

Ojabo, Idoko

THESIS – THREAD OF LIES

**EXEGESIS – COMMUNAL
CONSCIOUSNESS: *THREAD OF LIES*
AS COMPOSITE NOVEL AND
LITERARY DEPICTION OF
HOMOPHOBIA**

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Primary Supervisor: James George

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Acknowledgement

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Abstract

Thread of Lies is a work of fiction that deals with homophobia; the trauma and dejection homosexuals face in the twenty-first century. The death of a lesbian couple is the background behind the plot. The exegesis explores the genre (the composite novel) of the creative work, the impacts of religion and politics on homosexuality, and the societies that gay novelists, James Baldwin and Sarah Waters, portray in their fictio

THESIS – THREAD OF LIES

1. Michael's Inquest

The awaited mild storm was finally hovering over Sydney. Michael Merije had been up since it started at four in the morning. Okafor Obi was asleep. Both men's shadows were monstrous against the wall in front of the bed. The bedside light was on. Michael's troubled eyes were fixed on the flower-shaped tattoo on Okafor's body.

Okafor breathed in heavily and blinked his eyes open after an hour. His hassle-free bones creaked austere as he altered his lying posture. 'Why up so early, honey?' he asked in a feeble voice.

'We need to talk,' Michael said quietly.

Okafor watched him get away from the bed, watched Michael's shadow fade off the wall leaving him alone. He watched Michael adjusting into a sort of to and fro movement within the room.

'What's the matter?'

'Who is Sue...? Sue Chong-Xuzin?'

Okafor raised a brow. His feet touched the tiled floor. He stood. His nakedness was unwary of cover; his shadow faded away from the wall too, as his fingers found his waist. His stare journeyed away from the room, away from Michael.

'Answer me, Okafor... You lied to me...'

Okafor's palms found his face. He hissed. It was an ephemeral sound that had a profundity of sorrow. He turned his back against Michael and slowly headed into the bathroom.

Tears flooded his heart. The shower couldn't wash away the growing pain. The three month overgrown affair with Michael was all he had. He had told Michael that the last time he had an affair with a woman was seven years ago. It was a lie. He remembered Sue. He remembered that first day she had said yes to him. He remembered her movements, her quick pace, by the seaside. The powerful waves of that day had the same strength Sue had in her legs. It was their last time together. That night of that day she flew out of Singapore.

For the first time in months he threw his imagination into what had happened at Narita Airport on the 21st of March, 2009. She never knew of the drugs. There she was, happily passing through the Japanese customs, excitedly telling them she was

coming in from Singapore for a holiday. When the nineteen year old saw the kilos of cannabis dug out from her luggage, a lightening of confusion had hit her. The torture that tore through her was palpable in her eyes for the tears couldn't stop the customs officers from dragging her into the airport cell. She had managed to slip away from their grip for a while.

There was Sue, running, her determined pace heading in no direction within the airport. They soon had her trapped in their web.

In the bathroom under the shower, Okafor knew his game was over. It had been hard getting to Australia. It had been hard convincing Michael Merije, whom he had met online. He remembered the flat in Singapore which he had shared with two other Nigerians. He remembered the Skype calls, and Facebook chats he had had with Michael from there, all the dirty talk, and the filthy phone sex.

Okafor had to leave Singapore when the police called his flat twice. First, they asked about his forsaken study at the university, and then the status of his visa. Most who knew him in Singapore including his flatmates had little or no suspicion about his past. They were okay with the lies painted. These were the same lies he had told Michael during his fall, during his desperate times. His desperate times were unlike those glorious moments when he would make love to a man and then a woman on a bed littered with US dollars and pulverized leaves of cannabis. Then, his name ran darkly through Tokyo, Bangkok, Johor and Singapore.

He came out of the bathroom with a towel over his shoulders. His eyes caught Michael who was standing with his back against the window. 'Are you going to call the police now?'

'I wouldn't call the cops,' Michael said, developing a furtive frown. 'You planned on using me next, I believe?'

'I see you have really dug into my past. Whatever I say now would not change anything. I must tell you this. I really loved Sue. I wanted to marry her. I had her make that single trip to Tokyo so we could raise money for our lives afterwards. When she was caught, it became hell. I could not do it myself because, as you know, Nigerian passports attract problems all the time. It was a choice made because she had a Singaporean passport and would not be much of a headache passing through the customs. I swear I did not come after you because you had an Australian passport. Neither did I come after you because I wanted you to transport drugs.'

Michael who had never been to Nigeria, but whose parents were Nigerians who had met at the University of Melbourne in the seventies, was gladly in joy that he had fallen in love with someone who shared in his ancestral roots. Yes, he had heard about how Nigerian scammers made a good life by ruining good people. How Nigerian leaders enriched themselves by waving corrupt hands in the air, but that never injected a molecule of suspicion against *this* man, against *this* Nigerian.

Against the perception that all spades weren't identical, Michael never thought it unreasonable to investigate Okafor.

He watched Okafor sort his clothes out of the wardrobe.

Michael wanted to ask him if their relationship had been based on love, as once believed. He wanted to ask him why he was denting the name of the Motherland that deserved a better image. But instead he ran toward Okafor and embraced him tightly. His tears fell on the scandalous naked shoulders he first saw as his happiness.

Michael watched Okafor drag his luggage out of the flat that morning. And that was the last he saw of him. It took two weeks before he dialled Okafor's number.

The number wasn't in service anymore.

2. Tilted Truth

Sonny walked into the facility looking at the ceiling over his head, the white painted walls and the brown leather sofas. He sat down and waited.

There was a quick airy sound that echoed thrice through the building. There was the sound of a door opening and closing. His brother's dragging steps followed. Dafe was in a night robe, his hairy chest, exposed. He also had pyjama pants on. Although Dafe appeared better in his trimmer stature compared to the last time Sonny saw him in Nigeria, there was something odd about him: the brownish looking teeth, the unkempt beards. There was a distant imagination emanating from his eyes.

Sonny stood up and offered to shake hands.

It was barely a handshake. Dafe didn't let him have a grip. He could see Dafe's eyes avoiding his. He watched his brother fall on the sofa opposite him.

He then sat, letting a gulp of oxygen refresh his lungs before he spoke. 'How are you?'

'I do not like to be asked that and you know.'

A bit of silence crept in. 'Dafe, I am concerned about you as much as Nina and Daddy and Mummy.'

'Bullshit. Bullshit, Sonny. How would you feel if you were locked up in here?'

'Dafe, you are here because you need help.'

'I do not need any goddamn help.'

'Would you have preferred to be locked up in jail back in Nigeria? Or sent to those ineffective mental institutions in Lagos?'

'I am not supposed to be restricted. I need freedom. Daddy or Mummy could help. They are the government back home and what is the goddamn government?'

'Dafe.'

'The goddamn government is the fucking law.' Dafe's eyes were beginning to focus on his.

Sonny hated the intensifying argument.

Forty-eight hours before his flight to Auckland, he had tried as much as he could to reach Dafe. The first time, a staff member said he couldn't speak to Dafe unless granted permission by the regional manager of the service. It took him thirty

minutes on the phone to get that. It took almost six minutes more, waiting for Dafe to handle the phone.

‘Hello.’

‘Is that Dafe?’

‘I am sorry. Who do you say you are again?’

He felt sick. He was tired of saying who he was. ‘I am Sonny, Dafe’s brother.’

‘I am sorry. Dafe wouldn’t talk to you. Can you call back perhaps in an hour?’ That was it. Sonny slammed down the phone.

He was staring straight into the eyes of his own guilt. He heard the sound of someone running within the house. This was followed by a hysterical laughter. He looked into Dafe’s eyes. There was good. There was evil. Dafe’s blood ran in his. Dafe’s death could only bring grief to his soul. Grief to their family. He wished Dafe had a normal life. Memories of that day when he was fifteen and Dafe was fourteen and Nina was twelve floated in like flakes of snow pouring over his face.

Nina had come home from the evening lesson gesturing at Dafe by nodding her head and flipping her right fingers, hoping that he, Sonny, wouldn’t notice.

Sonny lost interest in the video game he was playing. He watched Dafe follow her into the bathroom and wondered if it had happened again.

Dafe came back looking distorted. His eyes watered and he was biting his lower lip.

Daddy and Mummy weren’t in. Just the security guards outside and the cooks in the kitchen.

‘Her bloody Ghanaian teacher touched her again... and she’s bleeding.’

It hit him. Sonny couldn’t understand the reason why she wouldn’t involve their parents.

Sonny watered his gut with Daddy’s gin. Dafe drank twice as much. They left home that night with three kitchen knives in their possession. They kicked the door open and entered the house where their sister usually had lessons after school. They pounced on the forty year old. In defence, the teacher kicked and threw chairs at them. Dafe’s anger dusted off the teacher’s strength. Dafe hit the man’s forehead twice using the knife he held. It was the one Daddy usually used to slaughter goats.

They both had height to their advantage. The smallish teacher fell after tipping over the broken chair he had tried to use as a weapon. Dafe jabbed the knife in his hand against the man again and again. Harder and harder. In the man’s neck. In the man’s chest. And in the man’s belly. Eight stabs, Sonny had counted. The man was

now drenched in his blood and his shoes had settled in different corners of the room. The man's gradual unresponsiveness brought Sonny to a sudden stillness. He looked around the lounge. All windows were wide open.

Standing helplessly and moving backward, Sonny shouted, 'Dafe! Stop!' The liquor in his head was melting away. Dafe was still boiling. Horror stood majestically. Dafe eventually stopped and they both ran out.

The teacher would survive. The truth would never emerge. The Ghanaian feared the government. He feared Daddy. A breathing aid was his nose for seven months. Designs of stitches covered most of his neck.

He could only mumble the word 'Robber' when questioned by the police, Sonny learned later.

'I would like to say thank you for informing the police about me,' Dafe muttered bringing Sonny back. Sonny hated the entanglement of guilt that came with the gratitude. Mummy had pushed him into the same net of guilt several times in the past. Nina had too. It was just Daddy who had raised a thumb up for him.

'You should be thanking me for this,' Sonny replied, gesturing at the ceiling and walls, using his fingers.

'Fuck. What are you saying?'

'You are here because you have an intellectual disability, Dafe.'

Dafe stood up, breathing intensely. He raised his right fingers pointing at Sonny. 'It's you. It's Daddy, and it's Mummy who are mad. Not me.'

Dafe didn't attack him with punches. He just walked out through the same door he had come through.

His brother was not getting better. The service wasn't helping. Sonny spoke to Dafe's key worker. But heard only repeated tales. Dafe would get better. But how? When?

He left for the city centre afterwards in the rented car he was using. He was going to catch up with friends he hadn't seen since the university days. There were Anton and Craig, the Kiwi brothers in his class at the University of Portsmouth in England.

The cold tearing through Auckland was severe and it wasn't yet September. Truly, liquor would dissolve the just concluded episode. History always linked liquor to his dealings with his brother. The memory of that night back in Nigeria came over in bitterness. He was on his seventh bottle of beer when three policemen walked into the bar. His companions kept yelling at each other for the sake of a

premiership game, which had Manchester United trash Arsenal. He watched the policemen walk up to the barmen, igniting a conversation. The barmen seemed empty of information. The music that filled the bar was reduced before the policemen left.

Shortly after, Sonny left his yelling friends and approached one of the barmen. His vision was blurred, and his speech, garbled.

‘They demanded we reduce the music after we couldn’t help them.’ The barman said. ‘...they asked if anyone had walked in here in the past hour. We said you guys have been drinking here for five hours.’

‘Who might they be looking for?’ Sonny had asked.

‘They didn’t say but my colleague said the lesbian couple who lived six or seven houses away were attacked.’

Still holding his bottle, he felt an odd state of sanity taking hold of him. He took a sip. Beer tasted bitter. He nodded, went back to his friends and told them it was time to leave.

Outside the bar, in the parking lot, his friends doubted his composure and questioned his ability to drive. He ignored their questions, took the wheel and waited for them to make up their mind. When his friends all got into the car, he got the wheels moving. His thoughts had become a puzzle, while his friends went back into their football squabble.

He had kept many of Dafe’s past deeds secret, and wondered if he could do so again.

He dropped off his friends, and was back on the same road. The bar where he had been drinking was five kilometres away from where his parents had bought their new house.

Walking into the house, his greatest fear confronted him. The living room looked dishevelled, with cushions in unstructured arrangements. The central table stood, edging against the wall, and some of the pictures that had hung on the wall were all smashed against the floor.

‘Lesbians and witches are all hated by God and should die!’ he heard Dafe scream.

The door to Dafe’s room was slightly open, a little distorted off a hinge.

‘They are also humans, Dafe,’ Sonny heard his mother reply in tears.

‘Tell me the reason why God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.’

Sonny entered the room. Dafe was on the floor, drenched in tears. His right hand clinging to Nina's clothing.

'I am a murderer! I killed them! I killed them for God... '

Mummy's eyes were fixed on Daddy, who was standing, hands akimbo, with his usual look of tiredness, his gleaming specs hanging over his nose. His lips were folded inwards. Worry.

A ghost had perhaps slept on Dafe's bed. And the wardrobe stood slanting against the wall, as if bashed and rummaged.

'We have been waiting for you,' Nina said, quietly.

'Why? Why has no one called the police?' Sonny asked.

'No! No jail for me!' Dafe went on.

Feeling sick, Sonny left to use the phone in the living room.

In front of the Auckland bar on K road, friends could be waiting. Drinking was truly one of life's brilliant ways of getting over issues.

Reflections of that moment of argument, days before the killing, weaved along the beats of his heart. Who knew the empty words had a slayer's sway? They were all seated in the dining.

Rice and beef curry.

Dafe wouldn't have any meal other than a toasty, which Nina had to make.

'Sodom would fucking die!' Dafe kept on saying that afternoon – his song all day.

'How the hell do we make him stop this?' Sonny had asked Nina.

'Sodom wasn't a city of gay men and women. Go and learn to read your bible, Dafe,' Nina said.

'You are wrong. I will help God destroy this fucking world.'

In pain, Sonny gulped down the memories of the weak words, of the lame conversation. 'God needs the help of no man.'

Sharing the bed later with Dafe was another bizarre experience Sonny had to endure. Dafe kept pointing to the open GPS application on his phone and saying, 'Sonny, I can see where the lesbians are right now. Look, Sonny... See where that dotted red spot is? It's a bar near the barracks.'

'Dafe, GPS does not work in Nigeria.'

'But mine works. I will track them down anyway.'

Deep down in Sonny's sub-conscious he was forcing sleep to creep in. Dafe continued talking and talking.

3. Upon Fear

1

He couldn't keep his eyes away from her. He was seated at a corner in the bar, lightened by sparkles of red, blue and white bulbs. The music was quiet, not for wild night dancers, but for really gentle heavy drinkers.

He would wait for the night to mature. He would have one more bottle before walking toward her table. No – he would do it after half a bottle.

His eyes met hers as he walked toward her. He thought she smiled. Now that he stood in front of her table, her sudden agitation came hard on him. 'Hello, I am Michael.' And yes, her smile was of gold, like the strands of her hair which she adjusted using her fingers. He liked the way she jerked her head backward. It was quick but done carefully. Her cheeks were oily. Her lips hadn't felt any colour, neither had her eyelids. She had thin brows. 'Can I have a seat?' he asked.

She took a drag off the cigarette between her left fingers and killed it in an ashtray. 'Yep, sure. I am Rayleigh.'

'Rayleigh Johnson, I have seen you on TV. I followed the news regarding your sister's death.'

'You are not from over here?'

'It's my third month in Nigeria. I was born in Australia though my parents are from here.'

'How old are you?' she asked.

'Thirty-three.' He looked over his shoulder, and then over hers. 'Funny?'

Two women in calculative steps emerged out of a door behind her. They came in with a derailing noise, heading to meet a chubby man seated at the reception.

'This country really amazes me. I need to learn how to bribe my way through, before looking into police documents,' she said.

He could see how transparent she was. Distance had painted a false ego. 'I saw an article yesterday that linked the deaths to the Niger Delta militants.'

'That's a fucking lie.' Taking out a pack of cigarette from her purse, she offered him a stick.

'I am sorry...'

'You want a drink, then? More drinks?'

‘My belly already had enough for the night.’

‘The beer here is tougher than the ones in the UK.’

‘Yeah, easily puts one over a mountain.’

‘My sister and her partner had nothing to do with the goddamn oil. Six months after the legislators passed the bill here against gay affairs, the terrible murders occurred. Someone I met believes the government had a hand in it. No matter what, I will get to know the truth. I owe my sister the truth.’

‘You will find out the truth.’

He realised their drunkenness had killed off the awkward unfamiliarity standing between them. They were like old friends. Rayleigh’s laughter got so loud, and her shoulders brushed his as they walked out of the bar. He liked her car. She had led him into the car park, pointing at a red RAV4 parked yards away, the moon casting a shadow of a tree over it. He watched her lean on the driver’s door indolently, her body calling for him. He didn’t get scratchy, but stared into her eyes without saying a word. She suggested they take a walk.

‘My driving would be terrible in this state,’ she said, looking downwards, at her belly, hands akimbo.

‘Can I drive you to your apartment?’ He offered.

‘After a walk, there would be no need,’ she replied, laughing, her fingers finding his shoulder. ‘I live in a hotel.’

He wasn’t responsive. He noticed her fading excitement as her fingers slipped off his shoulder. Soon her laughter was up again, this time against the night, against his jokes, and against his placidness. It was a protracted walk. She found a suitable spot on a rock by the side of the road. He felt the surface. It was warm - a perfect spot to commune with the moon.

They lay with their backs on the rock avoiding each other’s eyes. From the corner of his eye he could see the movement of her breasts, as she breathed, thrusting gently against the sky.

‘When I was a kid, I used to think the moon was Santa’s home, where he came from during Christmas,’ she said.

‘My Dad made me believe Santa Claus was an angel of God.’ Michael gazed at her.

‘I remember the Christmas mornings when Dad and Mum would leave Christmas presents in front of our bedroom doors, only for me and my sister, Kay, to be told Santa had visited while we were asleep. It seems Kay always knew where the dolls

and chocolates and lollies came from. She had been an atheist from an early age. Not like me who stopped believing only when I turned sixteen.'

He looked away, pretending not to see her wipe off the tears that had filled her eyes. She sniffed and then smiled. 'Do you love rocks?'

'Never been really interested in landforms. But I love to spend time at the beach.'

'During most holidays as children, Dad and Mum usually sent Kay and I to Limerick where our great-grand aunt, Ivy, lived. Her last husband was Irish. She had brought Dad up when his parents passed away. Ivy would take us to the beach where people say many children had died. Ivy told us we were protected. She told us our grandparents' spirits wouldn't let us die young, and would let Kay and I swim through rising waves to the amazement of other children monitored closely by their parents. She rubbed her eyes. Her tears were returning as she folded her lips.

'You shouldn't let these memories hurt you, Rayleigh. These are happy memories.'

'I am only crying because of... because... you are failing to recognise my feelings,' she said, with a little laughter. Her stare held his briefly.

'Rayleigh,' he called, tilting her head up using his hand. He could see her shadow pushing against his body. He could read the desire on her lips. He would not acknowledge the beauty that sat on them. 'Rayleigh, I am not into women. I am gay.' He noticed a smile settle on her face.

She opened her mouth as if to speak but didn't.

'You weren't expecting that, Rayleigh. I'm sorry but...'

'Hey. You don't have to be sorry over anything. Gay people tend to have something in common. A sort of gentleness they carry, like it's a burden - as if their hearts seem to be in an isolated land.'

'I do not understand. If I do, I don't think you are right.'

'I know what I am talking about, Michael. It's just something... There is something always peculiar about homosexuals. My sister had a peculiar behaviour. So did her partner. So do you. Not identical, summing my personal studies. What stands identical though is that distance from the world. You folk are present but distant holding onto a sort of confidence, but in a modest manner.'

2

I do not believe in God because my parents were Christians; I do not believe in God because I found his voice and existence. I believe in God because I have been able to identify a lot of meanings to his words in the bible. I do not go to church, and I do not like priests, bishops, ministers and pastors. I just wonder if those that give themselves these titles really understand the existence of Jesus. Could Jesus have been a pastor? Could he have been a priest? Could he have been a bishop? I would rather call him a doctor for the sake of history. My parents were deeply religious, and for that, I had always visualized Nigeria as a religious nation.

I had another picture of Nigeria. War. My father's memory of his own father was of a drunkard who had been known throughout Okigwe - their village - to climb palm trees and tap good wine to sell. Sometimes he sold all the wine tapped, and on the days he couldn't sell, he came home singing in a famous Igbo song. My grandfather's song was all about dying for Biafra.

'Your mates are on war fronts dying for Biafra, and not singing,' my grandmother once challenged my grandfather.

'I am the best palm wine tapper in all of Okigwe, and if you do not understand the effect of palm wine, keep your mouth shut. Palm wine triggers precision on the war front. My tapped wine is always the best taken to any war ground. And that's why we are going to win the war or die for Biafra,' my grandfather had replied, his breath heavy with alcohol.

'Real men have been recruited and taken to fight. You are here dying for palm wine.' Grandmother could never give up.

Grandfather ignited his dying-for-Biafra-song, shutting his ears to her words.

Shortly after the Biafra troops in Enugu failed in the battle, the Nigerian Army headed for Okigwe. My father was six then, but remembered it well. There was little time to run and hide in the basement dug outside the house. Missiles came upon Okigwe like rain, tearing houses down, in a way dreadful storms would. My father survived underneath the collapsed house he used to share with his sisters. Grandmother and two of Dad's sisters lost their lives underneath the same collapsed building.

Grandfather was singing loudly about dying for Biafra while returning home that same night. A missile amidst others from a fighter-plane hit him in his drunkenness, taking him off the feet, smashing his ribs against massive branches of a fallen tree. He bled and died truly, for Biafra.

It was twenty-four hours later that my father was dug out of the safe haven, underneath zinc sheets and damaged wood.

Memories of my parents visited me all the time as shame and betrayal. They were supposed to be the only ones I could run to. But they stood against nature, in rejection of the person I had become.

Marriage to my parents was compulsory for anyone who wasn't going to become a priest. 'If you cannot find a woman in Australia, I would go and find one in Nigeria,' my mother had said. She was giving me a ride to the dairy where I was to get Dad a birthday present.

'I am tired of you and Dad bringing this up all the time.'

'I hope you are not planning to get a partner like they do here. I am not your father's partner. I am his wife. Do not forget your Christian upbringing.'

'Mum, can you tell me if Eve was Adam's partner or wife?'

'She was his wife?'

'Who wedded Adam and Eve?'

'God.'

'Mum, there is nowhere in the bible that speaks of that. I am open to any relationship for now and not marriage.' My reply had an effect. I knew the next question.

'I hope you...'

'I had to cut in. 'Mum, I said I am open to anyone at the moment, man or woman.'

I knew the night would be hard for her. When she and Dad succeeded in cutting me away from Kyle, they thought it was for good. Until this day, I hate to think about it.

'Why bring such disgrace to us?' Dad asked during the birthday barbecue.

'If it's disgrace, it's my name that sinks.'

'I have lived almost half of my life in Australia but still know my roots. I still know where I come from. Michael, you need to think. Know your values.'

'Who knows if it is a woman I might meet. I am open, Dad. I am.'

'Shame on you, Michael. Shame on me too... Shame on you, Edward,' Mum said, unable to look at Dad in the face. It had been a long time since she called Dad by his name. Her cheeks got wet, and she wouldn't let Dad console her.

It was funny she was crying. I wasn't dead.

It was Kyle who introduced me to magazines that showed naked men and women. My parents till this day thought that was the worst diversion for me in life. This helped in my discovery. I must say I was in a deep search for who I was. I saw photos of lesbians on lesbians - how they had oral exchange of vaginal fluids - but there was a wall that distanced me from indulging in their acts, just like the ones that had the men on women. Kyle couldn't get the pictures I wanted.

We were both fourteen. Kyle and I later explored the Queens Kingdom on George Street. The Indians and Chinese had *this* competition within the kingdom. I had a Chinese and a really large Indian woman on the first night. Kyle had a slim blond. We used a room that had two beds. I never failed to prove myself while Kyle watched, already comfortable with a job he had graciously thanked his girl for.

I had come to a stage of my life I would admit I was living in dirt. It had to be pronounced as weakness. To seek solace between the legs of a harlot was weakness. God in his infinite mercies had always been interested in delivering man from every weakness.

3.

She had insisted on giving the ride, and while fastening her seatbelt, she asked, 'Did you date girls?'

'I tried to but...'

'What?'

'I never felt I was in a relationship. They were no different from the girls I met in the kingdom. God forgive me, I cheated.'

'How many girls did you supposedly date?'

'Just two. I dated Annie for four months when I was fifteen. Then Orna, when I was seventeen, for nearly six months.'

'And the men you dated?'

'I have had sex with quite a number of men, but I have actually dated three. There was Kyle, and there was Paul - a Polynesian weightlifter who is now late, snatched off the earth by cancer. We were together for three and a half years. I met Okafor, a Nigerian, who was just created out of lies, fraud and smoke. He broke me with his lies, his past and unlawful records I hate to talk about.'

'Typical,' she said, nodding sideways, swerving onto Tokunbo lane and stopping in front of a bus-stop beside the mosque.

‘So much thanks, Rayleigh... and it was nice talking to you,’ he said, opening the door.

‘Wait,’ she said. He failed to catch what her eyes gave away. ‘You didn’t tell me the reason you are here in Nigeria.’

‘The reason...’ His mind wandered back to Pitt Street. Australia had been alerted of an advancing storm, but he had already experienced storms that left incisions on his life. Okafor’s incisions. He had a bottle in his hand, matching in slow calculative steps, with slurs dripping out of his mouth. He wanted to sing like his grandfather. He wanted to die for Biafra. But what was Biafra? Where was Biafra? Who gives a fuck about Biafra? He would then die for the sake of being queer. What the hell was life? Hated for his sexuality, by even his family. He felt raped by straight wicked men. Straight couples have lasted. Other non-straight couples have lasted. Why was he different? Perhaps because of God’s love. God’s direction. He wanted more beer. He invented a song and sang loudly, about gay men.

Across the road stood another black man, shouting like he was. The man was condemning the street. Condemning pubs, prostitutes, homosexuals, burglars and rapists.

Michael felt a connection to this man. He staggered across the road not too mindful of the traffic. He ignored the driver that shouted, ‘Fuck you.’

The black man needed no microphone. His lips were amplifiers. He resisted abuse and apathy from pedestrians by thrusting the bible he held against them.

The real Michael could have sighed and passed by. But there he was, standing, watching, and listening. The surprise was tall. He waited.

The sermon about the reality of hell and the hope of paradise was altered to silence and the man advanced toward him. ‘Hey brother,’ he whispered in a light intonation, different from his broadcasting voice. ‘You got a stronghold of unclean spirits around you.’

Michael felt the bottle in his hand drop. He was mindless of the street. Could it be true? It had indeed been a long time since he believed a stranger’s voice.

‘Brother we need to talk. God loves you.’

They both entered a coffee shop a few yards before the Commonwealth Bank. The silence between them as they had walked, built an understanding which words couldn’t.

‘How did I know you were a homosexual, brother?’ It was the man’s first sentence. He was probably in his early thirties and was on the verge of going bald.

‘I have no idea,’ Michael replied. He would have to tolerate the deepest of shit to get rid of his pathetic self.

‘My name is Noble,’ the man said. ‘I knew using the power of God.’ They had their orders, and the man wanted to know where he was from.

‘Over here. I am from Sydney.’

‘I mean where you got that black skin from.’

Michael spoke of his roots.

And the man said he was from Ghana. He said Ghana and Nigeria were like Esau and Jacob. ‘You will have to go back to Nigeria and deal with your problem. Your case is very complicated. I know a lot of great men of God in Nigeria. I could give you the name of a church.’

4

It was pandemonium everywhere – thundering of bare feet over a concrete floor; hard clapping and forceful nodding of heads, with lips in enchantments. Fire-filled languages. War songs - against the camp of the devil. All these were done on empty stomachs, as we were not expected to eat or drink for four days. This, to me was Nigeria’s welcome. My head seemed so empty. The straining of my neck built bare muscles over my shoulders. My ears were malfunctioning, as eardrums were almost breaking. So much sweat. Foul gases of body energy filled the church. Foul lingering smell from people’s mouths. I could taste the saltiness of mine. My eyes were supposed to be tightly shut, like every eye and fist around, but they were open, blinking and searching for nothing in particular.

We were up to forty in number that had come with different issues. Mine was interpreted as a flesh battle. I was to kill the flesh in me. I was to kill a spirit man tormenting me. My concentration as directed was to be on my groin. There were women who had to deal with their wombs that felt like stones in them. There were other women who had to also deal with similar spirits to the one I was dealing with. The spirits were said to be responsible for their failed marriages. Some men were to kill the spirit women. Some people were to destroy enchantments floating within the atmosphere. Some were to deal with wizards of modern days.

The first night was incredible, a little scary, in discovering another form of God’s existence. The second day had my throat sore. I wondered if death awaited me on the third day. And when the day came, I felt stronger. I believed I could do it - go on without food till the end. On the fourth day I was exhausted. I felt like I had

been castrated. I had a dream a man was chasing me. I confronted the chaser with a scream when he got hold of me, and I saw him collapse.

‘After this fasting and waiting upon God to fight, you will realise a lot of changes, my son,’ the counsellor assigned to me said, during one of our one-on-one meetings.

‘I dreamt he died... the spirit man.’

‘Good, good. You will soon start seeing the good things coming your way. You would have a beautiful wife who will have seven children for you. Also, a beautiful job in Australia. Mark my words.’

‘Seven children? That’s too much.’

The counsellor laughed. ‘How many do you want?’

‘Two or four would be alright.’

I thought I lost something after the exercise. My counsellor was an attractive man whom I would love to take out for dinner, not for the motive I was made to believe was evil. He was a good man. He gave me hope. He was a man that had a high taste for suits and didn’t fail to ask me for an Australian suit which I promised to send when I got back. He never believed me when I said a good suit was a good one. He had categories ranging from the Italian to African designs.

Back in my hotel room, which had a view over the Atlantic Ocean, I stood facing the window. I watched the anger of the waves. Aside the need to oil my sore belly with food I had missed, I needed to refresh my breath with liquor. I needed to examine my heart. To test my body.

Here was I, two days after a four or five day fast, inserting lust into a prostitute. She wanted some sort of caress which I couldn’t offer. She was short, having supple hips. Mildly dark and had a propensity of being fat sometime in life. Here was I, done and relaxed as if satisfied, with the woman sleeping deeply beside me. Here was I confused in my head, fighting hard. My ears and eyes and my nose seemed flapping like the wings of a bird. My mind shoved aside the memories of my cleansing. I had to wake the girl.

‘You have to go.’

‘Can’t I stay till the morning?’

‘I would be on my way out soon.’

She got up, her nakedness like regrets, like the fasting, against my eyes. After getting her clothes on, I tossed her twice what she wanted me to pay. As soon as she shut the door, I got online using the computer in the room. It didn’t take long to

dig out a map direction leading to a street where a syndicate of homosexuals, the most wanted queer men in Nigeria, clubbed and dined secretly. I called a taxi.

4. Cycle

1.

I stand before your grave this day, to say that I knew you better after you had gone. You were brought up under the umbrella that saw same-sex relationships as a sin, yet you had to accept being queer like it was your heavenly call on earth. You were killed alongside my sister because of the passion that glued you two together.

I want to say I am sorry for taking the feelings you and my sister shared for granted. I want to say I am sorry for keeping away. I was insane. I am still in a deep search for reconciliation, and also the meaning of fate and death. Life after all, is full of choices. Making the right choices.

You never expected to be caught up within the wave of a gay relationship until you turned fifteen. Before then, you were still a virgin, keeping yourself for a destined husband. You were unlike my sister who had a first experience at thirteen. Let me ask you a question. Did you have a picture of an ideal man ever in your life? Tall, nice whiskers, tolerably built..? Did you lust for men at all?

I got to know Adesayo was your first lover from the earliest page of the diary you kept in 1996. You met her two days after your fifteenth birthday when you joined the choir at Saint Mary's. She had a boyish figure, aye? You would never forget the evening she invited you for dinner at her place in Akoka. Your parents were okay since she wasn't a boy or a man. How old was she? Twenty-three, I reckon. And after a lovely dinner, you described her approach as rape. Was it? She was rough and had fire on all her fingers, which were so wet from touching the unfathomable spot between your thighs. You were excited, but afraid. You were more comfortable than even being in your dreams of men.

While you walked home that night, I guess you recalled the guilt that held you captive, the religious upbringing, the bondage your parents had around you. Three more times in the same week, the same secret union was shared. And the first Saturday after that first starry-eyed night, the confessional stood against the real person you would become.

'Bless me father for I have sinned, my last confession was two weeks ago,' you said after kneeling in front of the stand.

After blessing you with the sign of the cross, Father Ubong asked, ‘What are your sins, dear one?’

‘I for... for... fornicated... I fornicated with a... with a...’

‘It’s alright. You don’t need to mention who he is. You should know that Jesus loves us all the time. Whenever you have sex with a man who is not your husband, and then asked for God’s forgiveness, you crucify Christ all over again.’ After a sigh, he asked,

‘What other sins do you have to confess?’

‘I... I... lied to my parents, and I lost my temper and raised my voice against my brother.’

‘Parents are the most precious gifts any child in the world can have. We live in a world where so many kids are orphaned or born out of wedlock. You should not treat your parents carelessly, daughter. You should also seek for the Virgin Mary’s direction in handling your anger. Say the ‘Hail Mary’ fifteen times, ‘The Lord’s Prayer’ seven times. Say the ‘Acts of Contrition’, now.’

But your struggle would continue. You felt it continued because you did not confess appropriately, aye? Adesayo’s curvy hips wouldn’t fade away from your mind neither would the love of your God. The next day was a Sunday. And the day consumed your control, giving way to lustful glances at unremitting intervals, between you and Adesayo in the choir section, in church. The exchanges had the weight of your first lovemaking, and you couldn’t adjust to the tempo that the choir members sang - *A Cry against Goliath*. You wouldn’t receive the Holy Communion as intended. But Adesayo did.

Mass was over. You felt being controlled, being pulled. Isolated. You smiled and laughed, walking beside her on that road heading toward Pako bus stop. Both of you took the right turn just before the roundabout ahead, heading to the street where she lived. You wanted her more than she wanted you. Inside the house with the door shut, she drew you into her arms, and you hungrily licked the tongue she stuck into your mouth. You let her hands clasp your breasts. She undressed you, gently pulling down the zip behind you. She pushed you against the bed that had most of the space in the room. Your lips trembled. Your body trembled. You were afraid to moan. Perhaps for fear that the walls had ears. Her fingers found your triangle. Her body found you. It was too late when guilt held your heart.

‘This is immortal, Adesayo,’ you said, breathing hard.

Adesayo, who was seated up in bed, gave you a mean stare. ‘Why now, Ruky. Why did you not see it as an immortal sin before we did it?’

‘Because I couldn’t control myself. You brought me into this.’

‘We are both mature enough to determine what is right, Ruky. We are not married, neither do we have boyfriends that could satisfy these desires. I do not have a thing for boys, and I see the tendency in you. We just have to remain in this till some day, perhaps, when true husbands emerge.’

‘I am not comfortable. Virgin Mary, help me.’

So did your arguments live on and keep growing.

You were in front of the confessional again - after three weeks.

‘I had sex with a fellow girl.’

It was the priest’s silence in response. The silence like fists, squeezing your throat, and cutting off your breath. Father Ubong wouldn’t advise you like he did the last time. He only prayed for your soul, sprinkling the holy water on you like you needed a bath.

Your penance this time was to say the entire rosary thrice. He also asked you to keep a scapular around your neck and sin no more. That was a hard one. Your anger seemed to take control over your body on the way home. Permit me to ask what brought the anger on you? The priest was just being human, like any other being. Like me, like your parents, like most Nigerians. Like most people.

Anger altered your steps and you headed toward Pako bus stop, toward Adesayo’s street. You met her absence but sat over her doorsteps, pulled off the scapular and waited. You forgot night was coming. You forgot you were expected home before nightfall. You couldn’t wait for Adesayo to settle when she arrived. You devoured her to her surprise just after she had opened the door and both of you had entered. Your fingers pressed her breasts like they had never done. While seated on the bed, with legs wide apart, and your dress drawn over your waist, you guided her fingers to feel your triangle. Your moans this time weren’t shy of the neighbours. Were you doing this to hurt God or Father Ubong? While she was kissing your neck, your eyes caught the scapular you had pulled off. It was on the floor just before the door.

Your father’s pesky words and your mum’s displeasure waited for you at home. Their suspicions of your involvement with a boy continued to mount.

The time came when you saw no need for confessions. I think it was five months after your relationship with Adesayo began. You told yourself God wasn’t deaf, and concluded you would rely on personal confessions.

You got to know Adesayo better. She was a bit tight-fisted and careless. She would neglect a date with you if Manchester United was going to play on the planned day. And she truly loved the company of men, not for sex, but for the love of squabbling. She

would argue in the bar, a few kilometres away from where she lived, with whoever wasn't a Man United fan.

She had introduced you to wild parties. The last time, both of you had exceeded the beer intake accustomed to your bodies which led to her caressing you openly, on the dance floor. That ignited the rumour of your affair among other choir members in church.

You hated arguments and so gave in each time something went wrong between you two, like the time she accused you of staring at Sylvester, a boy in the choir. She didn't like you for giving up too easily. She had told you several times that you were too quiet. She wanted you to be like her. To challenge men as she did.

There was a day you saw yourself in a dream mothering a baby. You woke up crying like a child. You wept asking the Virgin Mother for help. Your mother heard you and knocked on your door. You claimed everything was fine and wanted to be left alone, aye? After that incident, you seemed to have developed a hard skin. You pulled out of the choir and started avoiding Adesayo.

One Saturday, you saw her coming from the opposite direction while you were on your way to the market. You turned around, as if you had forgotten something, and headed back home.

A day came when she was able to confront you. Wednesday. You were on the way to the market again, and couldn't turn around this time.

'That demonic thing we do has to stop, Adesayo.'

'Ruky, it is not easy. It could have been better if it didn't start at all.'

'So?'

'It's not just the desires. We both have failed to recognise love.'

Those words dragged you into what you never imagined to accept. You fought against the opening of your heart. You got so confused, and for weeks you could do nothing better than sitting and thinking. You had a lot of sleepless nights. You were so lucky to be away from school. The term break had just started. You eventually stopped going to church. And stopped praying. But couldn't stop thinking about her.

2.

Your aunt pushed you to join a Pentecostal Church, when your parents cried over your new habit of staying home on Sundays. It was in one of the unenthusiastic presences, witnessing the congregation's thundering of feet and speaking in tongues, that the pastor pointed at you.

Your heart raced. You thought he was going to tell the church you were a lesbian. Another infliction you weren't ready to bear. You had seen him cast out what he called demons from people in previous services. You had seen him heal the sick and ordered the cripple to walk.

'God is taking you to a foreign land,' he said.

And that was all he said. Relief. You didn't think of the prophetic words until you reached home that day. Your affection for the church heightened. Of course it was every Nigerian's dream to leave the shore of the decaying economy. But right there, deep down in your heart, you still missed her.

The words in your diary said that whenever you began missing her, she appeared from somewhere and rejuvenated her efforts in trying to get you back. She would come to your house looking for you. Most of the time you were in, but never came out. You used to tell your siblings to tell her you were out. But Adesayo would wait all day. Adesayo's waiting had become an irritating habit. It happened thrice and your parents got worried. 'I realised she wasn't a good person,' you had told them. Then you started staying away from home, spending much more time in the new church until school resumed.

Just before you turned seventeen, your parents had gathered some money and were ready to send you abroad so you could have a quality undergraduate study. Of course the pastor's words were coming true. You were going to study English Literature in Britain. You were going to get disconnected finally from Adesayo's world.

The news of your departure hit her like a rock. You received numerous letters from her during your first year in Britain. You got to know that the scar you left her never healed. She shoved her body beneath various men, after you left, and still felt lonely.

You had made friends at the university in London. You were now part of an Indian family that had let you one of their rooms. Schooling had become as awesome as you imagined it. And your religious devotion was getting bounteous in a recommended Pentecostal Church. Your classmates gave you the nickname, 'Radical Lady', after you challenged Kay Johnson for presuming Jesus could have been gay during his lifetime. You had been so mad.

'How can such a worthless remark be spoken about God?'

Her silence didn't satisfy you. You nearly slapped her. You wished you had spat on her.

After a couple of months, when you had put the incident behind you, she approached you. You were surprised at her friendliness. You were surprised she apologised. And your friendship with her started. Never did you know you would have an affair with her. Never did you know she had her eye on you from the onset. Indeed it took a lesbian to identify another. Life was indeed a cycle.

4. My Brother

I was the last born. We grew up as happy kids. I never looked at Dafe, who I was next to, as a kid with an intellectual disability. He appeared clever and normal to me. Daddy and Mummy used to go miles to please him, and I used to wonder why. Why he was so special?

I remember there was a time he was a year ahead of me in school. I usually got to see him during break-times. All I had to do was stand in front of one of Primary 2A's windows. There was Dafe. Seated amongst boys in his class, who enjoyed listening to his tales. Anytime he saw me at the window, he left the crowd around him. He knew when I wanted part of his lunch. He knew when something was wrong.

There was a day one bully in my class said I was as skinny as a grasshopper. I found my way to 2A. And that day Dafe asked, 'Who is looking for your trouble?' I only nodded my head, so he could follow me and see. We hadn't reached the corridor of my class, Primary 1A, when the bully sprinted out of the class through the doorway, off across the football field. Teachers could only raise their necks like giraffes hoping everything was fine. Dafe chased.

The next session I sat in the same class with Dafe. The bully had become his disciple, following him about, everywhere. Dafe's eminence gave me a queen's status in class. And in the coming session, I was sad to leave him behind. I do not know how to describe the feeling then. I was just a little girl. The only explanation I could give my friends was what I overheard Daddy say to the headmaster - Dafe had health problems. The bully moved on too, and stopped being Dafe's disciple.

I had another brother, Sonny. He was in Primary 5C. That was when I was in 3A. He wasn't as popular as Dafe. He didn't play soccer, which Dafe was popular for. Only a few knew him to be our eldest. He was quiet and can be a jerk in school. I could bet he used to be ashamed of me and Dafe. I knew he used to be bullied by his mates. He reacted by laying his head on his crossed hands on the locker to cry. That was what Julie, a girl in his class, told me. Sonny of course had sworn heaven and earth in denial.

The three of us were bound by unity usually outside the school premises. Particularly when we were left on our own at birthday parties, or picnics at the

beach. My brothers were my rock. They would beat up boys that called me their wife. There were times when I felt so lonely. Usually when Dafe and Sonny got so attached to the video game in the children's parlour at home. Whenever I asked if I could play, they both claimed games weren't for girls. The same thing happened whenever they watched soccer. They both supported Arsenal. I liked Manchester United because Daddy had a Manchester United jersey. They would tell me to shut up each time I predicted a Ruud van Nistelrooy goal. I always stood alone except on the days Daddy was home.

I still had a distinct attachment to Dafe until I got into Primary 4A.

I had gone on an hour's visit to my girlfriend's house that shared a fence with ours. That visit turned out to be the last of all my visits there. My girlfriend's father was South Africa's envoy in Nigeria.

Coming back home, through the gate, I sighted more policemen on duty under the palm tree by the corner of the house we used to live. Daddy and Mummy were home.

The policemen's eyes all fell on me. 'Second Madam,' one of them called. I could hear Daddy's laughter from his bedroom, and Mummy's steps in the kitchen. Where could Sonny and Dafe be? I got into the house through the back door that led to the children's parlour only to bump into Amina, the new house-help, mopping the floor.

'Have you seen the boys?'

'They should be in the garden.'

That was true. Mummy had given them a week to transplant some flower-plants from a nursery bed into a set of flower-pots she had brought home.

They were there, squatted, hands stained with loamy soil. Dafe got to his feet, searching my eyes.

'I don't think I could ever go to Kagiso's house again. I heard their mother telling a woman some bad things about Daddy,' I said.

'What did she say?' Dafe was impatient.

'Don't believe her, Dafe. I guess Kagiso refused to give her a mug of ice-cream today,' Sonny said.

'You open your big mouth at home, but at school, you are as dumb as a lizard.'

Sonny piled up sand into both hands, targeting me. And when he threw the piles, Dafe took a step shielding me, letting the piles of sand hit him on the back.

I wanted to scream and urge Dafe to fight Sonny. But Dafe held my hands tight, asking, ‘What did Kagiso’s mother say?’

‘She told the other woman that Daddy was a criminal,’ I said, watching Sonny fetch some sand into a hand this time. He seemed to change his mind after hearing what I had said, and he poured the sand away and drew closer to listen. ‘She said Daddy was among the politicians taking away Nigeria’s oil to sell in South Africa. She said Daddy built companies in India but couldn’t build any here in Nigeria. She said she had been telling Kagiso’s father to stop Kagiso from seeing me. She said all these while Kagiso and I listened with our ears glued to the door.’

‘And what did Kagiso say?’

‘She said her mother was a bad woman but asked me not to tell anyone. It pained me to hear all that.’

‘We should teach them a lesson,’ Dafe suggested, as his eyes travelled a distance away.

‘That’s not my business,’ Sonny said. He turned on the tap in the garden, washed his hands and left.

Dafe sat on the ground matted with grass. There were quite a number of flowers growing uncontrollably in several pots. The shadows of the gigantic trees standing as roof, fought against the sunlight, pulling in a breeze that was making the leaves wave. I sat next to my brother.

‘Their cat will pay for all she said. Titan will pay,’ Dafe said.

A smile came over my face. The South Africans loved her so much. Titan, during the evenings, would get over the fence into our garden and have some food. I loved feeding her. Sonny loved her. I was unsure if Dafe ever did. I could imagine him getting hold of Titan and flogging hell out of her. I was ready to give the animal a bang on the head. We waited. The moon appeared in the sky. One of the policemen came into the garden asking if we were okay.

I got tired of waiting and wanted to tell Dafe I couldn’t wait anymore. But Titan had jumped over the fence from Kagiso’s house. A smile settled on both of our faces. Titan had a whitish-brown colour. She was blind in one eye. Kagiso said a car had run over her in the past. A veterinarian, their mother would never forget, kept Titan alive. She had to survive on milk from a toddler’s bottle for four months. I now wanted to discourage Dafe from harming her, but he was already whispering, calling the animal, offering a palm that had nothing. And he got hold of her to my horror.

‘What are you going to do, Dafe?’

He ignored me. I approached him. He was standing, holding the cat. I hit Titan on the head. It was more like a pat, but Titan knew it was unfriendly and yelled. Dafe’s grip got firmer.

‘Let her go,’ I said.

‘We could rip it apart,’ he replied.

I felt cold come over me. I took some steps backward. And I turned and ran out of the garden. In my room, I found myself pacing between walls. Now I couldn’t imagine what he was doing or what he was about to do. So I ran to the store, by the side of the kitchen. I had to climb on the bench to look through the window. There was the cat, within the fingers of my brother’s cruelty. I caught the sight of scissors in Dafe’s hand. At first I forced myself to believe he was trimming Titan’s hair. But her struggle, her tail’s wiggle, hit my heart hard. The sudden sight of blood splashing against Dafe’s face made me lose footing. I fell to the floor. My tears spilled over my palms. My heart kept drumming. I kept counting numbers. Still so wet with tears, I got up and climbed the bench again. Dafe was gone. I felt bare. I blanketed myself with both my arms. And found my way back to the garden. I could see blood on the spot Dafe stood. There were a few furs and I could perceive the smell of struggle.

I ran out of the garden to the front of the house. Dafe was in Daddy’s presence. Sonny was picking some coins off the floor. I ran into Daddy’s embrace, my tears rushing out.

‘What is it, Nina?’

I drew my face backward, turned and pointed at Dafe. He had washed his face. But there was a red stain on his shirt - a stain too small for Daddy to notice. ‘He killed Titan.’

Daddy jolted, squatted and looked into my eyes. ‘Are you sure?’

I nodded.

Daddy looked at Dafe.

Sonny’s eyes dropped to the floor.

‘Dafe, did you?’

‘I did it because Kagiso’s mother called you a criminal.’

Daddy stared back at me. ‘Nina, you must not speak about this to anyone especially Kagiso. Do you understand?’

I nodded my head.

Daddy then left me, walking toward Dafe. ‘Show me what you did,’ he said.

I watched Dafe leading the way as Daddy followed. One among the many policemen that littered our compound tailed them.

5. Arrival

The plane slipped through the unwounded clouds as it made its way into Murtala Mohammed. Rayleigh sighed. Tears drizzling. She was in Nigeria. The Lebanese man seated next to her, who smiled at her from time to time, offered her his handkerchief.

The plane sailed to a smooth stop and the silence from the passengers vanished, as most passengers got anxious, standing to their feet to get their hand luggage. She mopped her face ignoring the stare of the man next to her. She wouldn't be in a hurry to leave the plane. An Indian woman was almost being knocked over by a Nigerian woman. No apology. The Indian yelled in Hindi.

Rayleigh met Chioma in one of the lounges. She was plumper, fairer, and wore longer hair. They embraced. Rayleigh's smiles were over her tears.

'Nice trip?'

'Gosh! It was a tiring trip.'

She pulled Rayleigh's body tight against hers, and then got her inches away, her palms, on Rayleigh's shoulders. She saw the tears and said, 'I understand.' She hugged Rayleigh again. 'Let's get your luggage.'

'I need to be in Warri.'

'Of course. It's a fifteen minute flight, and hopefully in two hours time we should be off. It won't take long before we get to the local airport.'

The weather wasn't as hot as Rayleigh had anticipated, having checked the internet for updates, a day ago. She could smell the dust in the air. Looking through the side window of the moving taxi Chioma had arranged, she was stunned. Stunned by the population. Here and there were struggling Africans, determined and persuasive, selling variety of fruits, wristwatches, wallets, snacks, framed pictures, newspapers and perfumes. They weren't homeless people. Weren't underfed. These people looked homely and happy as they argued and laughed and ran around. A tear spilled onto her lap.

She was in the ladies' room at the local airport, weeping into a hand-towel Chioma had gotten her.

'You mean, Blaack Afrrica?' It was how she pronounced it, digging up the past back in London, when her sister had made up her mind about Nigeria.

'Come on Ray, I know you have this thing against blacks, but it is a continent our great grandparents lived for,' Kay replied, folding a pair of jeans into her luggage lying on the bed in the bedroom of the Neasden apartment she shared with Ruky.

'Our great grandparents were Christians. Missionaries. Kay, don't kid me. You have never been to Church. I got nothing against Africans. But why Afrrica? Not even South Afrrica?' Rayleigh let her body sprawl on a couch in the room.

'We want Nigeria. Ruky and I want Nigeria. We have made up our minds. And please, it disgusts me when you call Africa that way.'

The past brought more tears to her eyes, as she took her seat in a smaller plane. Chioma sat beside her. It was silence, tears, sighs, regrets, confusion, all through the short flight. Rayleigh wished she knew more about the African girl, Ruky.

After the plane landed in Warri, she followed Chioma, sensing her persisting concerns, and also, learning to push her way through the horde. Chioma stopped in front of two soldiers, her gaze confronting theirs. They nodded. Their rigid and fierce eyes made Rayleigh's own eyes flicker over Chioma for a moment.

'You should have told me.'

'I know you would object,' Chioma replied, turning away.

'I should feel comfortable. I am not in Iraq.'

'Are you sure your feelings say the same things? In Lagos - no problem. But this is Warri,' Chioma replied.

The soldiers tailed them as they walked. They were people walking in the same direction as they were. Chinese, Indians, Caucasians, Hispanic, with no soldiers.

She stood in front of the window. She could see the soldiers in their back and forth movement with their guns hanging over their backs, the nozzles pointing to the sky. She could see Chioma, who had found a hilly spot she now sat on, waiting.

The shadows of the trees in the premises were interwoven over the small garden she was sure Kay nurtured. Rayleigh found her way down to the lounge, using the stairs Kay and Ruky had walked on numerous times. The lounge was already empty of furniture. It was scrupulously clean as if death never ever visited to spill blood of innocent women. Her eyes found the entrance leading to the kitchen. An open wooden door that seemed to mock her. She went out through the door behind her fighting against the urge dragging her into that kitchen where it had all happened. She walked with bare feet over the grass toward Chioma.

‘I need a film crew,’ she said, while she bent and sat beside the Nigerian woman.

‘Are you sure?’ Chioma asked.

‘What do you reckon?’ she said, wiping off a tear.

‘I think you should hang on for while. You need strength.’

From the hilly spot, an increasing patchy noise caught her ears. ‘What’s that?’

Chioma tilted her head to listen. And the noise increased. It was a noise from a crowd: kill’am!!! kill’am!!! kill’am!!! Screams. Cries. Laments. Laughter.

Rayleigh’s heart missed a beat when her eyes caught a man, almost naked, running past the entrance that led into Kay’s premises. The noise increased. ‘Did you see that?’ she asked.

Chioma nodded. She didn’t. But she could now see a running multitude of people, quite a dreadful sight. Women and men had sticks; some men had machetes, and some teenage boys and children had stones weighing down their palms. Their voices were horribly loud like a wind chanting, and for a moment Rayleigh thought she could feel the hilly spot they were seated on shaking. The multitude was in pursuit. Their figures soon faded. And their voices seemed to diminish as they had risen. The two soldiers around walked to the entrance, and after some nodding of heads, one of them had to follow the multitude. The soldier that stayed back turned around and adjusted into the usual to and fro movement.

‘They could be chasing a thief,’ Chioma said.

‘I saw a man running past.’

‘It’s common for the whole street to chase a thief who has been caught red-handed.’

Rayleigh could only wish the man running was the damn murderer who had spilled blood in the house standing before them. ‘Are those people going to be allowed to use all those machetes and stones?’

‘If the soldier does not get involved on time, they can do whatever pleases them. Sometimes people put tyres over unlucky thieves until they are fully covered, and set them ablaze.’

Rayleigh froze. ‘Over stealing?’

‘Yes, over stealing petty things like televisions, laptops and recorders.’ Chioma rubbed her chin using a finger. ‘When we met in Atlanta, Rayleigh, I met a boy at the conference centre. He was vacuuming a staircase. He was very friendly and handsome. Perhaps seventeen years old. I wanted him to show the ladies. As he led me we got talking. He opened up to me saying was serving an eighty hour community service order for stealing a motorcycle. We live in diverse worlds.’

Rayleigh’s eyes wouldn’t leave Chioma. She turned away looking at the entrance and wetting her lower lip using her tongue.

6. Visit

I was at the bar with Michael, talking about the interview I needed to do. I was so disorganised, and still undecided about using one of the Harry's cameramen. A man in dreadlocks drunkenly approached our table, apologised for prying on our discussion, and told us he was a cameraman with no job and no flow of income. He was Su'eddie. I hired him straight away despite Michael's doubts. I hired him because he made me laugh. He brought a smile over the burden beer couldn't handle.

A day later, we were on our way to the house on 23 Road. I was so frightened. Michael believed everything would be fine but Su'eddie thought it would be fun.

I wasn't bold enough to knock, so Michael did. It took only a few seconds before a woman opened the door. It was obvious she was Ruky's mother. She smiled at Michael and Su'eddie but frowned when she stared at me. She ushered us in, led us through the sitting room that had a faint smell of dust. The cushions were brown. The standing fan by the side of a cushion produced a trivial noise as it spun at a snail's pace.

In the dining section, where she had us all seated, Su'eddie laid his video camera on the table.

'What can I do for you.' the woman asked, smiling edgily.

'Well, I am Rayleigh Johnson, Kay's sister.'

'I think I know who you are,' she interrupted me, squeezing her face. 'Please, you will excuse me... I need to let my husband know of this visit,' she said, trying to keep her voice low.

Michael raised a hand, gesturing at her to hang on, as she got to her feet. 'If this isn't a proper time, we can come later,' he said.

'No no... It is in our culture that a woman must let her husband know of every visitor that comes to the house,' she said, and left.

Silence took the woman's place.

'We should go,' I whispered.

A sheepish smile appeared on Su'eddie's face as he got his camera ready.

An angry voice of a man could be heard from one of the rooms in the house. This was followed by another chilled silence. Michael made a reach for my left fidgety fingers on the table.

Ruky's father was stout and bald, wearing a pair of knickers, and a white singlet that had several torn spots. He had a few grey hairs. He was between sixty-five and seventy. He narrowed his eyes and stared.

'Have you all come to kill us?' he asked quietly, at first. 'Isn't my daughter's blood enough for you?' His voice rose as his eyes settled on me.

I tried to stand up. Michael held me back. I noticed the wife reaching for her husband's shoulder. She spoke to him in Ijaw.

His eyes held mine as he listened. They soon settled on Su'eddie. Suddenly, he pushed his wife away. He confronted Su'eddie and grabbed his neck. The table screeched. The chairs fell. I saw Michael standing up, and I had to, too. I shut my eyes on hearing the woman scream. When I opened them, I realised the man had Su'eddie's camera in one hand, the other hand still squeezing breath out of Su'eddie.

I watched the man fling the camera against the wall. It split in two.

Su'eddie struggled, trying to push the man away.

Michael rushed at the man, and pulled off his hold against Su'eddie. The woman had fallen to the floor and was weeping.

'Sir, we understand your anger, but you also have to understand that we were subjected to the same loss. Your daughter died. That woman standing there,' Michael pointed, '...also lost a sister. We did not kill any of them. All we are doing is searching for justice. For the truth.'

'What justice can be done when she has already been killed because of these oyibo people's ideologies? My daughter died many years before she was murdered for the repugnant lifestyle she adopted,' the man shouted, in reply.

Su'eddie stared at the broken bits of his camera for a while before heading toward them. He picked them up. Looked. And let them fall. 'Can we sit down and talk like the adults that we all are?'

The man nodded. His bitterness wasn't like mine. Ruky's mother showed us the fallen and displaced dining chairs, which we lifted one after the other putting them in order. The table remained out of place, as one of its legs had broken.

The man sat down, his chin resting on his left palm, with the elbow resting on a lap. Michael motioned at me. He wanted me to say something. What could I say? What should I say? The little drama had shattered everything. Coming here was a mistake. I was about to open my mouth and speak, when the soft-spoken mother,

who now had a seat beside her husband, let out a cry. She fell back to the floor, lamenting.

‘We have been pretending to put everything behind us. We are trying to put everything behind us. And you all come here to reopen our wounds. What have I done to God to deserve this? Why? Why? Why?’

Ruky’s father hissed and didn’t even glance at his wife.

‘Mama, be strong,’ Su’eddie said.

Michael stared at me. I stared back at him, and then stared at the woman. ‘I am sorry,’ I found myself saying.

Suddenly, we heard someone stamping outside the front door. This was followed by a grunt. The woman’s wailing that filled the room quietened. The door opened. A man entered. He could have been thirty or more. ‘What is going on here?’ he demanded.

‘She has come with no trouble. She’s the sister of the white girl... of Ruky’s white girlfrie...’ Ruky’s father tried to explain.

And that was it. The man whom I was sure was Ruky’s brother, dashed for me. I stood up. Frozen. Michael had promptly taken a stand in front of me.

He could have been staring straight into Michael’s eyes when he asked, ‘How can a woman fuck a woman? Explain?’ His eyes were bulgy.

‘She is just her sister,’ Michael said. ‘She’s just Kay’s sister.’

I moved away from Michael’s back.

I watched Ruky’s brother nod his head while looking around. Just when I thought everything was okay, he took a step backward, squatted and jabbed his head into Michael’s belly. If his head had a horn, Michael would indeed be dead. I screamed. Someone took hold of my right fingers.

When I looked at my side, I saw Su’eddie. He pulled me, heading for the door, ‘We need to get out of here!’

‘I turned around and saw Michael being flung over the floor. Michael quickly got to his feet. And with a little effort, he was able to evade the blow coming against his face.

Su’eddie pulled me into the darkness, outside. And let go of my fingers. We ran. I never stopped turning back. I slipped and fell over a pool of mud. Su’eddie, who was a yard in front, ran back. While he tried to help me out, he slipped and fell too. I heard him laugh. I looked back again, and saw Michael limping toward us.

7. Goal

No one could argue against your place in the team. No one denied the fact that your feet were dangerous in front of goalposts. That day was a dream that came true for you. That glorious day. That moment. Before that moment, all the team could boast of after eighty-eight minutes were three off-target shots.

It was a home match and your team was a goal down. The coach was furious and couldn't have been thinking properly. Boos emanated onto the pitch from the few watching. The player that you envied so much was being booed despite his many accolades of the year.

The manager asked you to get ready and jump on to the pitch with just six minutes left to play. Even though you knew he did this out of anger and out of his head, you didn't object. You had no voice yet. No say. You were still a sheep being led and had waited for this day since you came to England. The booing from the stands increased when you jogged on. The coach nodded his head, sighing.

You read a lot of meanings to the booing. A lot of 'What-the-hell-is-wrong-with-the-fucking coach?' A lot of 'Who-the-hell-was-the-black-retard?' You could hear the laughter of the opponents' supporters. Your pride stood tall and you needed to prevent it from falling. You had the name, 'Dafe', instead of your surname, 'Ogheneovo', above the jersey number 18.

You decided to run onto the field with your ears shut. You felt a pain grip your head, but you had a raw desire and would keep to your feet. Since the coach gave no instructions, you chose to attack through the left flank, with the pressure still hard against your team.

It was Cap J's magic, a pass that came with reluctance, from outside your eighteen yard box in a guided accuracy. You trapped the ball and within the last three minutes before the fulltime whistle would be blown, you beat the opposing defenders and their goalkeeper, who was so confident that he attained a position in midfield. You pulled a trigger, earning a goal for your team. A goal from your own half. Incredible.

The goalkeeper ran backward, but couldn't reach his goalpost before the ball hit the net. This was comical. There was no way that even the best goalkeeper in the world could get hold of a ball at such speed. You thought you saw the cloud lighten

up as you fell on your knees in tears. Your teammates surrounded you, all kneeling like you did. ‘You are the king, man!’ Cap J screamed in your ears.

‘You are the true king,’ right-winger Shaun added. ‘You are the king... King!’

With five minutes of extra time added, and with two minutes already taken away, you celebrated with your teammates, blithely. Every player on the pitch wanted to settle for a draw, but you continued to chase the ball with so much inebriated energy.

While the last minute was being swallowed by vigorous delaying tactics of the opposition, one of their central defenders indecisively passed the ball to his goalkeeper. The keeper passed it back to him. There was the call by the home supporters for the referee to blow the whistle. You charged against the delay tactics of the number 5 player. He slipped and fell. You got the ball. The few supporters in the stands found their feet in feverish adrenaline, shouting your name in hope, and you didn’t fail. You hit the ball right into the net with the velocity of demons. The keeper failed in an attempt to stop the ball even though his palms felt it as he stretched. A hushed silence seemed to eat your world within a split second. Your knees fell, touching the grass again as your teammates crowded around you. There was a shower of alcohol somewhere on the stands. The ball had settled to the side of the quivering net. The whistle was heard.

You got tired of shaking hands with your teammates. The coach shook your hand for the first time since your arrival at the academy, and Cap J patted your back, telling you your future was as colourful as the rainbow.

‘That shouldn’t get into your head,’ Dwain, the only one among your teammates that didn’t shake hands with you, said.

‘Don’t listen to him,’ Cap J whispered into your ear, his hands on your shoulder.

‘Cap, I know what you are telling him, but that’s the fact,’ Dwain said. ‘He has a lot to learn.’

‘Leave him alone for now, Dwain,’ Cap J replied, dragging you away.’

You all started drinking from the dressing room that night.

‘What does it feel like rescuing the team today from what could have been a disastrous defeat,’ a pressman had asked.

‘I wouldn’t say I saved the team. God did it.’

‘Do you feel confident about a move from the under 19 to the reserves, soon?’

‘Yeah, if I am given the chance.’

‘Next test for us is in Manchester. What do you foresee?’

‘We can only do our best.’

‘Thank you so much, Dafe. I wish you luck in the future.’

‘Thanks.’

Yusuf, the Sudanese who drove you around, had been waiting in the car park. He wondered what had happened, why some of the teammates were clustered around you, why you walked and smiled differently. After getting into the car you asked him to tail Cap J’s wagon which was heading for a nightclub in central London. The sky was filled with stars and the streets, lightened by the streetlights and vehicle lamps. Yusuf had slowed down just before the nightclub’s entrance.

The car hadn’t come to a halt when you jumped out, without telling Yusuf to wait or pick you up later. Cap J spoke to him though, asking him to go home to his family, and forget about you for the rest of the night.

Inside the nightclub, at the corner beside a sparkling thread that made a curtain, you and Cap J joined the right-midfielder, Mike Taylor, who was at a table. He had been a bit quiet in the midfield during the match. He had his calm consistent smile, and was in the company of a woman. Cap J introduced her as the ex-wife of a premiership player.

‘Most of us are adulterers, Dafe. Welcome to the club,’ Mike said.

You smiled.

‘You will play for this country someday. They should be eyeing you for the under-nineteen national team soon. Dwain already has three caps,’ Cap J said.

‘I will get there.’

‘Pretty soon, I reckon. As a kid I adored Jay Jay Okocha. He doesn’t have age on his side these days.’

‘I don’t really like him,’ you replied.

The drinks kept coming and everyone wanted to hug you and pat your back. The time came when you couldn’t tell the difference between right-midfielder, Luis Tiago and defender, Bernard Tay. Cap J had dropped something in your drink, and your voice became so loud. You laughed when there was no need to, and waved at everyone, singing in line to the music, playing.

Cap J lifted you over his shoulders that night, spinning you around as they all tried to sing the song in the way you sang it. He took you out of the club, heading to

the car park. He struggled to open the back door of his car, breathing hard. He let you fall on the back seat, your head, almost hitting the roof of the car.

‘Oh my head!’ you lamented.

‘Sorry, about that,’ Cap J said.

While he drove over Tower Bridge, you could see a man and a girl walking a barking dog by the side of the road. You heard a familiar sound, and asked, ‘What’s that sound?’

‘Don’t fucking tell me you can’t recognise your phone’s ringtone?’

You struggled to get your phone from the pocket. ‘Damn.’ It was your father. You let the phone fall on your lap.

You told Cap J how your father wouldn’t support your football dream; how he thought Sonny and Nina (your siblings) were the ones with great futures, but perhaps now, he had heard of this glorious day. You told Cap J how you were forced to write the JSCE three times in school; about how Nina, who used to be two years behind you, went on to graduate before you.

Cap J drove into the car park by the side of the building that had his apartment on the seventh floor. You kicked the car door open but couldn’t get out. ‘Why don’t you take me to my fucking apartment?’ you pleaded.

‘You are in safe hands, Dafe,’ Cap J replied, lifting your body over his shoulders again. You sang. He laughed. He used the stairs, breathing hard. He took you straight into his room, passing through his messy lounge, and let you fall like a sack of saw-dust onto his bed. You watched him tear his clothes off. It was his pair of track-pants first, and then his vest. You let your imagination reveal his naked body before you actually saw it.

‘Where is your fucking girlfriend,’ you asked, turning over, your eyes shielded by sheets.

‘Not all men are straight enough to keep a bitch at home, you swine,’ Cap J replied, getting on the bed beside you.

You tried to think of Ngozi, your cousin back in Nigeria, who was so big behind and also in the chest. You remained still while his palms caressed your hips and the sides of your stomach. You adjusted yourself, easing it for him to drag off your pants. The realisation of your own naked body and arousal made you laugh. Your body shook and trembled as Cap J got rid of your underwear, forcing Ngozi’s breasts and backside out of your head. You willed your body to maintain the arousal. You would recall his thrusts and his smacks, his body’s thrashing over

yours; his tacky saliva on your lips, on your spine, on your thighs, on your neck. Everywhere. He groaned into your ears. When he slid off your body, your cousin's face re-emerged in your head, and you grabbed Cap J's body, your hands against his ribs.

You woke up finding yourself on a sofa in your lounge, fully dressed, your legs resting on the central table. Track pants. The long-sleeved jacket you had used in the nightclub. You felt something strange in your body. Perhaps a tail. You fought the pictures trying to force a way into your mind.

'I cannot have someone's cock growing out of my bum,' you said to yourself, walking into your room, pulling down your pants, your back against mirror. A knock on the door, heard from the lounge, jolted you. You pulled up your pants and headed for the lounge. It was Yusuf. You were late for training.

On reaching the training ground, the manager refused to shake hands with you. He slapped your hand away, asking you to wait on the sideline. You watched the others receive instructions and undergo drills. The hangover of last night made you yawn and yawn.

Cap J jogged toward you, his eyes looking over your shoulders first, before they met your gaze.

'Why late, kid?'

'Got up late. What happened last night?'

'We got so fucking high. Don't you have a hangover? I am trying to get mine off the shoulders.'

'Did you just take me to my apartment from the nightclub?'

'Did you fucking fantasise about me, mate?'

The manager called Cap J and he ran off. You were asked to join up after half an hour. The manager wouldn't include you in the line up that would play in Manchester at the weekend. He had told Duncan, the academy's Chief Executive that you had to face disciplinary measures.

Your mother called to ask if you were playing. She said Daddy was keen about coming to see you play. Just as you were getting out of the car and as Yusuf was switching off the ignition, the pressman who had acquainted himself with you on your most memorable day in England approached. You looked him in the eye telling him to fuck off. You had a match to watch.

The coach's decision was costly, and his eyes were fixed on the pitch for a while after the match. You watched your teammates drag arguments into the dressing room.

The home players had smiles, patting each other on the back. They chanted, praising their coach and mocking your teammates. This was Manchester.

Your Mum arrived, surprisingly, from Nigeria. She said she had been calling your phone without you answering, and had to leave numerous voicemails a day ago. A grey haired man, who looked very thin in an old brown suit, had come with her. He had facial marks, thick scars on both cheeks. You were nervous.

'This is Pastor Akagwu,' your mother introduced.

And that was it. You hated the Pentecostals. You were on Daddy's side, maintaining the pride of being born a Roman Catholic. You were against your mother on this one.

'Dafe, you are a great playmaker heading to a great level,' the man said.

'This is insane, Mummy,' you said, looking at her. 'I know... I know that sometimes I can be sick in the head, but since coming here, I have been brilliant. Mummy, it is sick to bring this... this insane man here.'

'Stop that Dafe,' she said, glancing at the pastor, before staring at you again. 'There is something very important we have come to talk to you about.'

'Shoot, Mummy.'

The pastor cleared his throat. 'Dafe,' he started, 'I was on the pulpit last Sunday with your mum in the congregation when I received a revelation from God that an attack is being planned against your career. You have just taken an awesome path and some witches are plotting against your life, against the good path that you have taken. We must pray and act now.'

‘Mummy, this is bullshit. Must you bring this man here to come and say such... such shit?’

‘Dafe, you need to listen. Don’t talk about a man of God like this.’

‘My ears are filled.’

You wouldn’t let them pray for you. The words they left behind were like seeds over your heart. Seeds bound to germinate. You couldn’t sleep at night, trembling at every slight movement of the curtain. In the morning your head felt light. Lighter than usual. You hadn’t felt this way since you were twelve. You weren’t sure where your mother and the man had gone to last night. Training was in two hours and Yusuf would be coming soon. The invisible tail, which you hadn’t felt for a day or two, began budding again. This time it felt a little sore.

Cap J was building a distance and you could feel it. You jogged onto the training ground and you were welcomed with a hit on your face. The ball was thrown by Diarra, the Malian left-back, who had featured twice for the reserves. He crowed like a cock, as your palms found your face and the other teammates laughed. The ball bounced gradually until it stopped before your feet.

You ran several times from one goalpost to another. You chased the ball within a circle formed by five teammates, who passed the ball amongst themselves making sure you didn’t get it. On the sideline, Cap J, with a foot over a ball, was standing beside Dwain and three others. He was talking and looking in your direction, weakening the strength in your legs.

You finally got the ball off Rodriguez, who tried to dribble you. He had a smile of mockery. Instead of the feeling of triumph, you felt failure hit you. The laughter directed at you from Cap J and his company hit you like a spear. Dwain made a monkey face at you. Your heart tore. Your coach, in midfield, stared, but was in a conversation with the goalkeepers. Could the tail behind you have sprouted out visibly? You squatted, supporting your head with your hands.

‘Hey. Get up, Dafe. Show us the pussy in your arse,’ Dwain shouted. Cap J’s laughter was the loudest, and it dug up a buried scene in your heart. The thrusts. His breaths. His whispers. His saliva. His sheet. His fucking apartment. You got up and ran toward them, their laughter fading away as you approached.

You threw a hand, aiming for Cap J's right cheek, but your arm was caught by Dwain. As Cap J stepped back, Dwain twisted your arm and pushed you to the ground. 'Hold it dude,' he said.

Cap J's betrayal stared at you. You stood up and couldn't say a word. The others became baffled.

Later in the evening, you headed to Cap J's apartment. You met a woman, who could have been in her mid-twenties, at the door.

'Hi.' she smiled.

You looked over her shoulder, and pushed your way in, stunning her for few seconds, her smile fading. She tailed you, heading past the lounge, which had beer bottles on its floor. You met Cap J's bedroom door open. You saw him in bed between two other women, who were likely to be of the same age as the one that had opened the door. He was completely naked, while the women had just bras and underpants

'Join us Dafe.'

'I came here to know why you said shit about me,' you replied.

'This is England, Dafe. Gay people are free.'

'Who the hell is gay?' you barked.

The women chuckled. The one who had opened the door for you took off the red robe around her, revealing a purple bra and red underpants and joined her mates in bed.

'Look at these wonderful girls, and tell me to my face that I am not straight,' Cap J said.

'Get off those trousers and join us, Dafe,' one of the women said.

'You goddamn swine. What was Dwain's remark about?'

He laughed. 'Joanna, do I fuck like a swine, like a gay man or like a real man?'

'Nah... You are like a stallion,' the women that had just got on the bed replied in a brisk voice.

'Dafe, go and sort issues out with Dwain. I only got amused. It was all about fun, man. You shouldn't take what happens during training sessions personal or else you will never go far in the forsaken career.'

You sighed, nodded and headed out. In your car you hit your head against the dashboard, jolting Yusuf. Blood dripped on your lap.

'Take me to my apartment.'

'Are you alri...'

‘I am not answering you, Yusuf. Just take me to my apartment,’ you said, touching the torn skin on your forehead.

You were calm seated beside Diarra, just before the last row in the bus. Dwain who was seated in the front, behind the driver, said something which you hadn’t picked up, but you were sure it was about a homosexual. You felt like getting hold of his throat. Most of your teammates almost laughed their lungs out. Cap J, who had an earpiece glued to an ear, kept smiling, avoiding your face.

You were going to start the match in Nottingham, right behind Dwain. You spat on the grass when the next day came, wearing your number 18 jersey. It was kickoff. You kept reassuring yourself nothing was wrong. No tail sprouting out your arse. There were superb passes at first from the midfield but they became scarce afterwards. The day was turning out agonizingly boring. The ball seemed to avoid you. You just ran about. You thought you planted yourself in vital positions. You thought the problem was with the midfielders – Mendez and Mike. It went on and on and on. The home supporters cheered their team. You began to sense the hideous tail. It felt so real that you sat on the grass despairingly as the referee blew the whistle, running to see if you had sustained any injury. You said you were okay, getting up and jogging to the midfield. There were witches in your imagination. The grey haired pastor in your imagination.

It was five minutes before the half-time whistle. There was a back pass from Cap J. It ended up an own goal to your frustration. The Nottingham players patted each other on the back, and their handful of supporters cheered.

There was no complaint in your team’s dressing room at half-time. No complaint against Cap J. The coach only stressed about your absence in the game. He demanded more. More from you. He wanted you to draw back a little and help in the midfield.

Back on the pitch you were eager, too eager, challenging to win every tackle you made against the opposition. It paid off in the seventy-fifth minute when your coach got to his feet, not sure on how you got there tackling the opposition’s goalkeeper, winning the ball and running pass a Nottingham defender. For a moment you had a crown on your head. The Nottingham supporters went quiet. You shot the ball.

Cap J approached you, patting your back. Your manager was on his feet, kicking against the air. His fears had fallen into his fists. What did you do, Dafe? You had shot the ball. Overshot it. Right over the goalpost.

‘Even a chicken could score that!’ you heard your coach scream.

8. Eaten Up

The culture was ripe when my son, Paul, left the Island. The festivals were still breathing and the company of our ancestors was very much with us.

It wasn't long after Paul left for Australia that he became my pride. He said he had become a professional weightlifter in Sydney, and I had to say 'thank you' to my ancestors. Paul sent me clothes, money, and books about Australia, unlike his siblings (excluding half-brothers and sisters) who could only send me infestations, horrible nightmares and toothaches from the stone-throw distances they had built their huts.

It was exactly five years after Paul left the Island. Some white men, who said they were scientists, came and prophesied evil upon the land I had known all my life. I was among the many Islanders who rebuked the evil pronouncements making them lick their bile and leave.

'The priest is saying the same thing. Water would eat the land soon,' my wife had said.

'What does your religion know, woman?'

'The demons you still worship are the problems,' she replied.

I could only laugh. I could only laugh remembering the story of Sodom and Gomorra as a child. I could only laugh at the stupidity she was passing onto all the children she bore me. 'Have you ever seen your God? Who is this unknown God, by the way?'

She had hissed and left the bedroom – that night.

Yesri, my cousin, shared in my belief but had views that contradicted mine. He was the first Islander to pour hot oil into my heart. He said he was glad my son in Australia was doing fine and sending me money. He said there was something he wasn't okay with. He said he wasn't okay with Paul infuriating our ancestors by burying his sperms inside a fellow man's body, giving the Island a dirty image. My wife's religion saw this as an abomination against God. Yesri saw this as an abomination against our ancestors. Which of the ancestors, I had asked him – on one of his visits.

'Will your father in the ancestral realm be proud of Paul?'

‘What are you talking about? What has my father got to do with what his grandson does in the private? If I decide to bury my sperm in the soil, it’s nobody’s business.’

I realised I had nobody to rely on in the entire Island. Not even my current wife.

Shortly after the rainy season started, a fragment of the white men’s evil words shocked the Island. A part of the Island had been eaten up overnight. I couldn’t shed tears for a Christian woman, whose house had been consumed. Her roof could still be seen floating away. Where was her God?

I was invited to be part of the village elders’ meeting. We had nothing to discuss other than walking about, scrutinizing the shores and suggesting stupid remedies.

We reassured ourselves that our ancestors were not asleep. We concluded that what had happened had nothing to do with the white man’s evil pronouncements. But it dawned on us a few days later, when news came that some neighbouring Islands had been completely eaten up. Fear, confusion and heartaches mounted.

In unsettled times like this, should one mourn? I kept myself busy fishing during most of the days. On a particular day while fishing with my youngest flock of children, we were able to clearly see wounds taking hold the land.

‘That’s where Ma Joseph’s house used to be.’ My youngest child, Ekueta, pointed.

‘No. That was where we used to come and watch the masquerade dance,’ Tsuye argued.

Two years separated them. They talked about all these like they were seeing a white man’s film. On our way back home, we came across men and women who had fright and anger in their facial expressions. Their greetings were like spears aimed at me.

‘Our ancestors are not asleep.’ I tried to give them hope.

‘What ancestors? The ones rotting in hell for their idolatries?’ one of the Christians among them replied.

What could I say? I could only blame the white man for such a remark. We had a religion before the white people brought theirs. We had a language before they brought theirs.

A day came when I had gone fishing alone, and injured my right index finger while adjusting a hook. I couldn’t fish anymore and had to go back to the shore. Yesri and two elders were waiting. I noticed their eyes were all watered. They

cornered me to a spot under a tree, away from some other fishermen, and gave me the news.

I slumped, my knees dug into the soil, and I cried.

‘It is the will of our ancestors,’ one of the elders said.

‘What will?’ I asked. ‘Why should a son die before his father?’

‘You shouldn’t question our ancestors,’ Yesri replied.

I pressed my palms against my face. Yesri and the two elders accompanied me home. Members of my wife’s church were already around singing hymns. My grown children, scattered around the Island, were around. My wife had chosen a pig for the night. Yesri took charge of the slaughtering.

Days later, an arrangement was made for me to speak to Paul’s next of kin. People said he was the one whom Paul buried his sperms in. They said he was an Australian black man who wasn’t an Aboriginal. They said he was black like the first of our ancestors. And on phone, this man spoke through his nose like the white men I have encountered in life. Most especially like the ones that had poisoned our land with their religion.

Yesri eyed me as I fidgeted with the phone. He wanted me to accuse the man on the other end over Paul’s death, but all I wanted was for Paul’s body to be brought back.

‘Much cheaper to have him buried in Sydney,’ the black man suggested.

‘Sell his houses, his cars, his jewellery, everything in his name, and use the money to send me his body.’

The black man took his time to reply. He made me wonder if my son had lived in a world of lies. He said he would weigh the cost and get back to me.

It took a week for the black man to arrive with Paul in a coffin. There were so many empty threats directed at him from some Islanders. No one could throw stones, for his perfume had charms. He was tall and slim. Calm with a steady striking look. He put a thread made of grasses over his shoulders like we all did. He had tears in his eyes but never cried like we did.

A fight broke out between my wife’s church members and the village elders over the hymns. The elders wanted silence.

The coffin was opened and I was the first on line to look at Paul. My son’s beards had a pinch of grey, which was not present when he last came to the Island. He still had the look of the Island. The intelligence. The muscles. I stared at him, tears rolling down my cheeks. How did cancer get hold of you - I wanted to ask.

Did you start smoking? Or was it the thing you had with the black man? All my children that were present paid their respects. The black man paid his, attracting scorn. He placed his lips on Paul's forehead. The undertakers around impatiently stared, as sand dripped off their shovels. Paul was laid to rest by four of his siblings beside his late mother's hut.

Two weeks after the burial there was a terrible storm, and it rained for two days without stopping. The entire Island got flooded and muddy, and people's anxieties worsened. Paul's grave got surrounded with water. I bit my lip. Suffering had overshadowed my bitterness. On one of the nights I could sleep, I saw myself in Australia, out of my culture, and I could hardly commune with my ancestors. I saw myself working as a gardener for two women married to each other. They paid me well in Australian dollars. I was smiling when I woke up. I realised it was a bad dream. I didn't want to leave the land.

On a different night, when I couldn't get hold of sleep, my wife challenged me. 'You and your demons will rot in this land.'

'And you and your children would someday die and then live forever in heaven, I guess. I will be glad to be like that rich man in hell who could see Lazarus in heaven. At least I will be able to still stare at your hips,' I replied, trying to touch the loosened knot of the clothing she tied around her body.

She slapped my hand off. 'If you do not make up your mind in three days about leaving this land, I and my children will leave. I hope you are listening?'

'I would die seventeen times for this Island,' I said.

She didn't respond.

The Island had no other choice other than to welcome back the white men. They came with their blackboards to explain the reason why we all needed to flee the Island. How can I flee the Island? How can I flee my culture? They said developed countries like theirs and America and Canada had contaminated the seas around the world, by disposing their wastes and fumes in them, causing the waters around the Island to rise above its normal level.

The white countries should stop the waters from eating away the land, I suggested in one of the sessions. One of the white men said they could save the land but it would cost much more than buying the entire Island.

The government that governed our land was yet to speak. All they do is steal funds and travel overseas for holidays. They don't care.

My wife had made up her mind, in loyalty to her religion. I would wait and see the water come and eat up the land I grew up in. I would watch the water eat up Paul's grave. Eat up my farmland. My house. Everything.

I watched her and the children get into the boat. They would head to the nearest safe island. I watched as Yesri and his family got into the same boat. I watched many other boys, girls, women and men get into the same boat.

'Papa, when will you join us?' Ekueta asked, while Tsuye waved.

'Soon, my boy, very soon,' I replied.

The tears in my wife's eyes wouldn't spill and roll over her cheeks. She wouldn't wave. She wanted me to see cruelty in her, but I could only see sorrow. I could see tears flowing through all her veins and arteries. It wasn't me she hated. It was my loyalty to the Island and my ancestors.

We were few that remained. I was one of the youngest of the true sons that remained. Three days after the boats departed with so many Islanders, a rain that wouldn't stop, started. Days passed. And a week passed. A salty taste infested our drinking water. Twice, the storm visited on a certain day. The water from the ocean ambled around the village, finding ways into houses. It rushed into mine, where I now lived alone, and gradually rose up to reach my knee cap.

I watched houses around mine fall. Roofs fell. Walls fell. Moist leaves from sickened trees floated all around.

9. Thread of Lies

She looks at Harry in a way that gives the rest of the crew members the impression that everything is going wrong. Harry will always have his pride to protect. She has seen him do it shrewdly, and no doubt charmingly. He is an award-winning film director and journalist; the documentary, *The Pacifist*, can speak for him. Rayleigh does not like his confidence. She doesn't like the way he blinks when she tries to make him understand that the woman playing Kay's role isn't the right choice. He insists the woman is just perfect. Just too sexy and romantic like most hot looking lesbians on earth. Lynda has nothing of her sister. Kay isn't romantic. Kay's big in her chest. Blond. Lynda, with a Middlesbrough accent, is too thin. Walks like a man. This isn't her sister.

'I have been in this business for more than twenty years and I am giving you my balls if she doesn't turn out terrific. Squash them. Use your high heels to squash my balls.'

'Harry, this is not a film about lesbians. It is not a movie. This is about my life. It's about my reconciliation with Kay. It's about my search for the truth. It isn't about history, or about making money. This means a lot to me.'

'And you think I would dump a project in Germany, and come to Nigeria for something that is worthless to me?' He blinks, staring at some of the crew members gathering together. His hands are in his pockets, exposing the massiveness of his belly. He squints. His spectacles are spotless. Like his polished shoes. 'You are a woman of high taste. Pretty, determined and focused. You are like me, Ray. I cannot just understand why like-minded people find it hard working together. You were not okay with the 'murderer' even after my team went out of their way to search Nollywood as you had suggested. Everyone that has seen Dafe thinks Chukwudi is his twin. Everyone except you.'

'Harry, this docudrama should not be about recruiting professionals out of professionals; I made my points. I wanted realistic characters. They can be found in the slums, homes, even in seminaries,' she says, noticing his forehead reddening, then spreading to the rest of his face. She watches him look away, staring at the ongoing rehearsal.

The English girl falls to the floor. Rayleigh takes her eyes away, glancing at the cameras standing yards away by her left. She has to tell him to his face at the end of the day, that his cameras are out of date, and should not have been allowed out of Chicago. The funding for the film was worth 'The Sound of Music.' Silence stands between them. She hates him. Hates his neat, beardless face. Hates the floor she is standing on. It is Harry who insists on the house. It is nothing like her sister's house. She still wants the setting in Warri, where the clouds are darker. Harry says it's Lagos, a plane's gateway. Harry insists there is no difference between Lagos and Warri. She says the docudrama isn't fiction. He says the project is a depiction of true events. She is sick of him. She thinks she can feel the ache her sister still swims in.

Over and over, the Middlesbrough woman falls to the floor, her manly frame, fragile. False pains. She just isn't suitable. But Rayleigh feels the pain. Bones going sore on each fall. Chukwudi, who is playing Dafe, is standing with legs apart destroying not just flesh but the entire scene, showing passion, treating blood with cruelty. Good acting. They make her sister messy. They paint the character, Ruky, as orderly, one who organise things for Kay. Rayleigh pictures Kay's outlying and scatty stare. The voice, between compunction and undertones.

'Look at her. Tell me she's got nothing of Kay,' Harry says.

'She's got nothing, but... but...'

'But what?' he asks, lighting a cigarette.

She does not reply. Rayleigh feels dampness in her armpits, an awaiting call to have a brief shower. But she has to make sure Harry does not bite off more than he is already chewing. She is staying. She accepts the cigarette he offers and lights it.

'The best of the shooting would be done at night,' Harry says. 'The weather might be lenient then.'

But her sister's blood has to flow under the bright sun.

'Rayleigh, this is about perfect picture, good acting and terrific images. If I were to make a movie about my boring childhood, I would take the scene of my father's death when he slipped and hit his head on a gravel floor, and make it seem as if he had slipped and hit his head on a rock with so many jaws. I would do this to reveal more pains, so the audience feel it. Darkness leans on death more than light does.'

Rayleigh blows smoke into the air. The oval shape of the smoke is no different from the truth belying in Harry's words. 'But light signifies happiness out there, beyond the earth,' she says.

Later in the evening, she stands between two cameramen. Five cameras are all being used. She watches the girl in her sister's shoes. She watches the girl breaking down to the floor in an overstressed moan, in response to the effect of the rubber club that truly looks like a real one. It is a real club to her eyes now. For the first time in hours, she sees the real Dafe in Chukwudi. The complexion. The anger she has been searching for. She now understands the horror, a slippery attack through the eyes of the night.

She will not let Harry know he is getting it right. Somehow he is getting it. Tears fill her eyes. She opens her purse, takes out her shades. She brushes her hair backward using her fingers before shielding her despair. There's Dafe, dragging Ruky out of the basement of the sink. He uses the club. Blood splatters. Sham. Ruky rolls over the floor.

'Fucking lesbians. White people are dumber than animals! Dumber than animals! They have made you dumb!' Dafe laments. He squats, still hitting the black girl with the club. 'Animals know the difference between a cock and a cunt. A she-goat knows a he-goat, and wouldn't fuck anything like a white woman. A she-goat wouldn't fuck candles, wouldn't fuck another hole. Whore! Whore!'

Rayleigh listens to Ruky's moans, underneath Kay's. She looks at the black body. It is wet with blood. Ruky plays in contrast to Harry's edification. Harry does not shout - 'Cut!'

On the floor, in a torn blue gown, her body's painful pulsation exposes her gaudy underwear - a display of cruelty. Rayleigh looks away.

Ruky took her sister away from her. Ruky took Kay away from her own self. Kay lived in Nigeria for four years.

What happened to the guitar, Kay? The guitar granddad thought would take you around the world. The guitar you used to win the hearts of school kids in South London. The music? What happened to the dream of having children? - You had always loved children, Kay. What happened to Rochelle? At least she loved your music. Why on earth did you leave her? For the black girl, I believe.

Rayleigh thought about the many emails that were never replied to. Not to Kay but to the black girl. She had called Ruky names. Winch, bitch, witch, whore, beast,

murderer, cunt. There were no replies. Rayleigh accused Ruky of causing her grandma's death. Grandma died earlier than she was supposed to, for worrying over Kay living in Africa. And Kay had only sent flowers and was absent from the funeral.

Bitterness.

I hated her for taking my sister away. I hated her for clasping my sister with her thighs. This made it so difficult for me to see Kay. For four years, I did not see my sister. Not until now, did I realise what my sister really shared with her. They had a relationship of gold and fragile diamonds, underneath scorns, trials and torments of sharp objects and barbaric characters.

Rayleigh read the lines thrice. Felt they gave away too much, and waved her right hand over her head. Harry blinked. He collected the sheets.

She was seated and he was standing in front of her. He read the lines. Stopped, and asked, 'What is wrong with this?'

'I don't like them.'

'This is written by a poet.'

'Liar. I don't care Harry. I am a trained journalist and can also write.'

'But not colourfully. Not romantically.' The sheets within his fingers fell to his side, over a table. He raised a leg, resting it on the bench next to her seat. She could smell the garlic and tobacco on his breath. 'A journalist brings out the bomb out of the story first – in the headlines, to catch the attention of viewers or readers. And what happens to the rest of the story? It becomes a recount. Summary of what the headline says and perhaps series of funny or boring interviews. But a real writer makes a real story. Bores you off with a first chapter, takes you on an interesting journey, reveal secrets, create clues, and the bomb comes off at the end. Do me a favour, Rayleigh. Use a towel to wipe off the emotions and confusion appearing as sweat on your face and let us make this film a hit.'

He left. She stared at the sheets. Looked away. Caught the figure of the actor, Chukwudi. His steps echoed. He was climbing the steps leading into the house with

a club in hand. She took the sheets from the table and widened her eyes in reluctance.

I couldn't imagine how someone would claim to be under the umbrella of religion while committing such an act. I couldn't just understand the puzzle. My mind flips through pages of the past. My reporting escapades in Pakistan, one of which I had witnessed a young boy of sixteen, handsome and strong, could have been a doctor some day, screaming 'Allah is Great' and blowing himself up to kill other beings. Religion. Has religion turned earth to a planet where vampires really exist?

She liked the paragraph. It would introduce the scene where she found the mental health service managing Dafe. She remembered the moment. Staring at Dafe for the first time. Seated in front of him. A support worker, by his side.

Seated in front of them I could feel the presence of an animal in me. It was a torn tiger. I imagined a chained tiger. I imagined the chain shattering. I felt voiceless. I felt like screaming. All I could hear was the voice inside me. The voiceless tiger could only roar like a lion. I wanted to roar like a lion, and devour the killer. He was the one. Seated, avoiding my eyes. He knew me. I don't know how. I don't have the same eye brows as my sister's, didn't use dark eye-pencils as she used. I was blond. Kay wasn't. But he recognised me. Perhaps it was guilt causing his agitation. I wanted to roar and devour him. I realised I was just trapped in my own flesh and wished he could attack me. Attack me using the cover of the mental disability. I cannot remember everything the support worker said that night. I could see his eyes searching my body. The clock ticked. For a moment I felt I had a knife hidden somewhere. But I felt a kind of satisfaction beyond explanation. I was able to look into the eyes of the man who killed my sister.

Rayleigh got up. Her stare met Harry. He came back.

‘What’s the problem, Rayleigh? You are scaring me!’

‘Harry, I did not give you my journal so you could reveal everything about me.’

He collected the sheets. A smile came to his face. ‘You should give me a kiss for this. This speaks about the future without your knowing it. Rayleigh, I understand your emotions toward the project. I am lying if I tell you that you aren’t distracting me. If you could go back, to your hotel room and put your head over a pillow for a while, it would be very helpful to me, the crew... most especially to you.’

Walking home along the dusty road, her nose ran terribly. Her nostrils got itchy. She saw a group of children in front of a house with a brown rusted roof staring at her and laughing.

‘Oyibo woman,’ one of them shouted.

The tallest among them hit the girl that had shouted, and then shouted in Rayleigh’s direction, ‘Good evening, ma.’

It was dark. The street was brightened by security fluorescents. A motorcycle sped pass her. The rider and his passenger looked back. To stare. This startled her. The rider almost lost control. In her hotel room, she sat on the bed, her elbows resting on her thighs, and palms shielding despair.

It was spring. On a Friday. She had met a man who could have been eighteen. He said he was twenty-three and she agreed to have a ‘go’ with him. It wasn’t the alcohol in her that wanted him. They got drunk together. She remembered he was shy while dancing with her. She remembered their stumbling steps as they walked to her apartment. The whistling siren of a police car reminded her that Friday nights weren’t safe. She had dragged Owen in and wasn’t in hurry, licking his neck and face. She tried to be a different person watching her shadow over the wall. It was an older woman kissing a boy. He wasn’t defiant, and remained quiet on the resilient bed.

After the third ring she decided to grab the phone. It was two hours before morning. She noticed Owen wasn’t asleep. She switched on the light. Her nudity appeared to embarrass him.

‘Who the hell is this?’ she spat.

It was a female voice. Rayleigh wanted to laugh because she didn't understand what was being said at first.

'Can you say that again?'

'It's me, Chioma. We met at the conference in Atlanta.'

'Oh!' she said, in an expression perforated by a Friday night.

'Rayleigh, I understand it's odd to call now... but this concerns your sister.'

Rayleigh tried to stitch up some torn nerves in her head. Did she tell Chioma about her sister? But Chioma was from Zimbabwe. Oh hell no! Chioma wasn't from Zimbabwe but Nigeria. But what was the connection? Had Chioma ran into Kay and her whore of a partner?

'Your sister was attacked a while ago. It's terrible, Rayleigh.'

'What... what happened? Who attacked her?'

'We do not know yet.'

'Where is she now?'

Silence.

It was the silence that gave her the reply. The fucking whore had killed her sister.

'Is she dead, Chioma?'

'I am... It's critical... You need to come over to Nigeria.' Chioma's voice broke.

Rayleigh sensed Owen's movement behind her. She tasted the sourness of alcohol on her lips.

'Are you still there, Rayleigh?'

'Yep. I will get back to you. I hope I can reach you...' she got the phone off her ear, looked at the screen, and turned on the phone speaker. 'I hope I can reach you through this number?'

'Yes. It's my mobile.'

She hung up. And her fingers went against her face, against desolation. Owen tried to touch her.

'Get your filthy hands off me!'

He trembled.

She didn't look at him but sensed the awkwardness in the way he got away from the bed.

'If there is...'

'You have nothing to offer right now besides getting out of here!' She took her fingers off her face.

He wore his shoes while standing. Sorted out his vest and jacket among her clothes of the previous night. He was able to mutter some words. ‘Sorry... I am sorry...’

Her eyes remained on the door after he had left.

10. Court

The number of people pouring into the court house, built twelve years after Nigeria's independence, was tremendous. Few were related to one of the victims charged. Most had come to get some good ingredients to cook gossip that would last a month. The white man was pushed into the courtroom by policemen. He struggled to maintain his balance, spreading his legs apart. One of the policemen behind him raised a woman's shoe against his face, and when he bent in fright, people laughed. A man pointed, staring in awe. They knew him as Gregory Pink. He had lived in Nigeria for more than ten years and claimed he knew no other home. Shouldn't he consider going back to Leeds in England, the place he was born fifty-two years ago? He stank of urine. A smell that came with him into the courtroom from the cell he had been in for the last three days. Dejection.

People spat, cursed and laughed. There were young and elderly women, young and elderly men, who saw this as disgustingly interesting, reprehensible and filthy. There was one man seated among them, guilty of the same charges, but yet to be caught. He was the only one who did not spit, curse or laugh. Michael Merije tried to incline himself to feel Mr Pink's pains, but couldn't. He couldn't carry such weight in his heart and had to push the thoughts away.

A dwarf almost everyone in the courthouse called Oluwa, walked up to Michael and threw one of his fat smallish hands against his hip. Oluwa wanted to hear Michael's voice.

These people exhibiting their bitterness in court had something in common. They smelt of poverty. Their faces spoke of hilarity and wantonness. A large woman with bulgy eyes, dressed in traditional attire with an igele fitted around her head, threw a question at the white man. She wanted to know what a man enjoyed when fucking another man.

Some men in suits entered the courtroom and were led to the front seats, right in front of the judges' desk.

'Court!' a man in a blue uniform shouted. The judge entered. He was tailed by another set of policemen, as silence fell over the room. He took his seat, and adjusted his glasses. The policemen that came in with him took different positions around the courtroom.

The white man was made to stand. He cried but had no tears. It was battering. Could this be called shame or disgrace or cruelty?

The white man's lawyer, a huge man among the men on the front row, stood up, licked his lips, and said, 'When will we Nigerians grow up? When will we have to understand the fact that what happens in our bedrooms should remain private? Mr Pink had no enemies here. He has lived in Lagos for the past fifteen years. He brought his steel company to Nigeria. He brought his good character. Mr Pink is not corrupt. The moment he falls in love with someone, Nigerians take to the streets. Who is a man to judge if he falls in love with another man? Who gave Nigerians the right to invade his privacy?'

'Objection, my lord, this is nonsense,' a small skinny man in an ash suit, from the same front row, interrupted, standing to speak. 'Nigeria's history, culture, and values, and most recently, policies, condemn such despicable acts.'

People jeered.

The judge waved his hands. The small skinny man nodded his head, sideways and sat down.

'I plead with you, my lord, to act in the most appropriate way. Mr Pink does not deserve such humiliation. He has not raped a woman or abused a child. He only had an affair with someone who reciprocated his feelings.'

'Rubbish!' A slim boy of about fourteen or fifteen in a tattered singlet that harboured three holes of dissimilar sizes, seated in front Michael Merije, screamed.

Michael asked the boy to shut up.

'Who the hell are you?' The boy got up, attracting a multitude of stares. He switched to Yoruba, using threatening gestures, his right hand waving over his head as one of his left fingers touched his tongue and pointed to the roof.

Two policemen approached the boy, and Michael changed seats, moving to the row behind. Michael had almost raised a hand against the boy, who was ready to hit back. The clock ran fast. A group of young women, all with wide grins, walked out of the courtroom.

Mr Pink was led to the stand. He seemed more relaxed and was ready for bullets.

'Mr Pink, have you lured any other Nigerian man other than Nicholas Epko into this game of yours?' the skinny lawyer asked.

'Objection my lord! This question...'

The judge waved off the huge lawyer. 'Mr Pink should answer the question.'

Mr Pink nodded. 'I have every right not to speak about my private affairs.' He wouldn't say anymore.

Every question that came out of the mouth of the skinny lawyer seemed to form some fists in the air. To Michael, the attacks were punches. He visualised blood spilling out of Mr Pink's mouth.

Mr Nicholas Ekpo was pushed into the courtroom by three policemen. He was wearing a tight vest. His eyes were bulgy; his brows were broad. He was heavily built, very tall and slightly bent. His reluctance revealed strength. He kicked in defence against the policemen and used his palms to shield his ears against the voices that filled the courtroom.

'Bring him to the stand,' the skinny lawyer said, in a loud, husky voice.

A policeman pushed Nicholas forward.

Nicholas charged back again. 'You wan fight!'

The same policeman jabbed the edge of an AK47 on Nicholas' chest. 'You no go move?'

Nicholas fell to the floor. The multitude jeered. He had been kicked into the court, and was being kicked on to the stand. Fear seemed to clasp him. A path had to be made easy. A gesture of authority from a pointed finger of the same ruthless policeman had Nicholas struggling to his feet and walking to the stand.

'Mr Ekpo, did you have a girlfriend or a wife before you met Mr Pink?' the skinny lawyer asked.

'Why am I supposed to answer that?' Nicholas replied, in pains.

'Because you have to.'

Nicholas looked around the courtroom. His eyes met Mr Pink. 'No,' he said.

'Who then is Magdalene Ogeh?'

Nicholas shook his head. 'Nobody has any right to question my life or my past.'

'Why do you lie, then? You just want to go abroad? That's why you let this shameless white monster infect you with his penis?'

'Objection!' The huge lawyer stood up.

Michael couldn't watch the judge wave his hand anymore. His handkerchief was wet and smelling of sweat. The smell of bodies and heat gave him a terrible headache. He rushed out of the courtroom. Now outside, the door slamming behind him, he squatted, coughing, bile tasting in his mouth. A spill of his spit hit the ground, as blue uniformed men at the gate, yards away, looked.

11. The Service

1.

It has been two years. Two years since I started working with the service. My most consistent duty was supporting a client who happened to be a Nigerian like me. Dafe was twenty-three years old, ten years younger than I was. His parents back home were eminent persons serving in the government. On the contrary, I came from a poor home. My poor father back in Nigeria still swallowed insults because of the money he had borrowed to send me overseas. I worked sixty hours sometimes, in a week. I tried every day to cut down the insults, sending a quarter of my weekly earnings to him. I had to send money to my fiancée who was also in Nigeria. I had rent to pay. Life was so hard. In the service, we supported mentally disabled persons. Most of them were rescued from the street. Some of them were under court orders for committing crimes. We gave them a life.

I had become Dafe's best companion. He wanted me working with him all the time. But I had a life too. There were times I needed an annual leave. There were times I had to ring in sick. Dafe could jump over the fence and head for the motorway if he didn't like a support staff.

When Phiona Gardner decided it was inappropriate for a Nigerian client to work with a Nigerian support worker, she had me transferred to Onehunga. She was the manager and I had no say. There were Islanders working with Islanders in this same service. There were Maoris working with Maoris. Indians working with Indians. My case was different. She was a nerve on my back. It wasn't long ago she reduced my wages, demoting me to level two. She said I only supported a client, and not two like some of the other staff members. The former regional manager wasn't dumb to have it that way. Dafe was the biggest headache the service had.

All Dafe had to do to get me back was play up several times. Once, it was said, he sprawled lazily on a sofa in the lounge and got out his prick. There had been three staff members present. The only female among them had to leave. Dafe laughed and kneaded his prick, calling her name. There had been two more clients in the lounge who took a deep interest, laughing and watching in curiosity. This was Dafe, who had no history of public masturbation, who was supposed to be getting better and not worse.

Dafe was suspected of smearing the wall in the bathroom with shit. He swore it wasn't him. And this was getting consistent. Dafe wanted the other clients in the house, Archibald and Ethan, investigated. Not him. The staff members couldn't cope cleaning the infuriating sketches while holding their breaths. They began catching the flu – mere excuses for avoiding work.

Onehunga was a bit different. I was assigned to Kelvin Milner and Arana Etera. Kelvin was a thirty-three year old Pakeha from Wellington. He had the mind of a seven year old. Respectful, adding 'thank you' to any request he made - 'Myles, can you get me some juice...? Thank you.' He had toys he played with. He made sure his bed was neatly made every morning. He rearranged anything he thought was out of place. I thought Arana was more difficult to work with until a Saturday morning when Kelvin lifted the fifty-two inch television in the lounge and threw it against the floor.

I had my eyes on fourteen year old Arana like a hawk whenever we went out. Public toilets were his favourite spaces. Once, a staff member had taken eyes off him for a minute while they were out in a park, and Arana disappeared. He was later found watching a five year old girl pee in the ladies. The girl's father had left a scar on Arana's chin and the staff member on shift lost his job.

'I am not surprised. I understand you are just being a black bastard.' That was what he said when I had taken him out to get money from the ATM and stood right behind him.

'And you are just a fucking racist.'

'Everyone calls me that. I don't fucking care,' he replied, as we both walked toward the dairy.

'I will talk to Phiona about this,' I said.

'I don't fucking care,' he repeated, spitting on the gravelled floor we walked on.

2.

I was the last to be informed about the meeting. Phiona never wanted me around. I had no doubt she, like Arana, had something against Blacks. Against Dafe. Against me.

'Why does no one want to work with Dafe? I want to know!' She demanded, narrowing her eyes. Damn it - she was attractive! Meeting her for the first time, one would place her between thirty and forty. She was fifty-eight. Her age could be her greatest problem as she had all the comfort I dreamt of. Flashy cars. A mansion in Takapuna. Expensive holidays, whenever and wherever.

'I never avoided Dafe,' I quietly said.

She ignored me hoping another staff member would say something. She touched her forehead. ‘Well, I am considering writing to Dafe’s parents and their lawyer about his stay with us,’ she said. ‘If he is difficult to handle, we cannot keep him.’

‘I see no reason for that, when we have a suitable staff member that can keep him well behaved and happy,’ Victor, one of the care managers, said. ‘I am talking about Myles Ojabo. I came back from my annual leave only to be briefed that Myles was transferred to Onehunga. It shocked me. It shouldn’t surprise anyone that Dafe is playing up. For chrissake, we all know Dafe is emotionally tied to Myles. The guy would hardly eat if Myles doesn’t cook his meals.’

Phiona stared at the papers in front of her. Her forefingers tapped the desk continuously. She brushed her hair using her fingers. Lifted her pen and made a note.

3.

I was transferred back to the North Shore. The staff members had failed to water the flowers we groomed indoors, in the lounge. The leaves were pale and the stems were frail. The soil in the flowerpots had hardened. Dafe brought me a red bowl filled to the brim with water. I watered the plants. He helped me in transport them to the terrace, where they would feel the light coming from the rising sun.

It didn’t take long before trouble found me again. I had never been carried away by any woman’s beauty since making up my mind about Tega, my fiancée. It all happened at the mall where I had gone with Dafe to get him some new clothes. The blond could be in her mid-thirties. She was tall and had wide hips. She had a pair of blue jeans beneath a grey sleeveless top with green stripes. She walked up to us. I was trained to wave off such persons. They might be journalists under a veil, who knew a bit of a client’s history.

‘Rayleigh,’ she said, offering a handshake.

‘Myles,’ I said.

Dafe looked away.

She offered to buy us coffee and led us through an open door into a coffee bar. Dafe was dragging his feet.

‘Isn’t she such a beauty?’ I whispered to his hearing. I held his hand. He pulled it off.

‘Cappuccino?’

‘Yep, please,’ I replied. We all sat. I let the paper bag holding Dafe’s clothes fall to the floor beside my legs. Dafe placed both palms above his head with the sides of his

hands covering his ears. He nodded sideways when I touched him. Later on, he fidgeted with his room keys for a while, his eyes constantly on the table. He looked at her once.

‘I guess you are English,’ I said.

‘Isn’t it obvious,’ she replied.

‘Did you follow Dafe’s soccer career before?’ I had to ask, getting a little suspicious.

She glanced at Dafe. ‘I never met him or saw him play. The Guardian had him on the front page one time.’

She was aware that Dafe had been with the service and wanted to know about his progress. This got me completely uncomfortable. Dafe wouldn’t utter a word. At the end of it all, she said it was nice meeting us and I got her number.

He was quiet all through the drive. His hands were folded resting on his lap. I reflected back, hoping I didn’t reveal any information about him. ‘Have you met Rayleigh before?’

‘No.’

‘She looks nice.’

‘I do not know. Please leave me alone.’

Her beauty remained in my heart. She was so white. So white, like she had had some dope. I drove into the house premises.

Dafe kicked the door on his side open before I stopped the car.

‘Hey Dafe, hold it.’

‘What?’

‘Don’t be a pain in the arse,’ I raised my voice.

He hesitated, with one of his legs already out of the car, on the gravelled ground.

‘I don’t want you saying anything to anyone about the woman we met. Do you understand?’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘If you say anything to anyone, I will lose my job and you will never see me again. Hope you understand me well?’

‘I do.’

In the lounge, I felt hot. The staff member, Singh, had the gas heater on. And also had all the windows closed. I wondered how he and the other clients and staff members could all watch television in such an oppressive atmosphere. Dafe headed straight into the corridor leading to his room. We heard his bedroom door slam. Singh and the others stared at me as I opened a window. Dafe hadn’t run into the house showing off his new clothes as he used to.

I knocked on Dafe's door an hour later.

'Go away. I do not want to talk to anyone,' he shouted.

When dinner was set, he came out, took a little portion of rice and lots of sauce. He ate silently at the table. One of the clients said his father had called from Nigeria while we were out. Dafe didn't say a word. When Singh asked if the food was too spicy for him, Dafe gave a blank stare.

In his progress note, I wrote:

13:30 – 20:00: Dafe had lunch with two other clients at 13:30. He had toast and coffee. One of the staff members (Singh) reminded him about his scheduled shopping. Dafe was rude to him. He asked the staff member to mind his business and I cautioned him reminding him that he always had to respect people.

Dafe got ready for his shopping at 16:00. He insisted on taking the front seat even after I asked him to sit at the back of the van. At the mall, Dafe picked two shirts and a pair of jeans. He wouldn't pay for a paper bag, which nearly resulted in an incident. I showed him a notice that said paper bags must be paid for. He paid after this.

Back in the house at 19:00, Dafe spent a little time in his room before coming out to have dinner. He added a lot of sauce to his rice. He ignored a client, Frankie, who told him his father had called from Nigeria. He also ignored Singh who asked him if the food was too spicy.

I drove home that night, troubled. Though I felt fulfilled I had Rayleigh's number. I tried to imagine her blush. I tried to imagine her smile. I remembered how she walked as she led us to the coffee bar. I was going to meet her in two days when I was off. Where should I take her?

I woke up with a headache the next morning. The phone was ringing. Gosh! Who was this? My shift was a pm one. I took off the duvet sprawled over me and stretched to get hold of the phone. It was Phiona.

‘You do not have to resume your shift today at the Shore. Just report here at the CBD office.’ There was an excitement in her tone. A worrisome excitement. I knew I was going to be fired.

I got to the bathroom and stared at the shower. I spilled part of my Colgate’s toothpaste over the sink before getting it on my toothbrush. I stared at the mirror. Brushing. I washed my face and put on a green polo shirt over a pair of jeans. I got my sneakers on, and I was ready.

Dafe was seated amongst the management team when I walked into the office. The door slammed behind me.

‘Let’s start,’ Phiona said.

It seemed the meeting had started long before my arrival. Dafe wouldn’t look at me. My hands found my pockets.

‘Have a seat, Myles.’ She was smiling.

I sat down. Mohammed, who took over from me last night, avoided my eyes. My most recent right-hand man, Victor, had a palm on his chin watching me.

‘Dafe, can you repeat everything you told Mohammed after Myles left yesterday?’ Phiona began.

‘...I do not want Myles supporting me anymore. He does not do things properly as he does before. Yesterday, he met a woman at the mall just after we finished shopping and wouldn’t give me any more attention. He told me she was beautiful and couldn’t stop staring at her. The woman invited us for some coffee which he accepted against my will. They both talked about meeting sometime in the week. They... they talked about me as if I was dumb. He told her I was with the service because of the bad things I did in the past; that I was cruel and full of shit.’

I felt like walking out. When did the words of a client become relevant in determining the ineffectiveness of a staff member?

He finished. Phiona handed me an incident report, written by Mohammed. The writing was bold but unsightly. Shortly after I had left that night, Dafe began crying vociferously. When he was asked what the problem was, he said I and a woman verbally abused him at the mall, saying he was retarded, hopeless and cruel.

My eyes tried to read over the lines again but couldn’t. My eyes wouldn’t leave the sheet either. I felt Phiona’s eyes piercing into my body.

‘I do not understand what is going on,’ I finally said, letting the paper fall on the desk.

‘Dafe said you both had coffee with *this* woman,’ Phiona said.

‘We met with a woman but...’

‘But your report says nothing of that,’ Victor interrupted.

‘It wasn’t important,’ I said.

‘We are disappointed in you,’ Phiona said, her smile fading.

That was it. That was the end of my job with the service. I walked out of the office, a dejected man. I didn’t argue. I had so many questions in my head. I couldn’t explain anything. How do I find another job? What was the relationship between Dafe and Rayleigh?

4.

For two days I could only glance at her number on my phone screen, thinking of what to do. Imagining my knuckles breaking her cheekbones. Imagining her blushing. Imagining her in my bed. Imagining my fingers against her throat. I dialled her number on the third day. She agreed to meet with me at the same coffee shop she had taken me and Dafe.

I was there half an hour before the scheduled time, taking the seat she had had. She came in five minutes late in a red dress, and took the seat opposite me. It was the usual cappuccino. I waited for her to ask of Dafe.

She asked.

I had never met any white person who pronounced Dafe’s name as well as she did. I hesitated. ‘What is your relationship with him?’

‘I have no relationship with Dafe. I met him for the first time the day I first met you.’

‘Liar!’ I screamed jumping to my feet.’ I felt stupid. People around in the coffee shop appallingly stared at me. She stared at me, unmoved. I sat down, and confusingly, I muttered, ‘I am sorry. I lost my job because... because of that meeting.’

‘I am not surprised he knew me. I understand, Myles. I understand how you feel.’ Her right hand touched mine over the table.

The people in the cafe had their eyes away now, though I could sense their mindfulness, as some of them glanced from time to time.

She went on, ‘I am certain that there is nothing wrong with Dafe. He and his parents who are back in Nigeria are on a performance stage.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I have spent the last nineteen months searching for the man who killed my sister, Kay. She was murdered in Nigeria. Dafe killed Kay and her partner.’

‘I don’t believe that.’

Her eyes were still for a moment, looking over my shoulders. She nodded, sighed and looked over the table. ‘I can’t be fooled by this world anymore. The bastard has no mental ailment. He deserved a death sentence, but he was secretly taken out of Nigeria with the help of the government and was brought to this country, where his father has citizenship. I guess you know his father is a senator in Nigeria?’

‘Yeah. His mother is also a cabinet minister.’ I was shocked. I thought my country’s leaders were the biggest of foul players. But here was a western country playing along. The service was a foul play. They bred a murderer. I had been supporting one. I had been supporting a snake I thought was a baby.

12. Family

i.

The senator didn't want his driver or the security service men to detect the ugliness in his sighs, so he discharged them for the day, insisting on taking the seat behind the wheel. His lips were moving, mumbling and cursing his wife as he drove. He swore and flogged her with words. He wanted to blame her for Dafe's disability. Left to his own judgement, their son was a psychopath. His anger rose from a valley deep down in him. He had had plans for Dafe. He had wanted Dafe to be properly educated overseas where people like him were valued.

He could read Abuja like he could read his right palm. He had driven through the lights even when it was showing red. He cursed himself, 'Shit head.' He wasn't elected to die as a senator, to die while cutting his share of the national cake.

His driving was still good. His swerving. His overtaking. As rough as she had liked it when he first took her on a ride from Benin to Warri. He made her what she was today. He had forced a principal into retirement so she could emerge as the first female principal of the government girl's college in Asaba. It was way before he made sure an election was rigged so she could find a seat in the House of Representatives. This was the same woman outsmarting him now. Her skin didn't taste like candy anymore. She wasn't the woman he loved to cuddle in the back seat of his 504 Peugeot in the middle of nowhere, between Benin and Warri. Now she was a minister. She could buy her way anywhere. She had taken the tricks he taught her and used them on a different soil.

There was no doubt Dafe was endowed with the gift of playing football, but his senses could never fit into the world she was carving for him secretly. She had thrown money away in England. That money wasn't necessary to spend as Dafe was eligible for an invalid benefit and a quiet life in Aotearoa.

He came to a halt in front of red lights. This time he was doing it right, watching a green bus with white stripes pull up beside him. He thought of his first marriage. The blond haired and blue eyed Jessica Crossly. He thought about her four boys he had fathered for almost two years; how he picked them up from school to win her heart while she was busy as a sales woman at the mall in Central Christchurch.

The green lights came on, and he accelerated. He tasted bile in his mouth. He wound down, threw a glob of saliva out. Its spray brushed his beards, and smeared the side of the door. He cleaned his chin using a hand. His eyes caught a white woman crossing the road through the rear mirror. It happened in a split second. He ran into a truck, parked wrongly, by the side of the former post office. His trembling body was flung onto the fractured windscreen.

He didn't die. He knew from the dream he had been thrown into. In that dream he was in New Zealand again and was still married to Jessica and fathering her children. And there she was. Back from work and asking after the children. Damn it, he had forgotten to pick them up from school. She was complaining again. He had been pretending. He never loved her children. He never really loved them. He never really wanted to stay. And yes it was true. He had wanted to return to Nigeria and marry a virgin.

The next time his eyes opened, he found himself in a room with white walls and red curtains. Two men were laughing at the top of their voices. His nose picked up the smell of iodine. Hospital smell. He felt an immense pressure on his left thigh. When he tried to move it, his lips gave out a groan. The men's laughter quietened. They were his friends. The Minister of Finance and Chief Efe Walters. They were seated. He saw gossip in their eyes. He saw greed in their smiles. He smiled back. These men had the lighter that lit every rumour that got out of Aso Rock.

'They couldn't kill the lion. He is back awake, and ready to roar,' Chief Walter said, laughing. 'How are you, great one?'

'Ahh... Honourable Senator, welcome back from hell,' The minister added.

'You scallywags are laughing at moi.'

'We celebrate you, Senator. The evil powers of your village couldn't swallow you up,' the Chief said. 'You are okay. No shit to worry about.'

He could feel the tautness around his head, and also the sting over his right shoulder. 'You say I only passed out?'

'Senator, which of the witch-doctors do you use?' The minister shook his head. He laughed. '...that couldn't protect you against accidents. I should take you to my village where all charms have got roots. For protection.'

The senator chuckled.

'Your wife will be here anytime soon.... but we would like to know what you were doing without security? What happened to that short driver of yours? Maybe you wanted your body to be eaten by vultures,' the minister said.

On the mention of his wife, he felt his heart go numb.

She arrived to meet him, answering a phone call. Her ebony skin which he used to think he could die for, her virginity of the past which he had sworn to live for, now lay in a bin in his heart, where every credibility in every politician he had dealt with, lay. She gestured at the policemen that had followed her and they went back outside the room.

The Finance Minister and Chief Walter got up to their feet.

‘Indeed the lioness is here. The only woman from Warri in the cabinet.’

‘Chief Walter, don’t start again,’ she replied, her attention on her husband in bed.

‘He is alright, Madam. Just ensure he eats enough pounded yam and egusi with a whole goat after he has been discharged. I could bet he was on his way to a pepper-soup joint when he hit the truck,’ the Finance Minister said.

The men left while the senator was still on the phone. Their laughter faded away in echoes, and sirens wailed outside for a while.

She had to wait. It was obvious he was speaking to the president. She stared at his bandaged head and wondered if she cared. She stared at his thighs. Of course she cared. He laughed, pressing the phone harder against his ear. Since the day she got married she had been thrown into the world of men. She had a long list of questions about men to God. They always laughed. Even during a funeral. What were they always laughing about? Laughing and yet, just hours ago, he could have been in hell. All politicians would go to hell if they don’t repent, a preacher had once told her. She had told him off. But the plan of repentance lay somewhere in her heart, which would only surface as soon as politics was over in her life. She always kept issues straight with the president. The president’s jokes at many times were confusing. And she could only smile while others, mostly men, laughed out their bellies.

‘I appreciate this call, your Excellency. I do not think this demands a check-up overseas. I will only have a couple of days off,’ he said, taking the phone off his ear, letting his head relax over the pillow on the bed.

‘How are you?’

He closed his eyes for a while before saying, ‘I am okay.’

‘What went into your head? When was the last time you drove?’

He sighed, letting the phone drop on the table beside the bed. ‘I can drive any car in any part of this world even if I was blind.’

‘You are lucky God was on your side.’

A middle-aged man walked in. His whiskers were tousled. His tie hung carelessly. His shoe laces were untied and shook as he approached the bed. He carried his shoulders high. ‘I am Dr. Mahmud, Madam,’ he said, not looking at her but at her husband. ‘And Sir, I have been the one managing the *little* injuries you sustained.’

‘Oh... Thank you for not making this woman a widow,’ the senator said, laughing.

The doctor raised a brow and smiled briefly. ‘Madam, your husband is a free man now. I cannot hold him here any longer, for he has done his time in this jail.’

She watched the doctor laugh. She watched her husband laugh. She had begged him over and over, for years not to laugh everywhere. And each time he would tell their daughter, in response, how his ex white wife had loved to look at him laugh; how the white women adored the laughter of black men.

She knew what he was up to. But she had long ago vowed that she would never let him spite her. Why didn’t he tell Nina that his ex father-in-law had called him a nigger? Why didn’t he tell their daughter all the ex father-in-law had said - how he would kill himself if he was black? Why hadn’t he told Nina or the boys that the white woman, who so loved his smile, was five years older than he was?

He wanted to say *no... not again...* But he had to wait. Wait for her question. Her stare bored into him like a nut. He stared at her thighs. Stared at the medications lying between them. He wouldn’t own up. He would never accept crashing onto a truck for staring. Staring at a white woman.

‘Where were you going?’

He looked through his side window. There were three women arguing about something. He took his eyes away. Looked straight ahead, looking at the driver’s head. He nodded his head sideways. ‘I was going to Nikon where I was supposed to meet with Senator Mark.’

‘God’s mercy on your soul and your infidelity.’

‘Did you come and pick me up so we could start a quarrel? For chrissake, what happened to the woman I married twenty-five years ago?’

‘I should ask you the same question.’

‘Okay. Ask then... And I will give you a reply.’

She sighed, looking away.

‘Before that, can you tell me why you decided to spend over five million naira on Dafe without telling me?’

Her eyes widened.

‘You thought I would never know? I made you who you are, today. You cannot spend so much without letting me know.’

‘It was for his good. Football was all he knew.’

‘I had better plans. Better plans than the rubbish you have pushed him into.’

He listened to the siren for a while. He hated himself instantly for getting into the car with her. It was her convoy. She was a goddess over him. A sickening stream of security and journalists tailed them.

Yes, he would agree that she had been a better parent to a son with complex behaviours. The senator had placed their first son, Sonny who was already a lawyer, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs where he earned more than those ahead on the ladder. The senator was grooming their only daughter, Nina. One day she would head the People’s Democratic Party in Delta State. And Dafe? What became of Dafe?

ii.

It was three months before Dafe’s departure to England. He was leaving at eighteen. It was like sending off her toddler to China. She had to face it. She really had to face it. She wondered. What did it feel like for him to be outside Daddy and Mummy’s circle for the first time?

A single night had yielded her plot, her decision. That night had crawled in like a snake. She was on her bed alone. Her husband was still out. Stolen away by perhaps a mistress she was yet to get her hands on.

The wrapper was loose, not tightened enough around her, as she tried to sleep. There was a sudden hooting of an owl, before the fingers of sleep finally gripped her. She thought she felt someone untying her wrapper, fidgeting with the already loosened knot. Sleep wasn’t pleasurable. Why should she not open her eyes? Could he be home? Could his mistress not have satisfied him enough? The smell of alcohol was absent. The smell of his body was different. But familiar. Her wrapper

was wholly loosened. She felt fingers tickling her between her thighs. She gasped. There was this feeling that stood between discontentment and apathy.

She stretched. Opened her eyes halfway. It was her husband mounting her. She closed her eyes. There were strained movements of spasm in her brain. She opened her eyes. Wider. It wasn't her husband. She screamed!

She tried to push Dafe off. She would stop him from inserting his whole self into her. She couldn't end up in this way after a good upbringing and an arduous journey into marriage. It was too late? Dafe was already thrusting so hard. It was weakness tying her down. The bed was jerking. The lamp stand beside the bed was also jerking. Finally she acquired strength. She sprang up, breathing hard. Her husband was beside her. Dafe was absent. The night was so quiet. She had a night gown on. Not a wrapper around her. She would keep this dream a secret. She would keep it in the bosom of her heart.

The dream came to pass after two weeks. She had once dreamt of her mother waving goodbye, dressed in a colourful ashoke. A fortnight later, news came from the village. Her mother-in-law had been bitten by a snake in the farm and passed away.

She waited. She avoided Dafe for the next few days. She avoided his stares. She tried to come home very late when he was in bed. And she tried to go to work very early before he woke up. It wasn't long before she felt she had to be there for his demands. It was on a Saturday morning. He had come into the bedroom while she had just a towel around her nude body. Her hair was wet. She would never forget that day.

It was his mumbling she first heard, before his full figure stormed into the room. 'Mummy... I... am tired of life... I hate myself... Daddy does not want me to play football. For two days now, daddy wouldn't let any of the drivers take me to the football field.'

She watched his lips as he spoke. She watched his eyes. They were searching her body. Her son was maturing. These were the same eyes her husband had as a suitor back in the eighties. For a moment she thought she had grown wings to fly off. For a moment she thought he saw a movement down his groin. She prayed in her heart.

'What do you want, Dafe?' It was there and then, right in her head, that she promised him a career. She saw his desperation. She watched him turn around and leave her room. Tears filled her eyes. Her son would never turn out a nonentity. Nothing was wrong with her son.

iii.

Her husband's prediction turned out accurate. Fame became a thorn in Dafe's life. A puzzle became her life. Regrets. Dafe floated in confusion. He didn't cope in England. He ended up back in Nigeria. And even Nigeria became a thorn against him. He stepped on thorns wherever he went. Touched thorns here and there in search for life.

She had lived with the beast in her husband for years and all the while it had been silent. But not on the day a call came in from the customs chief that Dafe had been deported back to Nigeria for getting involved with drugs, and also assaulting a teammate. The monster in her husband stared at her. It was her fault. Yes, it was her fault. They had to go in the same car to the airport with no escort. With just a policeman and a driver. He sighed every now and then. She let her tears drip on her handkerchief and all he did was call call and call, using a cell phone he hardly answered. He called the customs chief, asking him to keep the press far away. She listened to him speak to Colonel Aminu, asking for the services of his boys. She listened to him call his secretary, telling her to cancel a scheduled meeting with a local government chairman.

She saw the customs chief with other junior customs officers, standing in front the international airport, as they reached. They were led by the customs men into one of the offices, and Dafe was brought in. He had a bruise on his head that was still fresh with blood. Her husband wouldn't stare. He just bit his lip. She got up and walked toward her son. She embraced him, holding him tight, as silence filled the room. It was her husband's voice that made her draw away. Dafe stank of hunger. He had lost so much weight. And the question that couldn't make a way out of her mouth eventually had an answer.

'Where is the man that hit him?'

She froze.

One among the junior customs officers fell to his knees and started pleading. She was confused but listened to his words.

'Please, Madam. Please, Sir. I did not know he was your son. I thought he was one of those fraudsters and criminals that leave the shores of Nigeria, only to give the country a bad name. Please forgive me, Madam. Forgive me, Sir.'

‘Even if he was the devil, you had no right to lay a finger on him,’ the senator said, and turned to his wife. ‘Let us go.’

She put her hands on Dafe who was still too calm, who hadn’t even looked in the direction of the customs man, begging. His eyes were watery. He kept sucking his upper lip.

The pleading customs officer followed, crawling. Two of the other customs officers wanted to lift him to his feet, but the senator waved at them. ‘Leave him to crawl like a snake.’

Travellers, foreigners and airport staff stared in awe at the customs man crawling after a man dressed in white agbada, who could be a politician or a business icon.

A van carrying soldiers pulled up right in front of the airport. A 206 Peugeot pulled up behind it almost immediately. Colonel Aminu got out of the Peugeot and saluted the senator informally.

‘That’s the bagger,’ the senator said to the colonel, pointing at the pleading customs man, who still had his hands on the floor.

Colonel Aminu waved at his men in the van. Two soldiers jumped down, with AK47s hanging over their shoulders, rushing to take hold of the customs officer.

Dafe’s mother almost screamed as one of the soldiers jabbed the edge of his gun against the nose of the weeping customs officer. When the same soldier lifted a leg against the man’s waist, she caught a smile on Dafe’s lips. The other customs men and their chief had vanished.

Six months later. Dafe is living in New Zealand. It is her second visit to the country. She is with her daughter this time. Her son’s troubles are forgotten and New Zealand seems to cover her shame and keep Dafe quiet, even though the country never appeals to her, never appears beautiful, as everyone says.

Silence has most of the conversation, as she drives the hired car along the Albany Highway. Her eyes are wet with memories. Her daughter’s imagination is just filled with questions.

The car slowly reaches a roundabout. She is unsure about the location and won’t pull over. The GPS insists they are now at their destination. There are two houses in the remote location, unlike the last time. ‘There used to be just a building,’ she mutters.

The houses are identical, old-fashioned in design. Wooden fences around. She smells opulence in the air. Orderliness. Tranquillity. Her daughter catches his figure in one of the houses, waving. Through the transparent sliding door of the house

standing to the left, the mother sees her son. She pulls up the handbrake after parking properly by the corner, five yards away from the roundabout. They walk to the house. Two white men, probably in their early thirties, lead them in.

They sit on a couch with Dafe. Her utterances may lead to tears. Her daughter is quivering, unnoticeably.

‘I guess you have adjusted to life here, Dafe?’ the mother asks.

There is no reply. A calm menace building. Of course, he replies. Mumbling. And only a mother can interpret what the words are. The mumbling speaks of unhappiness. Of loneliness.

She asks her daughter to sing him a song. Nina starts incoherently, but gets on well after a while.

Continue, dear daughter. Her eyes are on Nina, whose eyes are on her brother.

When we leave this world

When we leave this world...

We only smile

Knowing there's somewhere...

‘Stop!’ he shouts.

The song ceases. The mother watches her daughter. Nina’s whole body seems to deflate, her eyes sinking in misery.

‘Go...’ he adds.

One of the men on shift approaches. ‘He has asked the both of you to leave.’

Dafe’s palms are against his face.

‘I have my visiting hours here until five pm. I came all the way from Africa to visit my son.’

‘But he’s insisting that you should leave,’ the man goes on.

‘Do you know my son more than I do?’

The man nods his head sideways and walks away.

The mother only stares as Dafe suddenly reacts like a cobra. The mother watches her son reach for his sister. Nina is quick, jumping to her feet. This isn’t quick enough. He is also fast on his feet. He catches her hair. Pulls. With an enormous force, his other hand weighs against the back of his sister’s skull. Thrusting her head against the wall.

Nina sustains a bruise. And places a palm over her face.

The mother stands to her feet, calling for help from the same man she almost insults, minutes ago. The man is nowhere. Dafe turns around, approaching her. She sees venom in his eyes. She feels he is reading something that is false. His fingers strike her. Against her face. She feels his fingers scratch her face. So fast. Piercing. Punching.

Suddenly, two of the men on shift emerges and take hold of his arms. Dafe struggles. And swears, kicking through the air.

‘Go out! Two of you!! Back in the car outside, please.’ It is the same man of minutes ago, pleading.

iv.

He was sure his wife and daughter were still with Dafe. Nigeria was twelve hours behind, and their appointment was at five. When he saw the light of his cell phone come on by his side, he wondered if Dafe had been lured to finally speak to him.

He gestured at the driver to turn off the car stereo, which had the news on. He answered the call.

When he heard Nina crying, he felt cold grip him. ‘Daddy, Daddy, Dafe attacked us! he...’

‘Hey Nina, calm down. Where is your mother?’

‘She is here. We are inside the car, outside the house he stays.’

‘Let me speak to your mother, please.’

‘Hang on.’

His right hand cuddled his head. What a way to start a day.

‘She won’t speak now, Daddy. She’s crying. Her head is over the steering wheel.’

‘Tell me what happened. Calm down and tell me what happened, Nina.’

‘Mummy had asked me to sing for him, and... and.’ She couldn’t say much. Her voice had broken.

‘Calm down Nina. I am on my way to the office right now. I will call back.’

When he hung up, all he wanted to say was, ‘Bitch’. His wife was a bitch. When the car came to a halt a policeman, who stood inches away, rushed over to open his door. He got out and had no reply to the policeman’s *Good morning, sir*. He wanted

to turn around and scream at the security service men tailing him. He ignored his secretary too, when she said, good morning. He got into his office, picked up the phone on his desk and told the same secretary to cancel the morning's meeting. He pulled out his drawer, and stared at his New Zealand passport which was lying over his Nigerian one. The bitch never appreciated anything. How he wished Jessica had stayed off smoking when he had brought her to Nigeria to meet his parents in 1979. How he wished Jessica hadn't spoken about her kids from past relationships to his sisters.

He took the same cell phone he had used in the car and dialled.

13. Chasing Karin

Dafe had his ears glued to the door. He heard about Karin for the first time. ‘She’s sexy. Fucking sexy,’ Mohammed, one of the staff members stressed. ‘You see the way she crosses her thighs while seated? So fucking tight? Who would imagine she spreads those fucking thighs so wide open for every goddamn Islander she meets?’

Right behind the door, he felt a hardening beneath. He yearned for the woman he was yet to see. He had never met anyone who was named Karin. He could see a white face with dark curly hair in his mind. He saw an average height woman, her hips standing so fucking out, in a pair of sagging jeans. He saw well-rounded and moderate sized breasts and imagined the nipples almost pointing upward in hunger while she lay in bed.

He avoided Edgar who was the only client allowed to smoke in the house. In one of his many pries, he got to know that Edgar had outsmarted the police by playing dumb, pretending to be sick in the head, to stay away from jail, where he was supposed to be for a kid-fucking offence. Edgar had been a chef in West Auckland before a judge sent him to the service. A chef who had won a million pounds on a recipe he had invented in the late nineties in Italy.

If Dafe was close to anyone in the house, it was Frankie.

Frankie had his room upstairs, opposite the passage that led to the office. He saw smoking as dirty. He always repeated his stories. Personal life stories.

It was in Wanganui. In 2007. A boy would leave home and run from one end of the street he lived, to the other end, and women’s underwear would go missing from the lines they were left to dry on. This scared some of the women as they wondered what the thief did with the undies. A few of them who were married, or had partners, never told their men of these incidents. They were scared of being accused of something else. They could only seal their lips. The use of a drier seemed to be the safest way to keep the thief away. Frankie, a son of writer whom the Queen of England had decorated in 1988, seemed to grow in skills each time. How a fourteen year old could go into his mate’s mother’s room and steal one of her underpants, was a question no one could answer. Not even he, himself. And he continued. At seventeen, he was spilling spunk into these underpants which he valued like

medals. Sometimes he wore them to get pleasure. Sometimes he just had to stare at them before pulling out his prick to fondle. His room stank till this day. His sheets were always stained and smelly. He truly needed rehabilitation. And it was his father's partner who kicked him into the service. If there was one woman whose panties Frank couldn't get hold of, it was her.

'I stole things. You never know,' he had said to Dafe. It was Dafe's first day in the facility. 'You can never imagine... that's why I am here. You never know what would happen.'

'Just stealing?' Dafe asked.

'And some bad things. I did really bad things... Terrible things...' Frankie replied, and wouldn't say more. As the days passed, he revealed more, causing the staff members to wonder.

Karin had come to work a week later. Two weeks after Dafe's first day. She was not so different from the picture he had of her in his mind. Aside being a little darker and taller. Charlie (staff member) spoke to her openly and always talked about this movie and that party and that music, without keeping an eye on Frankie or Edgar.

Karin wore a mini, a short skirt, which shoved her nakedness into his imagination. It went on playing over and over.

He was out in the terrace, refreshing the air in his lungs. His eyes reddened. His elbows were warm, weighing against the palisade. He bit his tongue in despair. His back was tilted forward, in a relaxed posture, as his chin rested on his hands.

Frankie joined him, attaining the same posture, except that he hung his right foot over a lower section of the palisade. 'You never know!'

'What is it this time?'

'You never know what comes your way, chocolate boy,' he replied, then snapped his neck, and groaned.

'You never know... You always never know...'

'She is strikingly hot! I mean hoooooot!!! What do you think, chocolate boy?'

'She shouldn't be dressing like that, and coming to work here.'

'It's good, Dafe. It makes her look crunchy.' He snapped his head again. 'Can I tell you a secret?'

Dafe's stare fell on him.

'She's got no undies on.'

Frankie had loosened a screw in his head. He tried to imagine what her hands could do in a massage over his back. He looked into the lounge where she was seated. Her legs were crossed. Tight! Straight legs. The television was on and Charlie was still talking with her. Dafe watched her smile, and did not notice Frankie leave.

Dafe went into the house in search of Frankie. He wanted to ask him how he knew she wore nothing under the skirt. When he got into the lounge and his eyes met hers, he couldn't move anymore.

When Dafe tried to join the conversation in the lounge between Charlie and Karin, he was asked to shut up. Charlie had done this jokingly. Silence had a firm grip over the conversation now that Dafe was there.

Charlie sighed and said, 'I will be in the office. Need to do some paperwork.'

'Have fun in the office,' Dafe said, watching him head toward the staircase.

'Make sure you treat the new client well, Karin,' Charlie said, from the distance he now held.

'What do you want me to cook for dinner?' she asked, her eyes fixed on the television.

'Are you Irish?'

'Yep. Do I sound Irish?'

'Sometimes. I lived in England for a while, and came across a lot of Irish people.'

He could tell she was a sensitive woman. Too sensitive to his stare. He would try to keep life in the conversation. Her replies were getting too quick and disconcerted. She doesn't like me – he thought. His eyes moved over her thighs, and down to her legs. She eventually unfolded her legs and stood up. She walked toward the kitchen, saying, 'I need to make you guys some dinner.'

'Check the roster, and you will know what's to be cooked,' he yelled.

It was three minutes later it dawned him that he was on the roster. He was to help a staff member in the cooking. He watched one of Frankie's favourite Burger King advertisements on TV before standing to his feet. He peeped into the kitchen. This startled her.

She ignored him and got her attention back on the potato she was peeling.

‘Are you alright?’ Dafe asked.

‘I am okay.’

He entered the kitchen. He brushed the side of his right arm against her body, while heading toward the microwave. He opened it, found nothing inside and closed it. He stared at some dark spots around her neck. Then spotted similar spots on some of the potatoes she had peeled. ‘It’s on the roster - I am supposed to help the staff make dinner.’

‘I can do it all alone to relieve you. I am aware you hate kitchen work.’

‘I want to help, today.’

She didn’t reply. Her hands moved faster as she peeled. She finished. Turned on the cooker and placed a clean pot on it. He wanted her to smell his arousal. He wanted her to know she was tormenting him. He watched her pour some water into the pot from a bowl. He watched her lifting the peeled potatoes, pouring them into the pot. He glanced at her legs, as she bent slightly to check the oven.

I think I should call Charlie or Mohammed to work with you now. Two full chickens are in the oven,’ she said, leaving hastily.

He hadn’t noticed the warmth of the kitchen, and the light that reflected from the oven. Now he could hear the sizzling sound of oil in the oven. He felt a burden coming over him. It took ten minutes before Mohammed joined him. Mohammed wanted him to chop some onions and carrots and vegetables. From the kitchen he could see Karin on the terrace. She had a cigarette within her fingers. She smoked too.

It was time for Karin to go. He watched her from the darkness of his room, while standing naked. He watched Charlie walk her to the entrance of the premises. He saw her skirt throbbing against the breeze. He thrust the scent of her perfume into his mind. He saw Charlie kiss her. She stopped him, when one of his hands went up to her chest, and the other was about to touch behind her skirt. She pushed him away gently. Perhaps she had parked her car on the side of the road. Perhaps she was going to wait by the bus-stop. Dafe watched her climb up the hilly road. He watched Charlie walk back to the house.

Karin seemed to go away in a wind with the reflection of the moon on her white mini skirt. He pushed his naked body through the window smoothly, smacking

momentarily against the cold walls. His big toes first touched the gravelled ground in a wracked colour. And he ran like a cat.

There she was walking ahead of him, through the quiet night, toward a blue jeep. He reached her from behind, his right hand getting over her face, clasping mouth. She let out a noiseless scream. She had become his toy. His left hand pulled her body against his bareness. He wanted to laugh at her suppressed struggle. This excited him. He was sure she had forgotten how short her skirt was. She kicked hard but got calm. He easily lowered her to the floor as he had planned, her body shaking. His hands shaking. Her calmness instilled fear into him, as he rubbed her thighs. Frankie's words re-echoed. *She's got no undies on...* Excitement.

Someone's hands touched his shoulders. Someone had grabbed him. He left her. He let her scream and attempted to loosen himself out of the hold. But he was being lifted. He found himself off the ground, as if floating over the air. It couldn't be a beast. He felt like paper in these massive hands. A paper about to be freed from a tall building. And he was freed. He hit the ground and a sharp stone pierced his unclothed arse. He bruised his chin against the hard ground of chip seal. And his fingers scrubbed the damaged skin. He tried to adjust himself, sitting on the road, gathering his senses. What had happened? Who was this beast? He raised his eyes. It was a fat... A really big fat man. He looked Samoan, with mighty arms. Dafe wanted to get to his feet and run. But felt a strain in his right leg. He remained still. He waited.

The beast came toward him again, kicking his ribs, kicking his belly and kicking his face. Dafe felt a crack on his left hip. He felt a flaccid growth on his left brow and spat blood. His belly burned. Karin screamed.

'He can't touch my girl and go free,' the man shouted.

'Please please... honey... My job! Save my job!' She held him back and locked herself in his embrace. The man patted her. She was still shaking.

The beast had been in the jeep Dafe thought was hers.

14. Woven Beyond

The man's movement on the stairs leading to the door of the flat was slow but loud. The screeching opening of the door made it even worse. Both ladies of the house, a black woman and a white woman, had to run into the kitchen, locking it from the inside. They could still hear his feet moving across the living room and toward the kitchen to the torture of their ears.

The women shook, clinging to each other as the man's fists came hard against the kitchen door. They crept underneath the sink's basement. The white woman had tears dripping against floor.

Both women, in the last couple of months, had to put up with the fame and reputation that surrounded them. They knew this would come soon. It was only three weeks ago that they had managed to fully sponsor an orphan in her first year in a university. An eye for an eye, people say. But the women hadn't hurt anyone. Hadn't abused anyone. They were used to shutting their ears against the voices that said they were destined for hell. They were used to smiling at the people who saw them as demons.

'My dream is to see her become independent in life,' the white woman had replied, two months back, when the police had paid a visit. 'I didn't leave England for Nigeria to turn girls to lesbians.'

'We are just doing our part to maintain law and order. It's good that we have heard your say on this. I will convey your message to the worried relatives of the girl,' one of the policewomen on visit had said.

Both women jolted. The second hit, which could have been a kick, still couldn't bring down the door but brought down the plates and tumblers on a table situated on the far end of the kitchen.

A third hit was just enough bring down the door. A shelf, a few yards away from the cooker, that had the cutlery, spices and beverages, crashed down. The women screamed. Their screams died as the man approached the basement.

The white woman's eyes, wide with fear stared at the boots of the man. Legs spread apart, ominous and drained of colour, like a gathering cloud. The black woman kept her eyes shut, shivering.

The man's fists reached out for the one whose eyes were wide open. The massive hands pulled her out. Pushed her against the fallen shelf, got hold of a knife and stabbed her right palm. She screamed. Blood splattered against his face. There was a tearing through the wooden board, underneath the damaged palm. He left her lifeless, half of her body, on the floor.

The man stepped in front of the basement, again. The black woman was now still. Eyes still shut while her lips trembled.

The man strained his ears to pick what she was saying.

'Now you remember the Virgin Mary?' he said, spitting.

'Please, let her live and take me instead,' the white woman in her lifeless state yelled, in a fading voice, from where her palm was pinned.

'I came for both of you,' the man replied, not looking back at the bleeding woman. His focus was beneath the sink. The basement.

And he dragged the black woman out. 'Filth,' he muttered.

'Please.... Please...' The black woman whispered.

'You bitches are full of filth, full of shit,' he shouted, tossing the black woman over the sink.

She fell. The sink broke off the wall. Shattering noises ringing against the tiled floor. The faucet had almost driven into her head. Lying motionless, her torn scalp, sticky with blood. Water ran over the floor, seeking to dominate more space than blood.

The man's shadow was back over the white woman.

The darkness was gathering like a dream. A dream that dug up the past. There was the black woman. There was the white woman. A first night together. The black woman's eyes were looking down over the tiles. And the white woman's fingers were unlacing her gown. What could be as uninterruptable as a lover's quietness at a time of such flooding passion?

That didn't soil the night. The shy bras had become naked breasts boiling in deep breaths as the clock ticked for the next twenty minutes.

Death had met them. What was next? What was death? Reincarnation? Perhaps a banquet in hell? Or a heaven for feminists?

15. Ruru's Tree

Dafe was seated at the dining section, behind the table which had a brown unstained surface with a sole bowl of bananas on it. He looked at the clock on the far wall beside a framed water-colour painting and wished he could tell the time. He wished he could read the clock like the digital wristwatch he kept in his room. Yes, the long hand on the clock was on two, and the short hand was between four and five. Perhaps it was almost five o'clock and Ruru was yet to return from Woodland.

Someone pushed the door open. It was Ruru. He held on to the door for a while, checking his pockets.

'You are late,' Dafe said.

Ruru glanced toward the dining section. 'Baker didn't come to pick me up on time.' He got his key out of his breast pocket and headed for his room at the far end.

Shortly afterwards, Baker came in through the door Ruru had left ajar.

'What have you been doing with yourself, Dafe?' Baker asked, looking around, heading for the lounge and then letting his weight sink on one of the black sofas. Dafe's reply wasn't forthcoming. 'We have always told you to behave well, treat people fine and you would get more functions to attend, but nope, you think you know everything.'

'I am okay, and will never set foot on that fucking Woodland ground,' Dafe said.

Baker sighed, slouching on the sofa. 'You got kicked out of Woodland for hitting Austin, causing him to lose an eye.' Baker sat up and reached for the television remote on the central table. 'Now you say - *I am okay, and will never set my foot on that fucking Woodland ground.*'

Ruru came into the lounge holding a shuttle bag with cables hanging out, heading toward the television before it came on. 'I want to play my game,' he said.

'Have you done your chores,' Baker asked. 'You must tidy up your room and clean the bathroom, and then I will let you play your game for an hour and a half.'

Ruru let the shuttle bag fall, catching Dafe's stare at the dining area, while heading back to his room.

Just before the passage that led to the courtyard, was a notice that Phiona had Baker place over the wall.

DAFE MUST NOT BE ALLOWED TO PLAY SOCCER VIDEO GAMES. AND NO STAFF MEMBER OR CLIENT SHOULD DISCUSS SOCCER IN THE HOUSE WITH DAFE.

Ruru sprayed the bleach over the toilet seats and wiped it off with a chunk of tissue. He used his leg to push the mop bucket underneath the sink, and then dragged the mop from one end of the floor to another. When he had finished the cleaning he peered into the lounge. Baker was still watching the news, and Dafe was still at the dining table. He went out into the courtyard where his pohutukawa tree was growing healthily. He sat on a bench watching it as the breeze came against the green leaves, making them wave. He had asked the management to get him this plant after seeing the movie, *Broken English*, on Maori TV. His favourite character in the movie was Eddie, who had a pohutukawa tree which he used in fighting his girlfriend's horrible father. Ruru shared so much similarity with this character. They were both Ngapuhi and had lost their fathers earlier in life, as children.

His pohutukawa tree would defend him against Dafe one of these days.

'Ruru,' Baker called from inside the house, 'As soon as you are through, you can come and play your game.'

Ruru went into the lounge. Dafe had left the dining area. Ruru connected the game to the television and had his control pads out.

Baker remained seated and watched Ruru play his Play Station car-racing. He soon adjusted into an awkward lying posture and must have dozed off. When he sat up, he realised Dafe was seated beside him.

Ruru paused the video game, got to his feet and farted.

'Fucking faggot!' Dafe screamed and stormed out amidst Ruru's giggles.

Baker shut his eyes again. He could hear the sound of the crashing cars in Ruru's game. He woke up an hour later to see a blank television screen. Ruru had gone to

bed and it wasn't nine o'clock yet. He got up lazily, glanced at the passage that led to Dafe and Ruru's rooms and turned off the lights.

When Ruru opened his door to go into his room, he heard Dafe's door open behind him, and his heart lost a beat. He stood, listening to Dafe's feet come behind.

'Go in, man, and stop standing there like a police officer,' Dafe whispered.

He went in, and Dafe followed. 'Baker is still in the lounge.'

'I know. He is always sleeping and getting paid by the management for nothing.'

Ruru let his shuttle bag, containing his video game fall on the rug, and walked toward his window, drawing the separated curtains to shield the darkness in view.

'I hate this country,' Dafe said.

'Go back to Africa.'

'My parents think my life is in danger over there.' Dafe sighed and sat on the bed, rubbing his fingers over Ruru's sheet. 'I love England, but I got deported to Nigeria after assaulting a mate in the team I used to play for.'

'You could get deported from here too, you know?'

'I am a citizen. My Dad came to New Zealand long ago to school and married a New Zealand woman. He became a citizen, before divorcing her and going back to Nigeria to marry my mother. I have two countries.'

'I got German blood in me because my father's mother was German. I think I could go there and live after I am done with the service.'

Dafe got up and walked toward Ruru. 'You know why I am here, Ruru? No time, please.'

'Dafe, this can't continue.'

'I can't help it.'

Ruru turned around, and caught Dafe's gaze.

'Come on, Ruru,' Dafe said and pointed at his groin.

'No. Dafe, No.'

Dafe widened his eyes and rested his hands on his waist. 'Don't fucking let me down or I will kill you,' Dafe whispered. 'You know why I ended up here in New Zealand?'

Ruru looked at the ceiling. He nodded his head, grudgingly knelt in front of Dafe. His fingers trembled as they found Dafe's zips.

'Come on, Ruru,' Dafe moaned, looking up, against the white ceiling. He closed his eyes and swallowed. He could feel Ruru's spittle, enveloping him down there, and that was all. Ruru wasn't doing it right. Dafe opened his eyes, looked downwards and his left fist hammered against Ruru's ear.

'Ouch,' Ruru groaned quietly, weighing a hand against the floor so he wouldn't hurt his head as he fell. He watched Dafe zip himself up. He watched Dafe approach him with a kick against his belly. 'Arhhh! Please...'

'You fucking cunt! Who teaches a cunt how to suck a cock, damn faggot,' Dafe, said, and spat on him. Put your head right in front of me!'

Ruru adjusted himself. He squatted this time.

Dafe stood firmer this time, his legs spread apart. He undid his zips, and felt his limpness. He pissed over Ruru's face. He sighed as the last drops splattered over the rug. He pushed Ruru away, using a leg, and left the room, leaving the door ajar.

Ruru woke up very early. He stank of the piss. The whole room stank. He sniffed and weighed his fingers against the rug, standing to his feet. The door was still ajar. He walked toward his wardrobe, opened it and took a clean pair of jeans and his green baseball jersey top, heading for the bathroom.

He used the cold water from the shower at first, massaging the parts of his body that was hurting from last night. He poured some shower milk over his sponge, scrubbed his skin and rinsed with hot water. He towelled himself with a hanging pink towel, and got dressed. He brushed his hair as he headed toward the courtyard to stare at his pohutukawa tree and gain strength for the day. Opening the door that led into the courtyard, he saw a smoke ring stretching for him. It was Baker, smoking.

'What happened to your tree, Ruru,' Baker said, and then took a drag out of the cigarette within his fingers.

The shelter, the large pot, for his pohutukawa tree had been broken into pieces, its black soil staring like shit. There were the lifeless leaves of his pohutukawa tree scattered all over the courtyard, with branches and its stems broken into bits. Ruru walked toward a broken branch, squatted, lifted it up as his tears came down.

'I will go and talk to Dafe, right now,' Baker said, killing his cigarette, getting off the ashes and putting the remains in his pocket. He went into the house, inserted a key into Dafe's door and kicked it open.

‘What the hell!’ Dafe said, alarmed, sitting up with his hands behind him fully stretched and weighing against the bed.

‘What did you do to Ruru’s tree?’

‘Nothing. I did nothing.’

‘You better be telling the truth because Phiona will be getting involved.’

‘That’s good. She is going to fucking know how you sleep all the time without doing your job properly.’

Baker nodded, and slammed the door after stepping out of the room. He turned around resting his back against the door, before heading back to the courtyard. Ruru wasn’t there anymore. Just the remains of the ruined tree. He headed back into the house, calling, ‘Ruru! Ruru!’ He walked into the lounge and found the door leading outside ajar. ‘Ruru! Ruru!’

His eyes caught the awkward view of the gate’s stability, as it moved in rhythm to a breeze’s whistling, its hinge on one end, ripped away from the fence. Baker took out his cell phone and dialled.

Baker waited for Phiona to arrive. He spotted her red car in view. She was with the clinical manager, Diane. They parked the car yards away, and headed toward the gate in quick strides, both women clutching to handbags like they were carrying gold. They were in black suits; Phiona in pants and Diane in a skirt.

Phiona’s gaze fell on the gate’s hinge that hung disjointedly from the fence as Diana confronted Baker, whose hands were searching for warmth in his pockets.

‘Where is Dafe,’ Diane asked.

‘He has been shattering the windows and bringing down all the cupboards in the house. I had to lock him up in there, and wait for Phiona.’

‘Really,’ Diane said, turning around to meet Phiona’s stare. ‘Baker says he has been playing up, shattering everything in the house.’

‘When did he start that, Baker?’ Phiona asked.

‘Just after I alerted you about Ruru.’

Just then, a shattering of glass somewhere in the house was heard, and then a television burst out through a window of the house and landed twelve yards in front of them, splitting apart. Diana shuddered. Baker stared at the shattered television.

Phiona's phone rang, and she stepped away, searching her handbag. When she found the phone, she stopped, roughened her blond hair before answering.

'Phiona here.'

It was the police wanting to get more details about the client that had absconded.

'His is half Maori, with dark curly hair, diagnosed Asperger's syndrome. He has reoffended thrice as you know, and my clinical manager, from recent assessments, believes that there is a seventy percent probability that he might reoffend and...'

There was another shattering sound that caused her to pause. 'Please can you send some of your men over to the facility in Massey? The other client in the house is causing us hell.' She turned around and spotted Baker going toward the house while waving his hands.

He was seated on a bench in the train station, looking around, catching the gaze of a Chinese girl repeatedly. He was indecisive about waiting for a train with no cash in his pockets. He noticed the Chinese girl heading toward the ladies room and he stood up, walked past a group of young women, talking and laughing. He reached the door leading into the ladies, hidden in a corner by a cross-sectioned wall. He pushed it, catching the back view. She was almost heading into one of the smaller rooms amid others.

She turned around, smiled and walked toward him. 'The men's room is on the other side.' She pointed over his shoulder.

She headed back toward one of the smaller rooms. She didn't hear the door close. When she looked back, she saw the door close but he was still inside and heading toward her. Before she could yell, his palm had found her lips. He pushed her into the small room she was about to enter. Tears came rolling down her cheeks. She felt his other hand search underneath her skirt.

She wouldn't scream now, even if his palms left her mouth. She would let him have his way. His palms eventually left her mouth. He let his pants fall while raising one of her legs. He thrust his body against her. He continued for a while. She widened and then narrowed her eyes. Her head tilted to her left. She prayed for the nightmare to fade away.

She let her weight fall on the toilet seat as he adjusted his pants back on to his waist. She searched for her handbag. It was on the floor. She felt so weak to reach for it.

Phiona hated to deal with the police and the department of corrections. She was seated behind a desk in front of Dafe, at the Henderson police station. He wouldn't talk. Baker was standing beside one of the police officers, who had interceded in Dafe's escalating behaviour. She was almost yawning when Tony, the police officer she had dated years ago, came in.

'We have the second kid now.'

Relief. She stood up. Tony led her out.

'He raped a woman before we found him.'

'Oh hell no!' she yelled, following him as close as she could. 'This has completely made an arse out of me, Tony!' She thought of quitting the shitty company which taken her twelve years to build. Tony kept on walking ahead of her as if the news meant nothing.

In the room they entered, Ruru was seated behind a similar desk to the one Dafe had in the other room. A police woman, perhaps in her mid-thirties, was talking to him.

The woman turned around, got up, and said, 'Hi Phiona, I am Jenny.' She stared at Tony, touched her lower lip and said, 'There is something else.'

Tony raised a brow.

Jenny was smallish. She had short blond hair, which gave her an elegant appearance. 'Tell them what you just told me, Ruru.'

Ruru nodded his head, as tears filled his eyes. 'Dafe pissed on my head last night after forcing me to put his cock in my mouth. He... He... spat on me, kicked me, and threatened to kill me... He has been doing it, but I have been too scared. Too scared to say anything.'

'I need a seat, Tony,' Phiona said, one of her hands, finding her waist. 'Please.'

16. Paul

The rented car came to halt in front of the building. He drew up the handbrake, came out of the car, and walked toward the entrance, both hands in the pockets of the pair of tight blue jeans he was wearing. He still had his brown leather jacket on even though the heat in Perth was unfriendly. He loved the flowers on the sides of the walkway, getting a hand out of the pocket and touching a yellow glowing petal.

At the reception, the woman smiled as he came out of the lift on the second floor. He looked around. There were beautiful plants in the balcony drawing his interest.

‘Hello, sir. How can I help you?’

‘Perth is so lovely. I am Michael Merije, and I am here to see one of the weightlifters - Paul Yamo.’

‘Oh, hang on, let me check the list,’ she said, keeping her smile and opening a file. ‘How far have you come, sir?’

‘Came in from Sydney.’

‘You must be tired,’ she said, tracing her finger down the list she had found.

‘I should be. It’s a seven hour flight.’

‘...and yes, he is expecting you. I will call him to come for you, right away,’ she said picking up the phone on her desk.

‘I will be out there, waiting,’ he said, pointing at the balcony.

She watched him walk away while she spoke to the weightlifter. She could sense the exhilaration in the weightlifter’s husky voice. The elation. The black man now stood in front of the aquarium on the balcony. He was attractive, tall and slim. Why did she find him so attractive? She knew why. She was tired of muscles, tired of lusting over the grunts and groans of the weightlifters when they trained and competed. There were seasons when a woman needed to see something different.

The elevator opened, and the Polynesian man came out, approaching her. It seemed as if his strained-looking muscles made it difficult for him to walk. She pointed at the black man who was now staring at Perth’s sky view. She watched Paul approach him, calling. The black man turned around, smiling. She blushed. What a spectacle in his smile. She saw tears come down his cheek as he threw

himself into the weightlifter's embrace. She felt odd, staring. She saw their lips coming together, and her heart lost a beat. She smiled.

Paul turned around, catching her stare, his left hand, holding Michael's. 'I would like you to meet my boyfriend, Michael,' he said. 'All the way from Sydney.'

'I have already met him,' she replied.

Paul pulled Michael toward the elevator. 'You need a beer.'

They both got into the elevator, and Paul's finger found the number, fourteen. And Michael threw himself into Paul's arms again. 'I really missed you,' he said.

The lift stopped, and opened. Both men walked into the bar, where so many other muscled men sat, scattered around different tables. Each table they passed, Paul announced, 'My boyfriend just arrived from Sydney.' The reactions were mixed as some had welcoming smiles, while others pretended not to hear.

Paul chose a table at the right end. He had the orders, and pointed to one of the biggest of all the muscled men in the bar, who had two skinny women on his table. 'That's McGregor. He is yet to contest. Most of us here are climbing up the ladder gradually, struggling between 165 and 170kg. His coach wouldn't let him contest until the final stages - with the starting weight of 200kg.'

'Where is he from?'

'Adelaide,' Paul replied. 'It is certain he will be in the Olympics. I have a personal best of 200kg. And so, if the sun shines on my path, I will be in London too, but now the target is to do well here and qualify for Melbourne.'

'How have you been doing, though?'

'Not too bad. Not every son of a bitch is a weightlifter, Michael. The chickens will be separated from the lions tomorrow,' Paul said, sipping his drink.

Michael now wore his black pyjamas that had numerous red flower designs. Slouched on the bed, he zapped through some television channels. He could hear the sound of water thrashing against the sink in the bathroom where Paul was getting ready to join him in bed.

Paul came in, bare-chested, with a pair of white shorts on. He reached the bed, and sat.

'Come on, Paul,' Michael said. 'Do the usual thing. It isn't too hot, tonight.'

'This isn't Sydney.'

‘Come on.’

‘You know, I don’t fancy it, but I don’t want to get you squabbling so I will go and wear mine.’ He got up, opened the wardrobe, got on his pyjama top, and then the pants. They were the same in design and colour as Michael’s. He went back to bed.

‘Don’t we look like lovers now?’ Michael asked smiling, wanting to hold Paul’s stare.

‘We look like twins, Michael,’ Paul replied, narrowing his eyes to catch the subtitle of an interview session with the North Korean President on TV.

The reply, no doubt, upset Michael. He looked at the mirror in the far corner, catching their images – two men, one hefty and the other slim.

Michael was snoring when Paul gently got off the bed, and quietly changed from the pyjamas into his training gear. Track pants. Black singlet. Brown sneakers. He crept out, heading for the ground floor where the gym was situated. He was alone for the next three hours, letting his sweat drizzle over the floor while seated on an arm machine. Just before dawn two of his colleagues walked into the gym. The red haired Sam Nath, and the tallie, Goowie Harold.

‘Thought you might be fucking that faggot boy of yours,’ Sam said.

The 60kg over Paul’s hands felt like 200kg. He let it fall.

Goowie laughed. Both men went into separate bathrooms in the right section of the gym. The sound of the showers infuriated Paul. He struggled to his feet, didn’t shower as intended, and left for his room. Michael’s snore was still quiet.

When Paul came out of the bathroom with the white towel hanging over his neck, Michael was stretching on the bed with his neck a little raised. ‘Where did you go?’

‘You are up. To the gym.’

‘I can’t wait to watch you, love.’

Paul thought of the words directed at him at the gym, caught Michael’s stare and looked away.

Michael raised a brow.

Paul whistled while opening his wardrobe, searching for nothing in particular. The kit for the day's competition hung right in front of him.

Michael applauded like the others did, but not really in excitement over McGregor's first appearance. McGregor got on stage calmly, fetched a bit of powder and confronted the weight, massaging the rod between discs, which had a hundred on each side. He lifted it. He did this with a little effort, up to his chest, and with a quick shout, he got it over his head, showing his strength, as the applause rose with a cavernous intensity.

The second man for the day wasn't Paul, infuriating Michael. He was a red haired Caucasian with a long beard. He got in front of the 160kg of weight after powdering his hands, and lifted it over his chest. He farted and staggered to the right side of the stage. He lifted it over his head but didn't get it right - three red lights flickered.

Heading backstage, the red-haired man let his left shoulder brush Paul who was on his way up stage. 'Fucking fag,' he said.

Paul turned around and looked at him. It was Sam Nath again. Paul wanted to grip his throat and push him to the floor. And if possible bring down a dumbbell over the prick's head.

Paul felt a hand on his back and he turned around.

'The judges are waiting.' It was his coach.

He got on stage, rubbed a little of the white powder on his palms and was ready to tackle the weight. 175kg. He thought of Michael. He wanted to make him proud. And also wanted to get back at Sam Nath. He groaned, lifting the weight to rest on his chest, feeling his clavicles splitting.

The spectators were quiet. Michael was up on his seat watching air fill Paul's mouth, watching Paul's eyes bulging out, listening to the grunts. Burden as a facial expression. Paul lifted it over his head, and as Michael's palms were almost coming together to applaud, the weight overpowered the strength in Paul's arms. And not long after that the weight came falling, attaining an odd position, Paul fell. He saw the judges' lights go red. While struggling to get up, he caught Michael's deflated stare in the crowd.

Michael raised his hands of despair to rest over his head.

Paul sighed and left the stage.

Paul's hands were folded. His eyes seemed distant, his weight, resting on the car's bonnet parked in front of the complex.

'You should have tried the second time. You shouldn't have given up. Bullshit! Fucking shit... I hate this. I hate this.' Michael was pacing right in front. Back and forth.

'Why did you come here,' Paul asked, his eyes upward, searching the sky. 'Did you come here because you missed me or you came to take over my coach's job?'

'Paul, your loss is my loss. Your victory is my victory.'

'No Michael,' he said. 'My loss is my fucking loss! Stay away from my fucking career.' The voice was firm at first. It broke at the tail end. He got up from the bonnet, turned his back against Michael, looking at his image reflecting in the car's windscreen.

Michael stopped pacing. He was stunned. 'Has it come to this, Paul?' he sighed. 'Has it come to this? I am crushed.' He drew near Paul and touched him. 'Turn around and look at me.'

'Don't touch me!' Paul said. He was crying. His tears poured over the bonnet. 'Don't touch me, Michael. You are the reason I failed today.'

Michael bit his lower lip and nodded. A weightlifter came out of the complex, entered a white Chevrolet and drove away. 'I will leave for the airport now. You are still in the best losers' category, and I wouldn't like to ruin that for you.' He walked up to the side of the car, and could see the tears on Paul's face and on the bonnet. 'Get out of the way.'

Paul gave way and wiped his face using a palm. 'Aren't you taking your luggage?'

'Bring it back with you,' Michael replied and started the car. While driving away, he kept watching Paul's figure as it became smaller and smaller in the rear mirror.

17. Laughter

You hear no sound and conclude Singh is asleep. Your heart, like the colour of the night, sings in horrible lullabies while your feet gently feel the chilliness of the tiles. Slowly and slowly, you head to the switch, turning the lights on. You catch the image of your total nakedness in the mirror standing at the corner. You lust over your own body, and stare into your own eyes. You move to the door and grip the knob, opening it a little to peep. You do this hideously. Not timidly. Passing by the doors leading to laundry room and the staff office, your body now quivers. You head to the lounge through the corridor. You touch the wall by your side while struggling to acquaint your eyes with the darkness. Singh is snoring, lying on the couch before Hahona's door.

One leg after the other, in the way Hahona paces around the lounge, you walk past Singh on the couch. You breathe in quietly, airing your lungs. You almost lose your footing, as the snore suddenly heightens. You try hard to hold your supple stamina, letting the terrible alarming snore subside.

You reach Hahona's door and turn around slowly, checking on Singh again, because you cannot trust your ears. Your instincts calm down the anger materialising as sticky ear dirt. You weigh down the knob and push. Slowly. There is an airy stretching sound. The sound quietens Singh's snore for a while. You stop pushing. The snore goes on, adjusting to its normal rhythm. You continue pushing. It does not make a loud noise but you think it does.

You enter, leaving the door ajar. Hahona is half awake, with both hands weighing against the bed with his back off the sheets. The light is dimly on. And his eyes are wild with awe.

You puzzle him, mounting over him, working your arousal against his groin, searching for his cock and squeezing the left side of his chest. You find his spine, as your right ankle digs into the sheets.

While cautious of every noiseless sound, you turn his body around with a quiet strength after getting rid of his track pants, the only clothing on him. He shoves his body against your groin. The thrusts, like whispers, setting Hahona's desires ablaze. Sweat, pouring over his back. Your fingers, cuddling his chest and hips. You thrust harder and harder. His breathing gets intense. Then it comes. You spill out a gulp of

breath into him and fall by his side, struggling to grasp air. Then does Hahona's laughter become an alarm. Loud, jolting the night. You catch Singh's figure standing at the doorway. You push yourself to the floor, crawl over to the wall and lean on it, feeling its chill against your back.

'Which is happenni here?' Singh is in between a gasp for breath and shock. Gech out now, Dafee,' he says.

You find your feet. Hahona's laughter fades. But yours begin, but does not bully the ambience within the house like Hahona's. You walk past Singh with high shoulders, your shadow casting terror upon the door, giving him fright without knowing.

Back in your room, you hold onto your laughter. You grab your duvet and pounce over the bed joyously. The springs swing you into the air. You feel the dirt between your thighs. In your imagination, you bring in Singh's face against yours. You picture his thoughts. What will he do? Your fingers play with the sack harbouring your balls as you listen to his movements in the staff toilet. There is the sound of unremitting coughing. Indeed, Singh is drowning in his own heave.

This single act, this battering, creates a gateway for your farewell out of the service, but you will stay back, for a single reason. You can't say if your family cares or not. Out there on the streets, you will embrace piercing stares and vices, and die. The next day's meeting is the saving grace for you.

Singh is opposite Hahona, over the massive brown office table. And there you are, in front of Phiona, who has the letter that is to accompany you to hell.

'I liked it... I... I... want him to stick it up my arse, again,' Hahona says.

You think it is funny and laugh.

Phiona looks at Singh, and Singh has his face down.

'Are you sure, you weren't forced?' Phiona asks, stretching out a hand and patting Hahona.

'I... like it... Thank you... Thank you!' Hahona replies, looking away from Phiona to Singh, and from Singh to you.

Phiona's stare falls on you. 'How long has this been going on?'

'First time. It's the first time,' you reply.

18. Ruky

The white woman's eyes became pale as she covered her mouth. Her other hand still held the phone against her ears. Her voice ceased for a while. She could only listen. She hung up and caught the Ruky's stare. The black woman was slouched on the sofa with legs curled watching a video. Kay sighed, dropped the phone and walked to the lounge.

Ruky uncurled her legs and took them off the sofa. She took the remote on her lap and muted the television.

'Mama Afoke is dead,' Kay said.

'Are you serious?'

'It was your uncle, Greg, on the phone. He didn't have much time. Said his home was open to us to spend a night since we are expected to attend the funeral, which is taking place tomorrow in the village.'

'I feel a bit of sympathy for the witch.'

'Ruky!'

'What?'

'She has just died.'

Ruky laughed. She got to her feet, walked to the dining area and opened the slender fridge. She brought out a bottle of brandy. 'I hate this feeling building up in me. I should be screaming in joy.'

'Stop that, Ruky. Stop it. Stop it.'

The black woman filled her glass. 'Do you want a drink?'

'No, thank you.'

She headed back to the lounge with the glass in her hand. She had an armless white blouse over a black pair of leggings. 'Why should I feel sorry? We picked her up from the roadside in the village, brought her here to Warri, gave her a life and at the end of it all, she went back to the village and told everybody how lesbians fuck!'

'At least she helped put the house in order.'

'In order my foot! I always re-tied the entire house each time she claimed to have done a wonderful job.'

'I wonder why they are burying her quickly.'

I am not going, Kay.'

'Are you out of your mind?'

But the next morning, the black woman, in a tight black dress barely reaching her knees, took their small luggage out of the house and put it in the trunk of the Mercedes parked in front of the house. She waited behind the wheel for Kay, who was still in their bedroom, seated in front of the mirror creaming her hair. Eventually she finished, came out and entered the car.

'Sorry, sweetie.'

'We still have time. I have this nagging headache.'

'It's the brandy of last night. I will drive if you...'

'No. I can still drive.'

The black woman inserted her Eminem CD in the car stereo.

'Ruky, please can you play something else?'

'I want this one.'

'Ruky, please play anything, but not rap.'

'Fuck you, honey. You aren't stopping me.'

Kay nodded her head sideways.

The Mercedes slowed down on the poorly constructed bridge of bricks. They drove passed a group of children. Some were naked exposing ribs that could be counted. They were waving and laughing, stretching out their hands in demand.

The roads in the village were sandy. The Mercedes almost got stuck just before Mama Afoke's family house. It took Ruky's perseverance to keep the car moving as she raised dust. Among a group of mud houses with rusted zinc as roofs, stood the big bungalow with a crowd in front.

A catholic priest was giving a sermon. Both women could see the coffin that had Mama Afoke's remains from where they had taken seats.

'Mama Afoke is undoubtedly with our Lord Jesus Christ,' the priest said. 'She died knowing that her children will live a good life having brought them up in the fear of God. Mama Afoke had struggled to send her first daughter to the

polytechnic in Auchi. She had also struggled to send her son to the University of Benin. She was determined and focused. She is what I can confidently refer to as a real African mother. Despite being widowed when she was only twenty-five, she chose not to remarry. Despite being so attractive and attracting a lot of suitors, she chose to focus on raising her children properly to become responsible adults.'

Ruky looked at Kay and said, 'Let me show you around the village.' She pulled up the white woman who was a little reluctant.

Ruky showed Kay the stream the village was named after. There were children bathing and swimming in it. A kilometre away from the stream, Ruky pointed at a brown bungalow, 'That's my grandparents' house.'

'Let's go and see them,' Kay suggested.

'Not as lesbians. They are no different from my parents. They were supposed to be at the funeral. They probably decided not to attend because of my presence,' Ruky said, and led Kay toward the village market, where everybody's stare pierced them like spears.

When they returned to Mama Afoke's family house, there was a queue of friends and relatives taking turns to stare at the remains one last time before burial. Both women joined the line. Staring at the woman in the coffin drew cold into the Ruky's body. Mama Afoke's body was slimmer. She looked calmer. Broader lids. Resting indeed, dressed in the Urhobo traditional attire, with an igele fitted around her head. A woman in the crowd lit a cry.

It was night now and they both had settled in a bedroom in Greg's house. Ruky couldn't sleep. She had watched Kay cry silently before sleeping. Mama Afoke's face kept appearing in her heart. The facial expression in the coffin. The calmness. Then she imagined what the deceased woman's voice was like when describing how lesbians fuck to the entire village. She heard a calm knock on the door and went to check. It was her uncle, Greg. She followed him to the courtyard where they both sat on a bench.

'I was unsure if you were still awake,' he said.

'I am glad you came because I couldn't sleep. I didn't see you at the burial.

'I was there at the tail end. I had to attend another burial. My wife's cousin also passed away.'

'So many deaths.'

She watched him stand up to fetch some groundnuts from a sack lying against the wall. He offered her some. She wasn't interested. He tossed some nuts into his

mouth and said, ‘You are really really bent on remaining a lesbian for the rest of your life.’

‘How else can I be happy? I am just glad you are the only tolerable relative I have.’

‘Hmm... Your parents are still keeping their distance?’

‘Yes oh. They all are. Uncle Mike, Brother Ike... And even Grandpapa and Grandmama.’

‘You cannot blame them.’

‘Uncle Greg, if not that you lived in Sweden and saw meaning another side of life, you will be no different.’

‘There are many who have lived abroad and have become more civilised than even white people but would rather die than have a lesbian daughter. I admit my rejection of religion is what kind of circumcised my heart to accept people as they are. In Sweden, gay relationships have blended so well into the society but I still have my personal reservations.’ He got up and went toward some sugarcane lying against the wall, beside the sack of groundnuts. He took a stick and used a knife to cut himself a sizeable piece. He brought it back with him and began peeling. ‘Rukevwe George, you have never asked me of my opinion on gay relationships, have you?’

‘But you have always been excited about me and Kay.’

Yes, of course. I have always been excited that both of you feel happy. But let me tell you this. I never supported the legalisation of gay marriage in Sweden. I remember having a brawl on the subject with my supervisor when I was rounding up my doctorate.’

‘You stand against same-sex marriage, Uncle Greg?’

‘I stand against injustice.’ He nodded his head. ‘Let me tell you a story. Two blocks away from the flat I used to live in Stockholm, there was this man called Devin whose wife passed away leaving him a twelve year old daughter to bring up. He soon got so starved of sex and had lost touch with the habit of going out to bars or clubs to woo women. This was a man that couldn’t stand the thought of visiting a whorehouse. You know what he did? He started abusing his little girl. I am not justifying this horrible act of humanity. He kept on luring Rosa to seat on his lap and doing his shit right on through her adolescence years until 2007. The goddamn Swedish police got to know about this only when Rosa had turned twenty-two with two children for her father. She loved her father and wouldn’t let him stay a week

in jail, claiming the sexual acts between them were mutual. After same-sex marriage became legitimate in Sweden, Rosa, who had been separated from her father, filed a petition requesting for the same rights given to gay people. Rukevwe, a day is coming when a woman would wed a stallion in church.’

She watched her uncle split a peeled chunk of his sugarcane.

Back in bed beside the white woman, she still couldn’t sleep. Uncle Greg had worsened her state. She wondered how a man would gain a bachelor’s degree and a doctorate in Engineering from a Swedish University, only to come back to Nigeria, build a house in his village and stick to a petit farming business. There was this rumour about his failed attempt to swindle a woman in Stockholm. When the police had begun investigation, he fled for Nigeria, and the village had become his safest haven. She left the lamp beside the bed on. Kay was still sleeping calmly like an angel. Really like an angel.

Ruky found a newspaper over the shelf in the room. She wanted to read a story about the latest Nigerian pastor to acquire a private jet but realised she was just staring at sentences without getting any meaning. Her mind wandered back to London - that confused moment in a decent relationship with Olutayo, a twenty-three year old pastor whose father was also a pastor. Their ministry grew widely in the UK and Olutayo had been assigned to pastor the branch she served as an usher. She remembered that day when she revealed the developing relationship with Kay to him.

‘We should go on a seventy day fast,’ he suggested.

‘No. I can’t,’ she replied.

‘This is a serious matter. Lesbianism is a strong bondage,’ he said, narrowing his eyes.

‘Olutayo, I... I am sorry. If you really understand how women feel, I wouldn’t be entangled in this white girl’s life.’

‘We both prayed and agreed, Ruky, that we will only have sex after a blessed union. There are blessings for chastity.’

She watched him walk toward the window of her London flat.

‘For the sake of our relationship to survive I wouldn’t mind,’ he finally said.

Olutayo began his fasting that day. And it was on that same day she loosened his belt for the first time. Christianity began appearing like riddle to her. This was Olutayo who preached and spoke in tongues on the pulpit on Sundays and Wednesday. It was the same Olutayo on a seventy day fast, thrusting between her

legs at most nights. All the nights he had mounted her, she smelt his weakness. It was of raw hunger. Not for her body. Not for food. For his God, but he was lost. She knew his feelings for her were really genuine. The question then, was about her feelings for him? His movement against her body during those nights were feebly forceful and he had always ejaculated panting for almost an hour which often ceased the life in the atmosphere. She found it extremely difficult to breathe when this happened. On some of the days when he fucked her on the stairs, she felt as if his penis was a sword that thrashed hunger into her, draining out the energy. Her moans were like cobwebs spreading on the wall.

On the morning that crept in after their last night together, her faith in Christianity ended. He had turned cold and still beside her. She shook his body. No response. In her naked state she had dialled his father's number and then 999. She remained nude when the cops came. She was still nude when Olutayo's father and some other junior pastors came.

In the days ahead, she visited the police station several times. Since she hadn't stabbed Olutayo with a knife or shot him with a gun, she was only referred to a psychologist who made her read books on recovery for months. Her last assignment on recovery was to speak to the senior Olutayo.

She was seated in his office in a flowery designed top over a decent skirt. Before this moment, she couldn't imagine what his reaction would be like.

'You are just a serpent and will surely perish in hell,' he said, seated behind his desk. It took four minutes of ghostly silence for him to reply.

She had said all she wanted to say. Cleared her conscience. Spoken of her bisexuality. Spoken of his son's fasting. Spoken of those nights Olutayo slept with her.

He found his feet, straightened his black suit using a palm and hesitantly approached her. He struck her on the face with the back of his hand. Tears. She expected more. And he struck her again and again. She didn't raise her hand to shield her face. She let him spit on her. Her nose bled. Her reddening cheekbones swelled. He kicked her and she fell on the floor, screaming silently. He lamented about the pain she had caused him and his wife and his ministry.

With her broken cheekbones and swollen eyes and bleeding lips, she drove to Kay's Neasden apartment and banged on the door. Kay came out, her mouth wide opened in awe. They hugged.

When morning came, she realised she had slept off thinking of the atrocious past in London. Her dead faith. Olutayo. This had now resulted in a chilling heat enveloping her body. Fever. She felt her skull splitting. Headache.

Kay was sitting on the edge of the bed with a make-up box on her lap while painting her lips. ‘What time do we leave for Warri?’ she asked, noticing Ruky’s movement on the bed.

We should leave as soon as we can. Couldn’t sleep much though. You will have to drive, Kay. I think I am sick.

19. Spray

You had left the lights on, tossing on your bed in weariness. You hadn't slept. If you did, it wasn't for long. But you felt stronger. You were sure the staff members were all snoring and enjoying some delightful dreams. You were sure Ethan was waiting for you now. You sat on your bed, your palms against your face; your elbows weighing against your lap. You weren't sure if what you had planned for the night was about fun or retribution. Your heart could only agree with all embedded plots. You lived in a far-away country. Mummy and Daddy had you here so you wouldn't put them to shame. And the service seemed more interested on the funds you were generating than your welfare. The little fan beside your bed had its shadow waving against the white wall. The blue duvet in its usual state gave your room a messy appearance that the staff members loved to sing about.

You drew out a drawer beside your bed, searched and found the body spray you bought yesterday. You had been pleased with its concentrations. Singh had also been pleased. 'It would gech off your body smell,' he said. His words hit you but you had remained quiet. You didn't reply as you were expected to. Your silence only impelled Singh in writing a good progress report for the day. Off you go. At the door, you turned around and looked at your room. If all went well, this would be a final goodbye to the blue duvet, to the small fan, to the television, and to the clothes in the wardrobe.

In Ethan's room, his ears could have been against his door when you entered. He raised his brows in curiosity. 'I... have been waiting for you,' he whispered.

'I told you I would be here at three o'clock,' you replied. Your eyes found the clock in the room.

'It's four-thirty,' he said.

It was four-thirty indeed. You hated the side of you that couldn't read the clock. Even in the middle of the quiet night, Ethan's bed was neatly made. The shadow of the windowpane was not just on the two of you but on the bed. 'Didn't you have a sleep? It's going to be a long night.'

'Too excited, Dafe! I would like to see how it goes.'

‘Shhh... What’s that sound,’ you asked. He followed you quietly, as you tiptoed toward his bathroom. Opening the door, you could see water-drops thrashing against the sink. Slowly.

‘You have to close your tap tightly.’

He walked past you, entered his bathroom and tightened the tap.

You walked to his bed and sat, waiting.

‘You would mess my bed up,’ he said, when he came out of his bathroom.

‘Why do you have to care about it? Everything is going on fire.’

And a glint came over his face. ‘Yes! We are setting the world on fire.’

There were people diagnosed of a similar disability that you suffer, walking about naked in Lagos. Here you were, being supported by people who spend more time with you than they spend with their family. Your intention was to grasp a freedom unknown to your imagination. Your gratitude was truly ugly.

You stood to your feet, looking confused. After a back and forth movement between the walls of the room you ran toward the switch turning the light off. But the light from Ethan’s bathroom kept streaming in. You got in front of the only curtain in the room, and pulled it to the side. Auckland was cold. There were dots of scattered lights here and there, from different residential buildings. You heard a bird squeal and fly through the darkness over a house.

‘Where is the lighter?’

You could hear the sound of Ethan’s movements. You could hear the sound of his hands ransacking clothes. You turned around and there he was, trying to hold onto the lighter so it wouldn’t slip off. But it fell. He picked it up. You turned your back on him again. You drew the curtain, covering the night view. You could feel Ethan’s breath against your back. You take three steps backward, and your shoulders rubbed against his. You made a gesture at him to move forward. He trembled forward, standing awkwardly, the side of his right hip before you.

‘Are you ready?’ you asked.

‘Yes.’ He shook his head.

‘Light it,’ you said, frowning.

He got a bit frightened as he lifted the lighter up to the height of his nose, away from his face. You took out the body spray from your pocket, and tossed it up twice, catching it each time. It was black, having some designs that ought to have belonged to a chocolate pack. Ethan lit the lighter, pressing the black button on the top.

‘Ready?’

‘He shook his head.’

You let the spray flush over the flame. The fire roared against Ethan’s fears. Digging up more excitements. The roaring sound fuelled the night. It got hold of the curtain in front of both of you. You cut off the pressure on the spray. Ethan let the lighter fall. For a while you both wanted to watch the fire climb up to the ceiling with its cruelty. But you held onto Ethan’s arm, pulling. ‘Let’s get out of the house, now.’

The heat from the growing fire was indeed in circulation. Both of you ran, heading downstairs. All you could imagine was Singh dying in his sleep. You wished the other clients, Tony and Frankie, dead. You wished staff members, Andrew and Gus, dead. You kicked the door downstairs open, and both of you were out. You really anticipated watching the house burn. Ethan could only mimic your pleasure, standing beside you. You smiled seeing smoke rising up into the sky from the building. A smile which was suddenly cut short by the alarm in the house. And just as the first glint of fire rose, Singh came out running. At the other end of the building, Andrew could be seen jumping out through the window. Gus, Tony and Frankie followed.

‘Someone call 111!’ Gus screamed, as he ran away from the building.

‘I did awlready,’ Singh shouted. His eyes were really wild.

The fire tore through the upper part of the building where your room, Ethan’s room and the office were. The burning noises were of anger. Of strife and swiftness.

The sirens of fire fighters lit the air from afar.

‘What the hell caused the fire?’ Andrew lamented.

With all stares on you, your eyes fell on Ethan.

20. Held

1.

Who was asking to see her in the lobby? The same person who had been ringing to speak with her? She was tired of listening to consolatory messages.

‘Madam, it’s the Minister of...’

‘Gosh... Tell him I am not in Nigeria for a religious visit,’ Rayleigh replied before the young woman finished speaking.

‘Please, Madam, hear me out.’

Rayleigh didn’t shut the door. She stared at the worried woman in the blue and white outfit that all the hotel staff members wore. She was desperate. It occurred to Rayleigh that the visitor might not be the preacher she had met in the lobby. She nodded at the woman.

‘You need to come down, Madam.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Our Minister of Information, Madam,’ the woman replied, pronouncing the word, ‘our’ with hallowed reverence.

‘I will be down soon.’ Rayleigh closed the door, and let her back weigh against it, as she searched through a heart now infested with confusion, anxiety and wonder. She sighed, and got in front of the mirror beside her bed. She stared at her image while colouring her lips. She put her lipstick down into a drawer, and reached for the purse over the bed, opened it, took out her phone and dialled.

‘Hi, Ray! Are you not supposed to be having a meeting with the minister?’

‘How did you know that?’

‘There is no access into the hotel premises right now. I am standing out here, waiting.’

Rayleigh’s right fingers searched through her hair massaging the scalp. ‘I will see you later then. I am about to meet with him.’

She stared at the mirror again, tossing the phone over the bed, and leaving the room.

In the lobby, two policemen approached her, and led her to a bar just before the hotel’s pool. She could see that all movements in the hotel premises were being

monitored - Policemen in black uniforms and plain clothes security service men were hanging around.

The minister, a man perhaps in his mid-fifties, in a traditional white caftan, was seated in front of a younger man in a brown suit. The pool was quiet before them, with a red tube floating over it.

‘Hello,’ she said, taking the vacant seat, and crossing her legs.

‘Miss Johnson, the nation sympathises with you. The culprits will be brought to justice,’ the minister said, his eyes fixed on her for a moment before falling on his companion. ‘Please meet the Police Inspector General, Aliyu Yusuf.’

‘Hello, Aliyu.’ She forced a smile, brief, but amiable.

Nice to meet you, Madam. Your loss is our loss. The police will support you on your course,’ the Inspector General said.

She wondered if they could see the disgust that had taken over her mind. She glanced at the minister’s belly, which was extremely large. As he talked, the turbulence in the belly distracted her. He was giant, fair skinned and clean-shaven. He had probably lived in the UK, sounding like a Londoner. Diverse accents made up the nation called Nigeria.

Taking out a brown envelope, he said, ‘We know how it is impossible for compensation to replace loss, but please take this as a token.’

She received it, wanting to press it against her breasts. It felt like a letter from her late sister.

‘Those militants who claim that they are fighting for the oil produced in their land are nuts. They put the blame on the government for the illiteracy they inflict on themselves. They put their blames on all white people, thinking they own every Shell or Mobil company,’ the police chief said. ‘They have a hand in your loss, Madam. We will surely bring them to face justice.’

2.

Chioma ran into the lobby, and suddenly halted on meeting Rayleigh’s gaze. Rayleigh led the way back to her room, in quick strides. Her eyes were distant. She pushed the door open, reached her reading table and put down the brown envelope before slouching onto the chair. ‘Your country breeds funny men.’

‘How much did he give?’ Chioma asked, her eyes on the brown envelop.

Rayleigh reached for it with reluctance, glared at it before tearing it open. She pulled out the piece of paper in it and the words held her stare for a while. ‘What am I to do with this?’

Chioma looked around the room, before heading toward the reading desk. She took the paper away from Rayleigh’s hands and after reading, she said, ‘I can’t believe this.’

‘They have made me rich.’

‘Yes, Rayleigh,’ Chioma said, letting the cheque fall on the desk. ‘There is something you don’t know.’

Rayleigh narrowed her eyes and rubbed her chin.

‘I don’t think the militants had a hand in Kay’s death.’

‘How do you know that?’

Chioma walked away toward the bed, lifting the handbag she had left on the floor. She zipped it open and got out a folded newspaper page. She handed it to Rayleigh saying ‘Have a read.’

3.

‘It isn’t advisable going on to the streets asking questions about a rogue that has been declared wanted,’ Chioma warned.

‘By whom? By the police or the government who, themselves, are rogues? We are supposed to be journalists... risk takers, Chioma,’ Rayleigh replied, looking at her palms, opening and closing them. ‘Journalists are risk takers. I need the truth on every tip of my fingers.’

‘In Afghanistan, bodies of journalists are found in shreds due to the blasts. In North Korea, bodies of journalists are found, dumped outside their borders, but here in Nigeria, it would be a miracle, if a journalist’s body is found at all.’

‘Don’t scare me, Chioma.’

Chioma wasn’t too hard on the accelerator as she reached a roundabout. ‘That’s another bar over there by the corner.’

They were looking out for a bar, a nice bar that would be open all through the night, and had already passed two bars. Rayleigh complained of one being crowded and the other too open.

‘The building appears creepy to me, Chioma. Keep on driving.’

‘Are you sure we are going to have any drink, tonight? I wonder why the bar in the hotel you stay doesn’t run at night.’

‘I think we should get a bottle of whiskey and head back,’ Rayleigh replied.

Chioma hissed, making a turn and taking Barracks Road. ‘You should listen to me.’

‘If I had been listening to you, I would be nowhere. You know that.’

Chioma slowed down, looked in her rear mirror, and pulled over.

‘What’s wrong, Chioma.’

‘Have you heard of occultism before?’

‘Is that the reason why you have stopped? To ask me that?’ Rayleigh laughed, took her eyes off Chioma and shook her head. ‘I have read some fantasies that paint pictures of voodoo and magic.’

‘You are on track. Occultism here is witchcraft. The man you want to go out in search for lives in voodoo.’

4.

She turned around, and saw the approaching black car, in a swirl of dust. The dust reached her first. She froze. She would only break out of their reach by growing instant wings. Two men, faces covered like robbers, emerged out of the car, leaving all doors ajar. They caught her after she had accomplished four long strides, failing to get a fifth. They were in camouflage jackets and black trousers tucked in boots.

She was dragged into the car with one of the men’s palm over her face. She searched for breath and couldn’t scream. There was a third man, who was driving. The car doors were closed, and his feet went hard against the accelerator. The car turned around swiftly raising more dust, heading back the way it had come.

Her white skin had been bruised by the men’s rigid black bodies. Their sweat soaked into her black silky dress. Their odour stopped her breath patchily. Her heartbeat was loud. One of the men, who sat on her left, forced her hands behind her back, which was painful at first, while the other, who sat on her right, took out a seal and placed it over her lips. She wanted to kick, trying to wriggle her hands off the man’s fists, behind her, but the narrowness of the car’s interior wouldn’t let her.

The car slowed down, reaching a quiet but populated area. She was sure she met gazes of people, who just ignored, as they passed. They saw the seal over her lips. They saw the masked faces in the car.

There was a woman in front of a food store, who screamed at two children, stopping them from staring at the car.

Rayleigh tried to mumble out some words after one of the men hit her left breast.

‘Quiet, abeg!’ he responded, in a deep dawdling voice.

They covered her face with a rag, horribly stinking of a decaying mouse. It was a smell of blankness. She sank into a bewildered state. She felt migraine splitting her head, her neck, losing control and her eyelids, weakening beyond measure.

5.

When her eyes fluttered, opening, the smell of vegetation reached her nose. She was alone in a hall-like room that had its windows slightly opened, with plants making their way in. She felt her hands bound together behind her back. The itchiness within her wrists was a nightmare. Her breath stank, and she could feel it against her tongue as she tried to get up to her feet. Her ankles ached. Her spine too. She sat up instead, which was relieving. Not long after her eyes got acquainted with the concrete floor, the stained white ceiling, and the snaky grasses making their way into the room through the windows, a tall slim man walked in, trailed by three others. He could be been thirty, and hadn’t covered his face like the three men behind him, who were obviously her captors.

‘You are awake now, sexy,’ he said.

‘What do you people want?’ she screamed, wriggling her body, struggling with the rope’s cruelty around her wrists.

‘She fine, no be small,’ one of the masked men said.

She watched them laugh.

She tried to scan herself, her body. The moist feeling in her armpits; the friction and itchiness between her legs and her jeans. They might have peeked at her nudity.

‘What do you want from me?’ she demanded in a calmer tone.

‘The question surprises me. Should it not be - what do you want from us?’ the man, who had his face exposed, said.

She noticed his dimples. His clever eyes. She watched him raise an arm, signalling. The other men left the room with their loud guffaws.

‘Who are you?’

‘I am your true lover whom you have been searching for.’

‘What you are talking about?’

He sighed, and sat beside her, his shoulder, brushing hers. ‘From the very first day a government spokesman poisoned your heart against my movement, you started a search for me. The walls have ears. I know everything. My father started

the movement I now run. My father died for it.’ He got out a knife. And her breathing trembled. When he reached behind her, she closed her eyes. She felt him swipe it twice. Her hands shook. The rope fell in bits.

Her breathing adjusted. She brought her liberated fingers in front of her face.

He took his eyes away from her, looking at the window, where the plants were making their way in. ‘We are militants fighting for the land, the oil, and for the Niger-Delta people. The federal government and foreign investors have been depriving us of what has been rightfully ours for a long time. We own the oil of Nigeria, yet we have the worst roads compared to the rest of the country. Countless accidents yearly. We are militants, and we kidnap foreigners who cooperate with the government in raping us, and stealing our oil. We have no reason to have you here.’

‘You are a lying pig. Did my sister have anything to do with your oil?’

He turned around to catch her stare. She felt something stir in her. She found her feet. And walked toward one of the open windows, the creeping plants.

He also found his feet. ‘If I had anything to do with her death, you wouldn’t be here, alive, English girl...’

His words tore into her. And she ran toward him in agony. She used both of her fists to strike him. She hit him on his face, over and over. She wasn’t bothered about the outcome. She had her way for a while. In the end, he pushed her. And she fell to the ground bruising her ankle against the concrete floor. He spat, almost on her.

‘I have slit throats. I have tasted blood. For greed. For justice. For hate. For good. For revenge. I wouldn’t hesitate to kill you, if you crossed my boundaries!’

She listened with a confused glare, embracing his slow words emanating like a cold steam.

She watched him turn his back against her. One of his hands was wiping his face. She could see the edge of his knife sticking out of the knife-holder buckled to his side. Tears came down her cheeks. The creeping plants over the window shook in rhythm to a hushed breeze.

‘I don’t blame them. I don’t blame the people that see me as a criminal who deserves to be hung. I am a good soldier now. I do not say these words to give you a good image of myself or prove you wrong. I already have an ugly image. I had my men bring you here, so I could personally ask you to shut the hell up and go after the real killer.’

She nodded, not because she believed him, but because she had never been this scared of any man. She had flown into Nigeria with confidence, tall enough to look and spit into the eyes of the man who had killed her sister. 'I have heard you.' Her voice trembled.

'The government of this nation which I regret to be ashamed of, laid the blame on us. I did not murder your sister, and no member of the movement was involved.'

'What is your story then?' She looked over the concrete floor. She seemed to taste salt in the humid air. The smell of vegetation kept coming with the breeze. At last he turned around and squatted before her. So close that his breath hit her face. His mouth odour was of darkness. Like wet bandages over a wound.

'I fight for the people of the Niger-Delta,' he began. 'I fight for my people, for the land. All Nigerians depend on oil, but are blind to the suffering of the people that live in the region where the oil comes from. I grew up under the roof of an idealist father, a warrior father. I grew up watching my father form this great militant movement. I grew into a man without a father. Nigeria's selfishness had my father murdered and thought she had finished off the movement. They tied his neck to a van which was driven over a rocky field that had stem-like stones piercing his bones. My father died a hero. And so will I die. So will my son die!' He took out a metallic cigarette pack and offered her a cigarette.

There was something about his eyes. Narrow. They held a grave persuasiveness that any dog lost in the cold would rely on.

He lit the cigarette between her lips, and she got up.

He lit a cigarette for himself too. A smell of chilli sauce, frying in oil, came with the breeze. The aroma was slippery. Spicy.

She sighed and said, 'I just need you to let me go.'

'Just like that?' he replied.

She took another drag of the smoke, and laughed. 'Are you going demand a ransom? I have no one on earth at this moment. Britain wouldn't care if I rot here.'

He didn't look at her. He left the burning cigarette at an edge of his lips, and folded his arms.

'Do you know who is responsible then?'

'My movement had no hand in your sister's death. The Nigerian government is responsible. You think if I needed your money, I wouldn't demand the five thousand pounds given to you by the government?'

'How do you know about that?' she asked, peering into his eyes. 'Voodoo?'

‘You shouldn’t be mindful of walls alone. Even the clouds could have ears. A senator in this country, who happens to be my uncle, is the father of your sister’s murderer. They all know this. The government knows this. The fucking senator was the one who gave my father’s life to the government. He betrayed this land.’

‘This cannot be true!’ she said, picturing the brown envelope on the reading table in her hotel room. Her eyes fell on the rough floor, and her palm felt it briefly before she sat. The floor had given her palm a cold feeling which she now transferred to her face. She massaged her forehead, the muscles in the arm tautening.

One of the men, who had picked her up, who had his face still covered, brought in a tray, that had a plate of white rice, and a bowl of curry stew. Steam rose out of the rice underneath pieces of meat. She could breathe better. Her cigarette had burned to a stub. So had his.

‘You should eat,’ the masked man said, and walked away whistling.

She stared at her unmasked companion, and he nodded his head, reaching for the plate. He used the fork she was expected to use, in fetching some of the rice into his mouth. She got the fork back from him and started to eat.

6.

It was the thirst for a cigarette, and its smell, that got her batting her eyelids, waking up to find herself seated, fastened with a seatbelt on the front seat. It was the same car that had picked her up. Seated beside her, on the driver’s seat, was the militant, the war-lord.

She perceived that smell, of a rotten mouse, prickling her nostrils. ‘Damn it. Don’t tell me you made me smell that horrible rag again.’

He took away the burning cigarette from his lips and shifted his legs. He looked in front of him, through the windscreen. She could see people right in front of them. It could be an open market, or a taxi park. There were taxis parked uniformly.

‘Go there and take a taxi back to your hotel.’

In her mind, she tried to scan herself again. She smelled of heat. She thought of the sweat that had soaked into her dress from her captors.

She looked at the militant chief while unfastening her belt.

‘You know the truth. Chase the facts now.’ He dragged in some smoke, narrowed his eyes, reached for her handbag on the back seat and dropped it on her lap. ‘You might not be able to prove it but at least you know now. Get out!’

She opened the door, stepped out, clinging onto her bag. She took a step away and turned around. He started the car, and drove unhurriedly away. She looked at the car number, forced herself against memorising it. It stuck.

21. Out of the Pitch

1.

You weren't a chicken after all

And what happened, you sucked spit out of your throat, gathered it over your tongue, and threw it on his face. He swore. And you swore back. He took two steps toward you, pouring his whole breath on your face. You sensed his nervousness, staring boldly into his eyes. You poured your breath on his face too and enjoyed your moment until Cap J pulled him off.

'He will never wear a blue shirt as long as I remain a coach,' he said, being led away.

Back in London, you were summoned by Duncan, the academy's chief executive, to your coach's office. A blue Chevrolet was packed in front of the glass building. Seated in your car beside Yusuf, you wouldn't think of the last match. You wouldn't think of your future in England. A woman came out of the office searching. You got out and waved. She waved back. You headed toward her. She smiled and led you into the coach's office. You could see your body's reflection on the blank television screen on the wall. You wore a suede jacket and a sagging pair of jeans.

Duncan got on his feet extending a hand. 'Hey, shithead... If you want to ever make a life in football, please apologise to Freddy.'

After peeking into his eyes, you shook his hand and looked at your reflection on the screen, again. Meeting the gaze of your coach, you said, 'I am sorry.'

The coach ignored you. His eyes, pale, over his desk.

Duncan looked at your coach, and then back at you. His hands found his pockets. He was in a grey suit, with his red tie loosened, speaking of a tired day. 'Say that again, Dafe.'

'I said I am sorry, coach!'

Your coach looked up, licked his lips and said, 'I hold nothing against you. I do not hold grudges. I forgot about the incident the moment I left the pitch. You just have to know that whatever you do while here in the academy works for, or against you. But I must warn you never ever to try that again!'

You couldn't sleep that night. You still felt the growth in your arse. Cap J's face also had a portion of your thoughts. Magazines flooded your floor. Dirty clothes in heaps, in corners, and the washing machine and drier were full of unutilised potency.

2.

Dwain had stopped laughing at you. He avoided you during training. And Cap J only spoke to you when he saw the need to put you right on track. The morning training ended with your conscience gripping you. You had attacked Diarra with two of your legs, sliding against his foot. The challenge had him down for nearly half an hour with the attention of the health team. Your coach's eyes wouldn't leave you. What were you thinking when you charged at him. You wished this had happened to Cap J or Dwain. The coach ended the training after Diarra was taken to the hospital. There were no talks. Each player seemed to go back home with a sense of loss. There was hardly a replacement for Diarra, who hardly got injured. If not for the superb form of the reserve right-back, Terry Handley, Diarra would have been playing in the reserve premier league, long ago.

This time you went on your own to the coach's office to say you were sorry. He said the same thing as the last time. He didn't hold grudges outside the pitch. Diarra's injury was worse than what it seemed, you heard.

You sat on the bench when your team faced the young gunners, and when they faced Norwich. Lost both matches. You whispered to a colleague, asking if the coach knew what he was doing, and you were relegated to the stands in the next game. You seemed to be more relaxed. Happier. You began going to trainings late. The coach only watched you. Cap J could do that. Dwain could too. But you?

3.

You found your way through Surrey.

'You have reached your destination' – said the voice, on the GPS. Yusuf pulled up the handbrake, and you unclipped your seatbelt looking at the gate. Ash metallic bars. 'I won't be too long,' you said, stepping out and closing the car door. You pressed the bell when you reached the gate and a black woman with a baby strapped to her back came with a frown. She spoke no word of English.

'Hello. I am Dafe. Can I see Diarra?'

She raised her hand, signalling you to wait. The baby giggled.

She came back smiling this time without the baby. She undid the lock and opened the gate. You entered, and waited for her to lead the way. It was a massive building. Diarra's motor-bike was parked by the corner, beside a blue Suzuki jeep.

Inside the house, Diarra was seated on a stool with a cast around the injured leg. He was full of smiles.

'My African brother, welcome...'

'Damn it! You are living like a king in England.'

'I am only maintaining this for my fellow countryman who used to play for Tottenham but has now moved to Turkey.'

'Who's that?'

'Kanoute... Frederic Kanoute.'

'Oh.'

The woman that had led you in said something in French, smiling shyly and looking at you.

You smiled back.

'She wants to know what you would like to drink.'

'I am sorry, I would like a cup of coffee but I already had too much today.'

Diarra translated your words. She disappeared into the room where the cry of her baby was beginning to come from.

'I am very sorry for this, Diarra. Honestly, it wasn't intentional,' you said, pointing at the cast.

'Dafe, I don't hold you responsible. It's evil from my small village in Mali coming after my career. I failed to do my ritual last month and so evil succeeded. I have to now appease the good gods to recover quickly.'

'What crap are you talking about?'

'I am serious. You are from Nigeria and should understand all these things. Why do you think I have been able to stay here so long? The future is bright for me, Dafe. I have asked my gods for a big favour, next year. I will play in the championship.'

'Hmm.'

'Look, Dafe. You are a brother, an African brother, and I cannot hurt you. I have been seeing things happening around you. Come back here tonight and we can settle everything. We will sacrifice a lamb to appease the gods in Africa and spill its blood on the pitch we play most home games, and believe me, you will start

getting 90 minutes of play, and you will score as many goals that can lead you to a big signing.’

You stared at him. You see substance in his words. You would indeed come back later. You kept on saying you were sorry for his injury. He jokingly threatened to get mad if you continued. He limped while leading you out. He walked you to the gate, undid the lock, and waved as you headed toward your car.

In the evening Yusuf drove you back, and Diarra led you to the back of his house where he pointed at a lamb tethered to a stand. He let his weight fall on a bench. You approached the hairy young animal, loosened the rope around its neck and lifted it up. It was heavier than you thought. It yelled, looking at its sides. You headed out of the premises toward your car. Diarra followed. You dropped the lamb in the trunk Yusuf had opened.

You took the seat beside Yusuf, after helping Diarra into the back seat. One of his hands had relied on your shoulders. You wanted a feeling of uprightness, which was hollow in your mind. In your entire life you were made to believe you lived outside the circle of norms. You felt a movement in your belly as the car approached the field. The security officers gave a loud laugh on seeing you lift the lamb out of the trunk. Yusuf would wait. Approaching the gate with Diarra, who had his crutches for support, one of them shouted, ‘Victory is back! Victory is back!’

‘We have to start winning our matches now,’ another said, opening the gate as wide as he could.

On the pitch, Diarra got a sharp knife out of a bag in his hand and approached you. ‘Put it down and hold its legs firmly.’

You let the lamb lie on its side against the carpet grass and divided its legs between your hands. It jerked but you held firm. Diarra let his crutches fall and squatted. The knife touched the lamb’s throat, and blood spilled against the grass. The lamb jerked again. This time your hold shook, to an extent that you considered letting it go. But the jerking soon weakened, and stopped. The surge of blood.

Diarra watched you walk around the field several times with the dead lamb over your shoulder, its blood, pouring over the white jersey, soaking into your body. You released air out of your lungs, narrowly opening your mouth. You could feel the drizzling effect on the sides of your ribs. You came back to the spot the lamb was killed and threw the body to the ground.

‘Is Duncan aware of this?’ you asked, watching Diarra dig a little hole over the penalty spot to bury some blood.

‘Duncan encourages this. He believes in my tradition. As far as it brings the team victory,’ he said, licking blood off the knife in his hand. ‘The gods in Africa would be happy. You will score more than you expect, and I will recover as quickly as no one can predict.’

You looked at the dead lamb lying before you. You looked around the pitch, the stands, and you tried to imagine your celebration after netting the next goal.

During the next match you still sat on the stands with Diarra beside you. You saw Dwain’s hat trick put a smile over the academy. Diarra leaped up in joy, his right hand weighing over your shoulder, his casted leg awkward in slight movements, when the final whistle was blown. But your heart was ugly. The blood only favoured your team.

In Diarra’s house, on the stool he had put in front of you, lay six bottles of beer. You felt as if cobwebs had taken hold of your face. Shit faced. Diarra was sinking into stupor too. He got out a paper bag, opened it and fetched some brown powdery substance.

‘Tobacco?’ you asked.

‘Come on boy, this is weed.’

He had a chunk over a paper, wrapped and lighted it. You smoked in the way he did, dragging in so hard, holding his breath for a while and letting out the smoke through the nose. You choked at first, holding your chest. You got it the second time. He laughed, asking you to sip some beer, and try again.

4.

After the next away game, which you watched from Diarra’s lounge and not even the stands, your team narrowly clung onto victory. Thanks to a Cap J first-half header. Diarra wanted to swim in stupor and celebrate his gods. You weren’t sure if you wanted his drinks. But you drank more than you did the last time. Smoked more weed than you ever did. There was one thing you were sure of. You were going to kick his casted leg. You were going to inflict him with the grief stabbing your heart. You would stamp on his belief. On his goddamn gods.

‘We should be shooting bullets into the sky, Dafe!’

‘For what? For watching? Just watching while I am supposed to be playing?’

‘Don’t be in haste. We don’t hurry the actions of the gods in Mali,’ Diarra replied.

‘Save me from the bullshit! It’s so funny I had to believe you. So funny I look back and see myself playing with the blood of the lamb.’

‘Are you alright, Dafe?’

The question watered your anger. It maddened your anger, shattering the beer effect, hindering your outburst. That was the question Daddy, Mummy, Sonny and Nina asked you all through your childhood – ARE YOU ALRIGHT? Sometimes, you wondered if there was something wrong with your brain, and yes, you had concluded. Something was wrong, but you couldn’t bear that *question*. You couldn’t just bear being asked, ‘Are you alright?’ You got up, not looking at him. You could feel his eyes piercing you, in no anticipation of what you were up to. You kicked the stool away suddenly causing his shoulders to rise. The empty bottles fell, some shattering. The powdery weed on the stool splattered through the air, and on the floor, like dust. Diarra reached for his crutches. You heard his wife’s movements upstairs. ‘Don’t fucking ask me that!’ you screamed, looking around, not sure of what you were searching for. Then your eyes met his. ‘Are you trying to mock me, Diarra? Answer me.’

He watched you.

‘Don’t ever ask me if I am alright!’ You snatched a crutch from him, raised it over your head and let it fall on his cast.

He flinched.

‘You think I do not know what you and the other players say behind my back. You are here pretending to be my pal. Drinking with me, mocking me... You made me join you in killing a damn lamb. I did enjoy it. As a kid, I enjoyed cutting frogs and lizards up. I enjoyed seeing puppies dying underneath car tyres. I enjoyed tearing up cats.’ You raised the crutch up again. This time, it broke against the cast and Diarra gave a shout. Falling to the floor.

You took your eyes off him, and turned around walking toward the dining room and then back toward his curling body. ‘You think I don’t know what you think of me?’ As you asked, you squatted and searched his eyes. ‘...that I am gay. I see the way you look at me. I always notice how mindful you are when shaking my hands or tackling me on the field. And for that reason I am giving you this.’ You stood up and stood on the foot of his injured leg, where the cast was absent, and he grunted. There was a sudden cry from the baby upstairs.

Diarra kicked you with his good leg. You staggered, and he crawled away. He got hold of one of the cushions, gripping it tightly. You heard a yell behind you, and turned around. It was his wife. You could see her head jerking backward, taking cover behind a door. She shut the door and you heard her feet running upstairs.

‘Get out of my house, Dafe!’

You wanted to rush at him. To kick the breath out of him. You wanted to chase the fucking wife. Instead, you sank to the floor, sitting and letting your tears pour. ‘What is wrong with me?’ you lamented, your hands sprawled over your head. ‘What is wrong with me?’

You cried and cried and didn’t realise when Diarra struggled to his feet. You never realised when the woman of the house led in two policemen.

22. Kay's Yard

In this country where her sister was buried, people believed in God so much that they thought it stupid to care about graveyards. In the country she came from, people were losing faith, embracing Charles Darwin's theory, and giving so much care to cemeteries. In this country where her sister had died, they had so much land, so much vast land, that would take and keep taking the dead for many many generations to come, yet they let wild growing grasses and dust eat graves. In the country she came from, land was gold. Bodies had to be buried vertically or cremated so there could be space for others. If her sister had died in England, perhaps her body would have taken the path of cremation. She stood looking over her sister's grave. She had today, brought a bottle of jelly-like fragrance which she sprinkled over the concrete grave. The flowers she had left three days ago were gone. Even the shredding leaves couldn't be spared. She had two kids weed the grasses growing around it. Her sister's grave was like a diamond among the others. The grave on the right side of her sister's seemed infested by termites. The insects had their mansion built over it. One of the boys that had cleared the grasses around her sister's grave said he had heard the ghost lying in the termite-infested grave hiss. Rayleigh looked at the name. Elope, Sandra, 1984 – 2006. The woman had died in her early twenties.

'She hissed because she sees the weeding as waste of time,' the other kid had said.

Rayleigh wondered – what sort of belief hovered over Nigeria? What sort of children would talk about this like a mere tale? If only they could tear her chest and measure the fright taking hold of her body. Now she was here alone, battling with hallucinations. On the left side of her sister's grave was another grave, also being devoured by grasses. The words written over the tomb were: 'RIP Naked Wire'. The words were written using a rock, she could tell. The cross over it had a huge chunk on its left side wedged off.

She could smell something familiar. Incense. Smoke. Marijuana. She heard someone cough and sighted the smokers. There were four teenage boys that could have been of the same age as the boys that had cleared off the grasses around Kay's grave. They were seated over a grave smoking, less concerned of her presence.

Her stare came back to her sister's grave. She remembered the burial. It was just her, her friend, Chioma, and the lawyer that promised to dig up the truth. Everyone who knew her sister seemed to live in England, and her email on that day of the burial got so filled with tributes and recounted memories. She wanted to see the other woman being buried. The woman that died beside her sister. The woman her sister loved. And Chioma had driven her to the village where the roads had been constructed with red sand and burnt bricks. The memories of those many thatched roofs and rusted zinc sheets were still fresh. The difference was clear. Poverty smelt in the village. She saw teenage girls that were almost naked, by the roadsides. They looked hungry and were begging for money. And yet one could smell money. The burial procession was like a festival, with so many people around, wailing over the blue coffin. There was food for everyone in attendance. Balls of pounded yam, and a red soup, which had so many pieces of meat, were served to sympathisers. A sermon by a Roman Catholic priest was in progress when they had arrived. It seemed every man or woman she walked past did the 'sign-of-the-cross', their right fingers, touching their foreheads and then their chests, before their left and right body regions above the breasts. People stared at her with disgust and when she tried to catch their stares, they looked away. Children who smiled desiring to come toward her, were redirected immediately by parents.

'Why do they come here to bury her? Why not in the township graveyard with my sister?' she had asked Chioma.

'People, after meeting death, are buried in their respective places of origin,' Chioma explained. It is a practice in most Nigerian cultures. There's an exception though. A married woman is expected to be buried in her husband's ancestral village when she dies.'

'What about the ones buried in the township graveyard?'

'Some of their ancestors come from the town. However, most of them, who are buried there, are not really from there. Perhaps no one cared or was ready to spend enough money to have their bodies taken to their respective villages.'

Kay wanted it this way. She wanted to be buried in this country.

Rayleigh dropped a bunch of flowers and walked away, avoiding looking at the unkempt graves. Something sharp pricked her through her right shoe. Pain. She bent and checked. There was a little bleeding. She pulled off her right shoe, got the little rusted nail out before cleaning the blood with a handkerchief. She got the shoe back on and wiped her fingers against her jeans.

23. Arson

You fail to understand, that evil afflicts its carriers, too. My sister's blood still screams. Your parents will continue to weep for you and their protection over you will soon melt away, like a web on fire. I may look at you, and do nothing because my hands are weak. In my eyes lie all my strength. What can I do? Nothing but stare. You cannot see me and cannot hear me. When you hear this voice, my agonised ricocheting words, your ears will deafen.

You stand there looking down from the window, plotting. You stand there letting evil float around you, letting evil eat you up. Malik is not aware of your evil eyes looking at him from the top right corner of the brown building. This is your new premises and you have been living here for three months. Malik sprinkles some soapy water on his car's windscreen and scrubs it with a small piece of cloth. Afterward, he inserts a nozzle into his fuel tank, channelling in some petrol.

You know he is stealing the petrol set aside for you to mow the lawns in the evening. He only takes half a litre out of the five litre can. You see him shoving his body into his car and searching. When he rushes into the building, you take your chance, leaving the window and heading to your door, opening it slowly. You hear Malik's steps moving through the store inside the house while you sprint quietly toward his car.

You take the can and head behind the building. Between two trees that often have their shadows over the house in the evenings, you hide the can and head back into the house, back into your room. You listen to Malik's hovering steps, still in the store. After locking the door to your room, you reach for your bed, lie down and pull the white duvet over your body. You close your eyes and listen to Malik open and close the front door downstairs. His pacing back and forth in the compound, his opening and closing the doors of his car, his opening and closing the trunk.

You hear the sound of a car coming into the premises. The staff member on the morning shift has arrived, and you hear Malik's ignition coming to life. Throwing off the duvet and stretching toward the window, you see Malik's car going out of the premises.

You do not know who owns the blue van now in front of the house. It cannot be Vaughan, for he is on leave. It cannot be Singh, because he no longer works for the

service. You sit on your bed, smiling anxiously, cuddling your lonesomeness. Whoever it is, you hear the sound of his feet on the stairs. You stand up and within a minute the room darkens. The day has no promise. A good reason to hate winter. There are signs of rain. You walk toward your door and open it, making a shrill sound. You can hear Vitali's Russian language coming from the staffroom. The other Saturday he spends almost all morning on phone before checking on you. This is another Saturday. No woodwork and painting lessons. It's still morning and it will take some time before afternoon comes, when he will check on you.

You tiptoe downstairs heading outside to get the can between the trees. Back inside the house, you go into the kitchen quietly opening a drawer searching between spoons and forks. What are you looking for? You drop the can on the floor and open the oven, still searching. You turn the oven on, setting it on grill. You reach for the *NZ Herald* lying on top of the freezer. Heat is emanating from the oven and coming hard against your legs. You drop the newspaper on the floor and reach the can. You sprinkle petrol over the walls and over the floor. You go to the lounge and sprinkle the petrol over the big white couch, half a yard away from of the television. Back in the kitchen you pick up the newspaper and open the oven fully. You shove the paper in to feel the temperature of the oven's roof. The paper catches fire and the burning flame stretches to reach your hand. You pull yourself away swiftly, your legs moving over the gathering petrol on the floor. You slip, hitting the back of your head on the floor, your waist brushing against the can that then tips. Leftover spills. The burning paper in your hand falls too. Flames seem to build a life over the floor, rising in a rapturous freedom, over you, over the cooker. It is darkness that takes hold of you, and not the fire. You feel the stings, the smoke, beneath your nose and above your eyelids. You feel the bite of the fire in an intensifying grip on your left leg. You pull yourself up, marching toward the left side of the kitchen where the fire's anger is still negligible.

The alarm screams. A burning chunk of the ceiling falls, and hits the left side of your face. You feel a cloud of bees taking hold of your face as you fall clutching your eyes. A steamy immensity between your arse and pants causes you to roll on the floor a couple of times. The fire holds your throat so strongly. You can still scream. You thrash your head several times against the floor. You feel the fire feeding from your face. You become still like a ruined whip. A cold feeling flush through your body. Suddenly, through the blurriness taking hold of your sight, you see a blue blanket falling upon you from Vitali's hands.

You wake up feeling a covering on an eye. In the blurriness, you can see the milky white ceiling. The white walls. You feel like a robot lying on bed. You feel heavy. Disproportionately heavy. You see your mother on the couch beside you. You can smell the overwrought frailness. She is snoring wearisomely.

The realisation of being stung, being bitten and bruised, surfaces like a rising sun.

24. Why

The cloud was heavy. Noticing the glary eyes of the security men around, tension took hold of her steps. She walked funny, heading into the government building. She didn't feel like a friend to Nigeria. The cabinet minister, perhaps seated, and waiting for her in his office, took three weeks to approve the meeting with her.

He had seen her heading into the reception, standing in front of the window. He would keep her waiting for a while. He walked back to his desk to use the phone. For the next hour he wouldn't be seeing anyone. He had so much paperwork to do and with no paper or file on his desk. He asked for coffee to be made for him, and fidgeted with the remote for a while before the screen on the wall came on. There was no law that required Nigeria's cabinet ministers to protect the country's image. But it just had to occur, even though he saw the senator, who ought to swim in his own stupor, as an enemy.

Seated cross-legged while waiting, her eyes were fixed on the screen on the wall. One of the news headlines was about an emerging terrorist group in Northern Nigeria. There were pictures of churches in a grimy environment. There were interviews with people in tattered clothing. After half an hour, the receptionist led her into the minister's office.

'It is indeed nice to meet you, Miss Johnson,' he said, standing to his feet as the receptionist left. 'You have come to harass a guiltless servant.'

With her eyes fixed on him, she shook the hand he offered. She took the seat he showed her and said, 'I would like to know if you are indeed ready.'

'The ball is in your court.'

She wished she could kick him and spit in his face. Turning on her recorder and placing it beside her, she started. 'I would like to know why my sister's murderer wasn't charged in court.'

'You are wrong. He was charged in court.'

'There has been no record that proves that.'

'The case was complicated. The crime was committed by someone with complex health issues. And so it might not be proper for the crime in question to be called a crime. The entire proceedings never saw the light of the day.'

‘There are a lot of criminals in Nigerian prisons today whose mental conditions have never been assessed. Can’t you just admit that you are protecting an interest?’

‘With the elections a stone throw away, it is in the best interests of the ruling party that the case is kept under the carpet.’

‘I met with the Minister of Information and a police chief who tried to convince me that my sister was murdered by the Niger-Delta militants.’

‘Not every government representative is aware of the details in question. Your country’s government is aware of the whole incident, Miss Johnson. There was a court case... And the judge passed a sentence.’

‘If Dafe Ogheneovo was the son of an ordinary Nigerian, perhaps a bus driver, would he be privileged to have what he’s enjoying today somewhere in New Zealand?’

The minister licked his lower lip, and his eyes fell to his desk.

‘And the parents of the mentally deteriorating kid wouldn’t meet with me.’

‘We have given detailed reports pertaining to the case to the British government, and it is their responsibility to explain the situation to you or any other relative. The president of Nigeria takes full responsibility for the tragedy and has offered an apology.’

‘An apology! Just an apology? Liar! They only believe the bullshit about Kay being murdered by some militants in the Niger-Delta.’

His reply was in a whisper. ‘I have three daughters that are obviously older than you. None of them has ever ever raised a voice against me. Let me give you some advice, Miss. This is Nigeria. Behave differently.’

And that was it. He walked out of his own office. At first she thought he was going to the bathroom. The receptionist, who had directed her in, came in to usher her out. Miss Rayleigh Johnson felt mad. She was mad at the African country. A third world country of lies. She felt mad at her own country for only showing concerns by offering to fly her sister’s body home, and warning British citizens against travelling to Africa.

‘But he didn’t say he was leaving.’

‘He is on his way right now to a meeting,’ the receptionist replied.

She felt tied to the greenish leather cushion. Her scalp itched. She shook her head, stirring her hair to rest over her shoulders. She saw a policeman join the receptionist at the door. She stood up and pressed a button on her recorder before

placing it in her handbag. The receptionist and the policeman stood aside as she passed between.

‘Can I give you a lift,’ the policeman asked. ‘I saw you come in a taxi.’

‘No, thank you,’ she replied.

She entered a passage and walked past two doors, not sure of where she was going.

‘Over here.’ It was the policeman.

She turned around. He was standing, slightly bent to his right side, in front of one of the doors she had passed. He had the door behind him wide open like a servant would do in a Jane Austen classic. She felt her face redden. People walked by, taking notice. ‘Thank you,’ she said, trying hard not to rub her shoulder against his body as she went through as fast as she could.

He mumbled.

She heard him. She looked at him. He was so thin. Bearded. Unkempt. She remembered the set of policemen that had stopped her taxi on the airport road demanding she pay them an entrustment fee she couldn’t understand, only to be told, hours later, by a road safety officer, that she had encountered fake policemen.

She looked at the policeman’s badge. Can’t be false. This was a government building, a minister’s office. There was a stain on the upper left corner of his shirt; his trousers needed ironing; but his shoes were well polished.

He led her into the car park and opened the passenger door for her. It was a 504 Peugeot. She stood still searching his face, and then the car’s interior.

‘Oh sorry,’ he muttered.

She watched him pick up the biscuit packs and banana peels that littered the seat he was offering her, throwing them on the ground not far from where she stood. He gathered the papers crowding the section that would shelter her legs, and dumped them on the back seat. He got a rag from underneath the driver’s seat and thoroughly wiped the seat she would have.

She got in. At first she was mindful of the cleaning he had done. Hoping she didn’t get stained. The car stunk. Grease. And perhaps, the deteriorating banana peels.

He got the car moving carefully onto the road.

‘Tell me about it.’

‘Madam, if I didn’t say I was there, you wouldn’t have accepted this ride?’

‘I think you know the reply to that,’ she said. ‘Tell me then. You were there in court, you say.’

He shook his head. ‘I am wearing this uniform, Madam, but I don’t stand for the corrupt system. If I am corrupt, poverty caused it. Poverty is the reason we policemen extort money from drivers on highways. I tell you the truth - that court case was the most surprising one I have been to in my life. That boy, Dafe! I still remember his face so well.’ He paused as he approached a roundabout, and made a turn.

‘I stay in Shear Hills Hotel, not far fro...’

‘I know Shear Hills,’ he said.

She nodded, oppressively humbled, and smiled faintly.

‘He was fascinated with the buttocks of the policewoman who led him into the courtroom, with both of his parents present. He even asked her what she was like in bed. No one could say anything because he was the son of a senator. He smiled at every question and asked the judge to read his bible and decide for himself if same-sex relationships were okay. As far as I am concerned, Madam, no trial took place. Madam, you mustn’t quote me. I never told you this. I found his sentence interesting. It was like sentencing a criminal to heaven. I do not support gay relationships but what I saw that day kept me thinking for days. How can you send a murderer overseas to live in luxury, for killing two people?’

She swallowed with difficulty. Abuja’s heat had a grip on her now. And she wanted a cold shower. When they got to Shear Hills, and she tried to open the door on her side, he stopped her. He raised his handbrake, got out and came over to her side to open the door. ‘Thank you,’ she muttered, stepping out.

‘Madam, I hope you won’t be mad if I request for something in appreciation. What I have told you might be of little significance, but you see, this police job hardly puts food on my table. I have a Master’s degree, but the condition of this country gave me no choice. I just had to end up a policeman.

She looked into his eyes, opened her handbag and gave him the fare she might have been charged taking a taxi.

And he smiled.

25. Scarred

Dafe, who in the past would be the first to walk into the white walled hall; who would start an argument at the start of the meeting, which would turn into the theme of the day; who would wipe dust off the seats before the start of each meeting – was quiet in presence, his voice beneath the laughter of Jeff and Jimmy, and the hammering voice of Lorraine, the coordinator.

He coughed, screwing up his face, biting his lower lip as if feeling pain. He wiped his good eye, which had turned red, with his scarred right hand.

‘Dafe, are you alright,’ Lorraine asked.

‘Dafe coughed again. Both of his palms found his face and he let his spittle touch them. He raised his stare to meet the Lorraine’s. She was dressed in a red suit. Her hair was dyed black today. His eyes searched her hips briefly, and he wondered how she would twist over a man beneath her in bed. He wore the skin of the man he imagined, and felt a stirring within his thighs, and then a pain. That part of his body hadn’t healed properly. Stirring, in response to his manly needs, and water from the shower, seemed to be the anti-catalyst, the doctor had said, against total healing.

‘I am alright,’ Dafe said. He felt something crawling in his stomach, and found his feet. His stomach had been groaning all morning. He walked away from the circle. Lorraine stared.

‘Dafe, where are you going?’

‘Toilet,’ he replied.

She watched him limp on his bad leg, the one that had healed scars, blackened and thickened with broken flesh. She swallowed the drool accumulating in her mouth, feeling tears well up and fill her eyes. She watched him raise an arm against the wall to support his body before opening the door to the toilet. Both of his hands were ugly, patchily deformed. The once handsome and unpredictable black kid now lived in a damaged body. She hated to liken the present state of his skin to an enormous frog’s body she had seen in a picture a day ago. There were lumpy squeezed ridges of damaged skin over the cheeks and down the chin. A part of this facial scar was as dark as charcoal. The ridges toward the chin were white. There was a developing hard-hitting reluctance in her that wanted to stop calling him

Dafe. He was no more the 'Dafe' she used to know. The upper part of his left arm was also white. With dotted fragments of brown skin. The reason why he limped was because of the hole he sustained in the bone in his left thigh, his care manager had written in his secondary file.

'Jimmy, let's hear from you,' she said, trying hard to get Dafe off her mind.

'I have got nothing to say,' Jimmy replied, nodding his head. He was twenty-three years old, and was from the service branch in Otahuhu.

'Jimmy, how can you say you have nothing to say?' Lorraine asked. 'What happened to the agreement you signed? During the last meeting, we agreed that you would welcome the woman, didn't you?'

'I am not in the service to fuck harlots,' Jimmy replied.

Jeff squealed. He was half-Maori, half-Pakeha, from the same service in Otahuhu.

Lorraine glanced at him before staring back at Jimmy. 'You are with the service because you need help. How many times do we need to remind you, Jimmy? The reason you are with the service is because you need help. You have abused a child in the past, which isn't appropriate, and the service is trying everything possible to help you.'

'But I do not want the woman. I don't like her,' Jimmy replied.

'We can have another one to replace her.'

'No. I am not interested.'

She shook her head. 'How do you deal with your urges when they come?'

'I just deal with it,' he replied.

'How often do you masturbate a day, Jimmy?'

Jimmy shook his head. 'Twice.'

'Can I tell your care manager then to cancel the contract with the women?'

He shook his head.

She scribbled down a few words on the notepad on her lap.

'Over to you, Jeff. You spoke to your care manager about getting the 'Hot Rod' Magazine, last week. I am aware you understand that this magazine is meant for you and no one else?'

'Yes,' Jeff replied. He was plump, broad shouldered and short.

'Now, you will assure me that that will keep you away from the bedrooms of your flatmates.'

There was no chance for him to reassure her as an infuriating smell took hold of the hall.

‘Damn it! Dafe will kill us!’ Jeff screamed, his palms over his nose. Quietness crept in before the sound of the toilet, flushing.

‘Damn it!’ Dafe yelled, still in the men’s. He looked into the dirtied toilet and spat. He waited for water to fill the tank above the toilet before he flushed again. He could still feel the raw movement in his belly. He sat on the toilet again. He felt so full with nothing to pass out other than the condensed smell. He felt something like an insect creeping out of him, into the toilet. Then he stood up and grabbed the toilet roll one more time.

He struggled out to meet an empty hall. The meeting couldn’t have finished. He walked toward the entrance of the hall and sighted Lorraine and the others, outside. Jeff laughed, squatted and held his belly. Jimmy paced to and fro between Lorraine and the hall.

Dafe walked out to meet them. Their eyes settled on him.

‘Dafe, you are sick,’ Lorraine said. ‘You must go back to the house. Your support staff will contact the care manager. What did you eat before coming here?’

‘Rotten egg and bacteria infested bacon. The smell has poisoned all of us,’ Jimmy mumbled, still pacing.

‘I didn’t ask you,’ Lorraine said, with a fixed gaze on Jimmy. She turned to meet Dafe’s gaze. ‘Your support staff will take you back, now.’

Dafe’s eyes caught Ash, his key worker, emerging from the building, which stood at the far end, just by the corner of the entrance into the premises, where all support staff members were expected to wait. Dafe got into the front seat of the van without a word. Ash got in beside him, turned on the ignition and reversed. Lorraine waved. Jeff waved, smiling, and then laughing. Jimmy in his to and fro pace, which had stretched, didn’t wave. His hands had found his pockets, his frown against the ground.

‘What’s the issue with your stomach, man,’ Ash asked, as the van turned onto Gillies Avenue.

‘It was the milk in the fridge.’

‘I have told you over and over to use the powdered milk. Liquid milk isn’t good for everyone. I hope you don’t fart in here until we reach the house.’

Ash gave way to an oncoming cyclist and made a turn. He stopped, checked his blindside before taking the motorway.

Dafe sighed and scratched the hardness on his chin. ‘I should be the one determining whether I am sick or not. Not fucking Lorraine.’

‘Stop swearing or I will stop the van.’

‘You need to go back, Ash. I am not sick.’

‘Don’t make me laugh.’

‘Fuck it. Damn you!’ Dafe screamed, hitting the dashboard, on his side with a fist.

Ash jolted.

‘Take the next exit, and head back to Epsom, or I will get out of this crap of a van.’

Ash nodded his head, and put more weight on the accelerator. ‘Do your worst, Dafe,’ he said.

And it happened in a snap. Dafe opened the car door and went out.

There was a tortuous aerated sound. Ash braked. The opened door had slammed closed. Dafe had indeed leaped out. Ash drove over to the side of the road. Fast running vehicles were braking before Dafe’s unmoving body, Ash noticed through the rear mirror. An accident seemed to occur behind the braking cars, while Ash struggled out of the van, heading toward Dafe. A driver jumped out of a truck, hastily joining Ash, and they carried the bloodied body to the side of the road, over a rocky path.

Ash placed his ears over Dafe’s heart, breathing hard. The heart was beating through the blood stained cardigan. He asked the truck driver to dial 111, as cars that were able to manoeuvre around the vehicles that had stopped, got moving. A circle of people was building around Ash’s panic. Dafe’s face, covered with the glueyness of blood, looked like shit.

‘How the hell did he come out of the van?’ someone shouted.

Ash longed for his tears to become rain - that would clean off the mess. He didn’t want to leave Dafe for a second. His heart got flooded with questions. Inflictions and injuries and anguish. The wounds that had completely healed, six months ago, were reopening. He took his eyes away. But they fell back. This wasn’t a corpse. It was like a spattering exoskeleton. Dafe’s lips were torn, and were so wide apart, his swollen tongue, sprawled out in a surge of blood. Ash got out a handkerchief and placed it over the part of Dafe’s skull that was bleeding.

He avoided looking at Dafe’s ears. But from the first sight already trapped, he feared that one of them barely hung over the bruised face. He gently exposed

Dafe's belly, lifting the blood-stained cardigan upwards above the chest. An awfully bruised lesion.

A slightly built woman emerged out of the growing circle of people with a first aid box, and squatted beside Ash.

26. Chioma

Life started for everyone from a triangle in a woman's body. No man had been able to bear seeds that would inherit life's journey without a triangle. The building Chioma entered appeared rectangular, emerging toward the sky if seen from the outside. But it felt triangular as she looked around within the reception. There were architectural platforms, triangularly designed, on each corner. Not everyone could understand people's attraction to triangles. When two triangles, of two women, side by side, came in conflict to men's desires, questions would always sprout up from the earth.

She walked past the white triangular desk, heading toward the angle, where the elevator's entrance hid. The receptionist didn't look up. Chioma ignored her. She pressed the button on the white wall and the door opened without delay. After emerging out of the elevator on the fourth floor, she found herself between brightened brown walls. She walked to the end of the corridor, and found Room 44 M. She didn't knock. Rayleigh's walls were white. The curtains too. The tiles had whitish flowery drawings. It seemed everything was white except Rayleigh's red dress.

Rayleigh looked up and smiled. 'I thought you had forgotten about our dinner schedule.' She was slouched on the bed, her back a bit curved. Her eyes were fixed on the photo on the desk in the middle of the room.

'How can I forget? This is your most important day in Nigeria,' Chioma replied. She sat on the bed. 'You got a paradise for a hotel room,' she marvelled. '...a good way to end this special day.'

'I miss her. I miss my sister, Kay,' Rayleigh's voice almost broke. 'How was the screening? I know you have seen bits before today, but could you tell anything different?'

'I never noticed the brilliant concepts behind the film until today, Ray. It is an open curtain that really succeeded in exposing the cruelty of leaders to ordinary citizens. You have done what a true sister would do. You have searched for the truth, dug into secrets, and have come out with an exceptional film.'

'You are a Nigerian, Chioma. Rayleigh's voice deepened. Don't tell me you never ever saw same-sex affairs as filth? You don't need to hide it. I once saw it

that way. We humans have to learn all the time. Our weaknesses always torture us to an understanding.’

‘What are you talking about,’ Chioma asked. ‘You can’t just judge me because of what you went through or what your sister went through in this country.’

‘Tell me then. Tell me where you think my sister is at the moment? Hell?’

‘Stop it,’ Chioma said, putting her arms around Rayleigh. She sensed the white body moving further than what her hold had called for.

‘Do you have a man, Chioma?’

‘Rayleigh, some women aren’t meant for men. Perhaps your sister was right to stick to the path she took. I have had brief relationships with wild animals that saw themselves as men.’

Rayleigh gave a short laugh.

‘I have dated married men, confused men, and arrogant men. They thought they could ruin me. I learnt to forgive them even before they jumped in my bed.’

‘I know what you are talking about. I have had some men in my life, too,’ Rayleigh said. ‘Mi... Michael was so different.’

Chioma’s fingers found Rayleigh’s hair. She played with a few strands. Chioma noticed the lines of Rayleigh’s forehead thickening. She sensed the gradual colouring of Rayleigh’s face. She let the strands within her hold fall on the white shoulders.

‘I wanted him but... but he... he failed. He failed to give me an answer.’ Rayleigh went on.

‘Did you ask him to marry you?’

‘I wouldn’t. I had tried countless times to seduce him. That’s a woman’s way, you know. It never worked out.’ She jolted, and felt Chioma slowly and indecisively withdrawing her fingers that had been cuddling her shoulders. She dragged her purse toward her body. She took out a pack of cigarettes, lighted one and inhaled. ‘I asked him to give me a black child. Not through a natural way since he proved thick.’

Chioma gave Rayleigh a questioning stare, raising her brows.

‘He was supposed to give me an answer after the screening of the film. But he just walked out. He never clapped like the others did. He walked out on me, when people came to hug me. He didn’t congratulate me. It seemed I got him pressured. It seemed I was getting him chained.’ She took her phone from her purse, handed it

to Chioma and took a drag of her smoke. ‘Check how many times I tried to reach him and he wouldn’t pick up.’

‘That’s strange. I think he has got issues with women.’

Rayleigh laughed, as tears eyes filled her eyes.

Chioma dragged Rayleigh into her arms and tried to tickle her. ‘How can you cry and laugh at the same time?’

She felt Rayleigh pull away. Chioma watched her leaping to her feet, spilling ashes on the bed. She got to her feet, too. Rayleigh stepped away, toward the wall facing the bathroom. Chioma followed. This became a chase. Became fun. Chioma chased her around the room. Their laughter became idiotic. She got hold of the Rayleigh’s hair, and acted as if pulling it, just before Rayleigh’s fingers found the knob of the room’s door at the corner. She pinned Rayleigh’s body against the wooden surface of the door. She could feel the softness of the white body. She could feel the breezy stir of Rayleigh’s silky dress. Chioma kissed her momentarily.

Rayleigh’s face turned pale. But there was a smile. She raised a brow, and quenched the cigarette using a thumb. She stretched to drop the dead cigarette on the window frame by her side. ‘I think I want to live my sister’s life,’ she said. ‘Love a person rather than making out the cunt or cock between the person’s thighs, and happiness waits for you in a relationship. Kiss me again, Chioma.’

And they kissed, as Chioma pressed herself, gradually and enthusiastically, against Rayleigh.

‘Let us go and have dinner, Chioma,’ Rayleigh said, after taking away her lips in search of breath.

‘This is no time for dinner,’ Chioma replied.

Rayleigh smiled at the hunger she could see in Chioma. She smiled at the hidden blushes. At the oiliness over her facial skin that was becoming sweat. She felt Chioma’s left hand cupping her right breast. And felt another hand raising her dress from beneath and searching her thighs. ‘Chioma, let’s go and have dinner first. There will be time for this.’

And Chioma stopped, after a sigh. She stepped away and said, ‘It is raining.’

Rayleigh strained her ears. And she could hear the little pats against the walls outside. She could hear the sound of the slight pour over leaves outside. ‘We still have to eat, and you will spend the night with me.’

There was a gaze of dissatisfying contentment on Chioma’s face as she stepped away.

‘We have the entire night, Nigerian woman,’ Rayleigh reassured her, walking to the window. It was a dull day. She saw a man and woman running into a mechanic shop, due to the rain. They were already too wet, perhaps laughing in resentment. She thought of her sister and smiled. She loved the way Chioma’s hands had moved over her white body.

And both women headed downstairs using the staircase, laughing at the top of their voices. The white woman led the way with an umbrella fidgeting in her right hand, her red dress wafting as she was almost running. They passed the receptionist. This time, the slim woman behind the triangular desk looked up. None of the laughing women acknowledged her. Rayleigh opened the door, heading into the rain, dragging Chioma after her. They seemed to let the rain hit their bodies for a while. The umbrella in the white fingers was launched and their bodies came together. Their hands found each other as they headed away from the hotel building, away from the fluorescents, into the darkness.

27. Sydney

The plane was deafening. He could hear loud voices, distressed complaints, of people gripped oddly by impatience. His tired eyes searched around. An Indian girl was smiling vehemently at a Nigerian man in his forties, who was about to take the seat beside her. A large Chinese woman struggled in haste, approaching Michael through one of the plane's narrow passages. She slumped on the seat beside him. Another woman at the front, close to the entrance, before the business class section, nearly dropped her toddler. The baby whined.

The screen on the back of the seat, in front of him, came on. There was an announcement. In less than fifteen minutes the plane would be taking off. When the plane took off, not to the best of piloting skill, Lagos seemed to cough in such a strenuous sort of manner that he felt the city's spittle hit him on the face. The plane wafted with ease, through the clouds. He looked over Lagos. He tried to look over Nigeria. It was truly in a hat shape. Some elevations were coloured with brown dried grasses. Others were coloured with green vegetation that had become platforms for holding some deteriorating sticky clouds. There were diverse forms of the Atlantic Ocean's colours on the edges of some mountains. The plane slipped over a rolling ball of cloud. He lifted his eyes away from the window to the woman seated beside him. She had touched him for support. 'Why can't the pilot stop the plane from shaking,' she complained, not to him exactly. His eyes went back to the window.

When the air-hostess who was serving breakfast reached them he opened his mouth halfway to speak but couldn't. He waved his hand above his head. The woman beside him requested juice, coffee, a sandwich and a carrot cake. The air-hostess served the woman all she wanted and was about to move ahead but was stopped by the woman's stare of dissatisfaction. The woman wanted to know if the sandwich in front of her was for vegetarians. When the hostess shook her head smiling, the woman smiled back.

'You are sure you want nothing, sir,' the hostess asked him, narrowing her eyes.

'Nothing,' he said, beneath his breath.

She had a necklace that was worth a second look. She reminded him of Tuesday. The befuddled Tuesday that had an irrational night. He had partly spent the night on

Rayleigh's bed. The hostess, middle-eastern, with light reddish smudges as dimples on both cheeks, had wide hips, just like Rayleigh.

'It's so funny that all we do is just lie on the same bed, stare at each other with lustful eyes but do nothing other than talk,' Rayleigh said. Her bra only covered a breast, to some extent. She had her pink night-gown almost off, pulled down, resting over her hips. Her head was on his chest.

He ardently played with her hair using his fingers. 'I can't... You know I can't. I am not a eunuch. I have feelings. But I cannot place you in the circle of women I have had in the past.'

'Who cares? What is the difference between a woman and a slut?'

'Stop it, Rayleigh.'

She let her stare emerge onto the ceiling. The back of her head weighed harder against the middle of his chest. She lit her cigarette.

He trembled.

'Don't worry... I won't spill ashes on you.'

He sighed. 'Tense about tomorrow?'

'I don't know. Seems my sister would be re-dying tomorrow. I do not know if you understand. I have been here in Nigeria putting my all into the documentary, investigating, travelling, and filming. The film revealed more than I expected. There are still some unanswered questions, Michael.'

'You are the reason I am still here in Nigeria. My support is worth it, isn't it?' he said. 'My body will only implant confusion into your womb.'

Halfway through the cigarette, she cut off the burning. Turned over, adjusting her body over his impassiveness.

'I am not sure of your desires. Sometimes I think you want me so passionately and sometimes...' she stopped.

Of course he had desires for her. Tall, persisting desires. The smell of tobacco from her breath was the only thing putting him off at the moment. 'Don't start this again,' he said.

She placed her lips on his and sucked for a while. She slid off his body, settling to his side. He had tried hard not to rebuff her.

'Do you know that no fucking racist would ever admit being a racist?' she asked.

'Why do you bring that up?'

'Because I think I am one. Even if my desire calls for you all night, I remain the beast that I am, having a thing against blacks, as my sister had once spoken of me.'

No one knew me as well as Kay did. The first day she accused me of having this thing in me, I felt stoned. It was on the day she introduced me to her black girlfriend, Ruky.'

'Are you trying to say something?' Michael asked.

She laughed. Her eyes settled on him. 'Do you fucking think I am a racist?'

'I never saw that in you.'

'Will you help me mother a black baby?'

He adjusted himself quietly to a seated position. His eyes searched her body. 'I don't understand,' he said.

'Michael, I want to prove Kay wrong.'

He laughed. And lay back on the bed. He closed his eyes, and said, 'But there are so many black dudes here in Nigeria. So many attractive men.'

'It's you I want, Michael.'

'But the baby wouldn't be black enough.'

'I don't care.'

'Are you asking for this so I could make love to you?'

Her eyes fluttered as if sprayed with water. He noticed the hunger in her body vanishing as she sighed. 'Never mind,' she said.

The question seemed to have been sharpened by his lips and driven into her with a quiet fierce force. Seated on the plane right now, heading to Sydney, the stare she had given him in response was still very much clear.

He had left for his apartment, closing the door to her hotel room. He feared she might never open it for him again. He got to his apartment. Gathered the chaotic piles of clothes and magazines on his bed, so he could get hold of some sleep before dawn, when he would head to the airport to pick up some activists coming into Lagos to see the screening of her film. His cell phone rang. The shadow of the wardrobe in the bedroom fell over him and faded. A car engine roared from outside, and died away, its headlamps, projecting rays into the room briefly through the window.

What a nice feeling to have left me in, Michael,' she said.

'Ray...'

The night is so good. You made it so pleasant. You made me want to feel like eighteen again, Michael.'

'Rayleigh, please forgive me.'

‘You have made me realise something about myself. Never mind anyway. I am no longer interested in your fucking cock.’

‘I know,’ he said.

‘But I still need your cells. I mean sperm cells. I will talk to a doctor on Lagos Island about an artificial insemination.’

‘Rayleigh, you should be thinking of the screening.’

‘I didn’t come all the way here to screen or make a film. I came to find out the truth, and re-establish a connection with my sister,’ she was almost screaming. ‘Is that okay with you?’

He would give her an answer. But not until after the screening, he had replied, and she hung up. He stared at his phone, wondering what her face was like, wondering whether she was still in the pink nightie that barely covered her body, wondering if she was still in the doleful lying posture.

The plane arrived Doha after seven hours. After being part of a long queue that saw him book a seat for the next flight to Singapore, he found a seat in one of the airport’s lounges, among some Nigerian sportswomen, all in green and white outfits.

One of them wanted to know if he was a Nigerian.

‘Yes. I got on the six o’clock flight from Lagos, this morning.’

The women exchanged stares. The oldest among them could perhaps be thirty-two. She was full breasted and had her hair completely shaved, revealing a mildly dark scalp.

Her heavily black-pencilled eyes weighed him a bit. ‘Really?’

‘I was born in Australia. Spent a huge chunk of my life in Sydney, though got my skin colour from Nigerian parents.’

‘Your pronunciation of Lah-gos, gave you away. It’s Lagos... Leygos,’ a light complexioned woman among them, stressed.

He joined them in laughing about it. His laughter faded into a smile. He got to know they were footballers, heading for a tournament in Hong Kong. He told them of an encounter with a Nigerian woman at the Nigerian High Commission in Canberra. The skinny Yariba woman spat on the embassy’s sparkling floor after realising he was applying for a Nigerian visa.’

‘They made her clean the floor. And she kept cursing in Yariba language.’

Again, the women laughed. It wasn’t Yariba, but Yoruba.

When it was time for him to leave, they made him promise them that he would watch them play Canada in two weeks. He waved at them, heading through Qatar's customs. He boarded a bus that took a number of people to the arena, where they would board the plane. This time, he was seated next to an Indian man who was probably in his late sixties. There was nothing much to say. The plane carried more people than the other had. The food that would be served smelled good.

He nearly did not notice the take-off this time. There should have been an ovation like there was when his plane touched down in Warri, from Lagos, during one of his trips alongside Rayleigh. Funny Nigerians. Doha seemed to be a country of light. It was night, and all he saw below from the height now attained, was a city lightened with different colours.

There was a prolonged applause during the last moments he had spent with her. Applause by the same fingers that spoke ill of the murdered lesbian couple in the newspapers; by the same fingers that displayed gestures of hate against the lesbian couple killed over nothing, and had blamed nobody in their blabbering. They all knew the killer was the son of influential parents that governed their country. There, they all stood giving a tremendous ovation, as tears of loss and of reconciliation came from her eyes. She was beside him all through the screening. She had become the crowned queen of the cinema. A minister had flown in from Abuja to see it; few senators were present. The ovation meant a lot to Rayleigh. He couldn't stay there and just watch lest he gripped someone by the throat; lest he gripped her by the throat. Nigeria had puked over his face. On her face. He went out through that gigantic door as people approached to hug her. The film's curtain was just folding up. Darkness still had a firm grip on the cinema. Now in a plane, thinking about it again, with the gag smell re-emerging. Spunk smell. His answer had been 'yes'. He was going to tell her he was ready to wank and spill spunk in a hospital dish for her sake, after all wanking was all he knew how to do.

But he wouldn't stay back and couldn't smile. An ovation of mockery. He had to run and he was indeed running.

It was an impassive home coming for Michael Merije. They all moved to join the line. Sydney had Snit, a black police dog, sniffing every passenger's pants and shoes, under the control of a customs officer. The customs officer controlling the

dog was a dark skinned Indian man with bulgy eyes. There was also a Hispanic woman in the customs uniform, at the forefront. The shadows of the passengers seemed to be more united at the far front, ahead of the female customs officer. There was a sudden reaction after Snit smelled Michael Merije's shoes. It whined. It jumped. At first, Snit had smelled his shoes and passed. But it came back. It had a change of heart about Michael. A change of heart, in a fucking dog. It shook a little strength onto its controller's fists. The woman in the customs uniform approached the file, asking him to leave the line and follow her in a different direction.

‘What have you got on you,’ she asked, going through his passport.

‘Just myself and my goddamn luggage filled with books and clothes.’

‘Why did the dog react that way?’ she asked.

‘He smiled, nodded his head, and said, ‘You guys did well by not picking me yourselves this time. I think your dogs need to be enlightened, too.’

The woman smiled, gave him his passport after copying some details. He was directed to move ahead, to the luggage claims' section. After getting his luggage, he was led into an office, where a man asked him if he smoked marijuana.

He was the only one, of all the passengers that travelled on Airbus A330-200, whose clothes and books were taken out of his luggage; whose pants' pockets were turned out; whose books' pages were skimmed through; whose privacy on the pages of his diary was stabbed with venomous eyes that appeared welcoming; whose luggage even in its state of being stripped, had to be intensely scanned.

‘You can go now. You have to understand we do this for security.’

‘Do your job well and stop embarrassing black people,’ he replied, to the customs officer that had done the search. ‘Aborigines own Australia, officer.’

The blond haired Caucasian officer avoided his eyes, helped him arranged his books and clothes back into the bag before zipping it. Then he murmured, ‘You aren't Aboriginal, are you? Have a good day.’

He dragged his luggage toward one of the lounges, nodding his head. He stopped and looked at himself. Looked around. People walking past. This was home. He looked at his watch. Nodded his head. And found his way to the airport's train station.

In the train, while the rain fell, familiar voices echoed on the train's roof, over his head, against his ears, squeezing his eardrums. They were like Aboriginal drumming underneath chants. He imagined himself an African arriving in Sydney for the first time. How would the rain splattering on the train sound to his ears. Familiar. Yes, very familiar. How would the train's movement seem to him? Familiar. Of course familiar.

This is Mascot.

(After two minutes) Doors closing.

The next destination is Green Square...

These were words he knew well. But pretending to listen to them for the first time, only gave him a disrupted feeling of homelessness. At Waitara Station, before Hornsby, his boyhood memories sprang over him like a misplaced cloud of flippancy. He tried to imagine what Kyle looked like this day, under that thatch of blond hair.

It was only nine years ago, seated in the dining area, in front of his parents, beside Kyle. Michael, who had been impelled to that decisive action, stared at his father, who was staring at Kyle. Michael stared at his mother who was staring at her hands. The blinds of the curtains couldn't stop the sun's rays from entering the house and distorting the walls with flaky designs.

His father tried, fruitlessly, to convince Kyle on what a cock was meant for. 'This ugly meaty part of a man's body with an ugly head is used to satisfy a woman; used to conceive children; and used by man in acquiring a sense of responsibility.' Michael would never forget that day. The next day in school, Kyle returned the birthday present he had sent a week before. Kyle would never lay his eyes on him again. Each day after school, Michael would bite his lips. He tried to remember Kyle's last words to him over the phone. YOU CAN'T CHANGE ME. YOUR FATHER CANNOT CHANGE ME. THIS IS WHO I AM. I DO NOT WANT TO GET HURT.

Nothing had changed on the street where he had once lived, where his parents had made hell for a while. The same rustling sound from the rail track situated at the back of the house. The same noises of children from the school situated five blocks away; the same brown wooden fence and trimmed carpet grass. He stared at the silver door made of wood, with transparent a glass frame in its upper section. It

was the same emerald green lace, hanging behind the door, shielding a view. He knocked. Knocked again, before banging. He checked his watch. Both Dad and Mum could still be at the university. Damn teachers. He would go across the road and walk down through the footpath that led to the liquor shop that an elderly Pakistani man ran.

He got a bottle of whiskey and had found a spot in front of the door to his parent's house to sit. On every sip he took, he tried to imagine what they had thought of him after they found out he had left for Nigeria. Had they tried to even reach him? Could his mother still be suffering from the back pain she lamented each time he was around, so he could massage it using the flatness of his palms?

It was two years ago since he got conked out of a relationship that left him prematurely tied to a bed in Central Sydney. It was two years ago his parents rescued him from that awkward moment. Okafor had come into his life and vanished like the moon did at dawn. He looked at his drink. He was half way. He was fast, in as much as he drank with an obscure reluctance. His mind had turned hollow. And he left the drink on his left side on the concrete floor, where he laid his back, with his feet, flat on a step. His head rested against his palms, his face, fixed on the roof over the balcony.

In his dream, he met an ex-lover. Not Okafor. It was Paul who had lost a fight against cancer and had passed away. They were both seated on the platform with their feet in the water. There was a view of the Harbour Bridge to their right, where the breeze came in natural thinness. And the opera house, in its white ghostly facade, to the left.

‘Hey brother, aren’t you supposed to be dead?’

Paul stared at him, grimly. His eyes had become a little darker. His face, like a glow of coal, with no glint of a smile at first. Michael watched Paul lift his right hand. Michael allowed the friendly punch hit his belly. The punch tickled. He laughed. Paul laughed too.

The man stared at his son lying in front of the door, beside an almost empty bottle of whiskey. His mind had turned blank, and his wife, who was beside him, had her voice high against the walls of their house. Still, Michael didn’t move. The

man watched his wife approach their son, tapping and then shaking his body. The man watched his son's eyes flip open.

'Michael! Michael!' the woman shouted, nodding her head.

The man sighed, and said, 'He is alive.' He walked past both of them, barely catching the motherly murmur. He inserted his key into the door and pushed it open. He dropped the books in his hands on the table in the centre of the lounge, and sank onto one of the silver coloured sofas, placing a hand on his chin, watching his wife lead Michael into the house. She led him to the dining area. Michael sat, and she also sat. He stood up and hissed, and joined them.

'Michael, what are you doing to yourself,' he asked.

'I wanted to travel and that was it. I am back and will move out as soon as I find a place nearby,' Michael replied.

'Do you know what you put us through?' the mother asked, 'It took the police two weeks to tell us you had left Sydney. I was so distressed that I had to go on leave from work, Michael.'

'What did you go to do in Nigeria, Michael?' the man asked. 'Who do you know there? Your mother kept calling her cousins she last spoke to seven years ago to look out for you. It was so funny. With about a hundred and sixty million people in Nigeria, I wondered how the search was going to end up. A cunning cousin of hers even demanded some money to aid in the search. What did you go to do in Nigeria?'

'Dad, I am thirty-three. There's nothing wrong if I wanted to travel around.'

'You have a country here. A very good country with a promising future for you as a citizen, and you chase a country of our past. Do you think if Nigeria was better than Australia, your mother and I would be here?'

'Are you still into that thing? That gay nonsense, Michael,' the mother asked.

And Michael looked over the table, licking his lips and opening his mouth to speak.

'We will discuss that later,' the man said, altering whatever Michael had in response. He looked at his wife, and then turned to Michael. 'Go and take a shower now, and your mother will make something for you to eat.'

He watched Michael walk into the passage that led to his room. He was leaner. He watched his wife follow, with a distasteful expression. The man got away from the dining area, approaching the smaller table in the middle of the lounge. He lifted one of the books he had brought home. He opened the first page, and heard his son

scream. His eyes found the passage that led to Michael's room. Michael came out with rage, heading toward the dining.

'What's the problem,' the man asked.

'The problem is about you, and your fucking wife,' Michael said, looking straight into the man's eyes.

The man's gaze met his wife emerging out into the lounge with resentful look on her face. His gaze went back to Michael, who kicked one of the dining chairs. The chair went against the wall. He watched Michael, walking out, in the same way he had rushed out of the room. The man, through the open door, saw Michael kick the almost empty whiskey bottle on the concrete floor. It shattered. The luggage, which was still standing there, wasn't spared of Michael's kick.

'Michael,' the man shouted. 'Who do you think you are? Where do you think you are going?'

'To hell!' Michael shouted in reply, kicking against the wooden fence. His blue long-sleeved shirt was unbuttoned, displaying his black singlet.

And he went back, the same way he came, before deciding to go and get the whiskey, passing by the public library. After climbing up the stairs that brought him back to the Hornsby train station, he jumped over an automatic ticket gate, almost tipping over. No one stopped him. His gaze met the stares of some high school girls. He caught a stare of an elderly man, seated on a wooden bench. There were people seated on similar benches, upfront, waiting for the next train to Central. He wouldn't wait. A train had already left just before he came down the stairs. And suddenly he seemed to have been the first to notice an approaching train. He jumped onto the rail that was five feet below the spot passengers waited. Then he began running toward the sound of the approaching train. The high school girls screamed, almost uniformly. He ran in patience and baffling determination. The rolling belly that would go over Normanhurst, Thornleigh, Pennant Hill, right up to Chestwood, would roll over his own belly for he was tired of home. If he was indeed home in Australia, he needed a home in hell. He was puzzled like a kid bullied at school, running home only to discover that he could have been happier pouring tears on his desk and wetting his books. He increased his pace. More passengers were screaming. The sound of the train heightened, like an alarm that had just been triggered. Only the train would stop him. Even the thoughts about the non-existence of hell wouldn't. His eyes caught a full view of the unstoppable train. He couldn't stop the wall. It was his fear that first went against it, and he slumped

down in gloom. The train's belly didn't roll over him but pierced blood out of him. He wouldn't see his limbs splitting out in different directions. He wouldn't see his brain thawing out as gag beside the rail.

28. The Tip and End

The steam climbed up the walls toward the ceiling, filling every space above and below the bath. She searched through its blurriness. Life was a tormenting journey. A cruel place. The steam's smell was of the slight frizzle of a darkening paper over a flame. If she could see the steam, it was in form of a devil's wings, with a faint dagger-like skeletal frame. If the steam could scream it would sound like a silent wind. She let some cold water rush against her black thighs slouched in the bath. There was a projected platform from the wall over the sink on which Kay's gel, scissors, lipsticks, creams, nail files and combs lay. Ruky stood on the bath's floor, stretched and got hold of the black edged scissors lying over the platform. She sat back in the half filled bath of foamless water. She rubbed one of the scissors' blades against her left wrist, in search of a vein. The palm was before her eyes. She dipped the wrist into the warm water and slit. It was a flimsy cut. She placed the scissors over the edge of the bath and covered the cut with her right palm. A mild bleeding. She wanted to laugh at her clumsiness, but let out a moan.

She heard Kay's movements in their bedroom. She heard the bathroom door open. Then she heard Kay yell. Her voice was the same. Yesterday's voice. The same voice of malice and ruse.

'Gosh, what are you doing to yourself?'

She caught Kay's figure in the bluish pyjamas, leaping through the blurriness, into the bath. Water splashed upward against her frame. She was surprised at the way Kay gripped her bleeding wrist, seizing the scissors with her free hand from the edge of the bath and flinging it over the floor. She saw tears come over Kay's reddening face. She felt the hold around her wrist tighten, and then the hug.

'Don't be so stupid. Don't be so stupid. I cannot believe this. What do you want to do to yourself?' Kay went on.

'Why do I have to live when love appears to me like lies?' Ruky asked.

'You are being so stupid. So annoying.' Kay helped her out of the bath, water drizzling down both of their bodies against the floor. 'Is it because of yesterday? Come on, Ruky!' Kay led her to their bedroom, and made her sit in front of their love shaped mirror. Kay pulled off her wet pyjamas pants, and she remained in her pink underpants and pyjama top.

Kay pulled the brown leather stool close to Ruky, sat and reached for a drawer in front of her, getting out a small white box. She got out wool, cleaned the water and the blood off Ruky's wrist. She took out another chunk of wool and placed it over the torn skin. Pressing hard with a hand for a while. She found a bottle and opened it. There was a tickling smell. She made a drop fall over the wool, over the cut. She watched Ruky twitch, the breasts shaking slightly.

'Why do you do this, Kay? You made me think I made a mistake. You made me think I have become so ugly that you now hate me.'

'How can I, Ruky?'

'Why hide it from me?'

Kay nodded her head sideways. 'What is the essence of telling you something that isn't worth talking about? It would only hurt you.'

'Tell me, Kay. Have you started seeing someone?'

Kay, again, pressed the wool covering the cut.

'Tell me, Kay. Who is he?'

Kay left the wool for Ruky to manage and stood up, rubbing a palm against one of her white thighs. She touched her waist and looked at the stool she had sat on for a while. It was wet. 'I am seeing nobody.' Her eyes were on their images in the mirror. Her hands came on Ruky's shoulders. The wetness over Ruky's limbs and breasts was drying out. Her breasts were not as supple as they used to be, in their small roundish forms. Ruky's hair was still very wet. Her eyes too. Beautiful dark pupils - always embedded in a sort of joie de vivre. 'Remember when we first met and we had this brawl about Christianity, Ruky?'

Ruky nodded.

'Remember those days you forced me to go to church with you?' Kay left Ruky's shoulders and sighed. 'I thought you were suffering then. I pitied you in my heart. Now, living in your world where everyone lives by the bible and you have drowned off completely, I got to discover a place for religion in me.'

'Did you get involved with a man in that church?'

Kay nodded her head, sideways, frustrated over Ruky's gaze.

'No, Ruky.' Kay said, her eyes away from the mirror now. 'I went there because I wanted to look at things the way you did before we met.'

'And who did you meet in church? You must have met someone. A man.'

'Stop that, Ruky.'

'I am not a kid, Kay.'

‘The pastor approached me.’ Kay’s eyes fell back on the mirror. ‘He said he wanted to talk to me.’

Ruky increased the pressure of her right thumb against her cut. A frown came over her face. She took her eyes away from the mirror. All along she had watched Kay search her body as they spoke. She had seen anxiety in those eyes. Confusion. Neglect.

‘I met with him after a church service, weeks ago. He told me how pleased he was to have me in his church. He said he would like me to make the church an every Sunday routine.’

Ruky’s thoughts went to those Sunday mornings when she would wake up to meet Kay’s absence on the bed; the sound of the shower pouring over Kay, in readiness for church.’

‘As you know, sometimes I would go and sometimes I wouldn’t. I wanted to make friends, Ruky. And I did meet some really nice people. I really loved the new circle of friends I was making until I got the note.’

‘What note?’

‘A note from the pastor.’

‘And you never told me?’

‘I didn’t want you to flare up, Ruky.’

‘What was in it? Where is it?’

‘I threw it in the fire where we pile and burn the rubbish.’ Kay watched Ruky’s eyes widened. She saw her hips twist on the chair.

‘How could you?’

‘It’s not what you think, Ruky,’ she said, as if pleading. ‘That was the reason I stopped going to the church, Ruky, for our sake. The note spoke of nothing though. He wanted to find out why I missed out on some Sundays even after he had to speak to me. I asked myself if he knew every member of his congregation and sent them such notes when they failed to turn up. I asked myself if he wrote such notes to men’s wives who wouldn’t turn up in church on some Sundays. I weighed my answers.’

‘And you stopped going to the church...’

‘Yes.’

‘You met him last night and wouldn’t say?’

‘We met at Paddy’s.’ She hated the sound of Ruky’s voice when it sounded like this. ‘I had to, so I could tell him off. His response was like a threat. He threatened me with hell, Ruky.’

‘And you became born-again?’

‘Don’t mock me, Ruky. I told him I would confront God myself, one day, if he truly lives and cares.’

Kay was lying curled on her side of the bed. She had been turning restlessly, repeatedly flipping her eyelids. It wasn’t the sound of Ruky’s snore keeping her awake. It was the reason behind it that got her worried. Ruky snored when under a nozzle of stress. Ruky rarely relied on cigarettes or beer as she, Kay, did in grave times. She felt guilty. She felt dirty she couldn’t tell Ruky everything. She had now gotten rid of the scissors, the nail files, and even the pins for her ribbon, in their bathroom. She got all the knives in the kitchen away from the cutlery and locked them up in a cabinet.

She had walked into Paddy’s Restaurant the previous night, and nearly lost her footing. She hadn’t worn her high-heels for months. This got people’s stare on her. He was there seated at the far end, in his oversized grey suit and a tie of many colours.

‘I am sorry, I...’

‘It’s okay. Men are used to waiting.’

The reply stirred something in her which she couldn’t place. She couldn’t stare at him. It was like she was staring at her unbelief in God.

He gave her the menu, and she had what she was sure Ruky would go for. Fried rice, plantains and chicken.

The pastor wanted the same. ‘I am a servant to the world, and eat whatever the people I live for choose,’ he said.

His fork went hard against the plate, producing an erratic sound. She kept her fork quiet, tolerably mindful of his mannerism.

‘You need to establish a relationship with Jesus,’ he said, wiping his mouth with a serviette and then sipping his glass of water.

‘Who said I don’t have one.’

‘It’s obvious.’

‘How is it?’ she asked, giving him a look that seemed distant, but with scrutiny.

‘Who is Jesus to you?’

‘A man who lived centuries ago,’ she said, watching his brows rise. ‘A prophet, a good man,’ she replied.

‘Is that all?’

‘What else do you want to hear, pastor?’

‘Jesus is God, Miss.’

‘No, he’s not.’ The portion of trodden rice in her mouth almost went the wrong way. She took a serviette and covered her lips. ‘I admit I have not been a church goer in life. I do have a Christian background though, and from my little knowledge, I hear he is the son of God.’

She met his frozen stare.

‘Miss, you have to believe he’s God so that hell does not devour your soul when you depart from the world.’

‘So, I am going to go to hell, pastor?’ she asked. ‘I am an atheist, to be frank. I only come to the church to meet good people and listen to good and inspiring messages, which I acknowledge as vital, especially to people struggling to make a living. Can we talk of something else, if you don’t mind?’

‘I was hoping it would come to this. Separating God from our lifestyles has been the cause of the world’s acceptance of fornication, abortion, marijuana and homosexuality.’

She sighed, forcing away her glance on him.

‘I am sorry, Miss, but it is inappropriate to be in a same-sex affair... You see, people talk.’

‘I am sorry I need to go. You have no right to discuss my personal life,’ she said, stirring her legs underneath the table.’

His hands found hers over the table. It had been a while since a man touched her that way. She searched around, not mindful of other stares. She only hoped none of them knew Ruky.

‘Only a man who loves you would tell you this,’ he said.

For moment, she thought he was charming. He widened his eyes. Her eyes fell on his hand, still over hers. ‘Sorry,’ she said, withdrawing her hands and fetching the strap of her handbag. ‘Thanks for the lunch.’ It was a long walk toward the door. She felt his stare like a dart on her back. She glanced to her side to catch a woman stealing a look at her steps and whispering into a man’s ear.

The noise seemed to chase her out of a dream. There were blurry tangled words. Loud and sinking austerely like the sound of a fizzy boiling stew. Ruky woke. The noise was real, pricking her eardrums. Kay was asleep, breathing effortlessly. The distance between them was colossal, unlike the usual, when she would fall asleep with her head over Kay's chest. Kay's face was against the ceiling. The noise was getting clearer. Ruky's naked body underneath their sheet, stretched, her hand reaching for Kay's body.

Kay lifted up her neck. Her elbow weighed hard against the bed. She used her other hand to send the hair falling over her face backward. 'What's that noise?'

'That's the reason I woke you,' Ruky whispered, her voice, fractured.

Kay got off the bed, her pyjama top, a little rumped at the edges. She turned on the lights and walked toward the window. She pushed the plain brown curtain aside and held her breath. The noise rushed against her face. She felt Ruky come behind her.

'Shit!' Ruky was alarmed.

Kay turned around, her palms over her mouth. Ruky had covered herself with the bedspread. Arms clutched to her sides, her injured wrist appearing awkward, tightening its hold over the sheet.

Kay turned around again, looking into the night. The security lights over the gates had the shadows of the horde inside the house premises. There were members of the church up the road. They were chanting meaningless words, and some were matching in circles. There were two women, their feet fixed to the ground, facing the entrance and singing. Kay caught the figure of the pastor. His mouth was moving. He wasn't as calm as he was while seated at Paddy's two days ago. He was as mad as he could be when preaching on Sundays. There was a smallish man in a pair of shorts and a sleeveless shirt in whom Kay strained her ears to pick the audible words emanating from his lips. - 'I bind the spirits of dogs in this house, in the name of Jesus!' 'I break down every trick of Satan and his kingdom.'

She looked behind, wishing the words didn't reach Ruky. 'I will go and talk to them,' she said.

Ruky tilted her head, uttering nothing but silence. Kay almost brushed Ruky's shoulders, walking past her. After striding across the lounge she opened the door,

leaving it ajar, running toward the gate and shouting, 'Please leave us alone or I will call the police.'

They were deaf to her words, chanting louder against her face. The pastor wouldn't even stare at her.

'You are frightening the entire neighbourhood.'

One of the men came forward, and gripped the gate, his shadow falling over her. 'I command the spirit of repentance to fall over you, in the name of Jesus.'

She jolted, and stepped backward. She ran back to the house in the same quick steps as she had approached them. She grabbed the phone in the lounge.

Ruky came out of their room in her green polo shirt and a pair of jeans folded up to her knees.

'You couldn't do it,' Ruky said, widening her eyes and smiling. 'I am going to do it. They are not the only radicals in the world.'

'How are you going to do it?'

'It doesn't matter,' she replied, her back against the door.

Kay let the phone fall and followed her out of the door into the compound in front of the unruliness. Ruky headed toward the space she parked her Mercedes, picked up the nozzle of a long flexible pipeline she used to wash her car in the mornings. She turned on the tap before running against the horde.

They scattered in different directions. Ruky's aim met the pastor, and the specs on his face came off in the darkness. The chants ceased. One of the men ran back to drag the pastor away. Ruky turned around, looking at Kay.

**EXEGESIS – COMMUNAL
CONSCIOUSNESS: *THREAD OF LIES* AS
COMPOSITE NOVEL AND LITERARY
DEPICTION OF HOMOPHOBIA**

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Synopsis of Creative Project (*Thread of Lies*)

Thread of Lies is a *composite novel* that deals with homophobia in diverse societies. It is mostly set in Nigeria, Australia, New Zealand, and England.

The work has five recurring protagonists, functioning together as a collective protagonist. Morris and Dunn (1995) define the collective protagonist as "either a group that functions as a central character", or "an implied central character who functions as a metaphor (an aggregate figure who [...] may be [...] archetypal)" (p. 59). It must be noted that there are other vital characters besides the five protagonists: the structure of a composite novel, which will be discussed in chapter two, does not support the classification of characters as 'minor' (Gorman, 1998). The five protagonists introduced below, however, drive and shape the story in central ways and impact the roles the rest of the characters in *Thread of Lies* play.

Protagonists

Rayleigh Johnson is a British journalist who goes to Nigeria after receiving the tragic news of her sister's death. The cause of death is vague. Rayleigh embarks on a mission of unveiling the truth.

Kay Johnson is Rayleigh's sister, a lesbian who decides to settle in Nigeria with her partner, Ruky, despite the country's negative stance on same-sex relationships.

Rukevwe George (Ruky) is Kay's partner. She has a Christian upbringing, but leaves the faith and becomes an atheist after settling into the affair with Kay. Prior to leaving the faith, she had struggled with her Christian devotion.

Michael Merije is a black Australian man' born in Sydney to Nigerian parents. He is a homosexual who has had several failed relationships in the past. This often weighs him down emotionally. His parent's rejection disturbs him, and speaks to the larger questions of (in)tolerance and acceptance raised in the fiction.

Dafe Ogheneovo is an intellectually disabled man in his early twenties, whose parents are politicians active in Nigeria's government. He murders the lesbian couple, Kay and Ruky, after returning to Nigeria from England, where he was unsuccessful in establishing a football career.

Plot and Background

The deaths of the lesbian couple, Kay and Ruky, serve as the background and the catalyst for the plot of the composite novel. Rayleigh carries out an investigation, intending to make a documentary about the deaths. She realises there are two sides to the story surrounding the incident. One side accuses the Niger-Delta rebellious movement (an organisation fighting for a better share of Nigeria's oil revenues) of the murder. The second side points at Dafe, son of two politicians. Over the course of her investigation, Rayleigh establishes close relationships with Chioma (a journalist) and Michael Merije, both of whom are very supportive. Rayleigh falls in love with Michael who fails, being homosexual, to reciprocate her romantic feelings, despite the fact that he likes and respects her.

The narrative often moves back and forth in time, and so the way Kay and Ruky are killed is revealed in the middle of the work, even though it is highlighted in earlier sections.

Another switch in narrative focuses on the offender. Dafe Ogheneovo's efforts to establish a football career suffer a setback after he is sexually abused by a teammate, Cap J. This affects him traumatically, and his increasing bitterness and volatility become a source of concern for everyone around him, including family members. He verbally attacks his coach and also assaults a teammate named Diarra. He ends up being deported back to Nigeria, where he murders Kay and Ruky. His parents send him to New Zealand, where his father has citizenship, to protect him from the consequences of his actions. In New Zealand, Dafe is institutionalised in a compulsory care facility that provides rehabilitation and welfare for criminal offenders with intellectual disabilities and other mental illnesses. Dafe's mental state does not improve, and he assaults many fellow inmates and staff members. He attempts arson, unsuccessfully, and on his second attempt, he seriously hurts himself and becomes disfigured.

The narrative toward the last chapter shifts to Michael, who reveals that Rayleigh has finally made the documentary. The screening of the documentary has a profound emotional effect on him, and he decides to leave Nigeria as a

consequence. Back in Sydney, his parents' rejection of his sexuality hasn't changed, and this eventually fuels his decision to commit suicide.

Rayleigh, who never learns of this suicide, establishes a romantic relationship with her friend Chioma on the evening of the screening.

The closing chapter goes back in time, focusing on Kay and Ruky living together in an unwelcoming society in Nigeria.

Perception and Conviction

Nigerian society is intolerant and insensitive toward gay people. *Thread of Lies* portrays and analyses some of these negative attitudes toward homosexuals. There is a deep cultural and religious bias against homosexuality in Nigerian society. I don't support homosexuality, but I am anti-homophobia. I condemn the negative social perceptions and reactions against homosexuality. In Christianity, adultery, fornication (sex between couples outside marriage), prostitution, and homosexuality are all considered immoral. However, this same religion largely ignores adultery – when it happens between church members, it is habitually met with silence. The church routinely weds pregnant couples without condemning fornication. I am not condemning the church. My point is this: if other forms of immorality are met with this (hypocritical) treatment, why is homosexuality met with such outward hatred and violence?

Technique and Writing

In writing *Thread of Lies*, I switch between multiple points of view: the first person, the second person, and the third person. Further, the third person moves between the third person limited and the third person subjective.

The central figure, Dafe, has no control over his own life or what goes on around him, but influences basically every sequential event in the work. Given complications like these, I found it illuminating to use multiple points of view. This practice gave me room to view characters from different perspectives. The first person tended to bring out the sincerity in a character for me. It is employed with a host of characters, including Michael Merije and Rayleigh Johnson, in various sections of the work. It is never, however, used with Dafe. This is because he is never sincere. The second and third person points of view are employed in the chapters in which he plays a leading role.

When the narrative shifts into the second person, Rayleigh owns the voice: she is the one saying ‘you’, making her the subject of the narrative. Dafe is often the object of the narrative here, although Ruky has a similar role in one chapter.

The third person, which switches between subjective and limited positions, gave me a profound understanding of my characters: where the ‘subjective’ searches the heart and inner motivations of the character, the ‘limited’ focuses on the character’s outward actions only, letting those actions speak for themselves.

Travelling between countries is a major theme in the novel, and all the core characters move or journey from one country to another. My own trip to Australia during the period I was writing most of Michael’s side of the story had a significant effect. I could see a part of my personality in Michael, particularly in terms of his racial consciousness. Although, unlike Michael, I am not gay and neither was I born in Australia, my own perception of Sydney informed his in a major way. The journey as a thematic metaphor, linking the outer movement of the characters to their inner development, brings people of different races and backgrounds together in the novel and links the third world to the first world, establishing a world of its own.

Motivation and Aims

I didn’t set out to write a composite novel on homosexuality. My interest is in society’s responses to homosexuality (particularly homophobia). *Thread of Lies* also examines a lot of societal issues that tie into society’s responses to homosexuality, such as parenting, love, business, religion, and political corruption. It is mostly set in Nigeria, where homosexuality is punishable with the death penalty, or with jail sentences as long as fourteen years. The sections which are set in Australia, England, and New Zealand give room for comparisons across cultures.

I have researched and explored the negative responses and impacts of politics and religion on homosexuality in different societies and have mirrored them in the creative project. This exegesis will be analysing the effects of politics and religion on homosexuality. It will also analyse the societies portrayed in the works of gay authors, James Baldwin and Sarah Waters, particularly *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) and *Another Country* (1962) by Baldwin, and *Fingersmith* (2002) and *The Night Watch* (2006) by Waters.

CHAPTER 2

Genre

The Composite Novel

The practice of writing novels in which chapters or various sections can stand independently as (short) stories of their own has been around for quite some time. Early works that fit into this category include: Sarah Orne Jewett's *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896), Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives* (1909), Henry James' *The Finer Grain* (1910), James Joyce's *Dubliners* (1914). Henry Miller's *Black Spring* (1936), Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) are some further examples. These writers have put together a collection of interrelated short stories fused into one whole. However there has been some subsequent confusion as to how these works should be characterised and classified. Several different names and labels have been suggested by various scholars and critics, leading to much debate. Examples of the many names suggested by writers and scholars for the genre are: story cycle, short story cycle, multi-faceted novel, story novel, paranovel, short story composite, rovelle, anthology novel, short story sequence, and narrative of community (Dunn and Morris, 1995). Nagel (2004) gives an overview of this debate

Nagel sees this form as a *short story cycle*, "rich, with origins decidedly antecedent to the novel, with roots in the most ancient of narrative traditions" (2004, p. 1). He sees the 'short story cycle' as a collection of verses or narratives around some outstanding event or character. Nagel's definition is in line with what Dunn and Morris call a 'composite novel'.

Dunn and Morris (1995) describe the composite novel as "a literary work composed of shorter texts that though individually complete and autonomous – are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organising principles" (p. 2). According to Morris and Dunn, the term 'composite novel' emphasizes the integrity of the 'whole', while the term 'short story cycle' emphasizes the integrity of the 'parts'.

Lundén (1999), who advocates the use of the name 'short story composite', defines the genre as "the mode of narrative that most explicitly and deliberately

combines features from two established genres, the *short story* and the *novel*” (p. 32).

Ferguson (2003) seems to disagree with the work of other critics, particularly regarding the name for this genre of writing. She says that “a cycle by its name should ‘go around’ something—in time, in the consideration of a theme (returning to its point of origin?)” (p. 2). Ferguson describes Dunn and Morris's definition as capacious and relatively vague. Matheny (2012), who concurs that the genre stands between the short story and a novel, sees the name differences and genre question based on the ways the stories in a collection are connected.

The need to identify the genre in which a particular group of stories stands as a sequence or cycle speaks to the reason we work to classify objects in other areas: so that the reader can read strategically to understand the work (Ferguson, 2003).

This section's aim is not to choose a suitable name for the genre, as the terms 'composite novel', 'short story cycle', and 'short story composite' all seem to refer to the same type of work. The argument does, however, shed some light on the reasons I have adopted the term 'composite novel' for *Thread of Lies*. I have chosen this term for the distancing from the short story that it implies. *Thread of Lies* has a scope beyond the short story and the various stories it contains, which makes it more like a novel. It must be emphasised here that the term 'composite novel' is also used to avoid confusion as to the genre of the creative project. The complications of this genre as identified by other scholars, however, are not discarded.

Objective and Significance

The objective of writing *Thread of Lies* was to tie together a series of tales that would come together to form one whole. Ingram (1971) describes that the “[c]yclical habit of the mind is the habit of drawing smaller units into the integral wholeness of a superstructure” (p. 25). Dunn and Morris (1995) emphasize the concept of symbolic function, or the need to seek order, to arrange, to make connections. The standalone nature of the chapters or stories frees them from strict linearity, since the plot progresses spirally (subsequently visiting the past) rather than in a linear pattern. So it is vital for chapters to be strong enough independently to stand on its own.

The writing of *Thread of Lies* adheres to the several prescriptions for the composite novel as prescribed by various scholars. In the formative stages of the work, I intended to involve several characters, of different nationalities. Some

questions arose regarding how to link these different characters and fit them into a single narrative. This is close to Kennedy's classification of different stories that 'literally represent communities - an interweaving of voices and narrative, a communal consciousness' (2005, p. xiv). There arose a necessity to establish a connection between the characters and their respective countries. A community had to be built. Linear time turned out to be too reductive and deceptive (Dunn and Morris, 1995) for this sort of story: there was a need to distort chronology so the character's lives could connect explicitly. Dunn and Morris (1995) suggest that "[t]he construction of time line [must be] both horizontal and vertical, [and convey] both distance and depth" (p. 116). Lundén (1999), in his definition of a short story cluster, says that chronology should not be strictly adhered to. This liberated the writing to explore the past, and even the future, without the aid of dates and flashbacks (though applied for clarity).

In *Thread of Lies*, the murder of a lesbian couple links protagonists of different nationalities. That is to say, Rayleigh is linked to the deaths because of her connection to Kay as a sister; Michael is linked to the deaths because of his homosexuality's connection to the couple's sexuality. Dafe, being the murderer, has already established his own connection, by 'murdering'. This is in accord with Nagel (2004), who sees the genre as a collection of verse or narratives around some outstanding event or character. *Thread of Lies* works by combining "several separate pictures" (Luden 1999; p. 14) of the outstanding central event or character.

Nagel (2004) says "a 'short story cycle' is less unified than a novel but has much greater coherence and thematic integrity than a mere collection of short stories." Some of the chapters in *Thread of Lies* are respectively independent, but inform and build on each other to form 'one' novel. Letting the reader fuse these stories together to get a single picture demands deep involvement. This is in agreement with Dunn and Morris (1995), who indicate the need for readers to face the same task (as the writer) of mapping the work, that is to say, establishing connections between and among text-pieces. For example, in *Thread of Lies* the reader meets Michael's late partner, Paul, for the first time during his funeral in an early chapter. Paul is dead at the time that he is introduced, but the reader gets a sense of the relationship between him and Michael which is fleshed out as more chapters give hints of the affair. The same thing happens with regard to Kay's relationship with Rayleigh. It is clear, Kay passes away at the beginning of the composite novel; the

reader will have to construct her relationship to Rayleigh as they come across the hints in further chapters.

Lundén (1999), comparing the novel to the genre in question, states that the composite version is more multi-voiced and open-ended, defusing closure and resolution of plot (p 39). In this he agrees with Dunn and Morris (1995), who characterise narrative points of view in the individual stories of the composite novel as increasingly complex, moving from simple first-person narration to limited omniscience to omniscience. This allows the writer to explore different points of view and forms of narrative voice as I have done in the *Thread of Lies*, providing tools for the reader to understand characters from multiple angles.

Furthermore, *Thread of Lies*, as a composite novel, gave me space, as a writer, to explore issues affecting societies, connecting them to the plot(s). Nigel (2004) proposes that the genre, “with its concentric as opposed to linear plot development possibilities, lends itself particularly well to exploring themes of ethnic assimilation, which mirror some of the major issues facing societies.” (p. 300)

CHAPTER 3

Homosexuality

Politics and Religion

The western world in the twenty-first century appears to be well on the way to a wider acceptance of homosexuality. That this acceptance is not universal is clear, as homophobic attitudes are displayed both in political debates and in people's everyday remarks. Religion and politics have in the past, and even presently, taken stands for and against homosexuality. It certainly seems that these religious and interpersonal opinions are core sources of social and public homophobia.

In African countries, families of victimised homosexuals have been made to pass through a lot of public shame as depicted in the creative project. Grimshaw (2004) associates homosexuality with doubts, anxieties and guilt in his examination of Iris Murdoch's fiction set in nineteenth century Europe. Green (1982) associates homosexuality with hostility and humiliation in several works of American and European fiction between the 17th and 19th centuries. Homophobia and sexual discrimination has long been part of man's behaviour, and it is not just an African trait as the west's own track record shows. It is true, however, that homosexuals in most parts of Africa presently live in fear, are tormented by guilt, and are on a regular basis, publicly humiliated. Mirroring this in *Thread of Lies*, Michael Merije suffers both from the rejection of his family in the western world, and from witnessing the awful consequences of homophobia in Nigeria.

a. Political Impacts

Politics have had a tremendous impact on homosexuality. The Swedish government threatened, in 2009, to cut off aid and support to Uganda because of the Ugandan government's anti-gay campaign (Cheney, 2012). This would have led to a higher rate of poverty in Africa if it had been implemented. *Thread of Lies* depicts this differently: the scandal regarding the death of the lesbian couple in the composite novel is kept away from the public by Nigeria's government, lest it put the country at the same risk of sanction from the west.

Thread of Lies explores the judicial system in Nigeria through its portrayal of the public trial of two homosexuals, Gregory Pink and Nicholas Ekpo (p. 79). Michael Merije, stunned by the abuse gay people face in Nigeria, attends this trial and finds it deeply traumatising.

Due to the political sanctioning of homosexuality in Nigerian society, I would argue that gay people have suffered embarrassment, cruelty, and humiliation. *Thread of Lies* employs a sympathetic approach by depicting the trial through Michael's point of view, although other characters present in court gain satisfaction and a certain scornful humour from the situation. Bisbey (2011) explains that gender-based humour directed toward homosexuality tends to reinforce homophobia and the gender binary that informs it.

My focus is obviously on Nigeria, although it mirrors the African continent as a whole with 40 out of 53 countries deeming homosexuality illegal (Anderson, 2007). In the homophobic society depicted in *Thread of Lies*, Nigeria's leaders in government condemn homosexuality, much like Namibia's President Sam Nujoma. Their intolerance also recalls Zimbabwe Head of State Robert Mugabe's unpopular attack on homosexuality in 2006 (Anderson 2007). This condemnation of homosexuality by African leaders can be said to mirror the views of the majority in their respective countries, influenced by religion and cultural values.

In western countries, even though, as I have pointed out, homophobia still exists, policies and reforms in favour of homosexuality have led to social changes, which Escoffier (1985) notes in his analysis of the sexual revolution and gay identity politics. There are open communities of lesbian and gay men in many cities of the western societies. Why, however, should these communities separate themselves from society if the society really identifies with homosexuality? It is for the same reason that Kay and Ruky had to leave London, even though Kay's family had no issues with her sexuality, which is the subtle personal and social homophobia that has taken the place of public condemnation.

While homosexuality has received public sanction in many western societies - openly gay men and lesbians have been elected to city councils, state legislatures and the congress - this sanction often does not mirror personal attitudes. In *Thread of Lies* Greg, Ruky's uncle, who appears to be in support of gay marriages having lived in Sweden during era the bill on gay marriage was passed, reveals to Ruky (to her disappointment) that he doesn't support gay rights. He reasons that if gay

people should be given rights, then incestuous relationships should also have to be legal (p. 172).

b. Religious Impacts

Religion has been very formative in shaping the attitudes of people and societies. Chike (2007) states that the Anglican church is struggling with the issue of homosexuality at the present time because of interference of non-religious views (p. 1). The Catholic Church's stance on homosexuality, I would argue, has also been challenged in recent times: for example, in the Philippines, the LGBT rights movement contested against Catholic dominance of the state. Homosexuality and Christianity are the closest of enemies in the twenty-first century, as both sides' longstanding arguments have had impacts on larger social and political thinking on the issue. The Pentecostal movements have undoubtedly been opposed to homosexuality, even though their voices have drawn little attention. Lewis-Williams (2006) sees the Pentecostal position towards homosexuality as very harsh, and this is portrayed in *Threads of Lies*.

Most of the characters in the *Thread of Lies* are very sensitive to issues that concern religion. Dafe, who murders the lesbian couple, has religion as a backing, although inwardly, his drive has more to do with his own bitter emotions and mental instability.

Many Christians would agree that homosexuality displeases God so much that that was the reason He destroyed the city of Sodom as stated in the Bible (Rogers, 2011). Dafe capitalises on this long standing religious condemnation to commit the crime in *Threads of Lies*. Most modern Christians, I would argue, define homosexuality as immoral, and would insist Sodom was condemned because of homosexuality. Jeater (1993) says sex occupies the realm of the 'moral', and links sex to the concept of sin. However, as stated earlier, the Church has gradually become more tolerant, if not outwardly accepting, of other sins such as adultery or fornication.

Since *Thread of Lies* concerns itself with religious views toward homosexuality, it is vital to analyse scriptures in the Bible. The Bible categorises fornication, adultery, and homosexuality as the same kind of sin: 1 Corinthians 6:9 ("Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with

mankind”). However, bible scholars that are opposed to homosexuality may also refer to Leviticus 18:22 (Thou shalt not lie with mankind, as with womankind; it is abomination”). The penalty for this is in Leviticus 18:29 (“For whosoever shall commit any of these abominations, even the souls that commit them shall be cut off from among their people”). This was the law before the New Testament. However, it wasn’t only homosexuality that had such penalty in the Old Testament. Adultery also called for the death penalty. Today, adultery has no (legal) penalty other than in some parts of the Islamic world.

In *Thread of Lies*, Michael Merije questions religion when his parents pressure him about getting married to a woman. He asks his mother if Adam was ever married to Eve, as it wasn’t stated in the Bible (p 21). Religion itself has been carved to fit into accepted societal structures. The world’s slow acceptance of same-sex relationships is mirrored in *Thread of Lies* by the journey of Rayleigh, who at the beginning of the work seems to oppose gay relationships, but goes into a gay affair at the end. Religion no doubt presents the strongest social opposition to homosexuality. Some people have deviated from religion, but still order their lives on the platform of its edicts and traditions, both which have influenced the governing of societies.

In *Threads of Lies*, the lesbian characters, Ruky and Kay are atheists, as they have found their lifestyle incompatible with religious belief.

CHAPTER 4

Depiction of the Society in the works of James Baldwin and Sarah Waters

a. Giovanni's Room by James Baldwin

Baldwin's focus is on a relationship between two men in France - David and Giovanni. It is David's idea to end their short but passionate gay relationship because of his desire to live a 'normal life'. It is a sad decision for both men. Inasmuch as David wants to live a normal life, he cannot deny his homosexual orientation. Giovanni is not David's first gay partner, having had a sexual affair with another character, Joey, while he was still in America. What David has developed for Giovanni is deeply emotionally rooted. On Giovanni's part, he is so drawn into this affair that he suffers emotionally when David withdraws to rescue a tentative relationship with his girlfriend, Hella. Everything seems to go wrong after the two men break up, as Giovanni ends up in a police net after murdering his (ex) employer.

The depiction of David's past in the novel hints at an upbringing in an American society that sees homosexuality as a crime. Moreover, in 1956 when the novel was published, homosexual behaviour was still criminalised in America -- it remained a criminal act until the 1960s (Betvelzen, 2012). Baldwin depicts both American and French society in his novel, the former being hostile to homosexuality, the latter more permissive and accepting. Betvelzen (2012) states that David is fully aware that society can be very unforgiving towards gay relationships. In France, a lot of Baldwin's characters live openly as homosexuals. David's reasons for not wanting to settle down with Giovanni speak to the societal expectations that still face people (including homosexuals) in modern day societies, particularly the need to marry and have children (*Giovanni's Room*; p. 93). David cannot fulfil this expectation because of his desire for men. When his girlfriend discovers he is gay at the end of the novel, she leaves him. Baldwin depicts a homosexual struggling with his own identity in *Giovanni's Room*; according to Blackmer (1995), David realizes that accepting his homosexuality will lead to suffering in life (society). He doesn't want to accept his sexuality and risk that suffering in order to be with Giovanni.

Relating this plot to *Thread of Lies*, there is a parallel to Michael Merije's life in the sense that his parents wanted a normal life for him despite his strong attraction to men

Thread of Lies portrays the western world that tolerates homosexuality and an Africa that doesn't in a similar way to Baldwin's conceptions of America and France. In Baldwin's novel there are open gay clubs in France, but in America, society only allows secret avenues where men search for boys.

There's also the inward conflict in Baldwin's protagonist, David, which is identical to the inward conflict in Dafe. Both deny their homosexuality, yet desire gay sex, or rather, a homosexual relationship. David prefers to be closeted as a homosexual and, again according to Blackmer (1995), the biggest threat to his passing as a heterosexual is Giovanni. Hence David's desire to keep the affair brief and secret.

The deep emotional connection between Giovanni and David in Baldwin's fiction informed Michael and Paul's relationship in *Thread of Lies*. Unlike, David and Giovanni, Michael and Paul do not break up, but much of the emotional anxiety in their relationship comes from the same sorts of guilt and anxiety that Baldwin portrays.

***b. Another Country* by James Baldwin**

Baldwin sets *Another Country* in a predominantly racist era of history, and one of his protagonists, a black jazz drummer called Rufus, is affected by an internalisation of this racism that makes him hate himself. He is aggressively sexual with any person who is white because he seeks power. His eventual suicide brings his circle of friends (all white) closer, and the plot stretches and touches a lot of themes with homosexuality as the focal point. As in *Giovanni's Room*, Baldwin mirrors two opposing societies in America and France. Rufus' ex, Eric, one of *Another Country's* vital characters, could *simply live a free life as a homosexual in France*, but in America he must *make a conscious decision to live as gay*, as there is a heightened homophobic sense of awareness (Keily, 2005).

Signoriello (2005) states that relationships in *Another Country* are complicated and destructive because the characters cannot separate their public selves from their private selves. This is in contrast to the homophobic society painted in *Thread of Lies*, as in the latter, as much as the gay characters try to keep their lives private,

people insist on meddling with them. For example, in the case of Kay and Ruky, a religious group confronts them right in front of their home with prayers calling for them to repent (p. 264).

Keily (2005) also states that the purpose of sexual encounters in *Another Country* is to gain an inward forgiveness of self and this “shakes the very core of those involved, freeing them from the rigidity of their self-made identities”. I would disagree with this assessment: it seems Rufus never forgives himself and never forgives the people around him, leading to his eventual suicide. There is no sense of forgiveness in *Another Country*, as Baldwin’s treatment of the characters suggest the impossibility of maintaining of freedom and liberation (in terms of sexuality and race) (Signoriello 2005).

According to Kiely (2005), “in Baldwin’s poignant treatment of white, male sexual identity and identity politics he illustrates the unwillingness of American society to approach the topic of race”. In contrast, I would argue that Baldwin treatment was a protest calling for both racism and homosexuality to be confronted and treated with equality in society.

Baldwin depicts a society in *Another Country*, in which the black and white races need each other, but the white race fails to listen to and authenticate black experience (Keily, 2005). In *Thread of Lies*, ‘religion’ plays a similar role to ‘racial subjection’ in *Another Country*, as gay characters Kay and Ruky were objects of attacks and condemnation.

However Rufus, who is an object of racial subjection in Baldwin’s fiction, informs the construction of *Thread of Lies*’ character, Michael, a black gay man from Australia. Just like Rufus, he has a distorted relationship with his family; just like Rufus he ends his own life.

c. The Night Watch by Sarah Waters

In *The Night Watch*, Waters depicts a society in London during World War II. Most of her major characters are lesbians living comfortably in the absence of homophobia, though there are negative remarks against gay relationships. Perdec (2011) explains that the war had engendered a more relaxed morality, a higher degree of sexual freedom. Women’s sexual independence increased as a result of their domestic, financial and professional independence when men had gone to the front.

Waters gives gay relationships in the society she is depicting all the features of straight relationships, portraying emotions, romance and even breakups. She uses the Second World War as a metaphor too: while the key characters, Kay and Helen, have a healthy relationship before the war, they fall out during the war. After the war is over, Helen leaves Kay and settles with another lesbian character, Julia. In contrast, *Thread of Lies* does not give same-sex relationship a healthy or natural environment; instead, the lesbian characters face active homophobia.

Waters also presents a society in her novel that depicts men's cruelty toward women; she takes a strongly feminist stance. Perdec (2011) says the post-war return to "normal", with men returning from the front and reclaiming their jobs, their patriarchal status in the family (society), and their control over sexuality, was a disappointment to most women, whether straight or gay. One of the male characters, Reggie, horribly maltreats Viv, a woman with whom he is having an extramarital affair. Reggie gets Viv pregnant and lures her into experiencing a painful clandestine abortion performed by a dentist. This nearly leads to her death, as she suffers severe haemorrhage. *Threads of Lies* does not make sexism a focus of its depiction of society, but it gives a hint of its on-going existence as shown in the conversation below between Rayleigh and Chioma in *Thread of Lies*:

'Rayleigh. Some women aren't meant for men... Perhaps your sister was right to stick to the path she took. I have had brief relationships with wild animals that saw themselves as men.'

Rayleigh gave a short laugh.

'I have dated married men, confused men, and arrogant men. They thought they could ruin me... I learnt to forgive them even before they jumped in my bed.' (p. 232)

Waters depicts women who are liberated by virtue of having no men in their lives, as the society portrayed in the novel looks at a time of massive transformation, when men were away fighting and women took over in several areas. Women do men's jobs, make decisions in the household, and become the major bread-winners in their families (Perdec, 2011). However Waters reverses the liberation of her character, Kay, at the end of her gay affair. She becomes depressed, lonely, and disoriented. Waters also does not liberate Viv, a woman

entangled in a man's world. *The Night Watch* isn't so much a protest against men's dominance over women, as an indication that women can indeed stand alone.

The Night Watch's characterisation of a lesbian affair informed the writing of the relationship between Kay and Ruky in *Thread of Lies*. Kay in the *Thread of Lies* was named after the Kay in *The Night Watch*, but these two, besides being British, have entirely different personalities.

d. *Fingersmith* By Sarah Waters

While *Fingersmith* was written in the first years of the twenty-first century, its focus is on the Victorian era: the London society in this work is constituted of the poor wretches, petty thieves and criminals living in the Borough, the sedated and abused madwomen in the asylum, and the almost backward servants at Briar (De Schryver, 2010).

The society Waters depicts here is similar to that of *The Night Watch* in her representation of men and how they ruin women's lives. A character in *Fingersmith*, Mr Gentleman, dominates two women's lives (the main protagonists, Sue Trinder and Maud Lily), taking advantage of them and trying to swindle them. Mr Gentleman, deceitful and criminal-minded, must die before the women can live and share the love they had developed for each other. This is in contrast to *Thread of Lies*, in which the men are portrayed as weak. Michael Merije's empathy over the death of the lesbian couple, his homosexuality, and the rejections he suffers are all disturbing to him, but opting for suicide is portrayed as weakness; Dafe's killing of the lesbian couple is a display of weakness, as it springs from his hatred of his own homosexuality.

Waters does not depict homophobia in *Fingersmith*; neither does she explore the role lesbianism plays in wider society. She plants a seed of love between two particular characters, and as the plot develops, Sue and Maud fall in love with each other. Hall (2006) says Waters "resituates female same-sex desire within culture and discourse" (p. 22).

Just as in *The Night Watch*, Waters indicates in *Fingersmith* that women are better off without men in their lives. Mr Gentleman, who acts in the novel as a husband figure, does not leave a good impression.

. The portrayal of men and women in *Fingersmith* differentiates it from the society depicted in *Thread of Lies*. Sue and Maud are heroic figures, which is in sharp contrast to Kay and Ruky who were (killed) ruined by a Dafe, a man. She empowers Maud and Sue with union. On the other hand *Thread of Lies*' lesbian couple's union cost them their lives.

The romantic scenes [including sex scenes] between the *Fingersmith*'s lesbian couple, Maud and Sue, informed *Thread of Lies* in its construction of lesbian relationships.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Different points of view and narrative techniques are fused in *Thread of Lies*, giving the reader the opportunity of viewing characters and the plot from multiple perspectives, hence providing opportunities for a deeper insight into a central occurrence. *Thread of Lies* explores the people and events connected with the murder of a lesbian couple in Nigeria.

The composite novel according to Morris and Dunn (1995) is like a “spider’s web – with many little threads radiating from a centre, criss-crossing each other. As with the web, the structure will emerge as it is made and you must simply listen and trust” (p. 89). This is one description among many for the genre that *Thread of Lies* falls under.

Linear time is completely distorted in the narrative, as the story progresses through the deliberate weaving of past and present. Morris and Dunn describe the nature of progression in this genre as “spiral-like rather than linear” (p. 90). Other features which *Thread of Lies* shares with the genre as a whole, as formulated by Morris and Dunn, are: ‘recurring characters’, ‘shared incidents’, ‘common setting’ and a ‘unifying element’.

Thread of Lie’s most central characters, Dafe, Rayleigh, and Michael, are connected because of Dafe’s act of murder, which is the “shared incident” in a “common setting” - Nigeria. The ‘unifying element’ is also Nigeria as it links all recurring protagonists and some back stories. It must also be stated that travelling in this composite novel is a ‘thematic metaphor’ which illustrates the world’s growing acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality, which has long been a source of argument.

The portrayal of the western societies, being Australia, England and New Zealand in the project, positively depicts the tolerance and protection of gay individuals against discrimination. However, even these countries are yet to grant equal marriage rights to gays and lesbians - signs that their tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality is still only partial. Africa, with Nigeria on the forefront, on the other hand, manifests high intolerance of homosexuality in the twenty-first century. Religion and politics will continue with their leading roles on the debate on homosexuality until a decision that accommodates every opinion is met.

As well as current religious and cultural debates, my work has been informed by fictional works of James Baldwin and Sarah Waters, who both portray different society's attitudes toward homosexuality. In Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* for instance, we see the psychological trauma that David and Giovanni are thrown into because of the society's influence on their decisions to breakup. In *Another Country*, we see a discriminatory society, in which Baldwin tries to equate sexual discrimination and racial discrimination. In *The Night Watch*, Waters depicts lesbians living freely in a society wounded by war and losing its values. And then we see a sexism issue in *Fingersmith* where Waters portray men as evil in their cruelty against women.

Thread of Lies depicts a homophobic society in Africa, comparing it to the mounting change in the west that has led and is leading to a greater tolerance and accommodation of homosexuality.

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