleep before leaving to start my new job.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: What's race-colour blindness? Does it exist?

@mandy-lucy: It's supposed to stop racial discrimination, but it doesn't work.

@oy: This term wrongly believes that Blacks and whites have the same privileges.

@nosi_nebs: It teaches Blacks to ignore racial injustices and move on. Rubbish!

@kate_frank: I hate being called blind just because I'm treating all races fairly.

@lady_k: Super concept. Skin colours shouldn't be considered in whatever we do.

@j_re8: The metaphor of colour doesn't work. Black & white aren't even colours.

@anieparks: Competence first, but it's utterly crazy to pretend colour blindness.

@ppy: Race-colour blindness is bullshit. Human beings notice their racial nuances.

@prof_rob: Every race is prejudiced in some way, so colour blindness is a myth.

About an hour later, my phone rings, and Laura is on the line.

"Tulu, I'm happy to announce that your living star was born some time ago, but I delayed the news. Your glory is shining brightly now. Spatial congratulations!"

I yawn. I yawn again. How's this new undocumented job of mine a glorious star in the sky, for goodness' sake? I don't ever get annoyed with Laura, so I burst out singing instead: "*Twinkle, twinkle, Laura, Laura. How I worry why you're here. How I worry why you say these things…*"

She breaks out laughing. "Stop it, Tulu. Aren't you so naughty?"

"That's because you have nothing meaningful to tell me. I have to leave for work now."

"Work, really? You work now?"

"Yes, I have a Neonatal Management & Maintenance job."

"That sounds so cool and impressive. It's a hospital job, right?"

"No, but it's within the hospitality industry."

"Fantastic. I'll call you later. Speak soon."

The Neonatal Management & Maintenance are my weasel words for babysitting and pram-pushing. There's nothing managerial about the job. However, I've infused it with the spirit of executive employment to cope with the rigours and shame of my duties. In truth and all honesty, it's not the kind of job I'm proud to announce online, definitely not Instagramable.

I ring the doorbell. The door opens, revealing a tall white woman. She's even taller than the door frame and has to bend as she listens while I identify myself. She has pure red cheeks, either a kind of make-up or her blood is trying to leak out. Her neck is stiff.

Nodding and glancing back at the wall clock, she says, “I’m calculating the percentage gain in time between your time of arrival and the scheduled time.”

When she asks me to come in and sit down, she doesn’t hold the door for me, igniting my suspicion about what kind of person she is. This very first hint of her bad manners already makes me uncomfortable. Dressed in a floral blouse and black bootcut trousers, she leads me to her sitting room.

“Chike has explained your situation, so there’s no need to go over it again,” she says, bending over the pram to button up her baby’s shirt. “Do you have a UK driving licence?”

“No, but I can drive very well.”

She rises from the pram and nods. I wonder if Chike has told her that I live on the same street as her. She’d like for us to go shopping at Farmfoods, she says, and there’s no need for further interview. She hates recruitment drama, like poring over CVs and cover letters and shortlisting and interviewing. Besides, there’s no prior experience required for the job, as long as I’m willing to work and learn along. But I have to come to her home any time she needs me during the day, from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m., all days of the week, except Sundays. She goes to work every day, and I have to take care of her six-month-old baby while she’s away. She was sceptical of leaving her baby with a stranger, but Chike assured her that no Black person would harm a white infant. It’s her first child. A professional nurse will be visiting on some days, she adds. She’ll pay me the minimum wage and in cash, weekly, with some bonus sometimes, but she’s not promising it.

“Do you believe in God?” she asks.

“Not completely, ma’am, but I’m willing to try.”

“The number of believers around the world decreased to twenty percent in 2014 from forty-five percent in the previous year, and that’s worrying.”

She talks in percentages, like a stockbroker. I wonder where she gets her figures from, what her job is. I’m surprised she’s religious and British. She asks me to hold her hand while she prays before we go out. Her tender, cream-pampered hands! Later, as I push the baby out through the door, she stands aside to watch me closely, monitoring how careful I am as I push. Outside, she teaches me how to buckle the baby into the backseat of her red BMW. I climb into the backseat too, to keep an eye on the baby.

At Farmfoods, I’m pushing the baby from the carpark towards the supermarket’s entrance. I shake my head, deflated. From driving a brand-new Range

Rover in Lagos to pushing a baby's pram in Norwich. This is not the migration budget I prepared for myself, not the glamourous image of Britain Aunty Bimbo painted for me in Lagos. Indeed, only those whose nostrils are closer to the stench of a grubby armpit can pull their faces away from the foulness of that part of the skin. But the armpit of this migration reeks of something different and weird entirely, jumping straight at my nose without giving me any earlier warning before its arrival. It cuts me deep and serrated, glorifying its own vitriol, fury, and affrontery.

However, I understand that unexpected magic can happen with this sort of discomfort, this kind of nearness to the distress of relocation, because some unpleasant smells are capable of igniting pleasant imaginations to turn the tide and bring about positive results. Let me keep pushing this pram, pushing my British aspirations forward because pushing, never pulling, is adept at actualising every imagination, bringing it to life, bringing forth concrete and wonderful outcomes.

When we finish shopping, my boss drives us back to Magpie Road. As I hop out of her car, she smiles, giving me her hand, which I take, and she shakes me vigorously. I spin around, going back towards my new basement room.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 11 September 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: ACCOMMODATION PROBLEMS FOR IMMIGRANTS

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

Searching for a home is one of the major sources of racism against Black immigrants in the United Kingdom, where some houseowners have no hearts and their estate agents have no brains. When heartlessness meets brainlessness, the result is toxic capitalism. Some landlords and their lettings agents instantly stop responding to your phone calls and emails as soon as you tell them you're from Jamaica or a country in Africa. The heartbreaks associated with such obnoxious behaviour can be disorienting for many members of our union, especially those who have just arrived in Britain. Even those who have lived here for many years still find it difficult and painful to switch from

bad accommodation to a new one just because of the unfounded prejudice against their Blackness. Accommodation gives us a vivid picture of the disgusting, racist way that white people in Britian look at Black people.

Arbitrary increases in rent are in common in Britain. Hateful of Black people's gorgeous melanin that glow from season to season, some British houseowners often hike up the rent when they intend to eject Black immigrants from their homes. This nasty bigotry immensely upsets us, distressing every immigrant.

Some shifty houseowners become absentee landlords and landladies, refusing to show up for repairs just because your skin colour is not just the one that they would like to look at. We've seen cases of terrible boilers that don't provide heating during harsh winter seasons, in rented apartments of immigrants, because the houseowners have suddenly become ghosts. Fungus attacks are prevalent where immigrants live, as we're aware of houses in which moulds have been a source of diseases, sometimes resulting in death.

British houseowners and lettings agents will ask you to provide impossible documents to satisfy their warped assessment of your personality, to prove you're a human being capable of living in a house, and end up denying you accommodation just because you're a Black immigrant. This is disgusting, and we condemn it in its entirety. We urge you to be prepared to face such horrible houseowners and agents from time to time. Please, tackle them with equanimity to preserve your mental health.

However, we must acknowledge and commend the generous hospitability of those excellent British houseowners and lettings agents who rent without giving vent to any form of discrimination. We deeply appreciate their kindness and wholesome hearts, wishing that they continue to make Britian comfortable for everyone. The United Kingdom is home for all of us, and immigrants are here to make it work

even better for everyone, irrespective of race, abhorring every shade of unfair practices against any group.

One of our duties at the Afropolitan Union is to blow the whistle gently on the UK's shameless unrecognition of diversity within the country, which sometimes turns an insensitive eye on the multiplicity of opinions, manifold philosophical leanings, the assorted orientations of culture, religion, and sexuality, as well as culinary and fashion tastes. Nobody wants to be unfairly treated, but maltreatment is an equation every immigrant must continue to battle with, solving with several means possible. This implicitly points to the fact that each group (white, Black, or brown) is capable of retaliatory violence and also calling attention to how vulnerable all races are to treatment without dignity.

We've resolved to compile a database of our members who are landlords and landladies in this country. We intend to liaise with them to shelter our homeless members for a very short time, also planning to have these Black landlords provide our members with rooms or flats with a tenancy contract that has a permanent human face, which is a Black face, a friendly face. But these are just plans for now, albeit weighty, and they remain what they are: mere ideas scribbled on our strategic development document. If you're a houseowner and willing to take part in this initiative, please do get in touch with us.

In addition, our plan is to build apartment homes in the major cities across the UK. Any immigrant who encounters a problem with accommodation can go and live in any of our rooms or flats, free of charge, for at least one year. Within this timeframe, they'll be able to find alternative accommodation and move out. In fact, we intend to build or buy cottages that can be rented to Afropolitans at reduced rents, providing a source of funding for our programmes. But we need donations for this lofty dream to come to fruition. If you could afford to donate towards these projects, we would appreciate it. Please email or call us. We would love to hear from you.

In the meantime, if you have any problem with accommodation, please reach out to us for counselling so that we can help to eradicate your nervousness. Until we come your way again next week, keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,
The Editors,
The Afropolitan Union.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It's now towards the end of September, on the kind of day that feels uncertain when summer and autumn are locked up in a kind of duel that hurts neither of them. Summer insists on continuing with its temperateness, but autumn refuses, using playful hands to squirt a cold wind on the feeble summer's sun, which in turn discharges heated air that hampers the arctic temperature.

I wish I could come across Deji on the streets of Norwich. Is he dead or alive? Nobody knows. If he's alive, what has he been doing and why has he set up his life to be such a big mystery? I want to know where he is, and I'm totally frustrated by his disappearance. In addition, my mother's poor health demoralises me deeply. I hope she'll recover very soon.

Another thing that worries me most is the deplorable state of my finances. It troubles me to think that one day I might be required to pay the UK's overpriced rent, and I won't be able to. I've told Chike about this, and he advised that working a second job wouldn't be wrong or too daunting for me, promising to help me to look round the city. For now, I have to scrape by on my earnings from the babysitting job, which is going well, and I've now done it for weeks.

My boss has been kind and courteous. What excites me most about her is that she's regular with my remuneration. She leaves my weekly wages in a white envelope on top of her television every Saturday evening. And I was right about her addiction to percentages. She works a numerate job, a senior actuary at the Norfolk-Suffolk Alliance Assurance.

Today, I've just returned from work early at 3.30 p.m. Our kitchen, as usual, has nobody using it. The people here don't ever cook. Only two of my housemates are often around. The irritating, dusty carpenter goes to his workshop every morning and comes back in the evening, smoking weed. He peeps into my pot of nsala soup, grimacing while walking to the toilet, and this annoys me to no end. The girl from central Europe is always at home, always talking on the phone. I'm yet to know what she does for a living. The third housemate, a chef working in a hotel, doesn't return home often. Once in a while, he sneaks in and slinks away, reeking of vinegar.

Alone in the kitchen, I cook beans and corn pottage with spring onions, tomatoes, spinach, curry, garlic, salmon, white onions fried with olive oil, thyme, two

Knorr cubes, and salt to taste, the ingredients I bought on my way back home. The girl from central Europe is in the sitting room, chewing blueberries. She loves her blueberries with mayonnaise sprinkled on them. Whenever I point out the anomaly of the habit, this combination, she'll say, "That's so rude." To her, every piece of advice, suggestion, or even a favour, is rude.

I watch her strutting into the kitchen. She pulls her drawer slowly open, bending down to look inside. She frowns, her eyes narrowed, as she fumbles for something either lost or forgotten. And I'm still watching her closely, judging her personality, this fine girl who orders everything she eats from online stores, food already cooked in factories. Then she lifts out a can of Hazzan Baked Beans and whacks it hard on the countertop, followed by a packet of Quattro Porridge Oats and a plastic jar of Bambam Tomato Ketchup. I wonder if she wants to cook today, even now. All the while, I'm stirring my precious beans and corn delicacy in my pot on the flame, so that the bottom doesn't burn.

"Hey, mate, these items are for you," she says. "I hope you'll enjoy them."

I shrink back in surprise.

"Ah, this is so unexpected, and I thank you exceedingly," I say, hurrying away from my steaming pot for a moment, the wooden spatula sticking out, to get hold of the wonderful goodies. "This is so generous of you, mate. Much appreciated."

"Such a pleasure to be of help."

As she twirls around, flouncing back to the sitting room, I grab the Quattro Porridge Oats first, the nylon packaging crinkling. Then I check the expiry date on the side, and 23-03-2015 is written in faded, dotted letters. This is September, so it expired about six months ago. My body stiffens, my skin prickling with anxiety. I clear my eyes of the fog gathering there and continue probing the ominous gifts. The Hazzan Baked Beans expired even earlier on **31/12/2014**, but the lettering is bolder. I gasp, and some urgent words escape from my mouth. I only hear myself mutter, "This one expired last December, nine months ago!" For the Bambam Tomato Ketchup, its italicised validity date ended on *30 June 2015*, the most recent expiration, but now it's almost the end of September. I sigh, disappointed, my heart waggling. What arrant wickedness!

"Hey, mate," I say. "Hey, mate. Are you still nearby?"

"Yeah," she answers, already stepping forward.

"These items are no longer safe for human consumption."

"Why not?"

"They've all passed their sell by dates."

"But I'm told Africans eat expired food."

I tremble. "What? So you're aware that these things are no longer edible?"

"Yes, I've been looking for a chance to donate them to needy people around here. The minute you arrived from work, I felt you should eat them, lucky you. They're all great, aren't they?"

"How dare you?" I snap, losing my breath from shock. "You're wicked, insensitive, and senseless."

She recoils, already turning red. "That's so rude, mate."

The smell of my burnt pot hits my nostrils. Rushing to turn off the gas cooker, I burst out, "Even if you'd wanted to kill me, you should've first given me a signal to prepare for the fragrant poison of *your* stupidity."

When I face her again, she's blinking rapidly like a disco light.

"You don't want the items?" she asks, straight-faced.

"You're a chemical terrorist, a crazy one at that," I roar. "You should thank your stars that this is Britain where there's a semblance of rule of law. Otherwise, I would douse you in boiling water this moment and dump your dead body inside the Wensum River or even feed your corpse to famished vultures."

"What are you even saying?"

I pause to give her an incisive glare. Doesn't she understand me? She looks surprised that I'm squirming, her eyes moistening with tears. Am I not supposed to be the person crying? Maybe I'm yet to understand how people like her interpret the world. Even my libido, which I've been saving for her, has completely perished. I can't imagine myself having sex with such a duck of cruelty.

"Go away," I say, snapping my fingers. "You're so inconsiderate, you devil."

"That's so rude."

I gather all the items and dump them into our trash can with such a force that I almost split the lid. She bursts out sobbing and swings around, rushing straight towards her bedroom. Because she might be calling the police, I yank the trash can open again and pull out the items, to serve as evidence for what she's just done. I've screamed so much that I'm panting, pains poking at the sides of my stomach. Although my hunger appears to have taken flight, I can't wait to dig into the culinary goodness inside my pot.

Eating after an outburst, to my surprise, seems to make me enjoy the food better. I've just finished gobbling up half of the pot, lounging on the couch in the sitting room, happy that no housemate is telling me that my food smells bad, even if it doesn't. This has always been my source of quarrel since I arrived here, especially with that foolish carpenter from a rustic village in Bedfordshire. He doesn't have any etiquette in his warped brain, which I think is plugged tight with decaying sawdust. He lives in the house with three starving dogs whose hairless tails stick between their bony hindlegs and backsides. The animals, as silly as their owner, always sniff at my feet whenever they troop into the house, infuriating me. The caveman from Bedfordshire sprays deodorant all over the house, grumbling about the pungent smell of my dried catfish or crayfish or stockfish.

"This house stinks," he snarls often, shutting his nose with a browned handkerchief. As a result, I've stopped cooking with dried fish altogether, resorting to only fresh salmon, although this remains an inconvenient courtesy on my part. What's the joy and value of a Nigerian like me without my assortment of dried fish?

Now, I yawn loudly, not bothered with anything, waiting for the food in my stomach to align well before I walk down to the basement to sleep. My phone rings, and Aunty Bimbo is on the line.

"Tulu, darling."

"Ha, Aunty. You must've recovered well, right?"

"Yes, I'm back to work again, but I'm at home now. Your mum wants to talk to you on video."

"That's fantastic. I can't wait."

She chortles. "But you have to wait for me to turn on the Skype on my MacBook."

"Go ahead, Aunty."

I swiftly plug in my earpiece and dash to the dining table. Sitting down, I station my phone on the table, leaning it on a candle-wax jar. I stare at the phone, waiting for the Skype signal, which comes almost instantly.

"Ah, mum, you still look so beautiful. I love you."

"Tulu, my son," she screams slowly, smiling, her voice still laden with grief and pain. "Ms. B has told me everything that happened. I hope you're well in London."

Aunty Bimbo is smiling beside her.

"No problems, Mum. I'm so happy to you see alive."

"I would've died, but God said no."

"Mum, you won't die. You'll soon return to the red carpet again."

She sighs, her head bald and slippery, her neck shrivelled with prominent veins poking out. Her cheeks sag, her eye sockets shrunken, her forehead squeezed like an oven-baked tomato with deep lines.

"That's not true, Tulu," she says. "I've lost my beauty. Can't you see? I'm now confined to a wheelchair. Your father's passing has destroyed my life."

"It hasn't, Mum, and it doesn't matter if you've lost your good looks. I still love you. A wretched life is better than a wretched death, and I'm sure your life isn't yet wretched. You'll soon recover completely."

She nods. "My everlasting gratitude goes to Ms. B. Please thank her for me."

"She's the only messiah we can see," I say.

"You've got such a fine house over there," Aunty Bimbo says, beaming. "It's obvious London does you well."

"Ah, thank you so much, Aunty. I survive."

A big, distressing lie.

"Is Deji home?"

"No, he's gone to work, not yet back this evening."

Another chunky fib.

I'm careful not to give her the impression that Deji has been missing for months, as I'm still undecided about reporting it to the police by myself, although the Afropolitan Union has already done so.

"Listen, the latest information is that your father's auditor friend has been fingered in his murder."

"Who?"

"The auditor."

"Mr. Theophilus," my mother explains.

I shrink back in shock, flabbergasted. "You mean auditor Theo? That old man who runs a one-man audit firm?"

"Yes, that's him," Aunty Bimbo says, nodding.

I shake my head. "But that can't be true."

"Well, who knows?" Aunty Bimbo says. "The information reaching us reveals he wanted your father to bring him into AtlanTel as an external auditor. But your father

turned down the request because he wanted an independent auditor who wasn't related to him in any way."

"If so, how was my dad wrong with what seemed like a good decision?"

"Of course, Mr. Theophilus must've been angry with him," Aunty Bimbo says. "Anyway, he's been apprehended, charged to court, and taken to Kirikiri Prison, while Senator Duke is still held at Ikoyi Prison."

"I can't believe Mr. Theo would have a hand in my father's brutal murder," I say. "They were very close friends, like brothers."

"Well, I think that trust is a thing with shaky wings," Aunty Bimbo says. "From your dad's phone, excavated from the murder scene by forensic investigators, they saw an incriminating message Mr. Theophilus had sent to your dad. I'm sure that either he or Senator Duke must be convicted, although all our law courts are shut at the moment. The judiciary and the entire personnel have all gone on strike again."

While she talks, my mother has even nodded off, reclining on the wheelchair, her mouth hanging open. When I let Aunty Bimbo know this, she recoils and says we must end the discussion so as not to stress my mother out because she's still taking her drugs, and most of them are really strong. Aunty Bimbo instructs her house servant to wheel my mother away to her bedroom, and I bid them farewell.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 25 September 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: IMMIGRATION: ARE ALL YOUR PRIVILEGES IN RUINS?

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

We're aware there's an African proverb from the Igbo tribe that says an impotent man can do anything to shatter his burden of childlessness, including the desperation to acquire and stockpile every vagina that claims to bring forth children. Immigrants are sometimes like childless people. They're nervous in their new conditions abroad, sometimes hopeless about achieving anything commendable, so they become reckless in their decisions. From time to time, some immigrants may show untruthful versions of themselves to their white

hosts and to those in their native countries so as to get an opportunity for reward, which arrives with a moral inconvenience, despite coming from privileged backgrounds in Africa.

From childhood to adulthood back home, you've been raised to cultivate your self-confidence with such acuity that allows you to be aware of your social status, including your financial, religious, political, economic, and cultural privileges. However, travelling away to a far-off domain to live and make a living often exposes the limits of your previous advantages. You tend to lose these sources of pride with no prior warning, leading to loneliness, frustration, and devastation. It can be jarring to watch yourself crumble under the weight of your own quandary. So, you choose not to open up to anyone perhaps because of shame or fear or ego, perhaps because of the smugness of your bygone pleasures that still deceive you, or perhaps you feel you're more than capable to deal with your migrant problems. Sadly, these are the incredible sources of your misery.

Look, your white hosts don't care, don't consider the privileges you used to enjoy in your homeland to be privileges. A common Western viewpoint is that every African immigrant is trailed by some ominous smoke of poverty from home. Some of these white people have never travelled to Africa to see all the African advances in modern medicine, science, technology and, of course, prosperity. An African proverb says that people who don't always travel assume erroneously that they're self-sufficient and those who travel far afield are hungry beggars searching for a means of livelihood.

However, we immensely appreciate those white hosts who amplify our dreams, making us realise them without suffering at all. If immigrants consider themselves seen and supported, they're likely to excel in their careers and difficult situations abroad. These immigrants often feel like they can't have a voice against their hosts who push them endlessly towards the margins. But when these hosts truly appreciate the contributions of immigrants, such validation can mean that they

have moved a little from the periphery, shifting gradually towards the centre. This would make them put themselves in a mental state in which leaving home might begin to make a whole lot of sense.

We don't intend to sound gender-biased here, but research findings at our disposal suggest that African men abroad don't often reach out for assistance. As a consequence, they're more likely to suffer from migrant dejection than African women. African men often travel overseas with a noxious self-image and nasty mannishness, traits that end up hindering their happiness and progression.

We have reports of African couples who have been at peace with each other in their native countries. However, these love birds creep into serious wranglings as soon as they settle down with their kids overseas. They quarrel daily just because the man feels he's traditionally groomed to be the family's king, often acting without any recourse to his wife. He thinks she's culturally expected (or socialised) to obtain her husband's sanction before she can reach her own conclusions abroad. Even in matters that affect only her life as a woman, her husband often compels himself to lend his opinion, otherwise trouble would brew indoors. Some collateral losses become apparent: the loss of marital communication, the disintegration of the adhesive binding the couple together, and the resentment of each other, among other add-on problems.

We'd like to urge our married members to help and forgive each other as much as they can. We wouldn't want to suggest that you do things in the 50:50 ratio because you split bills in the same ratio. Marriage doesn't work like that. Each of you has abilities the other doesn't have. Exchange your aptitudes and complement one another. You don't have to love someone in order to help them, but you have to help them to show you love them.

We thank you for your time. Until we come your way again next week, please keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,

The Editors,

The Afropolitan Union.

Later in the evening, Chike calls to say he's succeeded in finding me a second job, this time in a restaurant called The Great-Gourmand. It's in the city centre, at 82F London Street, NR1 4BT. They've agreed for me to work only on Sundays, which is their busiest day of the week, and he's excited that this doesn't interfere with my babysitting job.

"Ah, Chike, thank you so much."

"You're welcome, my guy. How's she treating you?"

"Who? My boss?"

"Yes."

"For now, not much problem from her, but she's always steeling herself whenever I'm pushing her baby in the pram, saying that I'm pushing too hard and forcibly, afraid the baby might be hurt."

"Well, she's a mother, and that's how all mothers, African and non-African, behave—overprotective and careful."

"And I'm surprised she's deeply religious. Sundays are very sacrosanct to her, wanting everyone to stay at home on that day, fasting and praying. I've never seen a more religious British person."

"No, she's not British-o," Chike says. "She's from Russia, although she has a Polish ancestry."

"You don't mean it."

"That's a fact, Tulu. Meanwhile, there are religious British people, although they're becoming few and far between because Christianity is gradually winding down in the country."

"But the woman doesn't speak English the Slavic way, those thick Russian-Polish-English sounds that place an emphatic stress at the end of every word."

"Well, she was born and trained here, a descendant of Russian refugees going back to almost three generations. Although she has a British passport, she always tells everyone that she's Russian, and she's a member of the Russian Orthodox Church."

"Oh, she's so compassionate and gentle."

Chike laughs. "Of course, I recommended her, knowing she wouldn't disappoint us."

She's so unlike Deji's former girlfriend, Dasha, from the same Russia. I thank Chike and go back to bed to cruise online and, maybe, catch some sleep afterwards.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: How can Blacks and whites share the world in peace, harmony, and equal justice, a world devoid of rancour?

@opatan: Mutual respect between Blacks and whites is absolutely necessary.

@wyt-wyse: Interracial marriages should be encouraged.

@otan: Racial education in all schools should be made compulsory everywhere.

@maksuz: Yes, the world must start teaching tolerance and acceptance, @otan.

@jaxin: America must pay $5,000,000 to each Black American—damages for slavery.

@wilze: Would that even compensate enough for the lost human lives? @jaxin

@louis_g: Let the US government start from there first, @wilze.

@trp: Britain should do the same, £5,000,000 paid to every Black British, @jaxin.

@tuc: Natives of former British colonies should be given automatic UK citizenship.

@adr: The visa system should also be abolished worldwide with immediate effect.

@z: Yes, white people invented visas to stop free movement of Black people, @adr.

@a_t: The truth is, when white people invaded Africa, they held no visas, @adr.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Great-Gourmand has a fully equipped kitchen, and my role varies from week to week. Sometimes, I'm a dishwasher, but at other times I prepare starters, making garlic bread with cheese, asparagi gratinati, olive miste, funghi all'aglio, lumache al forno, for customers. A married couple, Lorenz and Bianca, founded the restaurant way back in 2001, a five-star restaurant according to the UK's Food Standards Agency. The restaurant boasts of high customer patronage as soon as it throws its doors open for business at 2 p.m. every day, with a grand finale on Sundays. It doesn't open on Mondays.

The husband, Lorenz, has a bald patch, and he laughs when he's not supposed to and frowns when he's not supposed to. But he's a kind man, always warm and generous, who offers me a cup of coffee and delicious biscuits whenever I arrive at work. He's in charge of customer service on the palatial ground floor. His wife, Bianca, is the chief chef, endowed with auburn, glossy hair which tumbles down her back whenever she lets it out of her white headcover. She has slender hips, her nose so long and narrow it makes her sound like a mouse on a trap when she sneezes while frying onions and chilli together. She manages the affairs of the kitchen on the second floor with the seven of us kitchen staff. She gives each of us a free pizza at the close of work every Sunday evening at 11 p.m., sometimes at 11.30 p.m. But we all know that if her customers and employees were at the risk of burning in a fire and she could only save one group, she'd choose her customers. Her temper is as quick as cooking gas when it catches fire.

Last week, I was bent over the massive aluminium sink, doing dishes. It wasn't busy yet, but the restaurant was open and ready. Bianca screamed my name and her eyes popped out when she saw, through the CCTV screen on the kitchen wall, a group of four Black people walking into the restaurant downstairs.

"Tulu, come quickly, quickly," she exclaimed. "Come and see your brothers and sisters. They're even wearing Nike sneakers. How did they afford such pricey shoes?"

The two young men and two young ladies had now taken their seats around a table, each boy facing one girl, perhaps two pairs of young lovers. They were busy going through the cardboard menu in their hands, with all the confidence of youthful kings and queens in pristine T-shirts and jeans.

“Bianca, if you think they’re poor, shouldn’t you be bothered about how they’ll pay for the meals?” I asked.

She sucked her teeth, saying nothing, and craned her neck towards the screen, squinting to see the sneakers better. She continued to cringe at the live images of the Black people on the screen.

“Look, I insist that these sneakers aren’t cheap,” she gasped, “even though the people’s faces look like burned pizzas.”

She chuckled at the screen, perhaps to relieve herself of her self-induced discomfort.

“Bianca, I used to have fifty pairs of designer shoes in Nigeria.”

She swung around and puckered her ashen face, “You’re a lair, Tulu!” she yelled. “Stop lying to me. When Chike told us you were a good person, I didn’t expect to see a prevaricator. Why don’t you just shut up? You lie too much!”

My kitchen colleagues started to snigger quietly, but I could tell they were all scared as they stood hunched, busy with their duties. The lady from Argentina was sprinkling cheese into a dish of lasagne, the young man from India portioning olives of assorted colours into white dishes. Another lady from Thailand was cutting tomatoes and basils into a container in readiness for bruschetta al pomodoro and insalata caprese. Her hands seem to shake from Bianca’s outburst. Only Bianca’s junior chef, a bald-headed man, laughed out aloud while he stirred yellowed risotto on the gas cooker.

I excused myself from Bianca and returned to the sink, sulking. However, I was excited at the close of work that day to have struck up friendship with one of our regular customers, Harper Cox, a young lawyer. She invited me to her home for tea. When I got there and mentioned about Bianca and her attitude, the lawyer said I should ignore her and focus on earning an income. But if the situation became worse, I should report Bianca to her.

However, Lorenz is just the exact opposite of his wife. On the first Sunday I started this job, he’d stood downstairs, behind the stone counter in the bar section, which is full of elegantly shaped wineglasses, and asked me to introduce myself. When I said I graduated from university with a Bachelor’s degree in Banking and Finance, Bianca laughed and scratched at her eyebrows, exchanging contempt-laden glances with Lorenz. She couldn’t even hide her sneer with her thread-thin lips curved down and stretched taut. Still sniggering, she said I must be the most educated person in the

whole of Africa, and she was happy to have such a high-profile employee in their restaurant.

"That's not true," Lorenz countered her. "When I worked as a civil engineer in Botswana, most of the Africans there had doctorates, and they didn't even make any noise about their lofty achievements."

"Really?" Bianca said, recoiling.

"Yes, my assessment is that Africans are more educated than us Europeans—and even more intelligent than Asians. You can go verify this for yourself, Bianca."

I thought Bianca needed to travel far and wide, to read broadly and learn more about other people whose lives don't rotate from autumn to winter and spring and summer.

Today, Bianca has assigned me to prepare the starters. I usually do dishwashing, which I prefer because as I don't have to contend with Bianca's taunts and outbursts. Having to prepare the starters comes with her obscenities, making me anxious. I hate hearing her call me stupid when I forget to include a salami milano or a salami napoli on a dish of antipasto di carne. I've lost count of how many times she's insulted me. But, in fairness to her, she brands everyone in the kitchen stupid after each innocent mistake.

Despite weeks of training, I still find it difficult to tell artichoke and anchovy apart because they sound similar. Now, an order for a pizza napoletana has arrived, requiring artichokes as part of its many ingredients. I put everything together and pop it into the blazing oven. About three minutes later, I pull out the finished product with an oven shovel, about to take it to the food-lift for the downward journey to the waiters waiting to serve it. Bianca spots an error on the pizza and screams. I cringe.

"Tulu, what's that?" she roars. "Let me see."

"Napo-po-po-le-le-tana," I say, nervous, my mouth quivering.

I extend my hands to show her the pizza, the flat ceramic platter burning my palms. All the workers steel themselves, and the entire kitchen falls silent.

"That's wrong," she screams. "You should've used artichokes, not anchovies, not anchovies, you dickhead. How long will it take you to learn that an artichoke is a plant and an anchovy is a type of fish. Now you've spoilt the pizza napoletana. Go and do another one before the customer waits too long and complains."

"I'm so sorry, Bianca," I say. "Please forgive me."

"Put that one in your bag. You've just made pizza capricciosa for yourself."

"You say what?"

"Go home with that mistake and eat it. I know you're always hungry, after all."

I'm a little confused here, as I don't know whether she's being kind or she'll later deduct the cost of my mistake from my wages. I've heard that she neither monetises errors nor punishes her staff for them, but I fear my case might be different. Come rain or shine, I can testify that she's meticulous with staff weekly remuneration, holding it sacrosanct.

It always startles all of us whenever Bianca yells, asking us to leave if we no longer want to work. I guess she behaves this way thinking we have no option but to work for her. Time and again, she stresses there are many unemployed people in Norwich waiting to grab the opportunity in her kitchen. She hates to see us stand idle for a second resting or catching a breath after working long hours.

She keeps shrieking, "Don't stand still. Do some work. Do some work. I'm paying you by the hour. If you have nothing to do, bring in the ladder from the rear balcony and scrub the roof and the walls. Brush the stairs and mop them squeakily clean. Pour some bleach into the toilet, scrub, and flush it until it sparkles. We're not like people from the cave, or wherever else it is you sneaked out of, who don't clean and bathe. Check that your spare uniforms are spick and span. Just do something, anything. I hate to see workers standing lazily, useless in my kitchen."

Then she excuses herself, after rounds and rounds of screeching, and climbs up the attic to smoke her cigarette. To my shock, she returns later and continues to taunt and grumble as if she's a minority. She's a rare example of a white woman whose nastiness is equal in proportion to that of some Black women.

Bianca also reminds me of the white woman I met in a charity shop the other day. I'd gone there to buy one duvet, but I saw many that were so beautiful and varied in their thickness that I was unable to choose. So I asked this white woman standing beside me to help me select the one she thought best.

"Get off me right this minute," she snarled.

Then I recalled Chike warning me not to visit charity shops because the most parochial of the Brexit promoters always troop to those places to get hold of British antiques, reminiscing about the lost, old Britain. "Those are the people urging their fellow Britons to vote 'leave the European Union' when the referendum day comes," Chike told me. "Such people are deeply allergic to global understanding and opinions, with a hardcore phobia for international people and foreign news."

I later shared my ugly experience at the charity ship with the Afropolitan Union, and it became their newsletter of that week, having the bold subject: CHARITY SHOPS ARE RACISTS' SHOPS: BE WARY!

I'm grateful that the Afropolitan Union exists. The devils that confront immigrants are too notorious and ruinous for one person to counterattack. The joint efforts of many immigrants are key to surviving the shocks of bigotry. Of course, I'm aware that urinating together produces more foam than urinating alone. And, in this case, urinating together with other immigrants in the United Kingdom will produce enough foam to fill up the country's discriminatory sink, which is the clearest evidence of its imperfections, despite its achievements and laudable glories.

Often, when the Sunday business at The Great-Gourmand finally comes to a close and I go home, I'm always totally whacked to my bones, after standing up for eight hours at a stretch. The pain rips through my spine, landing in the back of my neck and head, and then, like an electric current, it shocks my ankles and feet to stupor. This isn't an ordinary pain because, as it multiplies itself each time I roll around in bed, it finds a new location in my body to attack. I lie still, all my joints stiffening, the headache unrelenting, an irritated ocean surging rough and random. I consider the pains to be unwanted migrants shoving themselves in through the backdoor to live in my body. My stomach feels as if I've swallowed the sun, as if a furnace is sitting under my abdomen. Not even paracetamol and codeine combined can tame the fiery chaos. It feels like the pain is capable of killing me, but I somehow stay alive through the night.

It's always a huge relief when my Russian employer doesn't call to say I have to come and mind her baby. If selfcare were a parent and had many children, then sleep must be the first child. So I sleep throughout the day, sometimes waking up to slalom from one online forum to another. As a tasty addition to my food and sleep, Queen Victoria often visits and goes back to Cambridge the next morning.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: What really is white privilege?

> **@davekay:** When you live without race consciousness because you're white.
>
> **@ziv:** When Blacks are prodded suspiciously & delayed at airports, but whites aren't.
>
> **@sofya:** When you think white is the default skin colour for intelligent people.
>
> **@uche_t:** The whiter you are, the wealthier you become.
>
> **@abux:**. When Black people revere white people as if they're Jesus and Virgin Mary.

@iykman: When you conclude that the most beautiful skin is white.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

My Russian employer says she is at home today and that I can take this Monday off. So I'm home resting. This afternoon, my dead father is visiting me in the basement, together with three Venusians. He's arrived clad in his usual spotless white shirt and black suit and elegant shoes. The Venusians, three women, are dressed in big, red gowns that billow on the floor, and they've smeared thick circles of white chalk around their eyes. Each woman bears a giant candle with a yellow flame that trembles as my small basement room expands and expands to accommodate the three of them. A large reddish-brown desk and three leather chairs appear at the centre of the room. My father first sits down on the middle chair, and two women flank him on either side, also sitting. They place their burning candles on the desk. One woman remains standing behind, her candle flame sparkling. I sit up on my bed, frightened, but I keep calm, watching them.

"Tulu, my son, please take me home," my father pleads.

"Dad, you're scaring me," I say. "Get out of here."

"Hear him out, please," one woman says, her voice echoing round the expanded basement like a hollow hall.

"I lost my way while returning home from work. But no matter how hard I try to find the right way home, I feel as I'm enclosed in a box, unable to escape."

"You're dead, Dad."

"No, I'm not. It's not yet my time to die."

"You were buried many-many months ago."

"That's not true. I've been travelling from one place to another, trying to get home to see you and your mother, my beloved wife. I miss her immensely. These women found me loitering along a deserted road that leads to an unending space. They're mermaids, so they took me to their dazzling homes under the oceans—the Indian Ocean, the Pacific Ocean, and the Atlantic Ocean. Each woman is the Queen of each ocean, directing the affairs of the people, animals, and plants there. They take turns to take good care of me, these women, because they say I'm a good man."

"Dad, I live in England now."

"The women told me so when I revealed I have a son whom I love to a fault. They've always known that you live in an underground room very close to the Atlantic Ocean. That's why they've brought me here. You're their neighbour."

"Dad, your presence here frightens me."

"Tulu, please follow me and take me to my mansion in Lagos, so these women can set themselves free. With you, I'm sure to see your mother again. I miss all my books on tort, evidence, criminal law, and jurisprudence. Now, my son. Let's return home and live happily again."

"No, Dad, no; you're dead," I scream, as they all vanish.

I'm rolling around, screaming on my bed in Norwich, weakened with cold. So I've just had an afternoonmare? I glance at my Rolex watch, one of the few most valuable possessions I still have, which reminds me of whom I used to be. It's 1 p.m. now, but I haven't had breakfast. I'm not even hungry.

But why did I dream about the visitors from the sea this stark afternoon? I pinch myself, hoping I'm not under a malaria-induced psychosis, but malaria doesn't exist in Britain. Hence, the afternoonmare means nothing, and I'm not so religious to be bothered with supernatural meetings. Perhaps, I've been thinking unconsciously about my dead father, and my brain is trying to play some silly pranks on me.

I'm now seated in the sitting room later in the day when my phone rings, Madam Sharon on the line. She's called me time and again since I left London, asking how I'm coping in Norwich. And if I need anything, I should let her know. Each time I ask her if Deji has come there to eat, she says no. But, if Deji is dead or missing all this while, wouldn't his mother have called him and, receiving no response, contacted me to find out why?

"My dear, Tulu," Madam Sharon says. "I received a letter this morning, addressed to you. Give me your new address in Norwich so I can put it in the post for you."

"There's no need sending it here, Madam Sharon," I say. "Open it, read, and summarise the content for me. I don't think it's anything serious."

"Alright, hold on for me."

Less than a minute later, she's gasping and screaming across the line.

"What is it, Madam?"

"This is very serious, Tulu. The Home Office has turned down your application for asylum after several months of waiting. You've been given fourteen days to leave the UK or you'll be removed by force, which means you can never reapply to come to this country in your lifetime."

I sit frozen as my breathing quickens and my eyes turn, my heart throbbing furiously. I'm dizzy for a moment before I manage to steady myself.

"Did they p-provide any reasons f-for rejecting my claim?" I ask, my voice trembling.

"Yes, give me a moment, my dear," she says, paper rustling at her end as I wait. "They say they don't have sufficient evidence that proves your life is at risk if you live in Nigeria." She exhales aloud, frantically. "They state that your father's assassination isn't enough reason for your own life to be in danger as well. I think their reason is utter rubbish. Discretionary nonsense!"

Lost and shaken, I stare unseeingly at the immaculate white wall opposite me. The words have tumbled out of Madam Sharon's mouth, and the disappointment she feels from the rejection worsens my own pain.

"What should I do next?" I ask, baffled.

"File an appeal immediately," she says. "Those people at the Home Office are only humans, capable of mistakes and sometimes confused. It's only when an immigration lawyer drags them to the appeal tribunal that they come back to their senses."

"But I can't afford a lawyer, Madam Sharon."

"You can appeal without one, but I'd advise you to contact the Afropolitan Union. They might be able to help you. This is such an immensely upsetting decision by the Home Office. But, my dear, take things easy. Do you hear me?"

I nod. "I do. Thank you so much."

"It seems I saw your friend, Deji, on my way back from shopping at Peckham yesterday, although the Afropolitan Union has been sending out a series of SOS about him regularly. I'm confused. What's going on?"

"I don't really know, Madam Sharon. But are you sure it was Deji you saw?"

"The person looked like him, all bearded and hairy, walking briskly. I was inside my car, seeing him from afar, so maybe it was the case of a doppelgänger. The man wore Deji's usual grey backpack. But it was him, I'm sure."

Did Deji desert me on purpose, cut me off like a leper? Maybe I should stop worrying about him, now that it seems he's alive. But what if he's not? Anyway, let me focus on my asylum disaster for now. Wait… Give me a second, that must have been Deji she saw. There was a time I overheard him on the phone telling someone about moving to Peckham because it's a bit affordable to live there. Hmm, that was Deji she

saw. That was Deji certainly. Madam Sharon must be correct. Deji must have read the SOS from the Afropolitan Union and ignored it. Hmm, Deji. Callous Deji. Henceforth, I must move on with my own life, but I wish him well.

“Thank you, Madam Sharon, for all the information,” I say. “Let’s wait and see what happens next regarding my asylum application.”

“Tulu, please keep your usual enthusiasm abuzz,” she says. “It’ll help you a lot during this little obstacle. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you loud and clear, Madam Sharon.”

I keep my phone on my thigh and curl up like a cat on the couch, my arms and legs softening, my mind flooded with the thoughts of my father. He was among the team of international lawyers who defended the UK government against the Abacha regime in a crude oil deal that went awry in 1995, and the UK won. My father also put his life at risk while he sought a bloodless release of British oil workers held hostage by the Niger Delta militants in 2002. The hostages were later let off unhurt. He also assisted the UK to secure a mouth-watering gas deal with Norway, a contract that has shrunk gas bills for many British households. I mentioned these hard facts during my substantive asylum interview many months ago in Croydon. I unveiled my intestines and bowel to the interviewers, to my caseworker, everything about me. Everything. Now look at this. Look at me, just look at me.

✈

Later on, out of anxiety and rage, I send a massive email, explaining all the odds and ends of my circumstances, to the Afropolitan Union. As I await their response, I reread the email, realising that it’s ridden with typos. Previously is written as “provioulys”, deny as “deyn”, asylum as “sayulm”. I hope they’ll be able to sift through these errors and understand exactly the dank state of my torment and ruin.

An hour later, they respond.

From: Harriet Hassan<h.hassan@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 7 December 2015 3:05

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: Re: DENIAL OF ASYLUM

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

I understand this is always an awful experience for our members. Our lawyers might be able to put in an appeal on your behalf as soon as you furnish us with a copy of the decision letter from the Home Office. Please send us all the documents you supplied to them earlier. Don’t worry about your immigration status and our charges. This service is at no cost to you.

As soon as we send in an appeal within the stipulated fourteen days, your stay remains legal until we receive the tribunal’s decision, which is often prolonged. Our lawyers will keep in touch with you throughout.

I look forward to hearing from you. Many thanks.

Kind regards,
Harriet Hassan,
Secretary, Legal Services,
The Afropolitan Union.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

About one week ago, I had a nasty quarrel with the godforsaken carpenter from Bedfordshire. He'd asked me to stop singing on one of those occasions I was cooking in the kitchen, the aroma of my African dish filling the house. His nasty words were too much for me to restrain from fighting. I turned the whole house upside down for him, after which he called the police. He and the central European girl complained about my polluting the house with the awful smell of my cooking and my ear-splitting African songs. But I turned the tide on them, demonstrating to the two policemen how the carpenter almost killed me, and how the central European girl too wanted to kill me with the outdated canned foods. I showed the two policemen the cans of death, after which those who reported me to the police found themselves apologising to me. The police asked them if they wanted to pursue the case. They didn't—not with the evidence of poison already in the hands of the police—and me neither.

I'd called Chike shortly afterwards, and on hearing of the encounter he said, "You really dazed them–o."

"Yes, I did, and I'm proud of myself. Discrimination and persecution often bestow Black people with a certain kind of energy and preparedness to defend themselves." I paused and sighed as what I was about to say might shock him. "Chike, I'm sorry, but I've decided to leave this house. I no longer feel comfortable here."

"Ahh-Ahh, are you afraid of white people? That guy from Bedfordshire is feeble. He's as limp and worn-out as a sun-scorched vegetable. He can't do anything to you."

"But we quarrel every day, Chike, and it's taking a toll on my mental health. I've started to feel suicidal."

"Ha, that's serious-o. Where are you going? Returning to Nigeria?"

"No, there's this beautiful white girl that comes to eat at The Great-Gourmand all the time. Her name is Harper Cox. She's working as a senior counsel in a law firm near the restaurant. We've been seeing each other for some time now in her flat on Earlham Road, and I don't just like where the friendship is heading."

"Why not?" Chike asked.

"If feel bad about breaking the oath I took with myself, the promise I made to myself to remain morally African."

"What oath, what promise? In a law court or in an African shrine?"

“You don’t just understand me, Chike. I mean I’m losing all my African ethics in Europe.”

“African ethics *kwa?* Who cares about them? Look, when you’re in Europe, you forget about Africa. When you’re in Africa, you forget about Europe. That’s how it works, my guy.”

I shook my head, downcast about forgetting Laura, but when I remembered Harper’s promise of free money and accommodation, Chike began to make some sense.

“But, Chike, why is it so easy for the women in this country to ask men for relationship and sex with no shame attached?”

“It’s the female sexual freedom being put into practice, and I love it. A woman who needs cuddles or sex in this country will sidle up to you and openly declare her needs, saying, ‘I want to be laid; I want to be laid.’ It looks like a shameless act, but it’s better than pretending and dying silently, the way most Nigerian women repress their sexual desires and end up in aggressive depression.” He sneezed. “Tulu, if any woman offers you free, casual sex in this nation, take it boldly. Do you hear me?”

“Yes, Chike.”

I recalled that before I managed to persuade Laura to be my lover, she’d evaded me for months and months on end, questioning my entreaties and doubting my fondness towards her. She squeezed lots of gifts out of me, and it took my persistent diplomacy just to convince her to agree to our first date. She proved so extremely tough that when she subsequently fell in love with me, I felt like I’d won a rare prize. She told me she’d had to confirm that I was indeed deeply in love, not merely infatuated about her, before opening up her body, heart, and soul for me to enter.

But here in Britain, I’ve been greeted with the exact opposite from the women here, and this contrast shocks me. However, I often tend to believe Chike. I take him to be a stimulus that could spur me towards self-actualisation in Britain, using his behaviour and achievements as an old immigrant to be models of what I, a recent immigrant, can aspire to, despite the prevailing obstacles.

“Go and enjoy yourself, my guy,” he said that day on the phone. “There are no gods or morality police in Britian or even the entire Europe to punish you. Forget everything about Africa while you live here.”

“But that’s what I find very difficult to do. I can’t do away with my homeland, and I regret that I’m becoming loose with myself.”

“Loose *kwa?* Tulu, you’re such a young and handsome man. Those penetrating white eyeballs of yours that sparkle out of your dark face make you irresistible to those young British girls. Regret nothing, my guy. Do you force yourself on them?”

“No. I’ll never do that!”

“Then go ahead and do the job men are created to do for women, to women. There’s no shrine taboo here in Britian. No Sango or Amadioha or other wicked deities to punish you for spreading sexual happiness to those who deserve it. Have you cut Harper’s flower already?”

“Yes, only once. I forced myself to do it because I didn’t want to feel less of a man. But, actually, I didn’t relish the experience.”

Harper appeared like the beginning of my movement towards some ease of life after so much difficulties in Britain, and giving her what she wanted from me felt like a suitable price to pay for becoming a stranger to myself.

Chike screamed, “Tulu, that was so quick. You’re super sharp-o.”

“Chike, I didn’t enjoy it that much, feeling worthless to myself like garbage. I bore the burden of shame and irresponsibility in my heart. My brain seemed to have felt deceptively happy, but my heart was utterly gloomy.”

He laughed. “You talk like a lawyer-o. Honestly, you’re getting too logical and philosophical with these things, Tulu, my guy. Is your mother or your grandfather a Queen’s Counsel? What have your heart and brain got to do with the thing that dangles between your thighs, eh?” He grunted and yawned. “Look, this weather is very cold, so you need all the warmth you can get from all the available sources, from women, from radiators, from the sun. Please continue cutting her flower whenever she offers you. I hope her white flower is very sweet. Was she delicious? Please tell me about your very first experience with a white girl. It’s always a peculiar occasion, a special treat.”

I exhaled aloud, feeling abashed about his question that sounded deviant. However, I said, “Yes, she was very delicious and warm, Chike, and it was so smooth and easy to cut her flower. She’s not a virgin, but she tasted like one. However, I felt lost and lifeless and nervous the whole time it lasted. I hate to engage in flings.”

“That was no fling, Tulu. Get over yourself, young man.” He sneezed. “Don’t worry, my guy. Stop judging yourself so harshly. Next time, you’ll feel better and less emotional, having listened to my good advice. Do you want to go there and live instead?”

"Yes, she's been begging me to come and stay with her because she's always lonely after work, and I've been doing some *shakara* for her, saying I don't want the place. She says I can even stop working altogether and she'll take care of all my financial needs, provided I agree to come and keep her company all night."

"Ahh-Ahh, big congrats, that's so good," Chike said. "You're old enough to know what's best for you. Congrats again."

"Ha, Chike, why those congrats? This isn't an achievement, naahh."

"It is, an astonishing one, in fact," he said. "Don't you know how much it means for a white person to accommodate you in this difficult country, rent free?"

Before I eventually moved in with Harper, I'd sent a text message to Queen Victoria, lying to her that I'd rented my new apartment at 195B Earlham Road, NR2 5HT. She was ecstatic. I hoped she wouldn't find out about Harper Cox, about this risky decision of mine. When I kept my phone down, I mourned the loss of my personality, disbelieving who this country was turning me into. That day, I concluded that being entangled with two British women was an immoral thing to do.

However, as I think about it this moment, Harper is only for my ongoing convenience in the face of what seems to be insurmountable obstacles. Queen Victoria is for me to keep proving my manliness to a royalty that would never turn me into a respectable prince. I sigh and tilt back on the couch in the sitting room, scrolling through the latest newsletter from the Afropolitan Union.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 27 November 2015 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: HOW PEOPLE DESCRIBE YOU MATTERS A LOT!

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

When white people travel to Africa to work as professional doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants, pharmacists, university professors, among others, they're described as expatriates. They're welcomed and celebrated with all sorts of privileges and offered flashy cars, plush offices, tastefully furnished mansions, respect, and adoration. They're paid hugely in pounds and dollars. Experts. Expats. In other words,

they're people who have special skills needed for the development of any society. However, when African professional doctors, nurses, engineers, accountants, pharmacists, university professors, among others, travel to work in Europe, America, Asia, or elsewhere, they're daubed as immigrants, people who are desperate for a source of livelihood. In other words, they're paupers who are jobless, scattering all over the world like starving birds to disturb and choke their hosts.

To be called an expatriate is to be told your homeland is rich and prestigious, having an excess supply of experts for exports to other less fortunate countries. But to be called an immigrant is to be told your homeland is in utter ruins, needing foreign aid, that you're forced to free, that you're in exile, lacking a home and self-esteem, and you're stripped of any appearance of prestige.

Africans abroad are often described as "Africans in diaspora" and they're always excited to be called so. Diaspora, as it relates to Black Africans, isn't an innocent word. Diaspora is a word we think is loosely rooted in slavery and reeks of subjugation—Africans in slavery. After the abolition of slave trade, former slaves were obliquely called "Africans in diaspora" to depict Blacks still scattered across America, Britain, and the Caribbean, in cotton farms, cornfield, and around company fences looking for opportunities—people without roots. Have you ever heard of Europeans in diaspora, Americans in diaspora or Britons in diaspora? Your answer is as good as ours. Does it mean these people don't migrate at all to live elsewhere? This is one of the reasons why we feel that diaspora is subtly consorted with powerlessness, rootlessness, and hopelessness. Even if those white diasporas exist, they carry positive meanings, associated with uplifting definitions and reverential connotations. Americans and Britons travel around the world like wealthy tourists with their dignity intact, without hoisting the onerous weight of diaspora on their shoulders.

At the Afropolitan Union, diaspora is all Greek to us, in its etymology, meaning, and intent. Although in the Greek language, it

means a dispersal, a scattering, but its meaning and intent are dehumanising for Black people. A dispersed race. A scattered race. A race widespread in crime around the world due to their abject lack. This is why we suspect diaspora, as most prisons in Europe and America are unjustly overpopulated by people of Black diaspora, why we prefer to be called Afropolitans because we're visible, dynamic and knowledgeable. We're experts, expatriates, belonging everywhere and developing everywhere, not tied to any form of racial-slave colouring or shackles. Our wings are wide and well-resourced to take on any challenges. Hopefully, in the future, African travellers will no longer be called immigrants or diasporans, whether they're skilled, privileged, educated, civilised, or not. We shall be called Afropolitans, and that name will live permanently in every heart, sticking to all lips.

People shouldn't be disparaged because of their places of origin. Prejudice is revolting, and we condemn it in its totality. Nobody chose to be Black or white or brown. Nobody chose to be male or female or British or American or Ethiopian. No human being had a chance to pick their gender, nationality, religion, or sexuality. In fact, no human being chose to be born. These things are all choices nature shoved at us, and none of us had an opportunity to refuse or even question them. So why should they stand as the recurring sources of human suffering, discriminations, and destructions, why? These things shouldn't matter at all.

Finally, we hear that a new classification of skin has emerged in the world of racism disorder. It's called the Vantablack, and it ranks lower than Black. How true is this? Please email us. We're curious to know because the racial madness doesn't seem to abate anytime soon.

Also email us if you notice anything incorrect with our assertions in this newsletter—we're not infallible. And until we come your way again next week, please keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,

The Editors,

The Afropolitan Union.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I've now spent exciting few weeks with Harper already. Today, it's a wintry Saturday afternoon, so both of us are inside her flat in the terraced house on Earlham Road. The Norwich cold snatches our lungs from our chests and does not bring them back, but our heater is on full blast, so we're as warm as chicks under the feathers of a motherly hen. I'm braiding her blonde hair into ridges of African cornrows, because she loves them. They'll confine her rebellious long hair to an obedient beauty until next Monday when I'll unknot the cornrows early in the morning before she goes to work, and her hair will flail behind her shoulders and reach the middle of her back. Both of us have become lovey-dovey butterflies in this city.

As I stick little plastic red roses onto some of Harper's cornrow ridges, I hail her like a royalty, "Barrister Harper, you look like an African queen."

She sits calmly on the couch and smiles, looking into a mirror. "Thank you so much, my darling Tulu. But barrister isn't a title, and shouldn't be a title."

"Really? Nigerian lawyers include 'Barrister' and 'ESQ' in their names because they feel these titles bring them respect and prestige. So you'll always hear Nigerians referring to a lawyer like you as Barrister Harper Cox, ESQ."

She bursts into laughter, picking a strand of hair from her miniskirt. "I doubt they're any good at law then."

Saturdays are for shopping, so she picks up her car key from the dining table. She'll drive to the shops in the city centre and stuff the car boot with packets of frozen chicken, beef and pork, plastic-wrapped beetroots and kiwis, noodles, packs of oranges, apples and pears, biscuits, pizza, ice-creams, oats, and baking ingredients. I often shop with her but not today because it's my birthday. I'll be making pancakes and muffins while she's out.

"Darling Tulu, what special gift should I get you for your birthday?" she asks, putting on her winter coat.

"Oh, I'd love you to continue giving me that very warm *ọtụ* of yours," I say.

"What the heck is that?" she asks, narrowing her brows. "*Ọtụ?*"

I burst out laughing. "It's the African watermelon, pure red in the middle when poked open, as sweet as honey, but you may not find it in this city. Anyway, just get me anything you fancy."

She shrugs. "I'll surprise you then." She zips up her coat. "See you later."

"I love you so much, Harper," I gush.

She blows me a kiss and hurries out of the house, shutting the door. My head swells with pride because I've become that hawk that has found everything it needs in the sky and refuses to swoop to the ground. I've begun to fly high in Britain. She's been my best acquisition since I arrived from London. I always clean her fingernails and toenails, and paint varnish on them. She kisses me every time with a slurping sound. Flecks of sunlight seem to glint on the freshness of her forehead and on the tip of her pointy nose. A gold ring squats on the wing of the nose. I call her Princess Harper because of the nose ring, which my people associate with royalty, exposure, achievement, and class. I like that we're the same age and bookish. She doesn't love historical novels, as I do, preferring Sci-Fi. She admires the white chaos of winter, the season for our warm hugs in this nimble city of Norwich. Her eyes are so blue that they remind me of the Atlantic Ocean. She was born in Norwich but was raised in Sydney, and went to university in New York where she studied law. I've revealed my ongoing asylum appeal to her, and she's promised to look into it. However, she believes the Afropolitan Union lawyers would do a good job, and she must wait for the outcome before she could step in.

Her Norfolk accent is always a melody in my ears, soothing the veins in my head. When I first arrived in Norwich, it was difficult to comprehend this accent. It stood out from other British accents, sounding more like a lazy drawl, with vowels running together like melted butter. Chike argues it's the most baffling of all British accents.

I tried to learn the Norfolk accent because I wanted to be accepted by the white people in this city, but mastering it was difficult. It required an enormous amount of energy, focus, and concentration to be done convincingly—with my tongue and teeth clashing together. The accent dried up my saliva every time I spoke, causing my throat to ache. But I encouraged myself not to abandon the project midway, even if I sounded like a sick man vomiting food.

Today, despite my earlier difficulties, I breathe, voice, chew, and swallow the Norfolk accent, rolling my tongue and flexing my lips in style. *Hellouu, I'm Tulu. Come and drin' bare in moi 'ouse righ' hair.* It would take a very attentive ear to understand that I've actually said, "Hello, I'm Tulu. Come and drink beer in my house right here." But that's how we Nigerians behave, apprentice dancers who skip and twirl and swing better than the professionals. In any case, a fowl stands only on one leg, so unsure of

its place when it arrives new but begins to defecate into pots and pans after some time. When I first I arrived in this city, I stood at the periphery, frightened, but now I occupy the heartbeat of the city.

I'm mixing flour, yeast, nutmeg and other dry ingredients in a bowl on the kitchen countertop. I add eggs, milk, butter, vanilla flavour and other wet ingredients into the bowl and continue mixing, the smell of vanilla filling my nostrils with baking goodness. My phone rings.

"Aunty Bimbo, great to speak to you again."

"Ah, Tulu, darling. There's so much excitement in your voice, so unlike before."

"Aunty, things seem to be looking up for me now."

"Oh my God, what's the secret? Maybe some good vibes from your beloved Laura. You're a lucky chap, aren't you?"

I roll my eyes hearing about Laura. When I spoke to her yesterday, assuring her of my love, she crept into her usual horoscopic fantasy again, saying my star, carried in her palms, sparkles with life and delight. I hung up instantly, bored of such a fantasy. With Harper Cox and Queen Victoria around me here in the UK, I've even started to avoid Laura's calls, my interest waning in a relationship separated by thousands of kilometres.

"There's no secret, Aunty Bimbo, but I live in comfort at the moment, and I don't overthink anymore."

"Overthink? Is that the new buzzword for young people in the UK now? Deji also used it yesterday and I thought he was trying to sound—"

"Wait, Aunty, wait! You mean Deji spoke to you?"

I freeze, my neck buckling, goosebumps sprouting out of my skin.

"We were on the phone for almost an hour yesterday."

"You mean Deji is still alive?"

"Tulu, darling, are you alright? What kind of question is that? Deji told me yesterday that you were asleep in his bedroom."

"Aunty, please don't be annoyed with me, but for how long have you been speaking with Deji. Since when? How many months?"

"Now, I'm sure something is amiss with you, Tulu. Should I get you on Skype, darling. Let me see your face to assure myself of your mental and physical health, should I?"

I stare up at the ceiling, horrified, my hands shaking, and my interest in the cake and pancake wanes. There's a sudden sting in my eyes, like a prickle of hot chilli, dizzying me. I wish Harper were around to take over this baking from me, so that I could lie in bed and calm my aching stomach and trundling heart. So did Deji simply sneak out on me on purpose?

"Aunty, for the past seven months or even more, I haven't set eyes on Deji. I left London a long time ago. I live in Norwich, Norfolk now."

"Norwich what? Are you kidding me?"

"I kid you not, Aunty. I called him several times, but his phone was always turned off. Could you please send me the phone number he's been calling you with?"

She asks me to hold on, my heart palpitating.

"Forwarded now," she says, about one minute later. "Have you received it, darling?"

"Yes, Aunty, but this number is new, and I don't have it."

"That's right, darling. He passed it on to me a long time ago, saying his old number had problems. And since then, we've been chatting on the phone almost every day."

I roar with annoyance. "Aunty, with due respect to your person and amiable personality, but Deji is an Oxford-educated idiot, a pathological liar! Your son is a fraud. In fact, to put it mildly, Aunty, what you have in London isn't a son but an unreliable trickster, a scumbag!"

"What's going on with you both?" she asks, huffing, the first time I've seen her so agitated. "I thought there was peace between you both."

"Peace? I don't know about peace, Aunty, but I'll never forgive him abandoning me in London the way he did. Never!"

"He abandoned you? Why didn't you tell me you couldn't reach him?"

"Aunty, it's a long story, and I was afraid of raising a false alarm."

She exclaims, saying she's going to call Deji right away, scold him, and get right back to me. But I've already dumped him in my mind's garbage bin, and I'll never have anything to do with him as long as I live. I get off the phone, panting from irritation, my eyeballs still tingling with a sensation that feels like I want to burst out crying. I hold it in.

A buzz on my phone about thirty minutes later, and I glance at it. A text message from Queen Victoria. She will be here at 7 a.m. tomorrow, so she can spend a lot of

time with me. I tell myself that I have to make sure Harper has left for work first. I delete the message immediately and continue with my baking. I pop the bigger cake and the muffins into the oven. Exhausted, I shuffle to the sitting room to sit and rest my feet, awaiting Harper's return and my birthday surprise from her.

Distracting myself with a previous newsletter from the Afropolitan Union, I recline on the couch, reading about a working-class mother in Aberdeen who needs help urgently. Her daughter, seven-year-old Daniella, wrote a disturbing poem and said she would like to have blonde hair and aquamarine eyes. She's threatened to kill herself and her mother if those needs aren't met within a very short time. Daniella coats herself all over with white powder whenever she returns home from school, weeping and blaming her Ghanaian mother for giving birth to her with such unsightly Black skin. She wants to be white instead. The Afropolitan Union's counsellors have invited the mother and daughter to their Edinburgh suboffice, but the AU wants to pull suggestions together from all members. They want me to send my thoughts on how to save Daniella and repair her damaged mind.

From: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Sent: 15 December 2015 1:09

To: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Subject: Re: PLEASE HELP US TO SAVE DANIELLA!

Dear Editors,

You should find out from Daniella's parents how many times they have travelled with this girl to their homeland in Africa. Her psychological volatility is often typical of children struggling with intimidated development of the mind and body abroad as they feel isolated and different. Daniella seems to have been dumped into a white majority for far too long, prompting her to feel alienated because her skin looks rare among a sea of whites.

Her parents must ensure they take her home to Ghana regularly so that she can see millions of other people who are Black and feeling gorgeous about it. Witnessing the joy and self-esteem of others with

similar skin will help her to normalise her feeling of being Black, and she'll begin to feel proud of herself.

At present, she's forcing herself to become an adult in disavowal. We all know that adulthood itself is such an unavoidable scam laced with disappointments. So I feel this girl is wrestling with the shocks of forced adulthood. Daniella should be encouraged and supported to enjoy some of her childhood in Ghana and leave the Scottish adulthood for adults.

Africans abroad should endeavour to send their children to their villages in Africa frequently, so that their western-influenced minds can acquire some native sense and intelligence. These children should be motivated to take part in cultural festivities and encouraged to learn indigenous African languages. It's self-demeaning and counterproductive to keep African children abroad permanently. It turns their minds upside down.

Many thanks.

Yours faithfully,
Tulugo Okoye.

Harper returns home hours later, her face an isosceles triangle of charm, smoothness, and majesty. I unload the shopping from the boot of her car, and we arrange them on the shelves and cupboards in the kitchen. I haven't seen anything special she's purchased for me. I expect a new shirt or a new pair of sneakers or jeans. I'm eating ice-cream with her, both of us sitting on the couch, when I remind her.

"Oh, my goodness, just a second," she exclaims, rising. "Your gift is in the car, in a carton on the front seat."

I chuckle. "Ah, how could you have forgotten such a precious birthday gift?"

She bolts out of the sitting room.

When she hurries back, she's cuddling a black cat. I yowl in horror, shrinking away to avoid looking at the animal. My stomach lurches up and down, so I dash into the toilet to puke, shivering. She comes into the toilet, too, still clutching the fluffy

black animal, the reason for my fright. I shriek again, flattening my face against the wall and telling her to leave me alone.

"Tulu, what's suddenly wrong with you?" she yells out, frowning. "I bought us a pet as your birthday gift."

"God forbid!" I say. "Cats are witches."

"Cats don't harm, darling. Calm down."

"Go away!"

She scuttles back to the sitting room. I'm gasping. My skin explodes with rashes and goose bumps, my heart pounding in my chest. I step out of the toilet and find her lolling back on the couch with the black cat on her thighs. She strokes its back and scratches its head and smooths its tail. When I make to tiptoe into the bedroom, scared stiff, hugging myself, she calls me back.

"I love cats, Tulu," she says. "Please compose yourself."

"I'd have preferred a dog instead, a chubby puppy. If I had a gun, I'd shoot this cat dead."

"You can't be so cruel," she yelps.

In my ancestral village in Nigeria, cats are believed to be purveyors of bad luck, so people lynch them. Pregnant women avoid them in case unborn babies develop whiskers and yellow eyes and show other feline behaviour like meowing and jumping, stealing dried fish and chasing rats. It's generally believed that witches disguise themselves as cats at midnight and kill new-born babies. My aunt, Sister Payshay, once told me that, apart from our family's curse, a bewitching cat in the village was also responsible for her not finding a husband. Although I still find it difficult to believe her, I suffer from ailurophobia myself. I was born with the condition, so I can't help it. Whenever I travel to my village, I watch out for the trails of cat's paws on the dirt roads and blot them out with my feet.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Weeks later, Harper gives the cat a name, Cathy. My imagination fails to understand why. She feeds Cathy milk, cheese and kibble and gross wet meaty jelly, replenishing these stocks when they run out. She sprinkles sugar into Cathy's tea, and I wonder if the cat knows the taste of sugar. She dresses its cot in the attic with warm clothing and brushes its fur every day before going to work and after returning. She's bought brushes of different sorts for Cathy. I wonder if she's already procured a British passport for Cathy, just in case she wants to travel abroad with the feline. I'm puzzled, wondering what's gone wrong with her.

Today, a frosty Tuesday, Cathy falls sick and refuses to eat, instead lying silent on the couch. Harper starts to sob. I see her tears wet her cheeks and think she's being ridiculous. She calls her office and informs them that her cat is sick, and they let her be absent from work. Harper gets dressed and tells me she's going to take the cat to a veterinarian. She drives away with it in her car. To distract myself from wondering and worrying too much, I pick up my phone and watch YouTube videos I've been saving.

My phone rings some minutes later, and it's Aunty Bimbo on the line again.

"Tulu, darling. Has Deji reached out to you since the last time you and I spoke?"

"Yes, Aunty. He's been calling me with both his old and new phone numbers, but I've refused to pick up the calls."

"Oh, I totally understand how bad you feel, darling. I've scolded him intensely, and he apologised, saying that he deserted you because he was too poor to provide for your needs. He admitted he didn't travel to Norwich at all, that he moved to another part of London to live alone. Peckham, I think."

"Really?" I burst out. "Aunty, really?"

"Yes, really, but I've blamed him for not letting me know about his dire financial straits. It even surprises me that my own son has an enormous toxic ego of men that wouldn't let him talk to his mother about his worries. But you know what, Tulu, darling? I'd advise that you embrace him back."

"I can never do that, Aunty Bimbo. Never! I'd rather kiss a cat than call Deji my friend again."

"What? Has the damage become so irreparable?"

"Yes, you heard me right, Aunty. I'd rather befriend a pig than get closer to Deji again. Your son is such a filthy coward, even worse than that."

"But you can't be enemies."

"That's precisely what I want."

"I see," she drawls. "I think it's high time I told the both of you a few weighty things about who you really are."

"Deji and I are nothing but foes who look daggers at one another."

She sighs heavily. "Alright, I'm going for an editorial meeting with my staff in the next few minutes, but I'll call you back on Skype at three o'clock this afternoon."

About two hours later, Harper returns home with the cat and starts singing Michael Bolton's song, *Go the Distance*, and dancing in the sitting room. She tells me the animal has been diagnosed with flu and the doctor commended her for bringing it so quickly to the hospital, otherwise it might have died. When she rustles a piece of white paper out of her jeans pocket and shows me, I fail to understand what it's meant for, refusing to touch it.

"What's this?" I ask, frowning and pointing to the narrow slip.

"The receipt," she says, a pleased expression on her face.

"Receipt for what?"

"The fee for the vet," she says, flashing me a toothy smile.

I take the paper and stare at £95.

"This is too expensive. It always puzzles me why you people are so obsessed with animals," I roar. "Cats, dogs, rabbits, horses, armadillo, hedgehog, hamster. I can't understand what special advantages pets offer to humans, apart from skipping around the house and pooing everywhere and messing around."

"This is only ninety-five quid, Tulu," she exclaims, cuddling the cat to her chest.

When I used to work at The Great-Gourmand, tolerating Bianca's slurs and expletives, £95 could be the equivalent of the wages I earned standing and working for more than fourteen busy hours.

"That's a ridiculous amount to treat a mere cat," I snarl.

She tuts. "As if I care."

I push the paper back into her hand and wrap my arms around my chest, trying to calm down. It's her money, I tell myself, and she's at liberty to spend it the way she wishes. She storms towards the bedroom, taking the cat along with her and frowning.

Aunty Bimbo's Skype notice wakes me up on the couch at exactly 3 p.m. Her face glistens on my phone screen, smiling, and her bright-red lipstick brightens up my sour mood.

"Aunty, I don't want to disrespect you, but please don't push me so hard on this. I've told you I'm no longer interested in talking about Deji."

"Well, darling, it might interest you to learn that you and Deji share the same blood. I've already told Deji about it."

"Blood? What do you mean?"

"You *are* brothers."

"Brothers? How?"

"Your father was also Deji's father."

An organ explodes inside my chest, throbbing hard. "Meaning what?"

"Well, I had sex with *your* father, Justice Okoye, at Cambridge and gave birth to my son, Deji."

I recoil in shock, befuddled. "Aunty, I'm struggling to make sense of this."

"Alright, let me explain, darling. Your dad and I met at Cambridge when he came for his LLM while I was completing my undergraduate degree in English."

"My father cheated on my mum with you?"

"Not at all, darling. At that time, he hadn't married her, but they were seriously courting. Your mum was still a typist in his law firm in Lagos. I didn't really fall in love with him, to be honest. I only needed a child, and he made it happen."

"I can't believe this, Aunty."

"Should I organise a DNA test? I'll fly into London tomorrow, and we'll get it done."

I pause, trembling on the couch, but Aunty Bimbo still keeps smiling at me as if she hasn't already shattered my idea of who I thought I was—an only child.

"Aunty, does my mum know about this?"

"Yes, darling," she says, nodding, her neck as straight and confident as a scientific fact. "But not at first. It was sometime later that your father, either out of good or guilty conscience, told her about it, and she didn't make trouble. Your mother lovingly kept the peace, unlike a typical Lagos woman who would've raised the roof calling me a side-chick or a husband snatcher. And that's one reason why I've sworn to keep her alive. Your mother kept my secret and got my precious care in return."

I break out in tears. “Aunty, this is too much for me. We must end this discussion now. Please give me some time to process this.”

“Fair enough, darling. Go for a walk and clear your head and be happy. Have I made myself clear?”

“Yes,” I say, with a dazed nod and watery eyes.

I feel my misery returning, and I consider going to Wensum River and take a fatal plunge. But every minute of the day, some officers in colourful boats guard the river up and down, as if it contains diamonds as expensive as Queen Elizabeth’s precious tiara.

Hmm, Deji is my brother? Which means there are deposits of genetic materials that we both share, coming from Justice Obiora Okoye? If Justice Obiora Okoye had a hereditary disease, it would afflict both Deji and me. What a shock! Blood isn’t only thicker than water but also thicker than the knowledge that we share the same fatherly gene. Does this gene contain the atoms of forgiveness? I don’t know, to be honest. Deji deserted me foolishly, ignorantly, but should I also forgive him foolishly, ignorantly? I’m conflicted, but I’m willing to give him a chance earn my stupid and ignorant forgiveness or leave him to keep wallowing in his stupidity and ignorance forever.

✈

The following day, when Harper says she’ll take the cat back to the vet for further treatment, I block my ears with two fingers. She frowns, accusing me of lacking sympathy for her sick pet. I haven’t told her about the shocking revelation from home grinding me to pieces.

After the visit to the vet, Cathy refuses to sleep in the attic. Harper scoops the cat onto the bed she shares with me. To my utmost horror, the cat lies in the middle of both of us, as she strokes its back. I’ve been struggling to sleep because I’m afraid Cathy might morph into a tiger, a puma, or even a cheetah at midnight, and attack me.

“It’s an abomination in my Ogemba village for animals to sleep on the same bed as humans,” I tell Harper. “I’ve tried to make you understand I’m terrified of cats, but you won’t listen.”

“I’m fed up with your nonsense behaviour, Tulu,” she yells, scowling.

“Harper, stop being stubborn about this useless animal,” I shoot back.

I can’t bear to share this bed with the cat, so I pick it up and fling it on the floor. It lands without a thud, but I hear it purr a little, perhaps out of sudden pain. Harper turns red and slaps me, twice and hard. The audacity! I spring up, holding my cheeks

with both hands. Then I prop up my back on a pillow, leaning on the headboard, still tending my battered face with my palms. She leaps down, picks up the cat, hugs it, and climbs back into bed.

"Don't you ever hurt my pet again or I'll call the police," she says, pointing straight to my forehead, almost prodding it.

I can't imagine being locked up in a police cell for harming a mere animal. I hop out of the bed and go to sleep in the sitting room instead. When we wake up at daybreak, we don't greet each other, both our faces straight. She feeds the cat and takes her bath alone. On a good day, she would've called on me to scrub her back with the sponge. She leaves for work, still without talking to me. I just shrug because my people say that sometimes human beings are buried inside the coffin of what they love. Let her enjoy her cat in peace.

When she returns home in the evening, I express my genuine regret, asking for her forgiveness. As she sighs, glaring at me, I stamp a wet kiss on her forehead, two on her cheeks, and a final one with a squelching sound on her lips, locking my lips on hers. Chike says that white women love kissing a lot, that if you want to get their favour, just kiss them passionately, and they'll surrender and submit themselves to you. I've just done exactly that. Harper smiles and hugs me. And as we continue living together, I still harbour the fear of the cat in my heart.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: I'd like to know the ways and means of preventing Africans from trooping overseas in droves? How would you convince an African to stay home and blossom?

@obejis: Provide lifesaving infrastructure vis-à-vis health, education, transport, etc.

@uwak_: Good jobs for Africans. Jobs, jobs, and more jobs, only excellent jobs.

@dos: Upholding human rights: LGBTQ+ rights, children's rights, women's rights, etc.

@motry: Good governance can turn our borders into fertile land for agriculture.

@jess_ng: All visa centres will be overtaken by weeds if security of lives is assured.

@zoe-eb: Capital punishment for proven cases of personal and institutional crime.

@gosi: Show the young their future by paying regular pensions to the old.

@tansibi: Make religion a private good, not a public nuisance.

@larryox: Keeping everyone busy in one way or another will make them stay home.

@james_g: Stop the senseless wars and conflicts, preventing a resurgence of them.

@gat: Ask those who've gone to return by showing good reasons why they should.

@franc.d: Encourage massive foreign direct investments and foreign capital inflows.

@ayo: End police brutality and protect freedom of expression across African nations.

@ta: Africans doing unique things will force the whites to queue for African visas.

@attorney-queen: By enhancing the ease of doing business and the rule of law.

@felix_bas: By promoting intra-Africa exchange of ideas, processes, and systems.

@ogde: Africa must build competent institutions instead of breeding corrupt men.

@mercyp: We must wipe off corrupt, stupid men that hold us hostage, @ogde.

@lara_funs: Nurture entrepreneurship, business education, and financial risk-taking.

@okez: Opening up global borders (debordering) will make migration less attractive.

@ec: Africans should post fine photos of home online, to counter the bad narratives.

@sunso: Start early to train African children to acquire computer programming skills.

@z: Internet broadband penetration aids virtual migration, no more physical travels.

@ambcul: By promoting the beautiful cultures of African peoples all over the world.

@ezzyroks: Convince Africans that leaving home doesn't mean succeeding abroad.

@hyed: The resistance to migration starts with participating in electing good leaders.

@wedjos: We must destroy all institutions and persons promoting cancel culture.

@law_val: African judiciary should scrap the use of wigs and gowns.

@ndy: And wear kente, adire, akwete, and other local fabrics in court. @law-val.

@karisk: France should stop printing currencies for African countries.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Whenever Queen Victoria is visiting, I hide Harper's clothes and shoes inside the wardrobe and lock it tight. I also seal her cupboard, which is laden with her make-up kits, creams, combs, and perfumes. I remove her shampoos and shower caps from the bathroom and hide them under the wooden staircase, ensuring there's no feminine items left outside. Today, around 12.30 p.m., Queen Victoria arrives again from Cambridge, her ninth time here since I moved in. Harper left for work early in the morning, saying she had a lot of briefs to look at. She asked me to take good care of myself with a nutritious breakfast of sausage, coffee, and porridge.

Queen Victoria and I have just finished cutting three rounds of flower and downed our tools, having groaned with pleasure and enjoyed every possible sex position. She'll later return to Cambridge because I don't ever allow her to spend the night here. We're resting on Harper's comfy bed when, without any prompting, the bedroom door opens with a short-lived creak. My thought first goes to the cat sneaking up on us, but instead Harper shoves the door, storming in on us, her eyes popping out. I freeze in my nakedness. Queen Victoria pulls the duvet to cover up herself, her face startled. I spring up from the bed, horrified.

Although I'm the common denominator between these two women, there's nothing I can say to appease either of them, to convince them of my African ethical character. There's no need to put on my clothes anymore because at different times they've seen and touched every part of my body. In a twist of feelings, I begin to see what I've done as an achievement. Men often feel like kings when women stare amorously at the nakedness of their masculinity, but I quickly dismiss the thought. Nevertheless, this impulsive organ of mine now hangs limp like a bat, gazing down at the floor, unconcerned, as if it's not even aware that it's in fiery trouble.

"Babe, you didn't let me know you were coming home so early," I tell Harper.

She shuts her eyes, pulling out her hair, already looking frustrated. "Tulu, what exactly are you doing on my bed?" she yells, flipping her eyes open. "And who's she?"

"Babe, why didn't you tell me you had a spare key?" I ask her, even though I know it's her flat, and she has every right to hold the key. "This isn't fair, Harper."

"Don't you question me, you slob! You should answer my question first."

"T-Love, who's this intruder," Queen Victoria asks me, with a deep frown, pointing at Harper.

Harper takes one angry stomp towards her and squalls, “This is my house, you hideous bitch!”

“Hey, Babe, pull yourself together,” I plead with Harper. “It was just a little fuck we had.”

“A little what?” Harper exclaims.

“A little fuck,” I say. “It wasn’t even too much, not as deep and passionate as you imagine it, I swear. I feel very sorry and awful about it. Please forgive me.”

“Tulu, who’s this, your shameless whore?” Harper asks, pointing her forefinger at Queen Victoria.

“Hey, never you call me that, ever again,” Queen Victoria yells, her forefinger also pointing towards Harper in return. “Tulu is my boyfriend, my lover who’s going to marry me, and I’m in *his* house. How dare you intrude into our privacy, you paled dunce!”

“Your boyfriend in his own house? An apartment that I paid for with my haaarrrd-earrrned moneeeyyyy?”

I fear her throat might burst. In an attempt to hit Queen Victoria, Harper wields her fist, but I catch it in mid-air, gripping it, but she shakes free, huffing. Deeply confused, not knowing else what to do, I decide to make light of the dire situation. Perhaps, if I turn everything into a joke, they’ll both laugh out loud and hug one another, forgiving me in the process. Chike often says that laughing women are forgiving women, no matter the situation. Let me try and see if this laughter trick would work magically and settle their dispute and wipe out my dilemma.

“Look, you women should stop fighting over this dick,” I say, smiling boldly and pointing down at my organ.

Queen Victoria cringes, squinting at me as if I’ve transformed into something so shrivelled that she no longer recognises. “You said what?” she asks, looking totally bewildered.

Argh! It seems this trick may not achieve its aim, but I press on nonetheless.

“There’s no need for quarrelling because my hardworking organ can always go round,” I say, and laugh teasingly. “It doesn’t depreciate at all with each use. In fact, the more I use it, the more effective it becomes.”

Harper howls, “I’ve always known you’re an arsehole, but this trumps everything!” She swings around, scuttling towards the door, her hair flying all over her shoulders, and saying, “What kind of mess have I got myself into? Oh gosh!”

I hit my chest, covering my face in shame, at my abysmal failure. When I try to explain myself to Queen Victoria, she shoves me hard onto the bed, and I fall on my back. She wriggles into her clothes, grabs her handbag, and briefly glances at her reflection in the standing mirror. She storms out, slamming the bedroom door shut.

Fidgeting, I put on my boxer shorts, chase her into the sitting room, pleading for her understanding, but she refuses to turn around. She bangs the front door so hard in my face that if the hardwood had caught my fingers, it would have flattened them. Harper is no longer in the house. I heard her car zoom away. I'm frightened that she might bring in the police to throw me out.

Later in the evening, I send a text message to Queen Victoria.

—V-Love, I'm so sorry for what happened today. It won't happen again. 4give me pls.

—Good luck in your future ventures, but this is my last msg 2 u. Pls don't reply!

I sit on the couch, frozen with shame, my hands shaking. When Harper returns from work, I also try to give account of what transpired, but she doesn't pay me any attention. Then I fall to my knees in front of her, blocking her movement towards the kitchen.

"Babe, I'm very sorry. Please forgive me. It's the devil who did it."

"So you're absolving yourself and blaming it on someone else?"

"No, no, no," I blurt out. "I mean, I did it, but it was a curse from my great-grandfather that pushed me into it. I also think the diabolical people in my village are controlling my mind with their talismans."

She sighs. "You still haven't taken full responsibility for your odious indiscretions." She makes to step out, but I grab her pyjama trousers. "Tulu, if you don't leave my legs right now, I swear, I'll call the police."

My hands soften, falling to the floor. Some frenzied urine escapes me, soaking my boxer shorts. I feel sore, every layer of my skin seems to have been peeled off.

For almost two weeks now, Harper still hasn't spoken to me the way she used to, and she no longer returns home regularly, perhaps preferring to stay at her friend's or in a guesthouse. I suppose she's forgiven me in her heart but hasn't said it out loud. I'm not quite sure of anything now because I think a woman in love can be difficult to predict. Everything in the house seems to be hostile towards me—the mattress with its springs that poke my skin a little too hard, the cat that scares me dead as it waddles around

the sitting room, and the heating system that no longer boils the water in the bathroom, leaving it too frosty for an enjoyable wintery bath.

I've been away from home for three days now because staying there, doing nothing, disheartens me. I prefer to while away my time with Chike as he drives us around Norwich, running errands for his British wife. At night, I sleep inside his car parked on the street until daybreak when he comes and drives me to a gym so that I can brush my teeth and have a shower. Oh, my life abroad is running in circles.

But today, around 5.30 p.m., I'm walking through Norwich Cemetery, returning home. I look at the fine graves made of gold and glossy stones. I've always associated the British with wisdom, efficiency, and sophistication, but siting a burial ground near a residential estate seems to be the height of British civilization. I've stood near a grave for almost an hour now, lost in thought, wondering about ghosts and graves, and still trying to picture my father in bed with Aunty Bimbo many years ago in Cambridge. And years later, the boy they sired and I became students at British Global College in Lagos, a four-year gap between us, and nobody had told us about the paternal blood we both share. Now I grieve for what I haven't yet been told, standing at the graveside of a stranger.

I imagine Harper will be in the sitting room waiting for me, watching television or reading *The British Weekly Law Report*. If she's not reading, she'll be on the phone to Sydney, asking her mum whether her dad's diabetes has worsened. She does this every day. I feel like I should travel to Sydney to care for her father as part of my atonement for my recklessness.

I arrive home, late evening. On tenterhooks, I whip out my key from my jeans pocket and unlock the front door. I enter the sitting room and call Harper's name twice, but silence slaps my ears. I stroll towards the bedroom. She'll be there for sure. This is the perfect weather for us to be entangled in bed, whispering and kissing and moaning and fiddling with one another's sex genitals. It still surprises me often how Harper surrenders her whole body to satisfy my manly cravings. I always ask myself what special traits she's discovered in me. Most times, my bedding a lawyer from Great Britain feels like I've won an Olympic gold medal.

I sigh and survey the room. The shoe rack is empty. "Why?" I murmur. There are usually loads of shoes piled up on it. The emptiness compels me to search the corners. I open the wardrobe and meet a deserted piece of furniture, dark floating inside. Her suitcase has gone, her plastic hangers vacant. My mind is overwhelmed

with thoughts now. To assure myself that I'm not standing in someone else's flat, I rush back to the sitting room and scan the flat all over again. I part the curtains and look outside. Her car isn't there, either. I scamper up the steps to the attic; even Cathy is gone. Everything. Gone! I sigh and shake my head.

On returning to the sitting room again, I glance at the dining table, and there lies a handwritten note. I snatch it and read.

Hi Tulu,

This is just a brief note to let you know that I've left the house, and I won't be returning. I've already told the landlord, letting him know that if you want to continue living in the flat, you'll pay the rent henceforth.

Kind regards,
Harper Cox.

I stare at the paper, a yellow legal pad, at her plain handwriting, and the brevity of the message, so disturbing in its simplicity. I pull my phone out of my pocket and call her. Her phone is switched off. I refuse to acknowledge she's left. I burst out crying, drenching my chest and cheeks with tears. It's all my fault. I stare up at the ceiling, sit down at the dining table, and start to use my brain. Sister Payshay often says that women who wear nose rings are sea spirits who disappear without any prior warnings. Harper could be one of those spirits, considering her ominous nose jewellery. She'd assured me of her wish to marry me, and I was genuine about marrying her as well, not even a sham marriage to secure my permanent residency in Britain. I can't believe that she's abandoned me with an unpaid rent and bills. How will I pay for these things when I resigned from my two jobs a long time ago? Worse, our landlord is an impatient bull who'll never listen to my pleas.

The sitting room is damp, even with the bad heater turned on, an appliance that used to make the room cosy, but not anymore. I need to clear my head, find a reason to stay in Norwich and determine if my coming to the UK has been worth it. But Nigeria still has a messed-up economy, so I'd rather stay in Norwich, even if I have to wash corpses in a mortuary with my bare hands. Living with Harper has exposed me to every

hidden goodness of Britain, and I'd love to continue enjoying it. I don't want to go back to Nigeria and be murdered like my father. Who wants to go back to hell and chaos?

I get to my feet, collapse onto the couch, ashamed of myself. Sleep has begun to fold my eyes. I feel like a prisoner condemned for life, but Harper still flashes through my mind. Oh, my dear Harper, please come back and give me a third chance to make amends. What have I done to myself? Indeed, a man with a reactive penis always carries an embarrassment between his thighs.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I've been asleep for hours today. There's nothing else I do these days but sleep and wake and sleep some more. A rap on the door jerks me awake. I wonder who the aggressive visitor is. A policeman? The British Immigration? The Home Office people? But British people aren't that loud on the door. They knock as if they're afraid of hurting their fingers or they're not yet serious or sure about the visit.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

I pull the door open. Chike hurls himself into the sitting room, carrying a backpack and wearing his winter coat. His black shoes are wet with melting snow.

"Tactical Tulu," he teases as usual, with enthusiasm on his face, removing the bag from his back. "Tulu, my guy, your sour expression looks like you've already impregnated many British ladies. Or, have you been chewing raw cocoyam and paracetamol and bitter-leaves together?"

"Gasbag!" I say, shutting the door. "I knew it must be you. Always in a hurry."

"Guy, what's wrong with you?" Chike says, pulling off his gloves and getting out his stubby dark fingers and thick knuckles. "You didn't attend my wife's seventy-seventh birthday party two weeks ago, and I'd invited you with all my heart. O-boy, you've been missed, so I decided to pop in and say hello. I'm on my way to Tesco to get ham for my woman."

"I'm in trouble," I tell him.

He flops down into the couch, keeping his backpack between his legs. "It's written all over your face. Too much *wahala* for you?"

"I'm worried about my asylum appeal."

"For what, naahh?" he exclaims, staring up at me. "Why?"

"I'm unsure if the Afropolitan Union lawyers will be able to upturn the decision of the Home Office at the tribunal."

"Worry not. Those lawyers want you to continue enjoying this Queen Mama Charley's beautiful country where human beings behave like human beings, not like those stinking humans littering Nigeria with sleaze and fraud."

"Chike, I don't even know what to do to convince myself," I say, leaning on the dining table. "I've heard stories of appellants who weren't successful at the tribunal. I'm worried. Nigeria is a lawless wildlife park, and I don't want to go back there."

"Have you told Harper? She's a lawyer, and should be able to help you, naahh."

I sigh. “Please, let’s not discuss that thoughtless lady now. Don’t remind me of her, I beg you.”

“Why not?”

I say nothing, shrugging.

“She’s left you?”

I nod, slowly.

Chike bursts out laughing. “I told you this before, didn’t I? Tulu, didn’t I tell you to leave those small-small British ladies alone? Young ladies who feel they’re equal to able-bodied men like us. Now, look at you.”

“I still can’t believe she’s abandoned me, that this has happened to me, Chike.”

“I advised you to find yourself an older white woman. They’re more reliable.”

I can’t imagine walking the streets of Norwich with a quivering old woman by my side, a woman older than my mother. I’m not as shameless as Chike who pretends to have fallen in love with Lydia Crosby, a seventy-seven-year-old widow, and they got married.

“I’m inside some big shit right now,” I say, and hiss.

“What would I have been in this precious country without my Lydia Crosby? Older white women are everything. They’re faithful, obedient, and immensely romantic.”

“How and where did you meet Lydia?” I ask Chike.

It seems I’m now changing my mind.

“During my MA”, he says. “I worked for a care home, and she used to be one of the residents there. One day, she told me she wanted to go back to her own house and asked if I was willing to work for her privately. One thing led to another, and the rest they say is history. We both fell in love and married.”

He giggles, but I exhale instead, fatigued.

“Chike, if I had a rope now, I’d kill myself.”

“Look, only cowards take their own lives,” Chike quips. “Guy, do something and find a solution to your problem. For your information, Lydia has begun to make arrangement towards my British citizenship.”

I flinch. “Eh? Right now?”

“My guy, I can’t lie about it.”

“Does Lydia know you already have a wife and children in Nigeria?”

"Go and tell Lydia yourself. Why should I?" Then he snorts with pleasure. "That old woman is a tigress. When I pound her on her comfy mattress, she moans and moans, positioning herself like an eighteen-year-old, my dear Lydia. She even wants it done in the morning, afternoon, and night. Ahh-Ahh, Lydia is such an amazing woman, so tireless, so sexy, so ready. She can't take her eyes off me for a second in bed, always winking and winking at me with warm smiles on her wrinkled face."

"Doesn't she have children?"

"Her only daughter was present at the birthday party, and she's excited that I'm taking good care of her mother. What daughter wouldn't be excited that a young man like me pumps fresh blood into her mother all the time?"

I shake my head, pull out a dining chair, and sit down. "I regret offending Harper. It's all my fault."

"Ahh-Ahh, I've told you to forget that lady. Must you befriend her by force, eh? She's one of those mad people everywhere. *Ndi ara*."

I'm knackered, and it's hard to stop thinking about Harper. I was her baby strapped to her back, so I quickly forgot both the distance and gravity of this daunting journey of living in the UK until she dumped me.

"Are you still applying for a PhD at the University of East Anglia?" I ask Chike, changing the subject to steer my mind away from Harper, at least for a moment.

"PhD *kwa*?" he yells, unveiling his two palms to signal disinterest. "My MA in International Development is enough for me. Actually, I did want that PhD before, but now I'm doing a better one, a PhD in the Satisfaction and Management of Lydia Crosby. I'll write my thesis about her."

He bursts out laughing. Despite my crestfallenness, I can't help but chuckle.

"I wish you good luck," I mutter.

"What matters is that I'm sending plenty of money to my beloved wife and children in Nigeria from time to time," he says. "And Lydia Crosby lives up to my expectations regarding that."

I flinch again. "You mean she pays you for being her property agent and also gives you an extra—"

"An extra sum for being the best husband, naahh. Is it easy to find a young and handsome husband like me?"

I just shrug. "That's wonderful; you're so lucky."

“Not just any money-o, but pound sterling, the only currency with the profile of our prestigious Queen Elizabeth the second—in the whole wide world-o. When I’m done with Lydia, I’ll dump her, asking her to rest in peace. Of course, I won’t be around to see her heart broken, to watch her coffin nailed tight and buried.”

“Chike, I need some money; it doesn’t matter how little. Could I go back to that basement room in the house at Magpie Road? I can’t afford the rent for this flat. It’s too expensive for me. I have nothing.”

“Ah, there are no vacant rooms in that house-o. A new tenant took over the basement room just last week. But I can offer you a few quid to buy food.”

He scrambles to his feet, pulls out his wallet, and offers me £20.

“I really appreciate this, Chike. Thank you.”

“Thank you for thanking me,” he says, while putting on his gloves again. “My pleasure, and no worries. Guy, I’m going. Lydia will be waiting for me. This evening, we’re travelling to Great Yarmouth where she’ll introduce me to some of her relatives. I wish I could help you more, but you need to start thinking of getting a job again or putting your sharp dick to commercial use.”

When he bangs the door shut, I burst out crying.

But I stop suddenly and wipe my eyes, telling myself that I’ve got to move on. A man with no physical disability doesn’t sit still to watch a mobile masquerade.

From: editors<editors@afropolitan-union.com>

Sent: 24 June 2016 00:00

To: Tulugo Okoye<tulugo@gmail.com>

Subject: THE DISPLACEMENT RACISM DISORDER

Dear Tulugo Okoye,

White people are wise people. Most times, they throw an opportunity open for only racially marginalised communities and watch how Black and brown immigrants will scramble like famished fishes in a vanishing pond to fight for that very opportunity. In the ensuing stampede, pay attention to how some brown immigrants will despise the presence of Black immigrants during interviews or auditions, sniggering and turning their noses up at everything Black in the room.

On the train or bus, be alert because a brown immigrant may find it immensely uncomfortable to sit nearest to you or even share the same seat-row as you. Truly, in the world of racial insanity and the scale of skin preference disorder, browns rank higher than Blacks. Browns are obviously next to whites, because browns are lighter in complexion than Blacks. So, some browns consider themselves to be more beautiful, more palatable for the eyes than Blacks.

Some brown immigrants who have companies may find it extremely difficult to employ Black immigrants for reasons of racial madness. These browns would rather have an unqualified brown immigrant occupy a position than bring in a competent Black immigrant. Furthermore, some brown immigrants may consider it abominable to see their children marry the children of Black immigrants. It's such a relentless brand of craziness.

We call the above the **Displacement Racism Disorder** because the oppressors are all immigrants, displaced from their native countries, and yet carrying the racism disorder alongside. Some of these brown immigrants managed to escape lethal bombs and religious fundamentalisms to arrive in the United Kingdom. But once settled, they become toxic to other immigrants, and even to our British hosts. Funnily enough, both browns and Blacks are under the merciless hammers of white immigrants whose skin ranks far higher than every other skin because they're European immigrants in the United Kingdom. It's heartbreaking to see immigrants discriminating against each other and despising one another—a horrible disorder.

Be on your guard as there are many instances of this Displacement Racism Disorder, some of them so subtle they may escape your observance. Until we come your way again next week, please keep Afropolitising!

Yours sincerely,

The Editors,

The Afropolitan Union.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Moments of fruitless struggle to find a new job bloat my brain all day. But there's a terrible forlornness that flattens my thoughts and desires, hampering me from going back to The Great-Gourmand to ask Bianca for my job. She might glance at me and snort with a cynicism that would worsen my hopelessness. Never will I return to The Great-Gourmand, I decide. I'm an Igbo man, and my body is prideful. I'll not take abuse and contempt from anyone. Nobody can feed me that rubbish again. *Arụ m na-asọmkparị!* Chike has promised to help me to find another job, but I haven't heard from him for the past few weeks since he last visited me. I've called him, but his phone was turned off. So I sit at home every day, sometimes going away to avoid my landlord who calls me constantly, insistent about getting his overdue rent paid.

As I recline myself on the sofa, a private number calls me and drops out. Then my phone rings again, almost immediately, revealing a number with a name I stored some years ago. I sit up, curious, my back stiff.

"Where have you been, my good friend?" the man says. "I've been meaning to get in touch with you for months, even years."

"Mr. James Volta?" I say, unsure.

"Exactly, Chief Volta, that frustrated man you saved from suicide on the Third Mainland Bridge. Remember? I'm now a rich man with the chieftaincy title of Feeder of Nations."

"Wonderful. Did you call me a while ago with a private line?"

"Yes, I just tried, wanting to be anonymous. But when it rang, I decided to switch to my real line."

"You sound excited, Chief Volta."

"Money is at the root of my delight, my good friend. I invested that money you gave me into cassava farming, and the business has flourished. The Bank of Agriculture and Commerce also gave me a loan, which I've paid back since."

"Congratulations, Chief Volta."

"Thank you, thank you. As I speak, I have about five thousand hectares of cassava farmland in Kwara State, and I'm acquiring even more hectares for future expansions. I also have a cassava processing factory, a huge one that turns my produce into sacks of garri and tonnes of flour for bread and cake industries. In fact, I export everything to Europe, America, and Asia, and I can't even satisfy demand. Recently, I

bought a new car, not exactly the type of jeep you drove on the day of my attempted suicide, but mine is still a fine car."

I'm both speechless and amazed at once, listening to him, unable to patch up the two conflicting images of the man in my head—the helpless one who previously sought comfort in death, cooped up in his failure, and the motivated one now so rich he has many employees, commanding influence.

"Do you mean you're now a successful entrepreneur?"

"Yes, but not only that-o. I'm also a happy family man now. Because of my riches, my nasty wife who ran away with my children has returned, worshipping me like a god. She even says she doesn't mind taking any shit from me. I bought her a small car. She's now very soft and pliable and no longer denies me sex, which she once hoarded like contraband. My friend, Tulu, you're the reason I'm successful."

"Ha, you even recall my name?"

"Ahh-Ahh, I could never forget you, my friend. You saved me, and I'll always look forward to your kind of wealth, to the kindness of your wealth, helping the poor."

I recall he was a poverty-stricken poet with a self-published collection of poems, which nobody wanted to buy when he peddled the copies along the streets of Lagos.

"On the contrary, it *was* my father's wealth," I tell him. "Which was lost when he was murdered and my life was threatened too. I fled from the country, devastated, but I'm now planning to start all over again."

"Oh, that's awful news, and I'm so sorry for that. You know what? I'll not let you suffer while I'm still alive. If you're interested in cassava farming, let me know. I'll teach you how to do it well and give you some plots of land to start."

I tell him I'll think about the offer and bid him farewell.

I decide to visit the Norwich Cathedral to ask the vicar or the dean, whatever they're called, to pray for me. It's twelve noon, and good things happen at noon, according to the people of my village. The gates of the cathedral are open, wide enough to allow the wings of a thousand angels to fly through. The spire on top looks sharp, pointing towards the frosty sky. I imagine it's transferring the prayers and supplications of the congregants to the celestial bodies. The leafless trees expose fluttering birds that chirp. God is here, I tell myself, and he'll answer me.

The sun begins to shine, but it's a frail sun—a December, winter-beaten sun—whose slats of yellow don't scorch, as though it's afraid to come out. The lawn is large,

faultlessly trimmed and filled with people who wear graduation gowns. Maybe they're choristers. Such happy people. They're snapping photos and smiling at their friends and relatives, at the professional photographers who are showing them how to strike good poses. I hear a photographer's subtle commands: "Keep your hands behind you and turn your right leg outwards. Slant your neck just a bit. Open your mouth to reveal a smile. All perfect." And then the click-click-click of his camera. I nod, appreciating their smiles at something as little as a flash from a camera, and it reminds me of my exciting photoshoot with Aunty Bimbo sometime ago. Such a little sprinkle of happiness is what builds a country because the little firewood of a nation is always sufficient to cook that nation's food. Sometimes, I wonder in what specific ways Britain's firewood, especially its weather, has over the centuries affected how its food is cooked. Does the weather ensure food is half-cooked or fully cooked? Does it affect the manner they think? Well, I guess it does, everyone always talking weather and making conversations about weather as they do.

The plangent chiming of the church organ from the mighty cathedral fills my ears and spins my head. I feel joy, my mood lifting. I kneel in the middle of the vast field, looking up at the sky. I pat my forehead on the grass, muttering my wishes to the unseen world. I scramble to my feet, the people around staring at me, and then I kneel again and stand and kneel and stand and kneel and stand, the way Catholics and Muslims do. I wonder which group purloined the other.

As I make my way towards the ancient building of God, I see a slim woman in high heels going towards an antique wooden door. I approach her with a faint smile.

"Can I talk to you, please?" I ask. She seems not to hear me. "Please, I'm talking to you, ma'am."

"Alright," she says, turning, her hair swinging.

She puts on what looks like a polite smile. She's wearing her identity card around her neck and holding a carnival of brightly coloured brochures. She must be a church warden, someone who knows every nook and cranny of the interior architecture of this cathedral. I can tell this from her calm assurance. From afar she seemed taciturn, so I'm glad that she's showing me her teeth now. She stands stiffly in front of me, barring my way into the church, but I can see the magnificence of the inside from where I stand near the antique door. She smells of blackcurrant; perhaps she's just consumed a plate of fruit salad.

"I'd like to see the priest," I tell her. "My problem is urgent."

The woman appraises me for a moment. The frown lines on her forehead suggest that she's never received such a request before. Don't Britons consult their priests to confess when they have big problems? Why then did they build such a humongous house of God?

"I'm afraid you can't see him," she replies. "We're having an ordination today."

She's wearing trousers on the premises of God. Sister Payshay would be horrified, saying the woman must be a sinner because women shouldn't wear trousers which are meant strictly for men.

"Please, I need the priest to talk to God on my behalf," I say. "My lover abandoned me recently and I can't bear the intense defeat and grief."

She sighs. "I'm sorry about your pain, but I'm afraid you can't see him." Her tongue is fervidly pink and neat.

"Can I at least gain access to the oratory?" I ask. "I promise I won't upset anything."

She shakes her head and narrows her eyes. Long strands of blonde hair fall over her forehead, covering her eyes. She gathers the curls with a finger and throws them over her slender shoulder.

"The oratory isn't lit at the moment," she tells me. "I'm sorry for that, but I promise to have the bulbs fixed today, so you can come back tomorrow and stay as long as you wish. Is that okay?"

"Let me in now, please," I say, pushing myself through the door.

She grabs my shirt and pulls me back. "Please, young man, respect our protocol here," she says firmly.

I scrunch my brow, swing around, and leave the cathedral.

Now I'm heading to Norwich Cemetery, walking rapidly. Why? Because it seems I'm changing and creeping towards spirituality now. I can't believe what this country has transformed me into, but destitution doesn't care. Superstition is a religion for suffering migrants who believe in possibilities without any underlying facts. Let me visit the Norwich community of dead bodies and see what I may find and achieve there. I've begun to believe in the power of ghosts to change human lives into miraculous beings. I've convinced myself that ghosts are alive and hardworking. Nobody dies and goes away. After people die, they return and hang around, producing the oxygen that human beings breathe. My people say that human beings live seven times and die

seven times, purified of sins, before they ultimately go to the land of the dead. I'm going to the cemetery to beseech the ghosts to storm Harper's mind and tweak it in my favour, wherever she is.

I'm striding along the sidewalks, walking fast through the quiet streets. I glide along the restaurant-ridden St. Benedict's Street, or is it St. Benedicts Street? It's not my concern how it's written or unwritten, anyway. I burst onto Dereham Road, which is insane and long, like the riddle of life and death, like the precarious journey of a migrant. About ten minutes later, the cemetery scoops me into its arms, hugging me. Soaking up my skin with a cold breeze, it reminds me of the certainty of death. A lone man walks out of the crematorium, looking devastated, dabbing a white handkerchief on his blotchy cheeks and teary eyes. In his left palm is an urn, which contains maybe the ashes of his cremated loved one. The man shakes his head and spits. The gooey saliva chugs slowly out of his mouth and plops on the tarmac. I feel sorry for him. Grief is such a faceless torturer.

A middle-aged woman is laying sacrificial items—a wreath of roses, a plastic doll, a plastic spoon, a mirror, a plastic jug—before a new grave so small and narrow it must be the grave of a child. Perhaps she recently lost a loved one, and her show of grief reminds me of my father's heart-breaking funeral. Afterwards, she crosses her hands on her chest and kneels down. I wonder if her problem is worse than mine. Considering the sacrificial itmes, her conduct seems to be very un-British, so emotional, but I'm happy to see her here. Her presence makes me feel that I'm right to seek a solution from the dead. Death defies every science of experimental reasoning, defeats every logic, and turns every objective human being into an absurdity as a result of loss and grief. And being irrational is a way to grieve and cope with the misery and irrationality from death.

I find one of the oldest graves and kneel in front of it. This is my open oratory, and I hope nobody will stop me. I open my hands and put them down on the grave. I prefer an old grave like this one, whose occupant must have passed through God's judgement and given a spotless statement of righteousness already. I want to work with a soul who has settled down, that has become an angel or a saint or an ancestor—whatever the rank or title. I don't want a recent burial. Such a corpse might still be suffering decomposition in purgatory, if that actually exists, still going through trials and a series of adjournments before he's sent to either heaven or hellfire—some gospel according to my aunt, Sister Payshay. I shut my eyes as I kneel down, convinced that

scrubbing a problem with prayer will force the answer to arrive at my doorstep, beautifully packaged, carried by the hands of a benevolent deity or an abiding angel.

I burst out shouting out to the trees, to the squirrels and birds, to the dead bodies and souls of Jews and Christians and Muslims and Hindus and atheists and animists buried or cremated here, to whoever cares to listen to me. I need no human intermediaries to speak on my behalf. I call on my ancestors, those great-great-greats. I ask them to use this oldest grave as the point of contact to gather together and bury my asylum problems. I'm ashamed of Nigeria, and I no longer want to be called a Nigerian. I need a British passport as a matter of urgency. Bring back Harper and let me marry her and apologise to Laura because marriage is the easiest route to British citizenship. After becoming a British citizen, I'll divorce Harper and marry Laura, the unquenchable love of my life. Getting a divorce in Britain is as simple as throwing saliva out of the mouth, after all. I'm certain that Laura will understand, forgive me, and encourage this strategy.

Sister Payshay often says that reciting recurring numbers can force the holy spirits living in heaven to hurry down to the world and answer human prayers, hastening up solutions. So, I break into counting and recounting numbers, again and again, clapping my hands together to match every word out of my mouth:

"Zero, zero, zero."

"One, one, one."

"Two, two, two."

"Three, three, three."

"Four, four, four."

"Five, five, five."

"Six, six, six."

"Seven, seven, seven."

"Eight, eight, eight."

"Nine, nine, nine."

"Ten, ten, ten."

When I get to the fifteenth attempt, I hear a rustle, flipping my eyes open. Two policemen in black uniforms are standing in front me. One is large, with a bulging stomach, and a truncheon is stuck to his belt. The other man is slim, almost weightless, wearing a cap the same colour as his uniform. They've parked their black-lemon-painted car near the vine-encrusted crematorium. I flinch and my knees buckle. I can

no longer stand up. My nerves tingle. The weightless policeman grips my hand and pulls me up, gently, gently.

“Please,” I plead, showing them a reassuring smile. “Please pity me.”

This must be the beginning of my deportation. I almost wet my underwear from anxiety.

“Why were you making so much noise?” the weightless policeman asks, his voice calm and musical.

I can feel the man’s self-confidence and the love for his job through the air he breathes out, which lands with a warm freshness on my forehead and nostrils. They haven’t manhandled me, nothing like the trigger-happy policemen in Nigeria.

“I didn’t know my voice was so loud,” I say. “I’m sorry, but I was talking to my dead grandmother. She told me to get married very soon, so that she could enter my wife’s womb and become my first daughter. My grandmother said she’d like to live here in Norwich. Would you like to see my dead grandmother? She’s really beautiful.”

The policemen exchange curious glances, frowning. The weightless one’s grip on my wrist begins to loosen. They search my pockets, smell my breath, and find nothing illegal.

“Addison, let’s go,” the weightless one mutters. “He seems deranged, but he’s not hurting anyone.”

When they drive away, I break into a little dance, rejoicing that my grandmother ruse worked. I evince inventiveness. Many migrants, like me, do the same thing, embodying a fusion of ingenuity and edgy play to rescue themselves from trouble, to draw attention to a myriad of diasporic problems, obstacles, and marginalisation that they’re tackling, seeking to highlight common inequalities and syndromes such as racial discrimination, unemployment, displacement, isolation, inequality, poverty, betrayal, loss, white superiority complex, and so on.

I dart out of the cemetery, awash with relief, thanking my luck. An elephant that breaks a wooden bridge and drowns while crossing it doesn’t deserve any further punishment, after all. I need no further torture to worsen my devastation after Harper’s departure. I find my way to the shopping mall to buy wonky items—miserable tomatoes and bread with reduced prices.

Returning home some hours later, I creak open my door, still hoping that Harper will be inside, but she’s nowhere to be found. My stomach is whining. It’s not hunger; it’s

a worm of worries. I slump onto the couch to mull over the events of the past weeks and months.

Then there's a knock, startling me. My breath quickens at the thought of Harper returning. I rush to open the door, but outside stands the landlord. I cringe. He scowls at me, his eyeballs yellowing in the winter cold, forehead and temples creased. He's lost all the hair on the crown of his head, which has turned rubbery, shimmering. I step aside for him to enter. He reeks of burnt cigarette when he walks past before swinging around to face me.

"I've been here several times," the man says.

"Let's talk, sir," I say with a warm smile, emphasising the "sir" like a typical Nigerian in need, also to show him my deepest respect.

But the man dismisses my deference. "I've been patient enough with you over the overdue rent, and I need it right now. I told you that Harper asked me to collect it from you, didn't I?"

I wonder how to sneak out of this mounting fire, but I ask, "Do you know exactly where she's gone?"

"No idea," the man snaps. "Italy, Spain, Greece, Australia, wherever it is she was going to, I've forgotten. Not my business, actually!"

I burst into tears. The landlord looks startled, cocking his eyes this way and that. I hate the buttery colour of those eyes.

"I don't want to hurt you, young man, but Harper signed the tenancy papers, not you," the man says.

I wipe my face. "Yes, sir."

"She says you're interested in living here."

"Yes, sir."

"Then pay the overdue rent and I'll send you a new tenancy agreement. Is that okay?"

"Yes, sir."

If I clear my throat and tell him about my financial trouble, this rent-hungry man may ask me to leave his house immediately. He wants money, but first I have to find a way to be rid of him.

"So what do you say?" he asks me.

"Give me your bank details," I tell him. "I'll forward you the rent tomorrow, without fail, I promise."

He scrabbles in his pocket, hands me a glossy card with his bank details on, turns around, and leaves. I heave a sigh, shut the door, and flung myself on the couch.

For hours, I've been lying on the couch, not asleep, not awake when my WhatsApp video ringtone sounds. My head dizzies as I see Laura on the line. She doesn't often call on that platform, so I'm a little agitated. If she drones on about the position of my horoscopic stars in the sky this moment, I'll hang up on her, I swear. But Laura's smiling face on my phone screen brightens the darkness in my mind, and her smile compels me to smile back immediately. Time and again, she glances at something on her right-hand side, as if the something is delicate and might break to pieces if she holds my gaze for a while.

"Hey, Tulu, I've got a revelation to make," she says. "I feel it's high time for the big disclosure after you've stayed so long and comfortable in the UK."

Has she found another man to marry her? I wouldn't blame her one bit. Distance destroys both the dignity and honesty of people in a relationship.

"Another one of your zodiacal stories, Laura?" I ask, expecting to be disappointed.

"Hell no. But I've been alluding to the news by using the stars."

"What is it?"

"Your dazzling daughter."

My heart summersaults, pounding. "My daughter? What do you mean?"

"Give me a moment." She rises to her feet. Then she bends and lifts up a chubby baby girl whose face on the screen is so adorable that my eyes refuse to blink. Like Laura, she's very fair in complexion and full of Spanish breed of hair, but her upstanding nose and thick lips are mine.

"When did this happen?" I ask, astonished.

"I fell pregnant at the beginning of July 2014, but I didn't tell you because you were passing through grief and pain. I mean your dad's gruesome murder, your mum's sudden sickness, and later on you were also preparing to flee the country. I gave birth to her on March 1, 2015, so our daughter is seventeen months old today, July 1, 2016, and she's so smart and observant."

"Why didn't you tell me this earlier, Laura? Why?"

She laughs. “This is what all those stars were all about, announcing every stage of my pregnancy in a roundabout way because I didn’t want to bother you with the responsibility, you know, money and all that.”

“Oh, my gracious Laura,” I gasp.

“Remember when I told you I was vomiting?”

“Of course, I do.”

“It was the pregnancy, but my parents took care of everything. My dad gave me money, and my mother gave her selfless care.”

“Laura, I love you,” I burst out, with tear-soaked eyes, and she breaks out giggling again. “Laura, I love you, Babe. I really, really love you. You’re the best woman in the world. You know what? I’m returning to Lagos soon. I no longer have any reason to live in Britain.”

“Don’t worry. Stay put there. The baby and I are doing well here. You don’t have to leave your job in London.”

“I’m no longer in London. I’m in the city of Norwich, but that’s a long story for now. I’m doing nothing here, Babe. I’ll tell you everything, my woes and my throes, when I see you in person. I’m coming home to marry you immediately. I can’t wait to cuddle my daughter.”

We both laugh vigorously, and even the baby starts to laugh along. Laura points at me on the screen and asks her to say Daddy. She says it perfectly, and my tears double in intensity. We bid our farewells.

What a pivotal occurrence! From losing my father suddenly to becoming myself a father suddenly? An enchanting shock! I must endeavour that my daughter stands on my shoulders to grab every giant opportunity that I can’t reach myself.

I didn’t ask the baby’s name but, whatever they call her, I decide to name her Ijemdimma, which means *My Journey Has Been Successful*. Ijemdimma Tulugo Okoye. But where do I get the money for a one-way ticket back to Lagos? I dial up Chike, feeling pessimistic. Luckily for me, his phone rings, and he answers.

“Tulu, I’m trouble-o,” he exclaims, his voice frenetic, covered in wind. “Hefty trouble-o.”

“Ahh-Ahh, what’s happened?”

“I’m at Stanstead Airport, sneaking back to Lagos through Casablanca.”

“Sneaking back, *kwa*? What’s gone wrong?”

"My guy, I just managed to escape from being captured by the UK police and immigration people-o. Someone revealed to Lydia Crosby that I have a wife and children in Nigeria. The woman got incensed and called the police on me. Can you imagine that nonsense? O-boy, I fled her house, running and running, my heels hitting my buttocks, and turned off my phone. I just spoke to my wife about my sudden return and, coincidentally, your call landed before I could turn off my phone again."

"Ha, that's serious. I'm planning to go back to Lagos as well, never coming back to the UK again."

"See you in Lagos then, that's if—"

He hangs up abruptly.

I hurry to the boisterous Haymarket Street in the city centre. Standing under a leafy tree, I fight back my tears as I show my Rolex watch, my most prized possession, to pedestrians, looking to find a willing buyer. Nobody seems to show any interest after scanning my face condescendingly, perhaps thinking that a Black man trying to dispose such an expensive wristwatch is rare. Maybe they think I've stolen it from somewhere. I keep walking up and down the busy street, showing the watch to everyone, white, Black, brown, to whatever skin can afford to show any interest.

All of a sudden, a white guy stops by and asks if I'm indeed trying sell the watch, and I said yes, nodding vigorously. We negotiate. He obviously notices this is such a rare bargain as I'm not even tough on the price I've quoted. I sell off the watch to him, realising just the money I imagine might be enough for my flight ticket. I shake my buyer's hand in appreciation, even though the sale feels so much like a freebie. I feel ashamed to remind myself of how much I've sold it, let alone whisper the proceeds to anyone. But I'll let Laura know if she asks.

"Thank you for your British patronage," I say, teasingly, to my customer. "It means a lot to me at this rigid time."

He shakes his head. "My pleasure. But I'm Northern Irish, not British."

"Britain is an island. Ireland is an island. So British is Irish and Irish is British."

"I insist I'm Northern Irish. And yourself?"

I wonder whether Southern Irish exists as well, and I'm not aware of it. "I'm Igbo, from Nigeria."

"Oh, the things-fall-apart country, right?"

“Yes, very much so. Spiritually fallen and culturally broken by the people from the islands many years ago. Anyway, my hours in this country are gradually winding up. I’m excited to be going back to my own country, leaving both the British Island and the Irish Island.”

He shrugs, saying nothing. Then we hug, bidding our farewells. I shake my head as he swings around, slipping my Rolex into his shirt pocket.

I return home to shop online for flights. The cheapest flight to Lagos is in two days’ time, but my landlord is coming tomorrow to throw me out. I have to avert the embarrassment. I must.

When I call Madam Sharon, she says she’s surprised about my leaving the UK so suddenly, but she’s delighted that I’ve found the courage to go back and seek a new life surrounded by the love from my new family. Aunty Bimbo expresses her optimism that my life might no longer be subjected to risks and death threats, after all, since my father’s suspected killers have all been arrested.

I start to pack my belongings into my suitcase.

At night, I sleep anxiously, floating in and out of consciousness, and much later I creep into a dream in which I arrive at Lagos Airport. Everywhere stinks, but I don’t pinch my nostrils shut as I stride towards Arrivals. Despite the pungent smell of urine and faeces, the first national monuments that welcome visitors to Nigeria, I inhale the stench of homeland in full, an odoriferous milieu. An immigration woman in a grey khaki uniform grips her stamp and grins at me. She’s a retired skin bleacher. Her face, especially the temples and cheeks, are charred red-black, perhaps by the mixed reactions of hydroquinone and mercury. She sucks her teeth.

Sitting calmly, she asks where I’ve come from, and I say Addis Ababa. Her big eyes turn incredulous, staring at me. So, I swiftly add, “From London to Addis Ababa.” She then nods, scratching her small nose, but doesn’t yet stamp my passport. I grab my handkerchief to soak up the sweat on my face. There’s a heatwave boiling the entire hall. It’s clear the air conditioning broke down a long time ago, and there’s no plan in the pipeline for repairs.

“You look so fresh, my brother,” she says, sweating and beaming mischievously at me. “I’m sure you must have hard currencies and many coming-home goodies for us. Please, don’t disappoint us-o. This is where we do our daily buying and selling. You uns’tand worai mean? The country is hard, my brother, but we must survive it-o.”

"I have nothing, Madam," I tell her, grimacing. I wonder where her pretentious brotherhood is heading. "If I were so rich as you've made yourself believe, I wouldn't have found myself on a cramped economy flight. I would've boarded a direct, first-class flight from London, either on Virgin Atlantic or British Airways."

"When will you be going back to Britain?"

"I'll never do that," I blurt out, miffed. "Over my dead legs and hands and heart and brain."

"Ahh-Ahh, why not? There's so much sadness beclouding your face and voice."

"That's because there's so much misery and murk inside my body."

She stamps the passport with such a force that everything rattles on her desk. I've had to be melancholic because excitement wouldn't have convinced her to let me go through so quickly. She would've insisted on getting me to bribe her bleaching fingers, wasting my time as a result.

I step towards baggage claim. My suitcase is already waiting for me there on the floor, but the handle is now broken because the conveyor belt doesn't work and the airport workers have resorted to throwing down the bags with their bare hands. Scratch marks now litter the skin of my suitcase.

Aunty Bimbo and Laura shout my name at the same time when they spot me walking through the Arrivals foyer towards the exit gate. Also exclaiming her joy is Baby Ijemdimma as if she knows it's her father who has just arrived. I hug all of them, one after the other and take the baby from Laura. The baby hugs my neck so tightly that I tear up a little, feeling the warmth of her love. She's too young to notice that I've arrived with nothing, no gifts for her, so she won't be disappointed in me. For her to feel this attracted to me, I'm certain that Laura must have done a lot of fantastic work, telling her about me.

"I've named our baby Ijemdimma," I announce.

"Oh my God, that sounds so stunning," Aunty Bimbo says. "What does it mean, Tulu, darling?"

I laugh, rolling my eyes, my tongue stuck in my cheek. "A fruitful travel," I say.

"Ah, that's great," Aunty Bimbo says, and giggles. "Such an elegant name."

Most times, I forget that we belong to two different tribes in Nigeria, with languages that have nothing in common. While she's Yoruba, my mum and I are Igbo.

"We've been calling her Chinyere, after your mum," Laura tells me. "But I think Ijemdimma does the job better."

“Both names excite me,” Aunty Bimbo says. “I’m told Chinyere means God’s precious gift. So beautiful as well.”

“Yes, you’re right, Aunty,” I say. “We shall combine both names. Ijemdimma as the first name, Chinyere the middle name.”

It thrills me that they didn’t give her an English name. I haven’t seen white people bearing Igbo names, although some British people have been saying my own name sounds magnificent, and I’m unable to tell whether they mean it or not.

I scan Aunty Bimbo’s smiling face, reading for a hidden surprise but find none. I’m always in awe of her astonishing releases. Now her grace conceals any hint of bombshell she might harbour, and her bright expression doesn’t reveal any form of secret skeleton in her mind. Perhaps because she’s wealthy, she often accepts every obstacle that comes her way as normal, solvable. She seems to repurpose all obstacles into things that benefit her. She behaves so much like students in Nigeria who work hard despite every disappointment, studying political science or sociology because they weren’t fortunate enough to get into a law programme; maths or physics because they couldn’t be admitted into proper engineering; biochemistry or anatomy or physiology because they were unlucky or couldn’t square up to the competition for the few spaces in medicine and surgery programmes. Aunty Bimbo is always like that, brilliant, capable of doing anything, everything, achieving the best out of all things. In fact, she’s an enigma.

“Your mum is waiting for us in my car,” Aunty Bimbo says. “Let’s go. She can’t wait to see you.”

“I can’t wait to see her as well,” I say.

Aunty Bimbo leads the way, capering in high heels and body-fitting, knee-faded jeans, her hair extension rippling down her back, swinging from side to side. Laura takes my suitcase, rolling it on the floor, her long skirt billowing around her feet. I follow suit. Baby Ijemdimma is touching my mouth and head and ears and clutching my neck, as if to assure herself that I’m really her father.

With her remote control, Aunty Bimbo commands her new Mercedes Benz jeep to beep, the doors flinging open. As Laura takes the baby from me, I notice my mother has just applied lipstick and eyeliner quickly, sitting on the front seat, maybe to beautify her face for me. She glances at her small mirror and swiftly shoves her makeups into her handbag. I exclaim, springing into her outstretched hands. We

embrace for long minutes without letting go of each other. She kisses my head and cheeks, her eyes wet with tears.

"Tulu, my son, is this really you?" she asks me, sobbing.

"Yes, mum, I'm alive," I say, standing. "I've come home to stay close to you at all times."

"Although I can no longer walk on my own, I'm fortunate to be alive to see you again."

"Don't worry, mum. Our people say that hot things will later become cold. You'll walk again."

On her thighs is the latest edition of *Cosmopolitan*, opened to the centre where a Black woman is shown advertising a popular British make-up brand, No. 7. I look at my mum's hairless head, at her withering face, which her current make-up of magenta lipstick, darkened eyebrows and thick mascara doesn't lift. It's only when she smiles that she truly comes alive. I wonder why she's still fantasising about her former beauty and glitz when her hair has refused to grow back. The last time I spoke to her, she revealed she was making plans with Aunty Bimbo for a hair-transplant surgery in the US or Turkey, and I wondered if that type of operation was medically possible. Indeed, an old woman will always remain an expert in the dance moves she learnt when she was young, and my mother will always be stuck in the memory of her past-perfected glamour.

As Aunty Bimbo drives us to her mansion, my mother starts to talk about me marrying Laura immediately, now that I'm back home. We must visit her parents and get their requirements for the traditional marriage before we can begin to plan for the big wedding party, inviting all the crème de la crème of Lagos, including international posh societies and classy people.

"Exactly my thoughts," Aunty Bimbo agrees, turning to glance at me. "My magazine will cover the entire series of events and splash them on our pages. In fact, I'll devote an entire issue of *AristoFemme* to celebrate your marriage, from the front cover to the centerspread to the back cover.

"Ms. B, we must invite Channels Television to cover it-o," my mother adds with a pleased tone.

"Even CNN, BBC, and Aljazeera," Aunty Bimbo suggests, my mother nodding several times in support. "Tulu, darling, who would you love to be *your* best man?"

"Deji, my fantastic brother," I say. "I adore him so much."

"Oh my God, that's so forgiving of you, Tulu, and I'm so delighted you've accepted my son back into your life."

I just shrug. Laura nudges me and winks. We both burst into laughter.

The marriage excites me, but my lack of income unsettles me, spewing fire on my calves and spine, my stomach burning. I wouldn't want to bother Aunty Bimbo with requests for money, even though she'd graciously release any amount I desire. Going forward, I'd like to be a self-made man.

I turn on the screen in front of me to enjoy some movies in the slow-moving Lagos traffic, but my father's fully bearded face stares back at me. I cringe and burst out screaming, "You torment me, Dad. Stop visiting me. The living and the dead have nothing in common," yanking myself out of the dream at midnight and still holding those words in my mouth. I sit up in bed, yawning and stretching myself from side to side. What a weird dream! My psychosis has worsened ever since Harper broke up with me.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The next morning arrives with pigeons and gulls butting against the windowpanes. I wheel my suitcase out of Harper's bedroom and step down the staircase. The sitting room sparkles, but the lights don't excite me. I fling the keys onto the table for the landlord to give to the next tenant. I draw the curtains, turn off the lights, and leave the flat.

The sun warms my skin and soul with its early arrival today. I'm now a trader in a market with nothing to sell. I'm travelling to an unknown destination on the UK map to spend the night, and my host is unknown, too. I walk down my street, towing my suitcase, which is almost empty—a few clothes and a pair of shoes and combs and a pot of Vaseline. I've decided to walk to a street corner near the railway station where I'm told illegals gather to check which British village to escape to and hide, before plotting their next move. But I'm not about to hide. I'm going home, going home to cuddle my precious daughter, my best package of joy ever.

I stroll across a zebra crossing on Earlham Road and stride along a coarse pavement near an old church. I burst onto Dereham Road, wondering why I keep turning from street to street. At the foot of Grapes Hill, I see a white couple, both of them weak and old, swaddled in winter coats, despite the sunshine. The man looks very weak, curled up in a wheelchair, and the woman is struggling to push him up the stretch of the mild slope.

I sidle up to them. "May I help you?"

The elderly woman turns around and squints at me, her forehead wrinkled, shoulders and back hunched. She's only as tall as the length of my legs.

"Oh, thank you," she says.

I put my suitcase on a lawn, the edges lined with dwarf green flowers—hydrangeas maybe—and push the wheelchair. In the middle of the incline, I swing around and glance backwards. The old woman is dragging my suitcase along, making her way up the gradient slowly. When I tell her to leave the suitcase, she refuses. At the crest, near a roundabout, I wait until she catches up with me. All of us move forward, and she asks me to turn into a street that has what looks like barren pine trees.

"Thank you once again, young man."

"My pleasure."

"I'm Fiona."

"Tulu."

"My husband is Robert."

"Good to meet you both."

She points towards another street, and we take a right turn. A car-less, careful street that reeks of hot-brewed coffee and barbecued lamb everywhere.

"We're home," she says, pointing to a house with a Labour Party flag in the garden.

She unlocks the door, pushes it open, and holds it. I wheel Robert into the house, and she shuts the door. To my surprise, the man wheezes out a thank you, as Fiona hands me my suitcase.

"I should be on my way now," I say.

"You've done us a great favour," Fiona says. "But, wait, would you like a cup of coffee?"

I glance up at the ceiling, holding my chin high. I don't want to appear cheap, hungry, and frustrated. I let out a sigh and dip a hand into my pocket, making myself look like I'm the Chief Financial Controller of the Bank of England and Bank of Scotland put together.

"I wouldn't mind," I say, finally.

Fiona gestures for me to sit at the dining table. After she runs a hand across Robert's grey hair, she stamps a kiss on his cheek and turns towards the inner door. Robert lolls back in his wheelchair. From time to time, he gurgles like a washing machine, coughs, and swallows his own phlegm.

I drop my weight on the vintage French dining chair and keep my suitcase underneath the table. I stare up at the small petal-shaped bulbs in the elaborate ceiling around the room. On the wood-panelled wall, the photo of a young elegant Fiona in military uniform smiles down. Robert is on the opposite wall, full of life and brawn and giggles, leaning near a white Range Rover, wearing a similar uniform.

The door gasps open, and Fiona heads towards me, stirring a white cup of steaming coffee.

"So where are you going?" she asks, handing me the cup and smiling. She sits across from me.

"Actually, I have nowhere to go," I say, starting to panic. "I'm looking for a place to sleep tonight."

She frowns. "You mean you've dressed up like that to sleep on the streets?"

Well, my people say that a man who hides his extremely gaseous stomach from his doctor may die with a bloated stomach. So I won't hide my truth here.

"In all honesty, I'm about to leave the UK permanently, returning to Nigeria," I tell her, and sip my coffee. "Can I sleep here tonight? I've already booked my flight to Lagos for tomorrow evening. I can show you my ticket if you want."

She sighs and stares at me for a long time. "Yes, I can help you," she says, pointing backwards. "I've got a vacant guestroom for you, this door behind me."

"You're so generous, Fiona," I burst out, taken aback by her kindness, my hand on my chest. "You and Robert must have had a glorious, loving marriage over the years."

She smiles. "Yes, you're correct. We've always been supportive and kind to one another. Robert is a bit incontinent now, and he often needs my attention. He's eighty-four, and I'm seventy-five. We've been married for forty-eight years, our children all grown and gone."

"That's wonderful, Fiona," I say, and she smiles again.

When I'm done with the coffee, I walk towards the guestroom. Once inside, the ambience feels like the home of a distant relative, en suite and comforting, yet temporary, what with the layers and layers of white bedclothes, spotless and soft, bestriding the mattress and cascading to the wooden floor. The headboard is made of stainless steel, and I wonder whether the gloss it exudes has some vegetable oil on its surface. I feel it, my fingers making circular movements over it. It's not oil, but its jarring smoothness might prompt anyone touching it while lying in bed to fall asleep suddenly and plunge into a nightmare—sliding downwards with the eyes closed and breaking one's head as soon as it makes an impact on the floor. I shrug, recovering from my reverie.

On the wall opposite the bed is a large square mirror, like a foreboding overlooking the room and capturing the stillness and busyness of the tranquillity brewing in the room. Perhaps, the entire apartment itself used to be a hotel. I keep my suitcase sit near the wardrobe. On the wall beside the wardrobe is a famed painting of giant giraffe starring up at a setting sun in the centre of a map of Africa. *The World Privileges Africa Because Africa Gave Birth to the World* is inscribed underneath the giraffe's overlong legs. I feel proud, wondering whether Fiona and her husband have lived in or visited Africa before, or they picked up the painting from a charity shop.

I change out of my clothes, put on my T-shirt and shorts, and jump into the bed. My phone is on the bedside table. I'm straddling between the illusion of sleepiness and the fantasy of wakefulness when my phone vibrates, beeping. A text message, but from who? I stretch my hand to check and see it's from Deji Williams! I sigh, the neurons of clemency overwhelming my brain with such weightiness that sinks my shoulders, buckling my neck. Maybe the most appropriate time has come for us to reconcile our lopsided scales if he's willing to put in the work of counterbalancing his own side of the seesaw.

—Tulu, my beloved brother. I'd really love to see you.

—Deji, I'm moving back to Nigeria tomorrow.

—What? Please, my gorgeous brother, allow me to see you before you leave.

—Why?

—I must see you, Tulu. It's important to me. I'm begging you with bended knees and eyes full of tears.

He then sends ten emojis of tears over, and I can't hold back my own tears, wishing to set my eyes on him immediately, after so long!

—Deji????

—Please and please, Tulu, let me know where you are in Norwich.

My face is deluged with wetness now.

—Meet me at Neville Street within the NR2 postcode. Use your Google Maps. Find the beginning of the street and call me. I know what to do when I receive your call.

—Thank you, Tulu, my excellent brother. See you tomorrow morning.

—Deji, I can't wait to hug you again.

The next morning, I hear Fiona's voice and peep through the keyhole. She's wheeling Robert towards the bathroom through the sitting room. I scuttle out of my room and take the wheelchair from her. In the bathroom, I bathe Robert in the tub. He thanks me with every shower of warm water landing on his head and back. I help him to brush his teeth, careful with his fragile gums. And, finally, I rub rose-smelling lotion all over his body.

Afterwards, we all have English breakfast together, sitting around the dining table filled with brown bread, scorched eggs, sausage, coffee, tea, and milk—no sugar.

I've had to assist Robert to rise from his wheelchair so he could sit alongside us at the table.

"I wish you could continue living with us, young man," Robert tells me. "We're currently in need of a caregiver, someone who's as painstaking as you've shown yourself to be."

"Would you be that person for us?" Fiona asks me. "And your accommodation will be on us."

I shake my head, smiling. I came to the UK to aspire to greatness. But any ambition that exposes a man to ridicule is a nasty one. This country has let me down, and I've already endured enough. Enough. Besides, I've received a good offer from Mr. Volta. I must find him, so that I can start a new life, farming cassava under his direction in Kwara State.

"Fiona, you've both been so kind and warm," I say. "But, with due respect, I just have to say no. I've already bought my flight ticket, and my new daughter is waiting for me in Lagos. She's the world for me right now, and she needs my first hug."

"Fair enough," Robert says, gripping his fork.

"Congrats on your daughter," Fiona tells me.

"Thank you both," I say, and sip my creamy tea.

Later at 10.30 a.m., I hug them, one after the other, bidding them farewell. I shut their front door gently, dragging my suitcase behind me.

✈

As I take a few slow steps along Neville Street, I see Deji standing at the beginning of the street. It seems he's just turned into it, holding his phone with two hands. He looks at the phone and then surveys the house next to him, looking up and down, obviously using his Google Maps to ensure that he's on the correct street. He appears gravely emaciated, to my shock, no longer the robust man with chubby cheeks he used to be. Are my eyes playing some visual prank on me?

"Hey, Deji, look at me here," I exclaim, waving one hand meant for him to see me, the other still holding my suitcase. He wheels around, and as his eyesight strikes at me, he breaks into a sprint, dashing and dashing towards me. I can't run to him in return due to the moderate heaviness of my suitcase on the ground, but I quicken my pace, as swift as my luggage can allow. His movement is feathery as if regulated and propelled by a string attached unseen to the air billowing above his head, and it seems his burden of financial anxiety bears heavily on his shoulders, drooping them. His

stomach is shallow, encased in a taupe hoodie that looks oversized, barely clinging to his body and, as he moves, the drawcords dangle irresponsibly from side to side on his chest. His jeans trousers are empty sacks of sorghum held in place by what looks like his wafer-thin waist. On reaching me in the middle of the street, he jumps into my widespread arms of embrace and clamps his hands and legs around me. I spin round and round with him still hanging on me. I steady myself and stand still. We stay hugging for some time, and then he jumps down, freeing me. He takes a step backwards, scanning me from head to toe with his astonished eyes, and embraces me again, this time even tighter.

He's totally sheared off his beard, and stunted stubbles struggle to sprout on his harried cheeks and jaw. His Afro hairstyle still stands, but the hair looks absolutely distressed, some part tangled, another part cropped, leaving almost a third of the dishevelled hair sticking out with unfortunate grey. The entire strands of his hoary hair would feel happier with themselves if hacked off from the roots and flung into the nearest bin. He should just go bald for the sake of simplicity. His legs appear to be threadlike, jutting out of black sneakers so overused that the soles are askew, the shoelaces dusty—clear pointers of a salvage value of zero in second-hand markets or charity shops. Adidas would be upset. The sneakers seem to be ashamed of themselves, traumatised by the public exposure, sick and tired of every interaction with the man, yet too powerless to protest being so stampeded and violated by his frustrated legs that pay no heed to the wreckage of the shoes. I wonder if he still lives inside his car.

"Tulu, I know I messed up on a grand scale," he bursts out, his hands wrapping around my upper body like poison ivies. "But I'll make it up for you, I swear, however you want it." His fingernails scratch my back, the hard pins of his stubble jabbing the left side of my neck and ears while he buries his face into the space between my left shoulder and neck. The tender stings from his stubbles and fingernails give me a doting discomfort. All of a sudden, he lowers himself on the ground, lying flat and prostrating his head between my white sneakers.

"Deji, what's the meaning of all this, for dignity's sake?" I ask, bewildered. "You're making a scene here, prompting white people to peep at us through their windows. You know these people are always surprised at every shade of our behaviour, at every conduct of Blacks like us. And street CCTVs are everywhere, recording this eyesore."

“I don’t care, Tulu,” he says. “You’re my only brother in this world, and that’s the only fact that matters to me right now. Please forgive my foolishness. I swear with the blood that we both share that I’ll compensate you for every misery that my unwarranted disappearance has caused you.”

I frown. “Deji, please stand up. You embarrass me. Someone might be secretly recording these dramatics with their phone and will post the video on Instagram for people to mock us.”

From prostrating, he switches to knelling, and stares up at me. I’m aware that prostration and kneeling are Nigeria’s cultural ways of cultivating contrition, this public performance of a sense of guilt and honest repentance. But we’re not in Nigeria, and it all looks so odd to display such aerobics on a street in England.

“Will you ever pardon me?” he asks, his palms glued together and placed close to his chest, as if in prayer.

I exhale, shifting to the side of the street with my suitcase, so that we don’t obstruct vehicular movements. He still walks on his knees, following me. I understand that the worsening or lessening of animosity is dependent on the intensity of the underlying apologies, and I feel his contriteness is genuine.

“Deji, what’s my gain if I don’t forgive you, my blood, my brother?” I tell him, lacing his fingers together. “I see you all the time in my dream; maybe that’s a divine sign.”

He shuts his eyes and hugs my legs, placing his shaggy head on my thighs, inhaling and exhaling loudly. And although I’m mortified even deeper, I lay my hands on his head, bending down a little, to cosset what I feel is his newfound worth, this fresh propriety that disables him. When he opens his eyes again and looks up at me, his face is swamped in tears that have already wetted my thighs, turning that part of my blue jeans into a soggy-spinach green. I see his outburst of waterworks as his use of a speechless language to produce a deep conversation that is simultaneously literal and philosophic between us, inspiring empathetic reflections, forgiveness, and tolerance in me. This is a sort of dialogue that is open, unpretentious, and all-encompassing, geared towards our reconciliation and understanding, burying our differences. I give him my hands and ask him to stand up. He takes them and gets to his feet, looking straight into my eyes.

“Tulu, I love you,” he says. “I really do.”

"Deji, I adore you more than you can ever imagine as my elder brother," I say, close to tears. "You look so skinny, my big brother. What's the problem? Have you been sick? Your collarbones are so prominent that I can hold them in my hands and jump behind your back."

"You see, eh? I've suffered the worst of hardships after disposing of my car when I couldn't cope with joblessness. I applied for more than a thousand jobs. I haven't been feeding well, doing many dehumanising jobs on the streets of London; that's why I'm so bony. But I've luckily got a new job last week, in fact an excellent one."

"Magical." I hug him briefly. "Really? Where?"

"Yes, really. I'll be heading the UK office of Emiratery Health Consultancy, an infectious diseases prevention and vaccines advocacy group, headquartered in Dubai. Their Africa's regional office is in Johannesburg, South Africa. I'll be the contact person between them and the British government, also liaising with the pharmaceutical companies and medical equipment manufacturers in the entire Europe to dispatch lifesaving supplies to war-torn territories in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia." He hiccups and pauses, taking a long breath, his eyes misting over. "I'm starting the job next month, and my office is in Richmond, in southwest London, but I'll be taking regular trips to Dubai and Johannesburg for executive meetings. Their directors even paid me a huge pre-salary perk to prepare myself ahead of resumption. Can you imagine that?"

"Ahh-Ahh, that's amazing, Deji," I shout, shaking his hand vigorously. "Massive congratulations! So you've risen to such an exalted pedestal, and you still lowered your self-esteem to prostrate and kneel for me, as if you're a typical Yoruba man?"

"I'm a proud Yoruba man, naahh," he says. "Have you forgotten?"

"No, you're Igbo because our father was Igbo."

"But my mother is Yoruba." He pauses, thinning his eyes and seeming to have slipped into some deep thinking. "Alright, let me just rephrase and say I'm a proud Igbo-Yoruba man."

"There you go! Now you're talking sense. You're so lucky, Deji. Maybe it's the spirit of our dead father opening all excellent doors for you, for both of us. He's been visiting me, all the time."

He pulls his face, turning his eyeballs from side to side, incredulous. "You now believe in superstition, or are you religious now?"

"Hardship draws your attention to the things you've always taken for granted."

He laughs and takes my suitcase. "Let's go, so you don't miss your bus to London," he says, swinging around and stepping out."

"Alright, Deji. Thank you so much."

"I feel wholesome now, Tulu, renewed and complete again," he says.

As we find our way to the Norwich Bus Station to board a National Express Coach going to Heathrow, he pulling my suitcase behind him, I recall my very first day in London when he met me at Heathrow. That day, he also took my suitcase in this manner, striding with a charming boastfulness to his paces, leading me to Islington. But this time around, I'm leading myself back to Lagos, with him standing strongly, lovingly by my side. This life is such a circumnavigating playhouse.

After several minutes, both of us walking wordlessly on Norwich's Theatre Street, I say, "Deji, your presence in Lagos is long overdue."

"Yes, of course, I'm coming to see my fabulous mum as soon as I stabilise on my new role," he says, nodding.

We tread on the sidewalk, both of us looking up at the lofty playhouse of the Norwich Theatre Royal that dazzles with gyratory lights that turn this way and that.

Once again, I seem to be turning back, spiralling and pivoting, like one in a difficult dance, as if I can't control myself. I'm circulating and recirculating, and I recall that this is how pieces of wood and plastic trash float on Lagos lagoon when one looks vicariously down from the bridges. But Lagos will forever be warm, Kwara State even warmer, and the breeze will be generous.

Seated comfortably inside the coach, I turn to the Internet with a statement for my online community, receiving penetrating replies.

INSTAGRAM—@tulu: Please give me an estimate of the number of years it will take Nigeria to become a developed country like the UK or the US.

@ritaza: In a million years, @tulu, when you and I are no longer alive.

@edcol: Haha, Nigeria's development can only happen in our dreams.

@yarop: Nothing to show the country wants to develop, so quell your fantasy.

@joe_rap: Nigeria hinders every form of repair. Enjoy your life abroad.

@jurl: Prez Buhari has come to put Nigeria on the path of progress.

@uha: He can't do it, @jurl. Cabals have already hijacked his graft-ridden regime.

@alux: The aroma of stew reveals its taste. I can't smell Buhari's flair at all, @jurl.

@anton: He's even more incompetent than his predecessor, Prez Jona, @jurl.

@runa: The rots of yesteryears are too deep to be undone in a year, @anton.

@sayo: No way, @tulu. Nigeria is doomed, a failed nation destroyed by the British.

@apa: We must stop blaming the British for the failures of our vile leaders, @sayo.

@ico: Stop it, @sayo. What have our leaders done for us since the British left?

@vitasy: Nigeria won't develop without a revolution, so scrap your crappy optimism.

@arax: We can build our own model of the UK, wealthy & healthy. Let's do it, folks!

@hope: It might take us five or ten years to develop if we have a good leader, @arax.

@ovp: Yes, @hope. We have to work hard to build our own United States of Nigeria.

@optimy: Our kingdom will come only if we pull our means & efforts together, @hope.

Home, I'm reaching home, preparing my feelings for what will come—ready to take up suggestions as to how I should be, but not necessarily agreeing to any assignment. I left home single, but I'm returning home to be married. That's a huge and complete transformation. I'm now a father, and fatherhood alters every man, and I'll not be different. I have learnt a lot from both Blacks and whites, from my own trials and triumphs, seeming to have figured out my own world in such a hybrid way that stretches and snaps back to itself. Whatever turns I next take, they shall be my own.

THE END

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