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Death's laughter (novel) and crafting a novel (exegesis)

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Edith Cowan University

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death's laughter

Death's laughter

(novel)

and

Crafting a novel

(exegesis)

Thesis submitted by

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B.A (Hons) Theatre Arts, PGDE, M.A (Communication and Language Arts)

for the requirements of Doctor of Philosophy (Writing)

in the Faculty of Education and Arts,

Edith Cowan University

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ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a creative component, a novel, *Death's laughter* and an exegetical essay, *Crafting a novel*. The novel centres on a true Nigerian story: a Pentecostal pastor, who died in a plane crash, was a government official found out to have amassed large sums of money and assets that were far greater than could be accrued from his modest salary. In addition, he was accused of bigamy because he had two wives who did not know each other in two different cities within the country. This basic story serves as the nucleus of the novel.

The novel tells the stories of various characters who were created with the intention of telling their own stories and, in doing this, giving the readers a montage of the pastor who was passive but ever present in the novel. Though the pastor dies in Chapter One of the novel, each character -- who is related or has a relationship with the pastor -- tells their own stories and together builds a picture of what happened to the pastor and the kind of person he was.

Pastor Jude Akanmu Babajide in the novel represents the Pastor Femi Àkànní, who was the character in the true Nigerian story. This novel does not paint a picture based on the research into the Nigerian pastor, it creates a fictional account of the pastor and of the various characters who populated the novel. As the reader goes through the various tales he/she is given an insight into Nigerian society and an introduction to some Yoruba cultural concepts.


The exegesis explores the processes and techniques used in crafting the novel. The exegesis starts with an exploration of how the novel was devised, the triggers for the novel and the various influences that affected the writing of the novel. The second chapter examines the themes, subthemes and their treatment in the novel after laying a basis through the examination of such themes in literature. The third chapter is an assessment of language use and narrative devices within the novel. In addition it examines the challenges of a second language user of English and the tools used in facing these challenges in respect to *Death's laughter*. The fourth and last chapter explores character creation and the roles they played in the novel. The exegesis concludes by examining the various experimentations in the novel such as in dialogue, narrative styles and language.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or a diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signed:

Dated:  17th August, 2011.

dedication

GOD:

*olodumare, arinu-rode,
ogbagba ti ngba ara adugbo,
o gba ara ile t'omo t'omo,
gbani- gbani ti a n s'aya,
ojiji firi, alaafin orun.*

and

my late mother:

*yinyin-ola, tigbalalaju, remilekun,
ikoyi eso omo a di gangan l'ogun,
eso to ba t'aju gbofa,
iru won l'akikanju,
eyi to ba t'ehin gbofa,
aju ni tii baba won.
sunre o, ma j'okun, ma j'ekolo'
ohun won n je lajule orun,
ni ko ba won je.*

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a book is a product of many
hands, brains, ears and eyes;
same with this thesis.
to those who made THIS possible,
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i have nothing to offer ALL of you,
except THANKS.

you see further,
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friends are oases in life's desert,
you can't survive without them.
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the first to introduce me to Western Australia.
shamimar, janice strudence, janice routledge,
kara jacob, jo macfarlane, anne beveridge,
bethany, joanna, danielle, sarah, gloria anthony,
finola, karen, sally, anita krefl, elaine,
isaiah, emeka, the ephraims, owoyemi
and 'the fairy godmother-angela'
YOU all made a stranger a 'home boy'.

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to my spiritual and praying support,
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adesanya and family and,
most especially pastor john adegboye
and family.
the beautiful people of maylands'
grace fellowship's church, especially:
pastor julian, sue, bev and bruce thyer,
daniel law, grenville, yean wei, darrel
and the praying band.
and
the praying crew at home'
pa agosu, pa oyelola, pastor gideon
and many others,
your prayers worked;
and this is the results of the vigils.
you all confirmed the truism of:
one body in Christ of many races and tongues,
and being brothers and sisters in CHRIST!

to the big masquerade,
my big brother, mentor,
and inspiration, femi osofisan,
the journey started more than 30 years ago;
educative ,fulfilling and enduring,
this is part of the journey's products.
thank you for holding my hand.

good friends are rare to find,
friends who stick with you,
in your absence are even rarer,
abu ajisegiri, waheed hassan, pa ayoola and taju,
and not to forget edu,
the 'man Friday',
you are no more friends
but brothers, your watching my back,
gave me the assurance to forge on,
and this is the product.

AND

finally to my children:
dami, femi(jnr.),bolu,ore and ayanfe,
you all have calmly borne
the brunt of these three years' absence.
to my jewel of inestimable value,
my wife, - temi- ni- temi, the pillar,
the confidant, strong woman of unimaginable strength ,
who held the fort and held forth,
coping with my three year's absence,
while holding the home front;
HOW CAN I THANK YOU ENOUGH?

FA.

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death's laughter

2005

prologue

the story

<i>Ajo l'ayé, bo pe bo ya,</i>	This world is a journey.
<i>Bó jìn, bó sún mó 'lé</i>	It may be far, it may be near,
<i>Gbogbo wà lá n re 'lé.</i>	We will all go home.
<i>Àjò o lè dùn kò dàbí ilè,</i>	A journey cannot be like home.
<i>Oríderé kì ígbé s'óko iwáje,</i>	Parrot won't be lost in the forest looking for food,
<i>Ilé koko sì ní t'agbe</i>	The sparrow must always return home.
<i>Bó jìn bó yá, bó pe bó yá,</i>	It may be far, it may be near,
<i>Gbogbo wà lá n re 'lé</i>	We will all go back home.

– yorùbá song

Èniyan rere fi ogún sílè fún àwon omo omo rẹ; sùgbón orò elésè li à to jó fún olódodo

A good man leaves an inheritance for his children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous – Proverbs 13:22 (NKJV)¹

Born, not meeting my grandfather, a storyteller, the village raconteur, religious leader and bard. I am Jude, a pastor like my father. My father, a reverend, like his father was a storyteller. Growing up, I heard stories about tortoises, wicked stepmothers, wicked siblings, spirits, gnomes, ghosts, witches and wizards. Unlike my grandfather and my father, a storyteller I was not. However, I will try to tell you a story I heard from my father, who heard it from his father.

One morning, aeons ago, a young man left his village on a journey to the nearby town, starting very early. Walking some distance, he realised his mistake because he did not meet anyone – no farmer going early to his farm, no woman going to the nearest market. He had mistaken the full moon for the dawn. He had gone too far to turn back, so he

¹ This and all further biblical references in this novel are taken from New King James Version.

continued his journey. Almost midway, he sensed a movement behind him. A shadow seemed to be following him, running fast as he walked. The faster Ikumapayi walked, the closer the shadow came, and he felt he was being stalked. The shadow finally caught up with him, an androgynous person with the most beautiful body Ikumapayi had ever seen, an ethereal beauty. But this beautiful being's face showed grotesque agony and anguish, with worry lines of sadness and sorrow. There were no smile lines or signs of laughter. The young man turned to the being, now walking beside him.

Why are you following me?

To keep your company and keep you safe.

Thank you, but who are you?

The young man felt a tingling down his spine as he asked the question and his hairs stood on end. Turning to look at the being, he felt a coldness coming over him. As the being turned to answer him, he felt the icy eyes searing into his soul.

I am Death.

Ikumapayi stood on the road, transfixed.

Is my time up? Have you come to take me?

No. I have to take someone in your destination town.

Ikumapayi felt relief and then doubt.

Why are you still walking with me?

I am keeping you company and also making you safe. When death is beside you, who can harm you?

That's odd, you are not known for favours. Why this favour for me?

People misunderstand me. They fear me so much, thereby making me lonely and isolated.

That can't be true. You must be enjoying what you are doing.

It's my job, and what I am created for.

You must enjoy doing it then.

That isn't true.

You are likely to be too busy to feel or suffer isolation and loneliness.

I am alone and a lonely being. I am the one. Everyone hates my action's objectivity and finality.

True, but your meeting and touching everyone gives you a lot of interaction.

Yes, but not when such interactions are based on fear. Nobody looks forward to death with happiness and joy; even those who commit suicide.

That's a pity. You can't be loved; your action brings finality to other's actions.

Yes, but it's a misconception. It is just a step in a process.

Is that so? Your explanation doesn't make dying easier.

Yes.

It was nearly dawn and a few people were now out walking. These people ignored them, which was unusual. When another person passed them as if she did not see them, Ikumapayi turned to his companion, whose face had become more hideous but whose body remained very beautiful. Ikumapayi felt afraid. Then he spoke to his companion,

You are becoming more fearful and hideous. Do you ever smile or laugh when on duty?

Death laughed, a shrill wail.

I laugh.

You do? That's incongruous.

No, it is not. I laugh a lot, especially about human beings.

Why?

You see, the person I intend to take away in the next twenty-four hours will be preparing for the next ten years and taking actions that I know will not come to fruition. I laugh every day at human beings' ignorance about so many things and at their comfort in that ignorance.

one

JUDE

the meeting

ònà kán wà tí ò dábí ení pé ó dáara l'ójú èniyàn, sùgbón òpin re ikú ni

there is a way that seemed right to a man, but the end thereof is the way of death – Proverbs 14:12 (KJV).

*october 20, 2005
BOA farm, ogbere.
ogun state.*

It was at the farm, a sprawling six hundred acres of cassava, poultry, piggery, aquaculture, horticulture, cowpea and mushrooms. In the middle, like a dot inside a circle, sat the farmhouse and other buildings. Crop plots and other amenities spread out from the farmhouse, which was like a spider in the centre of her web. Twenty-two suites were arranged in a circular form. The farmhouse, as the twenty-second suite, served as the administrative building. Surrounding it, were seven suites, ranging from one-bedroomed, to three-bedroomed, which served as accommodation for guests and farm conference participants. The farmhouse had a large office for the farm's Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and some smaller offices for the farm manager and other officers. A large conference room and a state-of-the-art communications room completed the farmhouse. Resting in the middle of nowhere, and far from the hustle and bustle of cities like Lagos, Ibadan, Sango or even Ijebu-Ode, the Babatunde Obafemi Àkànjí's (BOA) farm ranked among the three biggest farms in Nigeria and was the most mechanised.

The meeting started at eight on Thursday night, 20 October 2005, in the Conference Room. There were seventeen people in all, two each from the six geopolitical zones of the country, one Israeli consultant, two army generals, a secretary Papa, the farm owner and meeting convener. There were five women and twelve men in all. Papa, after introducing the participants, called the meeting to order:

You must have gone through the materials in the folders left in your various rooms. Our consultant will brief us and then we will break into groups to discuss the materials and the consultant's briefing.

The Israeli consultant spoke for just thirty minutes, dwelling on Nigeria's present state and security, listing the factors threatening to tear the country apart and relating this to the country's politics, succession patterns and the coming elections. He touched on

corruption and its effects on the body politic, and the need for a paradigm shift. He stressed the continuation of the efforts being taken to fight corruption, concluding with reference to the present president's term that was coming to an end and the need to look for a viable successor who would continue some of the good aspects of the present regime and correct some of the imperfections of its policies. Using statistics on Nigeria's present situation and projections for the future, he talked about the need for a good civilian-to-civilian transition, which had always eluded the country. He spelt out each group's functions and the materials they would be working on. Afterwards, there was a short break and each group went to its venue for discussions.

Pastor Jude Àkànmú Babájídé was in the electoral group. There were four others with him: a military intelligence general who specialized in tactics and strategic studies, a professor of political science, a female banker who was also the Director of Economic Intelligence at the Central Bank, and the CEO of the foremost advertising agency in the country. The pastor, a specialist in supply, logistics and finance, came to represent the nation's electoral body. This group discussed every aspect of the country's last election but specifically focussed on the next election based on facts from the briefing documents they had before them and on the materials from the Israeli. Their meeting lasted many hours with short breaks. Plans were made for the 2007 elections. Each plan came from a condensation of criticism and analyses. No aspect was left untouched: publicity, finance, security, staffing, logistics and media. The group developed counter strategies and tactics to combat rigging, violence and corruption. They profiled in detail the best presidential candidate and suggested ways he could be packaged and accepted by the general populace.

There were arguments, counter arguments and disagreements. Finally, decisions reached through rigorous analysis were codified for the next meeting, set for December 2005. It was almost morning when they returned to their rooms. Pastor Jude slept for an hour. He then used the whole of Friday to write his report on the meeting, which he meant to give his boss on Monday. He also rested in the farm's serene environment. He rarely had time to rest these days. He then planned his journey back to Abuja, confirming his flight for Saturday 22 October at eight pm. He still had some free hours before his flight and thought of going to Lagos on Friday night and spending time with his family at his home in Ikeja Government Reservation Area (GRA). But he had to prepare his sermon for the next day and meet his banker to discuss some vital decisions concerning the last

lot of money he had transferred, so he dismissed the family visit. Another part of his mind reminded him it was fear that made him stay away.

Yes, fear of facing Funmi. I will write an explanatory letter to her later, asking for forgiveness and then face her. The family in Lagos can wait, he told himself.

He would call them later and make arrangement to go and spend the next weekend with them. It was more than six months since he had seen them, and one side of his mind told him that that was unfair to them, but he dismissed it.

the flight

eda to mo 'la o si, to dia f'eni ti o ni d'ola ; to n d'osu mefa

nobody knows tomorrow, the divination for the person who won't last tomorrow but is planning the next six months – a yorùbá proverb.

*october 22, 2005
domestic terminal,
murtala muhammed airport,
ikeja, lagos state.*

Jude had confirmed his seat in first class, but after more than two hours journeying from the farm at Ògbèrè to Lagos, he was caught in a traffic snarl at Airport Road, a few kilometres from the airport. Two trailers had had a head-on collision at the intersection of Oshodi Expressway and Airport Road, and their load and containers had fallen on both sides of the road. Coupled with Lagos' drivers' impatience and uncouth traffic manners, there was a standstill making it impossible for traffic to enter Airport Road from the Apapa-Oshodi Expressway. The Federal Road Safety Corps (FRSC) took some time to clear the jam but, while this was going on, the impatient drivers blocked all other alternate avenues. An astute Lagos driver could have found his way to the Agege Motor Road and entered the Airport through Ikeja but the out-of-town driver from Ògbèrè was unfamiliar with these shortcuts. Forty-five minutes before the eight pm DeltaWay flight to Abuja Jude's Prado Jeep entered the airport. The pastor quickly checked in, and went to the first class lounge to wait and wind down from the stressful Lagos traffic. Sitting in the luxuriously furnished lounge, with the lounge's staff pampering him, his mind went back to how he left Lagos for Abuja almost six years ago and to how he broke the news to his wife:

I have been transferred to Abuja to replace Mr. Ekanem.

Oh, that's good. Hope it came with the promotion?

Yes, thank God. As the good Lord said in Isaiah, "Hearken diligently unto me, and eat ye that which is good, and let your soul delight itself in fatness". God has been faithful.

Praise God.

Alleluia, my dear. I am not only relieving Mr. Ekanem, I am taking over in acting capacity as the Assistant Director of Finance and Logistics.

It is one of the reasons for my being moved to Abuja.

Oh! That's very good. Congratulations, dear.

Fúnmiláyò gave her husband a big kiss. They had been praying for this position for more than a year. *The ways of the Lord, as they say, are unfathomable*, Funmi thought. Then she asked:

What about your Bible College studies? What are you going to do?

I'll change it to weekends and I'll be flying down every Friday to attend while discussing with the church headquarters to transfer me to a church in Abuja.

That's okay then.

You know what this means, dear?

What?

It means we all have to move to Abuja, me first, and then you and the child after I have been able to settle down and get a place.

We?

Yes, you and the child. I don't think you expect me to be there alone?

It is not going to be easy. We can't move now but maybe after a year.

After a year? That is a long time for me to be alone.

You'll manage. Bólánlé is just a year old; I am being primed for the Deputy General Manager in the bank. It would be an inauspicious time to move now. We have only some branches at Abuja and it is not even the Area Office, which is in Kaduna, and I can't be moved there if and when I become the DGM.

It won't be all right. When I finish the Bible College I'll become a substantive pastor in charge of a parish and possibly an area pastor.

How do you want me to manage and cope?

You'll cope, my dear, you've always coped.

Funmi, "What God has joined together, let no one tear asunder". No one, Funmi, no job, no other reason; it is for better, for worse.

Yes, I know, Jay, but we have to be wise in this matter.

But... but we can... we ...

There is no but, dear; we will manage for the next year in the first instance and we will see what happens.

Funmi coyly kissed her husband and deftly moved the discussion away from this point to preparations for her husband's movement to Abuja. The issue was never discussed again even after the year she gave for a reappraisal, and here he was, six years after, shuttling between Abuja and Lagos like a yo-yo. Like a little fissure, this minor disagreement had slowly widened into a gulf between them. However, Funmi was unaware because she had been so immersed in her work, office and children. Right from when they first married, Jude had been a deft operator in stabilizing his marriage and keeping the peace in his home. Who would ever think he would end up in the position he found himself now?

Ah! Pastor Jay!

The voice that jolted him out of his reminiscences belonged to a young, svelte lady hanging tenaciously onto her partner's arm. *Ah! Young lovers*, Pastor Jude thought, remembering Funmi and himself when they were about to marry- how they couldn't get enough of each other. Seeing Jude and Funmi then, nobody would ever imagine their marriage becoming this 'tasteless lump of food' that can't be swallowed or spat out. The couple came to him and he recognized them: The Òsúnfúntós, but now called Olúnfúntós. As common to newly converted Pentecostal Christians, they changed their names. As reflective of newly converted Christians, their former names were reminiscent of idol worshipping. Òsúnfúntó meant Osun (goddess of Osun River) gave me the child to care for. The thinking being that, since they are now children of God, -as if Satan created traditionalists- Olúnfúntó, the new name, means God gave me to care for. Jude had married them four weeks ago. They must have finished their honeymoon and were now returning to Abuja to resume work.

Oh! The newest couple in the universe, how are you doing?

Fine, pastor. Fine. God is wonderful and faithful.

That's good then, are you still on honeymoon?

No, pastor, we came in from Calabar yesterday and are going back to Abuja. Two weeks at Obudu was heavenly, so enjoyable.

Have you ever been at Obudu Cattle Ranch, pastor?, the lady asked

No, I have been too busy though I wanted to go. I am planning to go next month during my annual leave.

Nice place, pastor, nice place.

That's good then, happy to hear that. Hope you are planning to start a family soon?

Pastor! You are so good when it comes to knowing the unknown.

How did you know?

Know what?

Kayode whispered into his ear.

Hen? That's good. Nike, you will need to join the Pregnant Women's Counselling Group now; every Thursday evening for prayers and counselling.

I will from next week, pastor.

Their discussion was cut short by the call to embark. As they filed into the bowel of the 'big steel bird', Pastor Jude was happy for the young couple. He remembered the days when Funmi and he were like them, talking as one, but quickly shut the pictures out of his mind as he entered the first class cabin. The cabin was like a miniature who-is-who in Nigeria. There was the general who was at the meeting in Ògbèrè, so also was Abdulwazir Mumuni whom most people in the corridors of power believed was going to be the next President. Mumuni the one Papa, the present president, had anointed to take over from him – was a generous soul, astute, humble and very intelligent. Mumuni was also rich and the Chairman of Nigerian Railways, where he had been doing a yeoman's job trying to revive it after many years of neglect and destructive cannibalizing by former managers. He had been at the Ògbèrè meeting, too. Chukudi Odenigbo, owner of Abuja's best hotel who was battling the Federal Capital Territory's edict to pull the hotel down for violation of the Abuja's master plan, was in the cabin too. Jude had heard he was at Ògbèrè to see Papa, but he was not sure if that was true. There were many others – permanent secretaries, ministers, three bank managers that he knew, diplomatic staff of some embassies at Abuja and three vice chancellors of universities on their way to the National Universities Commission. There was also a top officer of the CCC, the Corruption and Crime Commission. Jude put on his safety belt and perfunctorily listened to the safety instructions, which the Captain was giving through the PAS. As always, he closed his eyes and nodded off to sleep. No matter the time he was travelling, he was bound to sleep during take offs and landings. Some said

it was because of being a pastor and willingly putting his fate in his Creator's hand. Also normal to him were the dreams during such sleep on the plane. While others were tensed up, Pastor Jude was asleep and dreaming. Faintly he heard the pilot's announcement in his drowsy state.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am Imafidon Efosa. You are welcome to the Eagles Airlines flight to Abuja. We are ready to take off now for the one-hour journey to Abuja. Please switch off all your digital cameras, cellphones and ...

Imafidon's name made Pastor Jude even more relaxed, as he was a veteran pilot who had started with Nigerian Airways before the locusts ate it all up. With Imafidon having more than fifteen years' flight experience and the nation's 'best pilot' award more than five times; Pastor Jude knew he was in the best hands. So he slept and dreamed. He was on a racetrack. There were many competitors, almost fifty of them, and the track stretched into the horizon. It was a very competitive race. He was leading. Following him closely were two people whose faces he was unable to recognize. As the race progressed, he saw the tape at the end. Striving harder, he was almost breasting the tape when his foot struck an object and he started falling. As he was stumbling and falling, loud shouts and wailings woke him up. It was ten minutes into the flight and many passengers were crying out:

Jesu! Jesus! Laila i la lah! Jesu Kristi! Olorun O! Chineke! Oritse! Tamara!

Ah! Olorun gba wa. God! Oh God!

The plane was in a free fall. Bags and people became missiles flying across the cabin. Pastor Jude opened his mouth to pray but no prayer came out. Sitting immobile and still belted, while the tongue of fire started to caress his body, no word came to him, no sound.

thirties to fifties
1930-1959

two

AKÀNKÉ

the beginning

àtòrì l'ayé tó bá rò s'íwájú a tùn ro s'èyin''

the world is a whip, it bends forward and backwards – yorùbá proverb

1937-1954

*akanni lamidi compound, ipapo,
5,oba's market,akure,
olujumu's palace road,ijumu,
western region.*

Akànjí and I were unlucky, very unlucky, in love and child bearing. Àkànjí was my third husband, while I was his second wife. I was not from Ìjumu but I was born in Ìpápó near Òwò in the old Western region. Family conflicts, most especially when it concerns inheritance and land matters, were consuming fires, that destroy those in the centre of the conflict and those on the periphery. Our own fire happened like this. One moment my father had been playing the traditional game 'ayò' with my brother, the next he had slumped and died. He had been a healthy young man of forty-six. He had just come back from his farm, had his meal and was relaxing when he died. Out of his parents' two surviving children, he was the eldest. My grandfather left the greater part of the plantation to him because he was the eldest and the most hardworking. My Uncle was a dissolute lay-about and a reckless being. He was a gambler, womanizer, a drunk, and adept in traditional medicine and the occult. When my father was told about his inheritance, he rejected it and asked the family elders to transfer everything to his brother, but they refused to do so citing cultural imperatives. The first person shot in this battle was my father. This was soon followed by my senior brother's death, leaving two children with my mother.

Three months later with a loud wailing shout, I woke up to find many people in our room.

Iya Aremu, ki lo de? What happened?

Aremu ni o, o tùn ti gbe se e de o. It's Aremu, he has started again.

Ah, o ti o. Omo owo ki ku l'oju owo. Fingers do not die with the hand watching.

Omo ese ki ku l'aju ese. Toes do not die with the foot watching. Take this, give it to him.

Baba, he is no more breathing.

No more breathing ke, let me see.

Ah, Iya Aremu, wa gba f'Olórun ni o. You will have to accept it as your fate.

No, Baba, I won't.

Iya Aremu, you can't do anything about this.

Ah, Aremu, Aremu ogo omo a p'oko f'esin je, will you leave me this way? Where are you going without me? Why are you going before me?

There was a big fight before the dead child, my brother, could be separated from my mother. She held to him, crying, keening and wailing for almost a day. Aremu, my brother, fell ill approximately a week after his older brother Akanbi was buried. Aremu had been taken to so many adahunses, - *local medicine men*-, but none had been able to diagnose what was wrong with him. He was losing weight, had continuous fever and convulsed intermittently. This morning's convulsion was his last. Every family member believed they knew where the attacks were coming from but nobody could voice it or stop the war. Four nights after Aremu's death, on a very dark night, my mother Àdùnní hurriedly packed the little she could call her own, and left for Àkúré, hundreds of kilometres away from the battle-front at Ìpàpó, carrying me on her back. The previous night she had buried her third-born, my brother, Aremu. I was the only one left with her. I was six years old.

I stayed in Àkúré for fifteen years, twelve with my mother and three years by myself. Twelve years were not enough for my mother to forget her past tribulations, but during this time she poured herself into her business and me and established herself as a successful trader in beads and traditional textiles. She had no distractions, and tragedies tend to sharpen human instincts: Her total dedication and concentration meant she became a successful itinerant businesswoman, trading as far as Uselle-Uku, Agbor in the mid-west, Onitsha in the east, Ankpa, Ìjágbo and Èsìé in the north, and Ìsèyìn and Shakí in the west. She never remarried and, apart from her trade, her other love was me. She introduced me to her trade and many times I kept her shop filled with various traditional textiles from Nigeria's east, west and Middle Belt at Àkúré's Oba's Market while she travelled. At eighteen I became an orphan. My mother was coming back from her trip to Ankpa when her boat capsized at Idah. I was left alone, to manage my

mother's sprawling business and find my way through life without anybody's guidance. By the age of eighteen, I was schooled in the ways of trading, inexperienced in the way of love, but rich, very rich.

Like butterflies to a flower, suitors came in all sizes and shapes. I fended them off for more than two years but they kept on coming. Finally, I succumbed to pressure and at twenty I married my heartthrob. There was nobody to advise me except my few friends and Ìyálójà who was my mentor. Oládayíye, among the plethora of suitors seeking my hand, was the one I loved most. He was quiet, unassuming and a successful cocoa farmer. He went to war in Burma, was uninjured and came back to invest his discharge entitlements in cocoa farming which made him a rich man. In spite of his stature, he remained humble and this attracted me to him. His rival for my love was Akínrótímí, his younger brother – richer, more famous and brash. He had two wives already and wanted me as the third. I liked Akinrotimi but I didn't love him the way I loved the more mature 'Dayiye.

Dayiye and I were a good match. We were so complementary and intertwined that people took us to be sister and brother rather than wife and husband. But good things never last, it seems. In our fourth year tragedy happened. I was pregnant for the second time, having lost my first child who was a stillborn. Some miscarriages later, I had carried a pregnancy almost to term. Labour came in the middle of the night and my husband went to call his driver who lived some few houses from us, to take us to the hospital. However, he found himself in the middle of a fight between two native cults and he was killed before they recognized he was not a member of either. His death sent me into shock. The stress and delay meant I delivered the child after a long labour but he only lived a few hours.

Yorùbá traditions and customs made provisions for people like me. I was given the choice of getting married to the family or being released in order to marry another person from outside the family. I decided to remain married to the family, thereby becoming the third wife of Akínrótímí, my former suitor. It was a mistake, which ripened two years later. He went after a lithe beautiful young wife of a Babaláwo². The Babaláwo warned him but he didn't heed the warning.

One early morning while having sex with the young girl, he suddenly asked her for water to drink. The young woman, in her innocence, gave him water to drink without understanding the fact that she had been laced with Mágùn³. He drank, and he died. But his family ignored the circumstances of his death and I was blamed for it. Two men within three years were too much for the family.

Because I was rich and successful, rumours started circulating that I killed my two husbands in order to use their Áísìkí.⁴ I became the family's enemy and the persecution started. Like my mother before me, I had to flee. One night, after selling off my stock and taking the little materials that I could carry with me, I went north to Ìjumu. My landlady at Ìjumu was one of my customers but also a friend who had offered to shelter me when my situation started becoming unbearable at Àkùré. So when the women of the house focused their battle-plans on me, I sent word to her, inquiring if her offer was still open. She promised to come and pick me up. However, two days before she was due, my friend sent her shop-girl to pick me up, because my friend's brother had lost his wife and son. So when I arrived in Ìjumu the next day, I was thrust into another series of sorrowful activities. The various situations weighed greatly on me and I started feeling disenchanted and dejected with life.

I thought my being rich early was the reason for the problems I faced. *If I do not have the money any longer, I thought, maybe there will be improvement in my affairs.* More than anything I wanted to be happy, so I started ignoring my trade and the situation would have continued this way if not for my friend who made me realize that, in the midst of sadness, happiness abides and vice versa. I would not have known that Bí ekún bá pe dí ale kan, ayò mbò l'ówúrò, (*If sadness stays till night, happiness will come in the morning*)

² **Babaláwo:** A traditional medicine man and an Ifa, the Yorùbá god of divination's believer.

³ **Mágùn:** A type of medicine that is placed on a woman by her husband or, in the case of a young girl, her father, to deter men from having sexual relationship with her. If any man who does not have the medicine's antidote has a sexual relationship with the woman, such a man dies. His death comes in various ways. The most popular way is the man crowing like a cock and dying or somersaulting twice and dying on the third somersault or crying for water and the moment he drinks the water, he dies. If the intention is to shame them both, the lovers' will remain coupled in the open till their death.

⁴ **Áísìkí:** An individual's good fortune, which the Yorùbás believe, is brought from heaven. They also believe that spirits, witches, wizards or people through medicine or the occult could change a person's **áisìkí**, and that a person's **áisìkí** could be stolen or used by other people. Hence the prayer, "k'araye ma pa kadara mi da, ki aye ma lo **áisìkí** mi. (May human beings not change my destiny, and may they not use my good fortune)

the counselling

eniyan l'aso mi bi mo r'eni leyin mi, inu mi adun, ara mi a ya gaga.

the people are my clothes and riches; when I see people around me, I am happy, hale and hearty – yorùbá proverb

*september 2 1954
olujumu's palace,
ijumu, western region.*

Akànké, are you going to mope away your life and burn excess body fat through drinking your tears?

Tell me why do bad things happen to good people, Folúké? Why? Why all these evils?

Are you going to jettison your life? You won't go on with life again? Is shock paralysing you through fear, making you feel it could happen again? There are many things we don't understand, Akanke; too many mysteries. Too many issues and ideas that are bigger than us.

That does not excuse evil, does it? It does not explain suffering, sadness and hardship, most especially for those who do not deserve them.

But something does.

What?

Akànké, do you use pots?

Yes, I do.

You have various pots for various purposes don't you?

Yes, orù is different from isasùn, which is different from ape, ikòkò and àmù and other different types of pots. The decorative pots are distinct and different from functional pots. Even in functions there are differences.

A storing pot differs from a cooking pot.

Akànké, don't you know that the potter conceives what each pot will be right for when he is designing them?

Yes.

He also determines the processes they would go through and the qualities of each.

Yes, surely, the weight of the isasùn isn't the same with that of ape. The shape of the orù is distinct from the ikòkò. There are differences of size, too.

You are right there. The way they are placed in the furnace determines the amount of heat they get, and how long they are exposed to heat, doesn't it?

Yes, Folúké.

We are like pots in the hand of the Creator; Elédùmarè gave us particular qualities, shapes, talents and peculiarities like the various ikòkò.

He knows us because He made us. He knows His purposes for us and creates situations that will help us achieve the purposes, if we can find them.

But that does not explain unnecessary suffering, does it?

It does, my dear. While ìsasùn, which you put on fire all the time and every day, stays in the centre of the furnace for long periods, your flower pot does not stay that long. It is lighter and more fragile than the ìsasùn. What do you think ìsasùn would be thinking while in the furnace?

Unnecessary sufferings, perhaps?

Yes. Yes, my friend.

But isn't the unnecessary suffering because of the long-term functions expected of it?

Yes ... yes, my friend. This does not explain the presence of evil in the world.

If God is as powerful as He is made to be, why did He create evil?

God did not create evil, my friend. Evil does not exist autonomously or something wholly created. Evil only exists in the absence of good and goodness, just as darkness only exists through light's absence.

Then why the evil men and evil acts in this world?

Evil, cruel and sadistic individuals are those without Elédùmarè's goodness in their minds and hearts. Evil exists and grows when Eda,⁵ human beings, remove themselves from Elédùmarè, Eleda⁶ and take His injunctions away from their souls.

Why then the perpetuation of evil in the name of religion?

Individuals or organisations' being religious does not always mean they are closer to God or Elédùmarè.

How right you are, my friend.

⁵ **Eda:** Human Beings

⁶ **Eleda:** The Creator

aborted movement

rírò ni t'ènyàn, síse ni t'Olórun.

man proposes, God disposes – yorùbá proverb

*september 2, 1954.
olujumu's palace road,
ijumu, western region.*

Folúké's counselling worked. I picked myself up, made contact with my suppliers and started my trade again. Ìjumu, though not as central and big as Àkúré, was more peaceful for me. I travelled to my various suppliers scattered over Nigeria but Ìjumu was my home. In the year and a quarter after my arrival in Ìjumu I was able to revive my trade fully. Once bitten, I decided to keep men at arm's length. I was living in my friend's house during this time. Having taken control of my life again, and having overcome my depression and despair, I thought the best thing was to help another. So I started counselling my friend's brother who had fallen headlong into depression.

Brother Àkànjí, life is not a straight line. You cannot just give up because you've lost your wife and son.

But why them? Why not me? If only...

If only what? Are you the Creator? Do you know their days?

If only I had gone on that journey instead of sending her to take the child to Ilorin. They would have survived.

What if something happened to your wife at home and something had taken your son while you survived, or you had died? God knows everything, sees all and made all to happen.

Why must it happen to me?

Why do you think it must happen to another and not you?

Your answer is not a consolation.

It's not meant to be. Nor the way you are thinking. Life has never been fair, Brother Àkànjí, and would never be if we have human beings in charge. Take whatever comes to you. Change that which you can change and stop worrying about those things you cannot change or understand.

Thank you. Since you came you've been of great help, though my troubles pale beside yours.

Ah! Brother Àkànjí, no trouble is little O. Trouble is trouble.

Yes, that's true.

With each discussion, I was becoming friendlier with him. There was no physical relationship. He was just not ready for another relationship, pining for his wife and child. He loved them too well, keeping too many mementoes of them so that he would not forget them. It was as if after their deaths he became frozen in mid-movement. Whenever I was in Ìjumu, after my itinerant trading, I helped clean his room. He had broken down so that he became unkempt and didn't bother. I saw a person slowly withering away and the only way I could help was cook his food, wash his clothes and try to inspire him. These, however, were not constant because it was only when I was around. I was his little sister and that was how he treated me.

Folúké's initial counselling kept growing in my mind and opened my eyes to various dimensions of life I had not thought of before. I became mellower and more patient with, and in, life. My love was my trade and my journeys and the voluntary activities I was getting involved in. Maybe these would have led to my living as an old spinster, but this was changed one day. After some time I decided to move out of Folúké's house to my own house that I had built in Ìjumu. My experiences in Àkúré reinforced the need to have my own house – not a rented one but one built to my taste. So as not to come across as an ingrate, I went to tell Àkànjí about my intention to leave and move to my own house. I had told Folúké about my house earlier when it was under construction, but I had begged her not to tell her brother. So a day before my planned move, I went to tell him and thank him for what he had done to make my stay in Ìjumu pleasant and comfortable. On my way, I met Folúké.

the proposition

a kù soó síbè , ká kù síbè

we don't utter it and die there – yorùbá proverb

*october 5, 1955.
olujumu's palace road,
ìjumu, western region*

Àkànjí sent me.

Sent you where and to whom?

He sent me to you.

Hope no problem?

No, none. It's just a small matter.

What is the matter?

Àkànjí wants to marry you. He has been pestering me, asking me to tell you. I told him to come to you himself.

Is that so?

On hearing you are leaving, he begged me to serve as his intermediary and that is why I am here.

It was not that I was shocked or anything like that. I was silent for a long time and my friend could not understand my silence. In my silence, wheels were turning in my head.

Could anything good come out of this? Is this what I need now? Is it not an invitation to trouble again? I have become almost too independent now. Would he understand and give me my freedom? Can I cope with repairing a damaged person like him? Will I be able to live up to his old wife? Is it possible for me to be happy again? Am I not being made fun of again? Isn't it better for me to remain single and accept my cross? What happens if it does not work again? Another move? What if he dies after I marry him? Will my friendship with his sister continue? Is this not a big risky journey again?

My friend looked at me, shook her head, stood up and began walking away. Disappointment was written over her face but also a modicum of understanding and, as she moved, I could sense a call for help, which she was not uttering.

Eh! Folúké, stop. It isn't that I don't like your brother. He has been good to me but you know my story. You know my history. I am still hurting. My body and soul aren't ready yet.

Yes, I know, but life goes on, Akàké. Life does not stop for anybody. Life goes on. It doesn't stop, no matter what we do or do not do.

Yes, I know. I am afraid. I am afraid for myself. I am afraid for your brother.

I know. I have my fears, too, when you realize there are just the two of us. I have my fears, Akanke, I do. But life continues. One does not allow fear to paralyse one from living. Fear is false evidence appearing to be real. I have discussed it with him.

What does he say? What were his thoughts?

We are all in the hands of God. God knows best and we can't fight Him.

I know, Folúké, I know but...but...

There is no but. If he accepts you and is ready to try again, I see no reason why you can't. Who knows tomorrow? Who can predict the days to come?

No one, Folúké, No one. But... but... you know how devastating it would be for me to lose another man. I would be wrecked. I hope I have not been cursed or fallen from my mother's back⁷.

Nothing like that. God's mind is inscrutable. Who can read it? Who is like God? Who is there when He takes His actions or conceives them? Who understands His ways?

None, my dear, He knows and understands everything. He is great mystery to us but...

But...no but, Akanke. No but. If my brother is ready to take the risk, I think it is about time for you and that you also can take it.

Okay. Give me time to think about it.

My thinking took more than a week. During this time I was unable to move to my house. I was in deep thought, not knowing what to do. A part of me wanted to say yes. The cautious part wanted me to be very cautious. A third man dying on me will stamp me, giving me a label – husband killer. No man would be brave enough to talk to me and it would be some few steps to being called a witch. I was like a tight ropewalker whose split-second timing determines his walking the rope or falling from a height to be broken. I was torn and then, suddenly, clarity came. I decided it would either work or not. Either he lives and I become happy, or he dies and I become an outcast and a sad woman to the end of my life. Who says I am not an outcast even now? I took the risk. I called my friend and gave my acceptance. The marriage was low, low key. There were no ceremonies. In Yorùbá tradition, if a man dies in his wife's house or in his in-laws' house, he is not taken out of the house through the door but through the windows and that is a shame because it is a thief who comes through the window. So I rented my house out and moved my belongings to my new husband's house.

birth pangs

àrǐjọ àrǐyò lá n kí omo tuntun

it's with joy and happiness that we welcome a new born babe – a
yorùbá saying

*april 8, 1956
ecwa hospital road,
kabba, western region.*

Breathe, breathe out and push. Push.

⁷ The Yorùbás believe that if a child falls from the mother's back while being carried, she is fated to marry seven husbands of whom all would die except the seventh, or he would marry nine wives of whom all would die except the ninth.

I am.

That's good, my dear. Breathe out more. Now push. Push with all your strength. Push.

I am pushing, Sister.

Yes, I know, my dear, but push. Push with all your energy. You are almost there. Oya breathe. Breathe-r-e-a-t-h-e!

I am, Sister.

Not yet. Look I am a woman, too; I know what you are going through. Push...push; put all your energy into it. Breathe and push.

I am tired.

You can't afford to be now. You are almost there. Look the head is coming out. Push. Push the more.

I am.

Then the pain came again. Slowly, but quicker than before. Like sipping a hot pepper-soup, the pain welled up, like being stung by a thousand bees. The pain rose and I was not bearing it again. I was in my own world of pain. Then I kept quiet. It was the interminable sighs and my breathing that kept me company in my world. And then I was breathing too much and almost too quickly. The pain became unbearable. I wanted to shout but no sound came. The pain now came like a lightning bolt and went through my whole body from the top of my head to the sole of my feet. My body arched. I was feeling weak and almost giving up but the sister's shout woke me up again.

Breathe. Oya. Breathe. Push, push, and push with all your strength, my dear. Push.

I struggled to push and the pain increased and I seemed to be knocking at death's door. Then, the pain exploded inside me, like dynamite went off inside me. Then the pain. The searing excruciating pain and I screamed. Then the release. The bliss. The quiet after the storm. The quiet was punctuated by a cry. My baby's cry. I felt drowsy and weak. I stretched my hand for my baby but I grasped empty air. My baby had been rushed to the incubator. He came too early – only seven months and a few days.

three

FOLÚKÉ

the sighting

eni nla ni n se nkan nla

great people do great things – a yorùbá saying

*april 8, 1956
ecwa hospital road,
seventh day adventist hospital,
kabba, western region.*

A kànke and Àkànjí's son had arrived – my nephew. The moment I saw him, I knew who he was, and who he would be. I knew. But how do you discuss the unexplainable with my unbelieving brother? How do I convince him to take necessary steps towards helping this new but ancient arrival? And how do I inform him about his visitor now that he is a Krio⁸? Thoughts were going through my mind as the medical people tried to make the premature babe comfortable. Incubator, tubes, medicine and other things were put into place to save his life. I laughed. All unnecessary. I could have told them one simple thing to do that would have anchored him here among us, but they wouldn't have believed me. I would not have been allowed to even perform the simple act that would have made him stay without all those troubles they went through. Not to worry, however, this one is not going anywhere.

My ability to see between times came very early, when I was seven.

Maami, who are these men coming inside?

Which men, Folúké? You've started again. Where are they?

Maami, they are walking in now. Can't you see them?

I can't see anybody. Stop this game. Stop this, your wild imagination tales. Stop telling lies. A child does not tell tales.

It is true, Maami. It is true, they are sitting down. They are laughing. Maybe they ...

Keep quiet there. Let me concentrate on what I am doing.

⁸ **Krio:** Early Christian converts in Yorùbá land were called Krios. This means Creole speakers. Creole was the bastardised mixture of English and indigenous language which the Sierra Leone freed slaves spoke. The freed slaves were the first church officials in Yorùbá land. They were also called Krios because of their conservative and religious fundamentalist life style.

Okay, Maami.

That was the first time I found out I could see what others cannot. I could traverse dimensions. The three men I saw really sat down and talked to me and I was not hallucinatory. They gave me instructions and directed me to places and objects that existed in the real world. I was told many things then that I cannot remember now but one thing they told me during that first visit that I still remember was that I have a purpose for being in the world. I was told of jobs I had to do and asked to not be afraid.

Most of those things they said I would do, I have now done, but there are still some that are yet to happen. My parents disbelieved me for more than eight years, and I had to learn to keep quiet whenever I saw or heard anything and to keep my activities secret, even when I was using my power to heal some people and helping others to sometimes find what they had lost or get some vital information. I have always asked people to keep such acts confidential. Some people, however, do not keep my deeds secret. At an early age, therefore, I had a stream of people coming to ask for my help. As much as I wanted my powers kept secret, the efficacy of my words and actions publicised me. When I was fifteen a message came about my father that I was unable to keep silent about.

My father wanted to go on a business journey to Ibadan and he had to take with him a lot of money. Two days before he embarked on the journey, I saw a vision of him accosted in Ibadan Motor Park by two men who were trying to steal the money he was carrying. I told my dad and described the men. I begged him to be careful, but he took the warning lightly, making fun of my 'second eyes', as he called it. On his return, he told us what happened to him at Ibadan. The men I described, including the one I told him would have six fingers on his left hand, had accosted him. It was the image of the six-fingered man that saved him from being robbed. He had to beat the men at their game in order to save his neck and money. After that my father became my defendant against my still-unbelieving mother who thought I was a mischievous little attention-seeking pest, interested only in fabulation.

What? It's not possible. Ah! I need to ask Baba Fagbemi. This person that has just walked in cannot be this new baby's guest. No, it cannot be.

I wanted to enter the room where the baby had been put in a glass bubble with tubes coming out of his nose, mouth and his hands. I wanted to at least talk with and welcome him.

You can't enter the room, Ma.

He is my nephew and the mother is too weak to come and see him.

The nurse looked at me as if I was a witch just arrived to snuff out the baby's life. I pleaded with her, telling her how important it was for me to be able to tell my brother what happened at the birth of his son. After some considerations, she accepted my going in to see him.

Okay, You can go in but you can only look at him. You can't carry him or touch him.

I won't.

I entered the room, greeted him and told him the few words I was told to tell him. The baby laughed and replied he had been waiting for me because he had been told I would be his mentor here on earth. As I went out I didn't look at the other being in the room with him, but I was wondering what he could be doing there. What could Alubuntu be doing in a day-old child's presence? Had he come to take him home? It would be inconsistent with this boy's destiny. Why is this immortal being in that room?

the consultation

akunleyan ohun l'adayeba, a de 'le aye tan, oju n kan gbogbo wa

predestination is what we come to earth to meet; we reached the world
and become impatient – *yorùbá* proverb

*april 9, 1956,
fadamilola fagbemi's compound,
ijumu, western region*

Baba, good morning O.

Good morning, Apinke.

Why are you here this morning?

I am here because of my nephew.

Your nephew, Folúké?

Yes, my nephew, my brother's new wife has just delivered a baby boy but they are still in Kabba.

Kabba ke, why such a distance?

She had a prolonged labour and had to be taken to the hospital in Kabba.

A labour problem, Apinke, and you didn't come to call me? Have you seen where somebody operated on a goat to deliver her kid? Do leaves inconvenience the tree before falling?

Yes, I know, Baba. I tried my best but I couldn't come to you when it was beyond my power. You know my brother and his Krio beliefs.

Ha, omode o m'ogun on pe l'efo. A child does not recognise a herb, calling it vegetable. These new fangled beliefs are fleeting; they are not rooted like our forebears' beliefs.

I know, Baba, but how do you explain the unseen to the unconvinced?

Yes, I know, but the Beginning, Isese, will always be there. Have you heard about the ground's death? The ground does not die, she only loses her nutrients. Tradition and customs will always be there. We are our culture as our culture determines who we are; when we lose that, we become nothing, a child of nowhere.

I know, Baba, I know.

Well, what about your nephew?

He is an ancient man that has come again, Baba.

We still have them coming? Ha, our ancestors have not ignored us.

That's true, Baba. But...but there was a problem O. While welcoming him, there was a guest that should not be with him at this time. I saw Alubuntu.

Alubuntu? Elédùmarè's policeman?

Yes, Baba, Iku, Death the everlasting, and ever-present grim reaper.

Ah, he shouldn't be there at this time. If you say the boy is an ancient man.

That's what brought me. What does Alubuntu want from him now?

Well, let me consult Orunmila.

Baba Fagbemi threw the Opele, the divining chain, and drew the representation of each throwing in the Opon Ifa, the divining tray. After studying the divining tray for some time, he sighed.

Hun Edi Meji!

What is it, Baba?

His answer was the recitation of the Odu Ifa, the Ifa verse Edi Meji.

*Koto koto l'a pile aran, bo ba d'oke a dí gburudu
B'o ba d'oke a dí gbarada
A dia fun Ipesan tí i se bale oja
Ipesan ma de o bale oja
Ti o nlo mu le bujoko*

Ipesan l'oruko a n p'Odan
Olori re ma d'oja O...
Won Ni k'Odan o rubo
Ko ma ba r'elenini ni bujoko e
Obuko kan, akuko kan, ada kan ati egbetalelogbon.
Won ni nibi yoo tí n'ibujoko
Yoo na apa, yoo na ese
Odan gbo ebo
O ru Obuko kan ati egbetalelogbon tí i se ibujoko
Ko ru akuko ati ada kan
Ti o je ko pe n' ibujoko na.
Nigba ti Odan de ibujoko
O na apa, O na ese
Nigba ti o na apa ti o na ese tan
Awon omo araye de
Won mu ada, won si bere si f'ada won lapa, won lese.

Hallowing is the foundation of the aran drum; if it goes up, it becomes huge.
 If it goes up it becomes immense. Was the one who cast Ifa for Ipesan
 Ipesan chief of the Market, Ipesan arrives, Oh, Chief of the Market.
 Ipesan is what we call Odan⁹ tree, the Banyon Tree,
 A lucky person arrives at the market...
 They said that Odan tree should sacrifice,
 One he –goat, one cock, one cutlass and one shilling seven pence and eight onini
 So that he would not encounter a slanderer at his settlement.
 They said he would find a large enough place in which to settle,
 And that he would stretch his arms and his legs.
 Odan tree heard the sacrifice and,
 He offered one he –goat and one shilling seven pence and eight onini, for a place in
 which to settle.
 But he did not offer the cock and the cutlass,
 That he might be able to stay there for a long time.
 When Odan reached his settlement, he stretched out his arms
 And stretched out his legs
 But when he has finished stretching them out,
 People came and took a cutlass and began to cut off his arms and legs.¹⁰

After the Edi Meji's¹¹ recitation, I turned to Baba Fagbemi and inquired,

Baba, what are we to do?

*Simple. We'll need to investigate further his akosejaye¹² and perform the
 necessary etutu¹³*

⁹ **Odan** – Fig/Banyan Tree (Ficus spp. Urticales Moracene)

¹⁰ The lines starting from “Koto koto la pile aran... “ On page 48 to the line “People came and took a cutlass and began to cut off his arms and legs’ on page 49 are taken from Bascom, W, (1969) *Ifa Divination: Communication between Gods and Men in West Africa*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press pp.131-134

¹¹ **Edi Meji**: A chapter in Ifa Literary Corpus. The recited verse is the second verse of this chapter made up of five verses. Edi is one of Ifa divination's sixteen figures.

What sacrifices are needed?

Not so much – a cock, one he-goat, one cutlass and seventeen naira in coins.

Well, when do I come to perform the necessary rituals?

No, you can't do it. The parents will have to come and inquire about his Akosejaye, and as for the rituals, you cannot, nor his mother either.

Who can?

His father.

the suggestion

omode o m'ogun, o n pe l'efo

a child does not recognise a herb, he calls it vegetable – *yorùbá*
proverb

april 13, 1956
olujumu's palace road,
ijumu, western region.

It was early morning and as usual we all congregated at Àkànjí's living room for the early morning prayers. My brother, Àkànjí entered the room, greeted us, closed his eyes and began a prayer.

Our God and creator, everlasting Father, we thank you for giving us this new dawn and day. We thank you for being with us not only during the night but also guarding us from evil and temptations. We thank you for providing our needs, and giving us a new baby. We also thank you for safeguarding the lives of both mother and son though the enemy wanted us to lose both. We pray your holy spirit will continue to lead and guide us as we go about our business today and other days. We pray in Jesus name, our Lord and saviour. Amen

Amen. Good morning, Broda mi.

Good morning, Folúké. Apinke¹⁴ ogo, omo Ikoyi eso, se o ji re?

Thank you, Broda mi, thank you, sir.

¹² **Akosejaye:** The Yorùbás believe that every individual born into this world has a life path or destiny. Investigating this life path or destiny at birth, would help in having knowledge of what the child can do, the child's appropriate career, what the child can eat or drink and those things that are taboos for the child. All these have been discarded with the inception of Christianity, Islam and modern civilization.

¹³ **Etutu:** Sacrifices or rituals needed to be performed after divination or the finding of a child's **akosejaye**. The rituals or sacrifice will help in tempering bad influences or appease malevolent spirits (**ajoguns**) and witches and wizards (**oso and aje**) so that they will not deflect or change the child's destiny.

¹⁴ **Apinke**, the daughter of Ikoyi guardsmen, did you wake well? This is a type of cognomen or praise name called **oriki** for a family. The question is usually asked from Yorùbás early in the morning after the calling of the cognomen.

I am the one to thank you and I thank God for giving you to me. I don't know what I would have done without you. I don't know where I would have been.

Ah, Broda mi, ko to yen.

Apinke, O ju yen lo. If you were not there during my trials would I still be living? I lost all sense of God, I faltered in my faith.

Such things happen, but God would have brought another person to comfort you.

Not in the way you've been with me. Not with your advice and never with the new happiness you gave me after the tragedy.

New happiness?

Yes, your friend in the first instance and this new 'ayò abara tintin', the new babe.

It's Elédùmarè's doing, Broda mi, we are all in God's hands.

Yes, but God does not come down to be with us. He uses people.

True, he could have used another person, and there's nothing outstanding in what I did.

There is something more than outstanding. It is not all our own flesh and blood that can do what you did, most especially when one recognises your state. Ore da ni ko to pon, tori eni abinibi, a t'abanigbele n da ni. When friends betray us we should not complain, because siblings do betray us not to talk of our neighbours.

What would have been my gain? You are my only brother. The only one left with me.

That notwithstanding, have you forgotten Soji's case?

Forgotten ke, how his only sister wanted to use him for money ritual because he is hunchbacked.

Hen, hen, so you know it is not because you are related to me; it is just because you are good.

You have always been good to me, too. You have always been there after we lost our parents. I know what you did for me and how you took care of me. I am only repaying a bit of what you've done for me.

I was just doing my duty.

The same way as I am doing mine.

Thank you all the same. But...but Folúké, why is life this difficult for me? Why am I always having problems? Why is it that every time 'to ba ti d'ori akayin mi, akara a d'egun?'¹⁵

Why are you thinking like this now?

¹⁵ Whenever it comes to the toothless individual's case, *akara*, bean cake (a soft food) turns into bone (a hard substance). This is a Yorùbá proverb.

Why must I not think this way? Don't you know I would have lost another wife? What do you think people would have been saying if Akanke died during childbirth?

But God did not allow that. Why don't you look at the bright side that she survived?

Yes, must we forget the child is premature? Why me, Lord, why me?

Brother mi, all things are in God's hands. We are His creatures and we cannot question His will and actions. He has reasons for what he does. It is not for us to question Him.

Yes, yes, you are right.

We need to thank Him in all situations. Who has been taking care of both of us since our parents died when you were ten and I was four?

He has been our hope and pillar of support.

*We continuously need to thank Him no matter what he gives to us. He is omniscient and omnipotent. He is the **alewilese** and **aleselewi**¹⁶. We are who we are because of His grace and mercy.*

You are quite right. To think you are the one explaining this to me. I should have been the one giving you this sermon. Thank you, my sister. Thank you.

No need to thank me, Broda mi, that's one of the reasons for my being here in this existence.

I was unable to see both of them yesterday. You know I have to go and see the Bishop. How are they doing?

They are fine. By the way, Broda, I observed some things when I saw him the day he was born but I do not know how to tell you.

Why?

You know you are a reverend now.

Yes and then?

What I saw was not physical. It was ...

It was what? Ok...Ok you must have seen something from the other world, hen? I ve seen your clairvoyant power so many times. So what did you see this time o, Apinke alabara meji?¹⁷

Broda mi, I don't like it O.

I am just joking.

You know I don't like that kind of joke. I am not a witch O!

Don't be angry. It is just a joke; I am pulling your leg.

¹⁶ The one who acts and utters and who utters and it is done. This is one of God's praise names in Yorùbá .

¹⁷ Apinke, the double bodied one Yorùbá euphemism for witches.

That child is an ancient soul and he is here for a purpose. Nothing will happen to him or disturb his mission.

Thank God. I have been so worried about his survival. I don't know, maybe the various problems I have gone through have shaken my belief in God. Folúké, I am in a state of doubt.

You don't have to doubt, Broda mi, look beyond yourself. Look unto God and count your blessings.

How true. How true.

Your boy will survive and to old age, though his living to old age has some conditions and factors.

What factors? What conditions?

Those are what I was afraid to tell you.

Tell me now, 'oro i sá wuwo ka f'obe bu¹⁸?

Broda mi, we must check his akosejaye.

There is nothing wrong in that, but can't we leave everything in God's hands?

We can but we also need directions and you know we have to do it in the traditional way.

Traditional way, Apinke? You know that...

Let me finish, Broda, 't'ibi t'ire la da le aye'¹⁹, the new born babe came with what will sabotage his achieving the purpose he is here for and make him die before his time. That was what I saw on the day he was born.

Ehn, so what can we do to amend this?

After inquiring into his akosejaye, we need to perform some rituals.

Rituals, Apinke, rituals, in this house?

Broda mi, you know I wouldn't have told you if it is what I could have done by myself. I am not a Kristiani like you. I know you wouldn't do it and wouldn't allow any of us to carry it out the moment you know about it. That was why I was afraid to tell you.

You are right. I have just been made a reverend and the vicar of a church. What do you want my church members to think of me? Won't they think it is a case of reverend worshipping Mammon and God?

Broda mi, it isn't like that.' Ile eni la ti n je ekute onidodo'²⁰

Yes, but...

¹⁸ Words cannot be so heavy that we cut it with a knife, a Yorùbá proverb.

¹⁹ The world is created in duality. It contains evil and good.

²⁰ It is in the secrecy of our house that we eat the rat with a navel, a Yorùbá proverb.

There is no but, brother. It's this baby's future and purpose here. He was given to us, and we must help him in achieving what he is here for. Are we to shirk that responsibility because of our beliefs? You wouldn't have heard of this but...but...I cannot carry out the rituals, nor his mother.

Who will then perform the rituals?

You.

Me?

sixties to seventies
1960-1979

four

AKANJI

visit from beyond

asan ninu asan, ni oniwasu wi, ofo ninu ofo

“vanity of vanities”; says the preacher, “vanity of vanities”, all is vanity
– ecclesiastes 1:2(NKJV)

*July 17, 1967
st.mark's anglican vicarage,
kabba, kwara state.*

Losing my faith, I Àkànjí was wallowing in doubt and ruminating on my life, and then I questioned God. Looking back not in anger but in sorrow and anguish, I assessed my life and existence and concluded it had all been in vain. ‘Vanity of vanity, all is vanity’, the preacher said. A close look into my almost sixty-two years of life revealed it had been for nothing, I surmised. What did I do wrong? Where did I take the wrong turn? Why was I created? As an example, or for suffering? I have always been the devoted one, and since childhood, God’s power has always awed me, most especially His immensity and the beauty of His creation. I wondered about the complexity of God’s mind, the wide expanse and unlimited cosmos and the depth of existence, but at every point of my life I have received life knocks that tend to shock me. He, the one I believed and had faith in, has not only been deaf but also merciless to me. You said, “With the merciful thou wilt show thyself merciful, with an upright man thou wilt show thyself upright, with the pure thou wilt show thyself pure, and with the wicked thou wilt show thyself wicked”.

In what way have I been wicked, Lord, that your visitations to me have been in trials and tribulations? Do you really exist? Where are you? Where are your eyes on me? Why are you hiding your face from me? Why am I a guinea pig in your laboratory? Why, Lord, why? What am I saying? Lord, Lord, please forgive me. Who am I to question you? What have I gone through that is comparable to my Saviour’s suffering on the cross? Whatever you have taken me through pales beside Job’s travails, Lord. Forgive my sins and iniquities. Have mercy on me; please, have mercy on me. I am just human.

Yesterday, I buried my second wife and stillborn child. After five miscarriages, countless prayers and a ray of hope that flickered at noon, I was informed of Akanke’s

death with her child. Her exit led to my mind exploding into conflicting thoughts. I indulged myself in exploring wild and wilder thoughts. *What do I have to lose again*, I questioned myself. My faith was in tatters and my courage and hope to live had deserted me. Like a person on death row, I kept seeing my transition. What had my life been except sufferings, tribulations upon tribulations, and acute afflictions and anguishes? Joy and happiness never stayed long in my house, but sadness and unhappiness are permanent residents. Whenever rays of light show in my life, they are quickly snuffed out by my life's overpowering and overhanging darkness. Life had become suffering's rollercoaster for me. Why must I continue living? Should I not go and meet my Creator and ask why I am created for anguish alone?

In the last four years, there seemed to have been a change in the tide of my life. I would even say it couldn't have been better. I became an Archdeacon, my wife's business boomed, Jude, our son, was doing well in school, and my wife was expecting a new baby after five miscarriages. Everything was rosy and I was deceived, deceived into believing that my good luck would last. I prayed that it would. I prayed, how I prayed. When the pregnancy was carried to term, I rejoiced. There was a swagger in my walk and my sermons talked more of hope, faith, belief and waiting for the Lord. Oh, how I deceived myself. Three days ago, her water broke but the calabash broke along with it. Rushed to the best hospital in Ilorin, with the best obstetrician and gynaecologist in attendance to deliver the baby, what they brought back for me was a stillborn and my wife's cadaver. Of what use were the two to me? I prepared myself for death in order to go and meet them. It had been too cold around here lately.

Someone once said that, towards one's last moments, one could see one's life flitting before one's eyes. In my case, I did not have the luxury of my last moments. My life in all its meanness had been replaying itself frame by frame on my mind's large screen. I had been an only son; my mother birthed and buried seven children to retain me. It was after her giving up on ever having another child that I came and stayed. My parents named me Kokumo and my sister was born some years after. Our parents died under bizarre circumstances while I was eleven and my sister five. My father, the richest man in Ìjumu then, suddenly took ill in the middle of the day and had to be rushed to Kabba for treatment. There were only three vehicles in Ìjumu then. My father owned two of the vehicles and the third was his friend's. The vehicles, which had been used on the morning of the day in question, refused to work in spite of countless efforts. It was a passing timber truck that was used to carry him to Kabba where he was certified dead

on arrival. As children, life's undercurrents meant nothing to us, but when our mother slumped and died three days later, at our father's burial, we knew something was amiss. Those who knew about such things talked of *asasi or aransi*²¹ but these were new words and images to us. What we knew was that something had made us orphans and like orphans we were treated.

Our uncles took over everything that belonged to our parents. Our saving grace was Ijumu's church catechist who took us in after we were made vagrants by those meant to take good care of us. I became a staunch believer, a person of faith. My faith and belief in God has grown since I experienced God's hands in our lives. We grew up to reclaim our parent's properties when our usurpers started dying one after the other. The remaining uncles and aunts brought us to our parents' house and handed us an account of what they had done with the properties. I was seventeen and my sister eleven. So, I grew up seeing the hands of God.

My adult life, however, has been a pendulum of suffering. I have lost my first wife and child in tragic circumstances, and now in my twilight years, I lost the one who had brought a lot of joy and happiness to my life, the one who reaffirmed my hope and belief in God after the trauma of my first wife's loss. Now hopes that I should retire and live in happiness with her, train my children and look forward to seeing my grand children have been turned into a sorrowful picnic. I have become lonely and isolated in my life's evening. My heart gave way after I heard the news of their deaths, and I have been bed-ridden since then. I am now suspended between this life and the next, switching between the two worlds with ease.

This loneliness and isolation is too much. What is left for me to do? What am I living for? Yes, my dears, you have come to take me home. Wait, let me get ready. Wait, I'll soon join you. Wait...wait...

²¹ **Aransi**: Types of Yorùbá occult practice in which words, curses or animals like snakes or other dangerous animals (or in the case of a hunter, mistaking a human being for an animal) is sent to a person through remote means and the person carries out such injunctions without knowing why. This is usually achieved through word of mouth. **Asasi** is almost like **aransi** but the difference is that in **asasi** the person targeted would not realise what is happening until after the event. For example, a man may be called to kill his wife or do harm to his children and he would carry it out without understanding or knowing why and will greatly regret the action when his vision clears.

the valedictory

*olukuluku ohun li akoko wa fun, ati igba fun ise gbogbo l'abe òrun.
Igba bibi ni, ati igba kiku, igba gbin gbin ati igba kika ohun ti a gbin.*

to everything, there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven.
A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck
what is planted – ecclesiastes 3:1-2

*july 23 1967
st.mark's anglican vicarage,
kabba, kwara state.*

*Broda mi, Àkànjí Qgq, we did not agree to this. Please, look at your son. You
can't leave us like this.*

A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance.

We won't weep in this house, l'ase Edumare. Broda mi, Broda mi.

*Ye es, did you call, Akànké? I am on the way, just a moment more. I've almost
finished.*

*Ah, Broda mi. Akanke Ke? She is dead. It is your sister Folúké. Please, please
you can't leave me alone. Please...please, what will I do without you?*

Apinke, what are you doing here? Where is Jude?

He went to school. Should I go and bring him?

*No. You have done enough. You've always been my good sister. You've tried
your best to make my life sweet and livable here. May God continue to bless you.*

Amin, Broda mi, Amin.

*Look, the time is nearer. I don't think I will survive this. Yes...yes, I can see the
car you have brought, Akanke. I am coming.*

Broda mi, Broda mi, Broda mi!

*Hen ...en, Apinke. I have to go now. Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in
peace, according to thy word, for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou
has prepared before the face of the people. A light...*

Broda mi, Broda mi, please wake up, please. Broda Àkànjí, Broda E gba mi O

*Hun ...hun, Apinke, you are still there. Apinke, please take care of my son. Don't
cry, it's time for me to go. Look after the house and make sure my son becomes
the best he can be. Teach him, guide him right. Oh, this pain, this pain.*

Let me get your medicine.

*It's of no use, Apinke; I've started seeing Omobonike, Luke and Àkànké. Can't
you see them? They are waiting for me. Can't you see the white car they
brought?*

I can Broda mi, but this is not the time for you to go.

five

TISA JAMES+FOLUKE

a redeeming talk

ogede dudu o ya busan, omo buruku o ya lu pa

an unripe plantain is not easily bitten into, as a problem child is not easily battered to death – *yorùbá* proverb

*tuesday, august 22, 1967
ijumu comprehensive high school,
ijumu.
kwara state.*

Jay is now a truant. I should know I am his teacher. I am James Towolawi but the students call me Pa Jamisi. The best-behaved and the most brilliant student in my class is now a truant. It started in an innocuous manner almost a month ago. I thought he had been cutting class as a result of losing his parents and that he was in a state of shock. I gave him time, in my mind, to get over his loss. It's not every day you wake to find your parents gone, so I felt he needed time to pick up again. There are very few counsellors in schools, and for a school like ours, which is far from the city centre, there was none. Nigeria is in the middle of a civil war and schools are just a little part of the problems our nation is facing. But the war is sucking the truants and the deviants out of the school system and into the armed forces. Jay may end up at the front. He is tall and mature looking. I would not have realised what was happening to him, if he had not joined the school's most disruptive elements.

He has become a member of the students' gang in the school, whose morning assembly ground is Mama Bushirat's Buka where they eat, tattle, solicit girls, pass marijuana and drinks round and generally waste their days and life. They are what the teachers and the school authorities call the NFA (no future ambition) members and we, as teachers, are happy that the war is taking this element and straightening them out through discipline and the horrors they see at the front. The gang keeps on attracting members in spite of its depletion because there are students who hate school and, being teenagers, hate conforming to the staid rules school the preaches. Above all, they hate teachers because not only are they "fuddy duddies", they are "old school" and "pains in the ass". They detest the grilling they are meant to go through in school because rules, assignments and instruction overwhelm and intimidate them. Some of them do not have

the brains to cope with the rigours of schooling. The brainy ones lack the strength of character to withstand peer pressure. I have always asked myself, what makes the teenage years rebellious years? Is it that, being at the crossroads, they do not have the adults' insight? Is it that they see more clearly than the adults at that stage and those adults' conflicting personas lead them to revolt? I think the teenager's journey is either a zigzag or a straight line, and adults who have gone through what teenagers are going through need only to remember what they the adults went through while teenagers. No matter the path the teenager may then choose, it is the adult's duty to support and pray for them realising that the biological changes going through them at this time to are largely responsible for their behaviours. This will help and if well handled, lead the teenagers away from the path of perdition. That was what I needed to do with Jude. However, I wouldn't have had the opportunity of helping him back from the precipice if not for a prodding from one of the school's bad boys.

I was on my way home one afternoon when the gang leader, their Capo or Don as he was called, approached me. I was afraid because I had heard a lot about him, mostly unsavoury, and frightening. I had heard his name mentioned in so many exploits but I had never had a face-to-face encounter with him. As the school's recently transferred Vice Principal, I had even heard about his escapades in my former school, but when I came to this school I had not met him until this particular afternoon. He was different from the image I had of him. Instead of being hefty, he was lanky. Rather than being rough, uncouth, brash and loud mouthed, he was softly spoken, polite and cultured. I had expected him to smell of marijuana's fumes and to be red-eyed, but he had on a nice perfume and had clear and penetrating eyes, not a whiff of marijuana around him. He looked like someone I could break in two but I did not allow this impression to deceive me. I was sure he was not only trained in unarmed combat, but that his goons must also have been following us and, though well hidden, any untoward act of mine would have brought them out. So I waited for him to direct the discussion because I was not privy to his mind and did not know what I could say.

Pa Jamisi, I will never forgive you and you will have to answer to me if you do not take action on what I want to discuss with you now.

What's so important that it would make enemies of us?

Well, it would because you may not want to act on it.

What gives you that idea?

You may think it is from a vagabond like me, a deviant and so it won't make any sense to you and you may decide to ignore it.

I don't think so.

You better not. It's about Jay.

Who is Jay?

Jude.

Jude?

Yes, Jude. Are you becoming deaf or senile?

No, I know him. What about him?

Well, you see, Pa Jamisi, people like us know that school is never for us. Even if we have the brains, we don't have the means of staying inside her walls because we don't have the necessary materials that will improve us and keep us within the classes. We are from deprived backgrounds. Maybe our parents are the deprived and we are just disinherited from the good things of life.

Don't say that. Society tries to create chances for people like you.

You are saying that because you don't have our backgrounds. Being disinherited from the good things of life means we have to learn how to take care of ourselves. We grow old while still children. Society does not care for us and we know. We are outsiders and outcasts and do not have the chance of joining the mainstream because, Pa James, the cards are stacked against us.

You can still go against all these odds and be successful.

Yes, we can, but what is the percentage among us who are able to crawl through the mud, slime and muck surrounding us and succeed? We are not fazed. We have accepted our lot and condition but we don't want some people among us.

Some people?

Yes, some people are not cut out to be our members and their belonging to our group is the society's loss.

Society's loss?

Are you now a parrot?

No, I don't understand how they can be the society's loss.

You see, if a person like Jude becomes a member, society loses a vital source and we gain a good member and instrument.

Ah!...Ah!

This is the reason that if you don't get him out of our group, I will neither forgive you nor forget, and you will have me to deal with.

Is he now a member?

In the last three weeks he has been staying with us. The gang is divided. There are those who want him to stay but there are those like me who can see beyond the present and who feel no joy and fruitfulness in corrupting a good person. Jude is good as well as brilliant. Perverting him would weigh on my soul till I die and it is not what I am ready to carry. Pa James, get Jude out of our group or...

I was unable to ask what would happen if I failed to get him out of the gang because Don Fratz, as he is popularly known, walked briskly away from me and I could see, following him at a distance, the school's worst bullies. Looking at them, I dwelt on Shakespeare's thought that "there is architecture in ruins". Is it possible for those at the society's fringe to be so profound? This was what I thought about through my afternoon and the night that followed my encounter. I was so worried and perturbed that I decided to visit Jude' home later the next day and that brought me into his life.

surrogates

n o se bi baba, ko le jo baba, n o se bi iya , ko le jo iya; oju mewa o jo oju eni

i will act as the father, can not be like the real father, i will act as mother, can not be the real mother; ten eyes cannot be equal to one's own eyes – a yorùbá proverb

*friday, august 24, 1967
olugbade's compound,
ijumu.
kwara state.*

Akanmu, my dear Jude, olowo ori mi, please come.

Yes, Maami, I am in the toilet, I'll soon be with you.

O kare omo mi. Welcome, sit down. I want to discuss something with you.

Yes, Maami, what is it about?

It's about you. About what just happened and what is happening to you.

Nothing is happening to me, Maami. I am fine.

You are fine?

Yes, I am fine. Everything is fine and I am not in any trouble.

You are sure?

Yes.

Then, why have you not been attending school?

Me? I have been attending school O; I've never absented myself from school without any genuine reason. Who are the people telling you this? They are telling you a lie.

Where were you on Monday?

I was in school till the closing time.

What were you doing in Mama Bushirat's Buka at ten o'clock when you were expected to be in class?

Ah! Me? Maami, me in Mama Bushirat's Buka at ten o'clock in the morning? That place is bad boys' and girls' meeting arena and I am not a bad boy O, Maami.

Are you not? Look, Jay, you've always been an honest boy. When did you start lying?

Lies ke, Maami? I don't tell lies.

You've never been a liar but you've started now.

Maami?

Don't Maami me. On Monday at eleven when you were expected to be attending a chemistry class, you were in Mama Bushirat's Buka talking and playing with Busayo, your friend's girlfriend, and you were asking her about her friend Bólánlé.

Ah! Maami. How did you know? Were you there?

You don't know me very well. If you do, you wouldn't be asking that question. Now tell me the truth.

Maami, I have not been attending classes.

When did that start? Don't play the silence game with me. Answer my question.

Since my father died.

You mean almost a month ago? Why?

Maami, what is the need for school? Why must one go to school? What is the need for this life?

There is a need for this life. There is the need to live, Akanmu.

Maami, why was I left just like that? My parents left me as if not thinking about me.

No, Akanmu, they were thinking of you. It was their time and nobody can dictate the time to die. None of us knows when we will die and how. It is all in God's hands.

Why then must God take them?

Nobody can question God, my dear. No one.

But Maami, why? Why? I lost my mother just some time ago and not too long after, I lost my father. Am I the only one?

You are not alone. Akanmu, you are my son. I am here to take care of you. Your parents may be gone but I am here to take care of you.

Yes, I know, Maami, but...but...

There is no but. That they are gone does not mean they've left you totally. They still think of you wherever they may be now.

Is that so?

Yes. Let me ask you a question. If your father were alive, would he have loved you cutting classes and not attending school?

No, he would have been very angry with me.

Oh...Oh, so you think because he is dead, he would love you not attending classes?

Maami, every time I sat in that class, I was always thinking of my parents. I was not listening to what the teachers were saying or interested in what I was being taught. I kept feeling sad and disinterested. I also felt that maybe I was a bad boy and that was the reason for their death.

Akanmu, life is full of good and bad. It is made up of happiness and sadness. You must learn to deal with the two because there is no one in the world who will not pass through sadness or joy. The difference is that some will experience one more than the other. There is no plan or pattern to this. A good person may suffer more than a bad person. Aye o to lo bi opa ibon, the world is not straight like the gun's snout. One must learn to accept whatever life throws into one's basket.

That's not fair.

Nothing is fair in this world and life that we are in. If you continue to cut your classes, you will be unfair to yourself and be doing yourself a lot of harm. You won't develop your potential and that will affect your preparation for life.

What can I do with this sadness that continues to envelope me?

Akanmu, remember it's a situation you cannot help or change. It is beyond your control.

And that means?

You just accept it. It is not in your power to stop your parents from dying. If it had been, you would have saved them, wouldn't you?

Yes, I would have saved them.

Remember that no matter what happens to us, no matter the situation, life will continue. Life does not come to a stop because something untoward happens to us. People will still continue to die; children will continue being born and

people will continue with their day-to-day activities. Have you ever seen the sun not coming up since your parents died?

No. Students, including my friends, have been going to school and school activities have been going on in spite of my sadness.

Well, my son, that is a lesson that whatever we are going through, it is peculiar to us. The world will not stop because we are experiencing what we are experiencing. In addition, others may not share what we are going through. This is because there are many others going through the same things we are going through while there are countless who are even facing worse situations than the one we are facing.

Well, this is my own way of dealing with the situation and the loss.

This way of yours will hurt you in the end. The only thing that can help you now is time. Time will heal your pains.

What do you think I should do?

Continue living. Experience. Since life does not stop, you should not stop living. Don't put yourself in a rut or situation where your past mortgages your future. Your parents would not want that. They would expect you to use their death not as a reason to give up but as an impetus to achieve and succeed, because if they were living that is what they would want from you.

That's going to be hard, most especially now that I am alone.

You are not alone. God is with you and I am here to take care of you.

It's going to be tough.

Nothing in life is easy. We are all here to do battle with life and win.

What do I have to do now?

You will go back and attend your classes. As you said, Mama Bushirat's Buka is the meeting point of bad boys and girls, so you will not be going there any more.

I won't be going there again.

You will also need to realize you are not the first or the last who will lose his parents at your age or at an age before yours.

That's no cheering news.

It's not, but realise your parents won't be happy, wherever they may be, if you end up being a failure.

Yes, that's true, Maami, most especially my father.

Do you promise to be a good boy, attend your classes and end up the boy your parents want you to be?

I will try, Maami, but you have to help me. It is going to be hard.

the visitation

ibi a ti n toju olokunrun, lati n toju ara eni

it is when we are caring for the sick that we care for ourselves – a
yorùbá proverb

*thursday, august 31, 1967
olugbade's compound,
ijumu.
kwara state.*

Hello, who is here?

Welcome, ah, James!

Ehn, Emily Onikaba?

That's what they called me in school – Emily. The teachers never called me Folúké. James and I were mates at the modern school I attended. We were friends and there was a time he had a crush on me. Many years ago. He trained as a teacher and so I heard he is now the Vice Principal of the only secondary school in our town.

What brought you here?

I came because of Jude.

Jude?

Yes, he is in my class and I am the Vice Principal of his school.

*I did not know you were the new VP I heard about. See how you have grown.
Welcome. Please sit down.*

Thank you. Is he your son? Sorry about your husband.

*He is not my son biologically. He is my nephew. Have you forgotten my brother
who was always barring you from seeing me?*

Ah. Brother Àkànjí. He is Brother Àkànjí's son?

Yes.

*Ah, when I saw you, I thought he was your son. I came to discuss him with
somebody in his house. I never expected that I would be seeing you again. It has
been some time.*

*Yes, we met last when we were in the Modern School. How are you? How is
your family?*

Family? I am still a bachelor.

Ah! Ah! Bachelor at your age? Why? You didn't see any good women outside?

After you refused to marry me because “I was not ripe for marriage and I still wanted to study more”, I have not been lucky to meet someone like you again.

You must be joking. What of your mates in the university? The female teachers in the various schools you have been teaching?

Truly, Emily, I have not been able to meet anyone that touched my heart the way you did. Remember you were my first love. What about you? Are you married? What have you been doing since you left Modern School? What of your husband?

I went to the Technical College and I am a businesswoman now. I am not married. I am still single.

What? You have not been snatched by any man?

I am still waiting; you know, it is not easy for any man to cope with my power to see. Who is the man who wants someone to see whatever he is doing at any time? Men cannot cope with my clairvoyance.

Well, that is good; we can start from where we stopped.

You said you came because of Jude. What about him?

He has been missing school and has started moving with the school bad boys.

It was his losing his father.

Yes, I think so. Before his father’s death, he was one of the best boys in the school and he was well behaved, too.

I have been talking with him. I believe he will change. You will see some changes, he has promised me.

I’ll talk with him too. I am happy he has you. You will take care of him. You’ve always been a good soul.

Thank you. Sorry for my manners, I did not offer you anything. What will you take?

Nothing. Don’t bother. I will soon be going back to school. I have a meeting with the staff and I am almost late.

Well, thanks for coming

Thank you for the welcome. By the way, Emily, would you mind my seeing you again?

No, no. You are welcome any time. You are free to come. My house is yours.

Thanks. I will work something out so that we can have an outing.

Well, let’s see. Maybe. Maybe.

SIX

‘JIIRE

first impression

iri ni si, ni i so ni l’ojo; bi a ba ti rin laa ko ni

appearance dictates our assessment; it is the way we look that we will
be met – a yorùbá proverb

*monday, october 30, 1972
ndidem hall,
oluyole university.
ibadan, western state.*

I met Jude in a room. Our first meeting registered his nature and character on me. A provincial, I came down to Ibadan, the second largest city in Africa for university education. The campus, to me, was paradise and I was overwhelmed by the city’s size and the campus’ sophistication. It was my first time of seeing beautifully manicured lawns, fine and exquisite buildings and wide tarred roads. The glittering campus streetlights and the number of vehicles on the city roads were a great source of amazement. After passing through the registration and orientation program, I was allocated a hall of residence. It was early evening fast turning into night as I lugged my baggage up three floors to my room remembering the journey that brought me here.

Jiire, Jiire what will you get out of this constant reading? Remember too many books can make someone mad.

Let him be, he is not cut out for our farming job. Let him read. That is better than being at the village square and taking part in the rubbish that present-day young people count as moonlight games.

Oh, I have heard Baba Jiire. I hope you have the strength to carry the load when he comes to ask for more than just reading.

Elédùmarè is never asleep. He will answer our prayers then.

Oh.

My parents were at it again. My mother took my reading as a lazy man’s way of opting out of the energy-sapping farm work. I was an old man’s child. The gap between my sister and me was almost eighteen years. My mother could not give birth after her second child, which turned out to be a girl. Since my grandfather only had my father, it seemed there would be no continuation of the family line. They tried everything but no child came. My father’s cousins and other relations pressed on him to get another wife

in order to continue the family line but he refused. My birth was a miraculous one because my mother became pregnant after she had stopped her menses. Nobody expected me and when I was in my mother's womb nobody expected me to be born. I was born and my father treated me like an egg. I was not allowed to do any hard job and that included farm work. I took to books like fish to water. At age three I cried until I was allowed to go to school with my sister, Omobonike. The problem was she was going to the secondary school. Finally, I was enrolled in the adjacent Primary school.

So, I started primary school at age three. There was no early childhood institution in the village. I was a voracious reader and precocious child who went through the primary school in four years instead of six. It was getting to secondary school that became my problem. The principal of the only secondary school in the district refused to admit me even though I passed the entrance examination, was among the top ten in the province and also won a scholarship. His gripe was I was too young to be in the secondary school. The bureaucratic to-ing and fro-ing on my case was only resolved after almost a year and I started my secondary school at the age of eight instead of twelve. I zoomed through secondary school and, on this night that my mother was protesting my reading, I was preparing for my university admission tests. I applied to four universities: Nsukka, Zaria, Jos and Ibadan. It was the Ibadan entrance exam that I was preparing for.

The results came and I was admitted to read Law in Nsukka and Engineering at Zaria. The Ibadan result had not come. I was bent on reading Law at Nsukka but my mother refused.

I won't allow my only son to go to the Yanminrin²² land.

Why won't you allow him? At least people are living there.

You won't understand. You don't know what I went through before having him. My son should not go to Gambari land or Yanminrin land.

Iya Jiire, are you God? Are you the one who has been taking care of him since?

I am not God. What I am saying is he is my only son and will not go out of Western State. If no Western state university admits him, he will have to wait.

Mojisola, why are you blocking your son's progress?

²² **Yanminrin:** A term used by Yorùbá s in calling those who are Ibos or speak Igbo language. Though most Yorùbá s who had not travelled to the eastern part of Nigeria tend to take all Easterners as Yanminrin, without realising that there are many ethnic groups in South Eastern Nigeria who are not Ibos. The Ibos on the other hand call Yorùbá s, **Onfemanu**, meaning one who eats a lot of palm oil because the Ibos believes most Yorùbá cuisine have too much palm oil in them. Some Yorùbás wrongly believe too that some Ibos are cannibals and that the distance to their abode was a very long way off and like an unreturnable journey.

I am not blocking his progress o. He either goes to school around here or he stays at home.

It was a big fight which money solved for us. My initial bill at Nsukka was almost one thousand pounds a session. It was no problem for my father who was ready to lease out one of his farms, but my mother would not hear any of it. She wanted me to take over the farms and, in her mind, going to college would ruin this plan. When, finally, the admission to read economics in the university at Ibadan came with a Western State scholarship, my mother had no more reason for blocking my passage to the university. I was the first in my extended family to enter the University and it was a great celebration. It was only when members of the family were pouring encomiums on me that my mother realised the enormity of my achievement. She then took care of all that I needed for my journey from the village Adegbola in the hinterland to Ibadan. So there I was, three hours after the rough journey from the village to Ibadan. Sweating, I finally arrived on the third floor and dragged my baggage to Room 310. After knocking and hearing no response, I opened the door and entered. It was a large room with two medium sized beds. The bed on the left was unoccupied but well-made with a reading table and bookshelf. I put my suitcases down and turned to say hello to the room's other occupant who seemed to be sleeping, covered totally in a white sheet.

Hello, hello. How are you?

There was no response. I went nearer. There was no breath. I was afraid. I wanted to go out quickly and report it before I was taken to be the person that killed him. I reached the door and, in my haste to exit the room, I couldn't open the door. I thought it was locked. I remembered vividly that I did not lock the door, because while coming in I realized there was no key in the door. Then, I heard a sound behind me. Too terrified to turn back and too jittery to shout or cry out, I shivered where I was. The sound became like that of a ghost and then one icy finger touched my nape. I froze, but a maniacal laughter came from behind me as a voice said;

Welcome to Ndidem Hall, buddy.

I gingerly opened my eyes and there was Jude doubled over with laughter, and that was my introduction to him. Throughout the three years I spent with him in the university, this first introduction stayed with me and I could not forget this practical joke at my expense. He was in his second year while I was in my first year and we were fated to be roommates twice. One thing stood out about him and this was his ability to make all things light-hearted. Also, he had the ability to be the prankster and play practical jokes

on his friends. We, his mates, dreaded every April first because we were sure he would always have one on us.

One prank that stands out; was his presentation of a vehicle towing chain to his best friend on his marriage day. Jude is what one can call a 'bon vivant'. After the initial joke that nearly gave me a seizure, Jude took me under his wing. Known as 'young Tim', he took me to the various nooks and crannies of the campus and Ibadan. Through him, I learned the best restaurants, nightclubs and 'bukateria' in Ibadan. Despite all the rollicking parties and the pleasure-seeking activities, Jude was not only the best in his class but also a well-loved sportsman, a charismatic fellow, a student politician, a campus press journalist, and a loyal and good confidant to his friends. Always ready to help and very generous, Jude was an only child, orphaned when in secondary school, I also found out that his late mother was a very wealthy woman, and he was being taken care of by his paternal aunt who was also very rich so he got whatever he wanted. But in spite of this, he was a humble and loving individual. Jude played and studied hard. He belonged to the prime social club on campus, and at the same time he was the fellowship leader and strong member of the Students' Christian Movement. I wondered how he was able to juggle all these activities. Though not a hard drinker, Jude was a gastronome and a wine connoisseur; he gave me the little education I had about wine. He was my role model. Many times when I was slacking in my studies, he was there to pull me back to line. Besides me, he had one other confidant and inJayte friend who nearly got him into trouble after their friendship started, but that is a story for another day.

Before the incident that nearly marred Jude's university career, there was another incident that proved the shallowness of my knowledge about him. This incident showed me that no human being can totally know another human being, no matter how long they have been together. What one sees, I learnt, is the face that an individual wants you to see, and in most cases, what you see is just a little. This seemed to justify the Yorùbá adage that, '*Bi inu ba se gba, i ba se si*': If a person's inside is like a calabash, one could have opened it. The incident shook me to my core and proved to me that, despite Jude's open, generous and vivacious nature, he was also a very secretive and dangerous person to cross. It happened in my second year of study when I was well integrated into university life. Jude was in his third year.

unveiling the mask

bi inu ba se igba, i ba se si; a ba ri'kun asebi.

if the inside is a calabash, we can open it and see the wicked man's insides – a yorùbá proverb

*friday, november 9, 1973
keita hall,
oluyole university.
ibadan.western state.*

How have you been and how was your day?

Hectic. I had to submit two papers and, with my procrastination, as you know, I did not start working on them until two days ago.

Were you able to submit?

I did but I had no sleep last night.

What were you doing? At a party? Or did you go to camp with that mulatto girlfriend of yours?

I told you, I was putting finishing touches to the papers I was writing.

I heard you. Loosen up, I was pulling your leg; you are too serious. What are your plans for this weekend?

Nothing much, I have to be in the library because Professor Ajeigbe gave us another assignment, and with him your work is sub-standard if it does not contain at least four pages of references and half of them journal titles.

I heard your Professor Aje works himself to the bone, is that so?

What do you expect him to do, living with that nympho of a wife who doesn't care where she takes her pants off? And doesn't care whom she sleeps with? It wouldn't have been any problem if it were only himself he wants to kill with work; however, he is the unhappy individual who believes every other individual must share his unhappiness.

Welcome to the fold, my brother. Welcome to Acada Campus. It will get better with time.

I hope so, because I am getting swamped. Tell me, Tim, how do you do it?

Do what?

How are you able to juggle all the activities you involve yourself in and still come out tops?

Planning, man, planning. He who plans to fail, fails to plan.

You mean he who fails to plan, plans to fail?

They mean the same, don't they? But the first one talks about intentional failure while the second talks about commissioned failure. One is deeper than the other.

Hun, philosopher.

You need to plan in order to maximize your time to your own benefit.

You are not saying anything, my brother; details man, details.

Well, take me as an example. I prioritize and then stick to my plans. I break my days into bits and make sure I fill each bit with specific activity that is relevant to my overall plan for the day, week, month and year.

It's easy for you to say. To me, it has been very difficult keeping to specific targets.

It is never easy or simple but you have to force your body and mind to follow your plans. Make it a habit and through that develop character, which will give you a destiny, though you need to have a destination and be sure about it. If not, you will be making and working on plans that will take you to the wrong destination and then all your plans will not matter, will they?

Hun, I have never thought of my studies or life this way. What enlightenment!

I thought you would not be so busy this weekend. I found a joint at Apata where you can get excellent Oguro and bush meat.

Bush meat? Which one? The one you eat or the one that blankets you?

I should be congratulated; my young friend is catching up fast. I hope I am not corrupting your innocence?

I am not complaining. It seems I am not deviating so much from the straight and narrow path.

I am happy. You know, as the son of a late venerable archdeacon, I would feel so bad if I turned out to be a bad influence on you.

You are not a bad influence on me; you are my model and mentor.

Don't model yourself on me; I may have clay feet.

What do you mean?

The photocopy can never be the same as the original. God made you an original. Try to be yourself; that is what I am saying. Stay an original, find yourself and you'll be fine.

Thanks, my big brother. I'll keep to your advice.

I've got to run. I have an appointment with my partner on a project we are working on.

What project is that? Can I come in?

No. If and when the time is ripe, I'll let you know.

We parted that Friday afternoon without me having an inkling that the weekend would start peeling off layers of my friend's fine covering. It was not something planned but what just happened. There were fraternities on campus then, and they were not for

everybody. They were not patterned after the American campus fraternities but were organizations meant to prepare young men (no women allowed in the fraters then) to be upright, disciplined, to battle corruption and fight injustice on campus and the country's body politic. You had to be among the top five in your class, and your grade point average had to be in the upper five percent. You had to be physically fit, morally upright and a good example to other students.

The search, selection and screening processes for these fraternities were very stringent. Members were very humble, secretive and so inconspicuous that it was difficult to know who was a member and who was not. The only time when they could be seen was when they were parading for their meetings, which usually took place at midnight. One well-known group on campus, the Vipers Confraternity, was known as VC. Whenever they did their parade, it was a beautiful sight. The weekend I was talking about was one of those on when they paraded. I was busy trying to make sense of the various references I had for Professor Ajeigbe when my roommate, who had been watching the parade, quickly called me.

Jiire, Jiire, come and look at something.

What? Please don't disturb me. As if you don't know I am busy, and you know the problem I am having with Professor Ajeigbe too.

Come, come and see before they move out of vision. Come now, they'll soon move towards the Senate building.

Let me be. If you don't have anything better to do, why don't you sleep and allow me to finish my assignment?

Jiire, come and see your friend who is always taking you out.

Who?

Young Tim or what do you call him?

On hearing Tim's name, I rushed to the window but they had almost passed our hall, and what I saw was the tail of the procession snaking its way round the corner to the Senate Building. The person at the tail end looked like Tim but I was not sure. I didn't see his face.

I told you to come quickly. You would have seen him then.

Are you sure he was the one?

It was your friend. I saw him and he turned his face away when he realized I was looking at him.

I don't believe you.

I went back to my work. When I saw Tim later, I asked him but he only laughed and asked me of what use that information was to me. Our friendship deepened and there was no more reference to the incident. Some months after this, my roommate was sent away because he was unable to meet the university's minimum academic standard in his first year. My new roommate turned out to be a new member of Jude's fraternity, and a bully. I was thoroughly intimidated, and whenever I complained, he threatened to deal with me by teaching me the lesson of my life. I kept quiet because I did not want to be pounced upon when coming home from rehearsals at night and beaten to pulp. I then realised that Jude was not coming to my room like he used to. I asked him the reason for this and he convinced me that, being in the third year, his academic load had increased and had made it impossible for him to maintain the tempo of his former visits.

One day, however, my obnoxious roommate went too far in his bullying. I was on the verge of fighting him, but the fact that both of us could be expelled if we fought held me back. I was so agitated that I went to Jay's room to sleep over. This was not the first time I had slept in Jay's room on some occasions I slept, in his room because, after finishing my rehearsals at around six am, I needed to attend a class at eight am and to my hall, was so far from the department, it would have made it impossible for me to attend my class. There were other times, however, that we would go to town and I would just bunk down in his room rather than going to my own room. In such cases, Jay would just move to stay with another person outside the campus at Agbowo. On this day, however, he came in to find me sulking and feeling helpless in the face of a consuming rage.

Hey, young Bro, what's the problem?

Nothing.

Stop joking. Something is wrong. Do you want to share it?

It's nothing serious; I'll get over it.

It doesn't look that way. You are very angry. Tell me who made you this angry?

My roommate. He has been giving me trouble since he arrived.

What type of trouble?

I think he is a VC member and he is using this to intimidate and bully me.

Why have you not reported him?

He promised to deal with me if I report him, and he threatens to send his friends in the Confra to deal with me.

What does he do to disturb you?

Playing his music very loud when I am sleeping or doing my assignments, and bringing his friends to disturb me at all times with their discussions and laughter.

Is that all?

No. Whenever he gets drunk, he picks fights with me and generally disturbs my peace. Not to talk about his vomiting when drunk, and I have to deal with the odour and clean the room.

Hen? And you are sure he is a member of the VC?

Yes, I saw him wearing their regalia one early morning when he came back from their procession the night before.

Why have you not informed me before now?

I don't want to bother you.

You don't want to bother me? What did he do today that made you boil?

He listened to me and said something about those who shouldn't be in a noble fraternity like VC because there is no way their background can be taken out of them. He then prepared himself to go to Agbowo and I fell asleep. Nothing happened for more than two weeks. Then, on the Monday of the third week, I saw my roommate come to the room in very bad shape. His face was swollen and there were marks on his body. I went to him and asked, "*What happened to you? Were you in an accident?*" But he prostrated himself in front of me and started begging me. *Please forgive me. Please, I won't offend you again.*

I was surprised. He was almost crying.

If I have wronged you and hurt you in any way, you should have discussed it with me instead of going to report me.

Report you?

Yes, report me.

Report you to whom?

To our Capo.

Your Capo? What do you mean? Who are you talking about?

Our Capo, Captain Rustrum.

Who?

As I was asking this question, Tim came into the room. My roommate scrambled out of the room and Tim completely ignored him.

How are you feeling today, young Bro?

Fine. Thank you. Tim, my roommate started begging me. What is happening?

Maybe he has repented of his sins. It is time now for you to forgive him.

seven

CARMILLE

decisions, habits and destiny

eyi a ba gbin la o ka, enikan o gbin gbado ko ka gbaguda

we harvest what we grow, nobody plants maize and harvests cassava –
a yorùbá proverb

january, 1968 – july, 1971
mary the immaculate convent
idi-ayunre, ibadan.

A single mother brought me up, a single mother not by choice but by life's circumstances, at a time when the concept of single motherhood was a sign of failure in Yorùbá land and Nigeria. She was a widow who stood up for her convictions, lost all that was hers, brought me up, and made up her mind her child would turn out well to shame her detractors. My mother was principal of a well-known and successful co-educational private secondary school that she owned. However, it was put about that her husband owned the college. In the fifties Nigerians, and most especially those in Yorùbá land, had not accepted the idea of female entrepreneurs or visionaries like my mother. Such women were reviled for wearing the trousers and subjugating their husbands or behaving above themselves when single. Part of my mother's modern ethos made her to name me Carmille. A name I grew up to like, though I did not know its meaning.

I did not attend my mother's school. After my father's death, the school was taken away from my mother. Her husband's family took the school to be their son's property, since to them she was only the principal and a haughty 'Acada' woman. She was replaced as principal by one of their own who ran the school down. My mother had to look for another job as a classroom teacher in a Catholic-owned school in order to cope. This brought me to Mary the Immaculate Convent, the school she taught in for five years before she died. Her double loss – that of her husband and her school – was too much for her. The convent adopted me. Two people in particular contributed to who I became: Sister Virginia Immaculate and Dr. Chand. Sister Immaculate was four years older than me and more mature in her bearing. We became friends while she was a final year-student and I was in class three, the year I lost my mother. At this time I withdrew from everybody, including my classmates, and started cutting classes and staying away

from the dormitory after class. My sanctuary was the small room behind the school's gymnasium, which was rarely used. This was the place where I always hid after school, creating my own home, imaginary friends and family. I only went back to the hostel for prayers and to sleep because I knew I would be missed at these times.

I was not aware that Sister Immaculate had been observing me and that she knew of my hiding place. One afternoon, I found her waiting for me there. That meeting was the beginning of our friendship, which lasted all my life. She questioned me and I opened up to her and poured all my grief, sorrow and loneliness into her listening ears. At the end she wiped my tears and advised me that I must go on with my life, not by withdrawing from it but embracing it. She said I was not responsible for my parents' death. From that day, she became my model and a mentor who took me back to the school system. Her encouragement doubled my efforts in my studies, and I started topping my class by the third term of that year. I maintained this throughout my secondary school years, and at the final school leaving certificate examination I had nine indices, was in grade one special and got a Western State scholarship to the university.

My excellent performance in school brought me to the attention of the convent's physics and mathematics teacher, Dr. Chand, an Indian. The seventies was the decade of expatriate teachers in Western State secondary schools. By my fourth and final year in the school, there were many expatriate teachers from Pakistan, India, Britain and other European countries, who were mostly science teachers. Dr. Chand (he had a PhD in physics) was an interesting teacher who simplified the arcane concepts in mathematics and physics. He had the ability to break all the difficult concepts into simple forms with plain examples for us. His physics and mathematics classrooms were always so full and interesting that many of us, including me, were attracted to the sciences. I became his top student, and he gave me extra lessons in additional mathematics and calculus. I became so good in them that when the time came for me to choose my university course, I was torn between physics and mathematics. Finally, I chose physics, only to find out that I was the only female in my class and the third in the history of the department. It was two years after my admission that four other women came into the department. However, by the time I was graduating, the trickle had become a rivulet with many more women coming in to read physics.

Sister Immaculate taught me a lot about the female body and nature of women. Her uncle had sexually abused her at the age of twelve and this brought her to the convent.

She took a vow of chastity and decided to keep herself pure for Christ. In educating me, she made me read copiously about women, and she made me understand that her own experience was not the regular one but an exception. She advised me to keep myself chaste for my husband and was not insistent on my following her to take the veil. On hearing her experience, I decided to maintain my purity and stay away from men.

burying the hatchet

bi a ko ba gbagbe oro ana, a o ni r'eni ba se 're

if we don't forget yesterday's quarrel, we won't have anybody to play
with – a yorùbá proverb

*october, 1974
F215, education and arts faculty building,
oluyole university,
ibadan.*

Prof. Adoki, you asked me to see you. Here I am.

Sit down, Carmille. Hope you are not with any camera or recording device this time?

I don't have a camera, but I have a mini tape recorder in my handbag. Do you mind?

I do. I would like whatever we are going to discuss to be between the two of us.

Do you think I should or can trust you?

I should ask you that question.

You can trust me but can I trust you?

Yes, you can. Please trust me. I won't do anything untoward. I asked you to see me because I want to ask you for some favours.

Favours? What favours?

Please, please ... don't publish those photographs. Save my name and integrity.

Name and integrity? Do you have any?

I know I do not have. But please forgive me and save me from shame and embarrassment.

You don't deserve any. You did not give any, so why must you expect any mercy?

I know, but please save me. Save my name and I promise to stop my philandering.

Can you ever stop? Will you ever stop?

I promise, I will stop. This experience has shaken me up. I am going to...

Going to do what? Your words do not serve me. We need to have a written agreement between us.

Okay, let's draft the agreement. I will sign but don't publicize the photographs, it will destroy me. My family will be shamed. It will...

It will do what? Did you ever think of your family? You were too selfish and too involved in yourself to think of them. You did not care and that was why the best thing would have been to unmask you and shame you.

Please forgive and forget. Forgive me; I have learnt my lesson.

I hope so. If we both draft an agreement and you sign, I destroy the photographs. If not, I publish them.

Where?

That is for me to decide.

I will sign anything as long as the photographs are not seen. I'll sign now, please forgive me and forget whatever happened between us.

If you say so. You have made almost three years of my existence on this campus a hell and nothing will be too much to do to you in response.

Please, I am begging you, I have just a few more years to my retirement; I don't want to be dismissed.

If you know this, why were you involved in all this nonsense?

It gives me power, makes me feel young. I enjoyed having fun with the young girls; it revitalizes me and the whole thing is a hunting game.

What if the game doesn't want to be hunted or runs away?

Then it assaults my ego to find a game that refuses to be hunted or runs away. It then becomes a task for me to achieve. My greatest joy is in hunting down those who reject my advances and capturing them at the end. I also love the defeat I see on the faces of those lives I have made unbearable as they beg me to have my way with them.

Oh, I see. As I said, if not for the sake of your family, I would have shown your true nature to the world. The world would have seen what a shameless old man you are, realise the depth of your depravity, but you won't be the only one to suffer. Your family and children would suffer too. They are the ones I am thinking of, and they are your saviours.

Thank you. Here is the signed copy of the agreement.

Okay, in case of any other misconduct from you, I will publicise this agreement and also publish our discussions. As a form of safeguard for myself, I'll keep some of the negatives.

This is not a part of our agreement. You broke my trust in you.

See who's talking of trust? There is no way I can trust you. You have not shown yourself worthy of being trusted.

That is not true!

Isn't it? Think back on all you've done to those young girls or to me. You've ruined our lives.

deepening trust

ife lakoja ofin, fi 'fe han fun mi, n o si je tire

love summarises all laws, show me your love and i will be yours

– a yorùbá saying

december 10. 1974

cabaña theatre+ lisa hall,

oluyole university.

ibadan, western state.

What many people agreed about me, Carmille was that I was not easily swayed. I have been a fiercely independent lady but Kumbi, my roommate, caused the situation I was in now. It was the end of the session and the campus was agog with the Primus Klubb's end-of-year party. My only intimate female friend on the campus, who happened to be my roommate, had been at me to attend it. I had refused but she had been unrelenting. Two days before the party, I agreed and that landed me in this situation. I had refused because of the unnecessary popularity that I had on campus as a result of the Professor Adoki affair. The Professor had pursued me since my first year on campus, and it was just this year, my third year, that I had been able to put an end to the miseries he caused me. I was not ready for another scandal and parties are always potential scandal. When she said that I could not hole myself up like a guilty person, I agreed to attend the party.

The ex-president of the Primus Klubb was the person I had fallen recklessly for. He had decided on only a platonic relationship with me, and I had been pretending to have the same with him. I could not trust what I would do, if very close to him at the Primus party or if I saw another woman with him. I refused all my friend's entreaties until her argument convinced me otherwise. The party night finally arrived, and I had developed cold feet.

I don't think I will be going to this party, I have a headache.

Don't worry; your headache will go the moment you enter fully into the party spirit. There are two analgesic tablets on the table. Take them and you'll be okay.

Thank you. You mean you won't excuse me?

No, I won't. You better get up and dress up now because there is no way I'll leave you and go to the party or not go to the party in order to stay with you.

So no way out for me?

None. Your intense rigour this semester needs some light relief. You are not going to get half class, are you? You are sure of your first class now; so for once let yourself go and enjoy yourself. Life is too short.

Okay, thanks for the advice; I'll go and get dressed up.

So I went and the first person I saw welcoming me at the gate was Jude. I stayed with him throughout the party, a Siamese twin. I danced with him and, surprise of all surprise, I did not see any other lady with him or flirting with him, so my fears were unfounded. We were on the third dance when he asked me to take a walk to relax.

By the way, Tim, am I not beautiful enough?

Why are you asking such a question?

Answer my question; am I not beautiful or brilliant enough for you?

Did I ever tell you that you were not?

Don't answer my question with a question.

Sorry, you are a beautiful woman and an intelligent one at that.

You have not answered my question. Am I intelligent and beautiful enough for you?

You are and I could not have loved any other person more than you.

So, why are you treating me like a leprous being?

A leprous being?

Yes, you accepted our being platonic friends but it seems if we touch, I would infect you with leprosy. You treat me as if I need to be quarantined.

No, that is not true. I am respecting your decision to be a virgin until your marriage night.

It doesn't mean you should not touch me, hug me or even kiss me.

It may be the beginning of what we cannot stop.

I should be the one complaining and not you. I am not complaining. Touch me, touch my body.

Okay, I will.

So, instead of going back to the dancing hall, he took me to his room.

You know how long I have longed for you and waited for a day like this?

How long?

Since the first day I met you.

You resisted me so well and camouflaged your needs and intentions.

It was a hard act but mystery sells. Don't allow anyone to read you fully and you'll be sought after. Let the public know you and you will soon be ignored, or you will have to continuously do something that will put you in their view.

You are saying openness is bad?

Yes, make people curious about you, and they are attracted to you, but being open creates and breeds familiarity.

How easy was it for you to maintain such a façade for so long?

You don't expect me to answer that. It would be giving you my secret success formula.

valedictory night

ife bi eji owuro, ife to toro minimini, lolufe feras mi lai s'etan

love like the morning dew, love like a soothing spring water, my lover
love me without deceit – a yorùbá song by shola allinson

5, july, 1975
mbari klub +lisa hall.
oluyole university,
ibadan. western state

Have you ever wanted something so bad that after getting it, you don't feel much elation? Have you ever loved someone so that they become your breath? Have you ever made plans that didn't turn out the way you made them? Have you ever missed someone so much that it is as if a large part of you has been cut off? Have you ever cried yourself to sleep not because of betrayal or abuse of trust, but because you have been wondering why you are so blessed? Have you ever had trepidations and heart palpitations because your relationship has been too good to be true but it is true? Have you come across somebody or loved somebody to the point that your heart is ever throbbing? I could answer yes to all these questions. My relationship with Jude or Jaymi was a sum total of what a young girl wishes for in her wildest imagination. I knew I was not only lucky but also privileged. It was like a constraint that had been put on him was taken away. He loved me with passion and without restraint.

Our days passed in bliss, and since the university does not allow co-educational accommodation, we had to make do with staying in each other's hall of residence until the last minute allowed. We became well known by the porters so that sometimes they overlooked our breaking the law. We both agreed not to get off-campus accommodation. Since Jude was in his final year, and I was in my third, our academic load had become heavier than our earlier days in the university. We needed the libraries, the study rooms and, sometimes, the discussions and brainstorming groups with our mates. So we made the best of the situation. Jude's final year went like lightning. As he was planning for his final sessional examination, he had a job waiting for him. The Federal Civil Service Commission had interviewed him, and he was waiting for the end of his examination to get his result and take up the appointment.

Jude finally finished his papers and his last day on campus came. It was a special day for us and after a satisfying dinner and celebration at Mbari Club we went to his room.

How am I to live without you around now?

You will, it is just for a year. Let's pray that you will be posted to Lagos after your initial training.

I pray so too. I pray I will be posted to the Cabinet Office.

It means you will be posted to Dodan Barracks; won't it be difficult for me to see you with all the soldiers?

It won't be difficult. Remember, I won't be living in the Barrack.

Well, that is if you are posted to Cabinet office. What if you were to be posted to Yola?

God will answer my prayers and not allow that to happen.

Okay, I 'll keep praying, too. If you are posted to Lagos, you know it means I will be spending all my weekends in Lagos. I could shuttle daily between the cities but you know it will be my final year.

It won't be all your weekends. We will be exchanging.

That will be nice. I am going to miss you a lot.

Not as much as I am going to miss you. I will miss your clear eyes, your subtle smile and sharing.

You made me a woman and brought me happiness. You've been my hope, my dreams and my all.

You are more than that for me. I knew that my life changed for the better after I met you. You helped me to focus my energies, brush up my life's expectations and my dreams. You are my angel sent down to lead me.

You'll make me cry if you don't stop.

For being there when I am lost, for being my support in times of trouble; I would like you to have something.

What?

Carmille, will you marry me?

Yes, yes ...yes.

Then, I give you this ring as a sign of commitment.

What? A diamond engagement ring? How did you get it?

It is a sign of my love, a symbol of who you are to me, and a representation of my heart that I am asking you to keep.

I'll keep it in the safest part of my body.

I know, I know. I would have loved us to get married now but wishes are not horses.

In my heart, you are my husband. I am only waiting for the time to actually inform everybody.

The time will come soon, my dear. The time will soon come. Finish your studies and we will be married.

I am looking forward to that. May Lagos not take you away from me.

nineties to zeroes
1990-2004

eight

MAGGIE + FRANCIS

loving the boss

a o n ni ki omo o ma d'ete, bi o ba ti le da 'nu igbo gbe- a yorùbá
proverb

we do not ask a child not to contract leprosy if he/she can live alone in
the big forest– a yorùbá proverb

september 1995 – 15 june 2000

27, gbaja street, surulere

58, norman-williams crescent, ikoyi

mazi mbonu close, asokoro, abuja

lagos state + federal capital territory.

I am Margaret Ekpan Awaki, but friends call me Maggie-n-se-be. I have lived some years in this world and I came to a realisation that trust is easily broken and impossible to mend properly. The first time I met my future boss, something within me said: here is someone you can trust. Call it intuition. Setting my eyes on him lit something in me. This trust has lasted. In all the years of my life I have never before met a soul who understood me, trusted me and accepted me the way I am without the attendant judgment. Growing up I was a loner and a rebel. It was not innate but something forced. My mother left my father when she was almost killed. I was twelve; I loved my father; and I was my mother's greatest opponent. Call it the Electra complex or what you will, but what I knew was that I loved my father so well that his repeated beating of my mother was, to me, appropriate punishment for her offences.

My mother (God bless her soul) was a shrew and a cantankerous woman. God maybe mistakenly created some women like that or maybe created them as his whips to lash some recalcitrant men into line. In my father's case, however, this is not so. The truth is that my mother was just too hot to be handled by my father. There are cases of such opposites, and in some instances, they blend and turn out something fine or, in the case of salt and pepper, they realize that one cannot do without the other and accept their cohabitation and complementarities. That, however, was not the situation in my parents' case. My mother was an expert needler. My father had a quiet, unassuming and pleasant nature. My mother seemed to bring out the beast in my father, just as in Fela Anikulapo Kuti's music, "The Beast of No Nation". A wrong word or action or an argument gone awry always led to a fracas in our home, and the neighbours became so fatigued separating the combatants that they began to ignore it. It had become too pedestrian. My

brother and I were ashamed of our mother because she was always the trigger in the entire fracas. It was something I could not understand until later in life when I heard an anecdote from a friend.

My friend had gone for the burial ceremonies of our older friend's father in Ilorin. The friend's father died at a ripe age, eighty-two, and our friend's mother had been married to him for more than fifty years. My friend, aged 45, told me that during the placement of the corpse into the grave, a tug of war developed. Strong physical restraint was used to stop her mother jumping into the grave to be buried with her husband. Everybody was surprised because the relationship between the two had been that of dog and cat, but despite of this they turned out good children, another miracle. As they were restraining the mother, she recited the traditional funeral dirge:

*E fi mi le o,
E je n ma b'oko mi lo,
E ma da n duro tori n o le ri ru e mo,
Olowo ori mi ba ti so ko yi o.
O le fi mi le bayi o,
Igba o wa ja mi le bi aso to gbo,
Ta ni o wa ma lu mi bi ofi?*

Leave me, let me be,
Let me go with my husband,
Don't stop my going with him,
I won't see another like him.
My husband, my crown,
This was not our agreement,
You can't leave me like this.
When you left me like a discarded rag;
Who would be beating again like the Ofi²³ cloth?

This anecdote explained and clarified so many things for me later in my life. It explained the irritating habit of my mother, after each beating, being on her best behaviour, sweet and caring to her husband and children. One thing that bothered me continuously when growing up was that if it was within her to be so sweet, why must she wait to be battered and bruised before doing what was right, like a donkey or a goat? My parents stuck to the unworkable relationship and made their children eat the food of shame. However, one day the long-awaited climax came to our house. My father must

²³ **Ofi:** A Yorùbá traditional woven cloth. It is never soaked in water, rather a heavy stick is used in beating it till it becomes smooth and all dirt is beaten from it.

have had a bad day at work. He came back from work and he was hungry. His dinner was being prepared, and his jovial inquiry about when the dinner would be ready was met with a song. Yes, a song. My mother had a beautiful voice. Hearing it without seeing the singer or knowing about her character, you would think you had missed your way and were hearing heaven's soprano. However, while beautiful sopranos like her can bring joy and peace to their hearers, she brought discord and conflict to her hearers, most especially to my father. My mother's songs were grenades. She sang Christian songs and hymns, and she had a repertoire from which she always picked an appropriate song for the occasion. So, her answer to the jovial "When are we going to have dinner tonight?" was a song on how, on the Day of Judgment, sinners would not partake at God's table. Something seemed to snap in my father's brain and it was the first and last time I would ever see him so angry. Even now as I am telling this I still wonder what took them over that day, and I shudder. One action followed another and my mother was thrown down the stairs. She broke three ribs, had a slight concussion, and had her neck braced for five weeks. Somebody must have been in charge that night or else we, the children, would have ended up as orphans. My mother could have died and my father be hanged for murder. After her discharge from the hospital, we were also discharged from my father's house. Even as my mother insisted she wanted to go back to her husband's house because she loved him, the two families met and agreed that, since they exchanged living beings when their children married, they were not ready to have corpses returned to them, so the marriage was dissolved.

I was nineteen, not a child anymore, but fast trying to be a woman and not yet one. My mother picked up the pieces, went into another city and started anew. We were the pieces she picked up with whatever else was salvageable from her marriage of more than twenty-one years. Something has always bothered me and confused me when it comes to relationships between the sexes and this concept called love. When, where and how does love pack her baggage, without those involved realising, and abscond from broken relationships? Does she pick her things up at once or one piece at a time? In full sight of those involved in the relationship, or surreptitiously? Are they the ones egging her on? If they had ever had anything like a fondness for her before, and that was what made them invite her to their house, why did they give up on her? Many questions were in my mind, and I thought I had some answers then, though in my adult years I found out I was wrong. That, however, is a story for another time.

Almost twelve months after I was “bagged” along with the broken pieces of my mother’s marriage, I was out on the street because my mother and I were always fighting and one day the fightings came to a head. On the day of reckoning, I couldn’t go back and stayed with my father because he had remarried a beautiful person with a contrary spirit from my mother. More educated than my mother but surprisingly more respectful of my father, she married very late, at forty, and after finally getting hooked to a person like my father, decided that she wanted a marriage that would last her all her life. While I was living at my mother’s, I met my father’s wife to be twice and I saw and felt her taking over my father’s love and affections for me. If she had been like my mother, I could have worked her out of my father’s life. However, since she was taking good care of him and I could see that he was very happy, I just had to accept that I had lost my ‘first love’. It was all I had been wishing for him and when I had to leave my mother’s house after the squabble, I ended up on the street. My father would have taken me in happily, and I am sure my stepmother too, but I would not be able to stomach the showers of affection that my stepmother would pour on my father if I had to be staying with them. Also I knew that having my love for my father supplanted by another person’s love would look well from afar but dangerous and dysfunctional at close quarters. Sooner rather than later I knew there would be quarrels between my stepmother and myself and I didn’t want to make my father sad again after what he had passed through and now that he was very happy and at peace with himself.

So, out on the street I found myself less than a year after my mother’s marriage potsherds. When I was fourteen I looked older than my age, and at nineteen I could pass for twenty-two. This led to my expulsion from my mother’s house. My stepfather had an affair with me. It wasn’t planned, it just happened like such things happen. My stepfather struggled to put an end to the affair after the initial seduction but I twisted him around my finger until the trysts reached a crescendo, which came one day.

Despite the fact that sleeping with you makes me feel bad, I am falling in love with you.

I don’t want you to.

That’s childish; a woman should be happy to find someone falling in love with her.

Of what use is that? Of what use is it for me? Love, that is like a chimera, a mirage, which is here today and gone tomorrow.

Don’t say that, what do you know about love?

Enough to know that I do not reckon with that nonsense called love.

You are too young to come to such a decision. Don't take your parents' relationship and love experiences as a model. There are better examples.

Like the one between you and your wife, my mother?

I love your mother.

And I am the dessert?

No.

What do you mean 'No'? By sleeping with me, what messages are you sending to me? That you love me?

At the beginning it was that I could not control myself; I lost the control that I should have exerted as an adult. However, when I tried to stop it, I found myself loving it.

You love it? What if I ask you to marry me, will you leave my mother and marry me?

I wouldn't mind doing that. I like you more than your mother. You are calmer and a more peaceful soul.

Yes, I know, but I am not ready to marry now; I am too young for that. Though, I like your teaching me many unknown things.

I will even do more. Let me kiss you again.

The door opened. We hadn't locked it. My mother was standing there.

Ye, ye mo gbe. What's this? Ah Maggie, Maggie, what are you doing?

Something held her. She was just looking at us as we disentangled. I got my clothes on, stealthily tip-toed past her, expecting a deafening slap but receiving none, left her with her husband. I was not remorseful for my actions. I was repaying my mother for the way she treated my father. I wanted to watch and see her pain, the way I felt my pain every time she had made him behave contrary to his nature. Later, my mother woke me up.

Maggie, Maggie, tell me when did this start?

My seventeenth birthday's celebration night.

What? This had been going on for two years? You did not tell me?

No.

Ah! My poor baby, he forced himself on you? Did he threaten to kill or punish you if you told me?

No.

So, why have you kept it a secret from me?

I liked him. I also love him.

What? You slut, you useless girl; where did I get you?

That's a question only you can answer.

Don't bandy words with me, you shameless girl, you...

Don't abuse me; I am the product of your actions.

How? In what way? In what way am I responsible for this Ashewo²⁴ of a daughter? My Lord, is she my daughter?

I am, unless you want to say my father was not my father and, in that case, I must have learnt from the expert.

Shut your mouth. You are so heartless. Have you no shame, no shame at all and no remorse for hurting someone who loved you so deeply?

Remorse? Shame? Pain? Did you feel any of those when you were torturing my father? Did you? Did you care enough for him when you kept on pushing him beyond his limits? When you kept needling him till he lost his reason?

You don't understand. It's beyo...

Save me the sermon. Look at who is talking of shame. Were you ashamed when all your neighbours saw you as the troublesome, cantankerous woman? Did shame cross your mind when your husband, your children, lived under the label of "that troublesome family"? Did you ever think, at the height of your power, what your neighbours and others felt about us: your children, you, and our father? Did you suffer any shame walking down the street and knowing people are talking about you and would become extraordinarily nice when you pass them to snigger behind your back? Shame, indeed!

Get out of my house and don't ever come back. I don't ever want to see you again. Get out, you shameless Ashewo.

You don't need to bother, I am ready to leave. I don't care if you to disown me. You've never been a good example or a good mother to me anyway.

This altercation sent me to the street. There are very few friends indeed during times of intense needs, and after almost two weeks on the concrete jungle and consuming streets of Lagos, I wanted to go back to my mother and ask for forgiveness. One main incident during this 'outsider' experience nearly pushed me back to my mother. Living on the street demands different skills from whatever you could have learned in the classrooms or under your parents. You have to be bold, smart and strong. Bold, smart and shrewd I was, but I was not a strong person physically. To add injury to my case was the fact that I was beautiful and young. My first night on the street was hellish but one old woman who had been living under the Isolo Bridge for more than twelve years took me in. She was a godsend and a mother to me. It is not all women who are mothers and not all mothers are women. We clicked and we were like a mother and daughter pair. Every

²⁴ **Ashewo** : Prostitute, commercial sex worker or whore

morning she sold some few things to passers by. I became her partner. I started learning the ropes but she kept telling me I must go back to school because, according to her, the street wasn't a fitting place for anybody. After almost two weeks' staying with her, one night she did not return to our abode under the bridge. Since she had been talking about her daughter living somewhere in Lagos, I thought she had gone to visit her. So I sold whatever I could and went back to sleep for the night. It was in the middle of the night that I saw three hefty men surrounding my space. They were ready to rape me. I know that I could not overpower them and that nobody would come to my help in the middle of the night. I was preparing myself to succumb. I had taken my clothes off and was taking off my underwear when I heard.

Eyin boys ki le n wa?

(What do you boys want?)

Ah, Mama Alaye, a o mo pe base yin niyi.

(Ah, godmother, we did not know this is your base)

E mo pe base me niyi? Oju yin fo ni?

(You did not know this is my base, are you blind?)

Ki le ro pe e fe se na? E mo pe esin I je koriko abe e? E mo pe omo mi niyi?

(What do you think you are doing? You don't know, the horse does not eat the grass it is standing on? You don't know this is my daughter?)

Mama Alaye, omo yin ke?

(Godmother, your daughter ke?)

Omo mi, se mi o so fun yin pe mo l'omo l'Eko ni abi agan le pe mi?

(Yes my daughter. Did I not tell you that I had a daughter in Lagos, or did you think I was barren?)

Iya, a mo rara. A kan ri gisoro tuntun yi la ni ka je mbe?

(Mother, we did not know. We saw this gazelle and we thought we need to take something from her)

Ke je mbe? Je mbe ko, je mbe ni? E ti pooro bayi k'inu o to bi mi?

(Take out of it ko, take out of it ni. Disappear before I become angry and lose my temper?)

The men disappeared like vapour while kowtowing and begging the woman. After they had left, she told me that the boys were petty thieves who carried out their trade at Oshodi along with being bus conductors, thugs when necessary and enforcers at Isolo

market. The next day she told me that I must leave because the men would be looking for another opportunity and that she may not be around to help me. She further told me that she was moving in with her daughter at Ayobo, but she could not take me along because it was a small place that would not accommodate both of us with her daughter and her children. I thanked her and went roaming the Lagos streets. I found myself at Apapa, thinking of where I would lay my head, and thinking of returning to my mother and asking for forgiveness. Then I suddenly remembered my most intimate friend in secondary school. She was not only my friend but, most times, in school she had copied my assignments and I had saved her many times from tight corners. We had our escapades like young girls usually have and we had concocted our own acronyms that are decipherable to only the two of us. She was the only daughter of a rich widower who so loved his late wife that he refused to remarry and her house during my secondary years was a place of refuge from the hell of my own house. After her mother's death she started taking care of her father. Her father cherished Tunrayo and gave her whatever she asked for. When I called her, it was at her insistence that her father housed me. They didn't ask what made me homeless and I didn't tell.

So, at nineteen, almost twenty, I ended up in posh Ikoyi. My friend's father was a loving man, a gentleman and one of those whom God created specially to help others. He got me a job in one of his own companies as a Customer Relations Officer. However, I was just settling down and thanking my lucky stars when I had to leave again. It was not my father's friend that was hitting on me this time; it was my friend. Why is it that you can never know a person fully, no matter how long you may have known them? Why is it that no matter how close you are to a person, there are aspects of them that come up to make you wonder if you really know them? Why are human beings so complex that understanding them is a lifelong process that you can never finish?

Initially I was shocked to find this out about my friend, but after some reflection, I came to the conclusion that her sexuality was her choice, but it was not mine. I discounted all her entreaties and propositions. I pitied her, not for being a lesbian, but for what she would likely face in our own society that has not come to an understanding or acceptance of homosexuality or lesbianism. She would likely marry and have to explore her lesbian nature in secret. I was too sexually straight to dabble in that. When she couldn't have her way with me, she called me a slut, an ungrateful person, and a nympho who wanted to ensnare her father. I became homeless once more. There were lessons I learnt as a result of my experience in Ikoyi. I learnt that an individual must be

careful of her actions because they always have a way of following one and determining what happens to a person's future. Actions stick labels on an individual that, in time, become difficult to take away.

I decided to run away from Lagos to Abuja. Abuja was a civil service town and a political town, a city of wheeling, dealing, secrets and intrigues, and yet a quiet city where the only pathway to riches was to plug into the political class. Abuja did not have as many opportunities as Lagos but I had become tired of Lagos. In reality, however, it was my actions that were pursuing me. Two weeks after my twenty-first birthday, I found myself on the road again with the little that I had acquired. While deepened, better informed, more learned, more repentant, I was also confused.

charting a new path

iwa ma l'ewa, iwa rere l'eso eniyan, b'obinrin ba so wa nu, ko le l'ori oko, b'okunrin so wa nu, ko le l'ori aya. Gbogbo ohun to n dan ko ni wura, iwa ma l'ewa omo eniyan.- a yorùbá song

character is beauty, integrity is a person's beauty, if a woman loses her good behaviour, she can never have the luck of getting a husband, if a man loses character, he can never be lucky in finding a good wife. Not all that glitters is gold, good behaviour is a person's beauty – a yorùbá song

*16/17 june 2000
executrix terminal, obanikoro, lagos,
executrix terminal, gwagwalada, abuja,
lagos to abuja.*

After rejecting my friend's advances I would be relocating to Abuja, and I thought deeply on what I wanted the city to mean to me. Abuja was meant to be a new vista. My journey northward was an exploration in making sense of my broken life. Twenty-one: shattered hopes, strings of broken and dysfunctional relationships, unfocussed ambitions and unleavened dreams. My peers and mates were university graduates, married or planning to marry; they had started or were just starting career pathways, and embarking on stable life pathways. I was someone with nebulous dreams, potential untapped and fragmented relationships all around me. I grew up too fast, matured too rapidly and experienced life unpruned with most of my years without a sense of direction. I was too reactive instead of being proactive. I had allowed events to shape me rather than shape events.

I decided that my new journey would be a road trip rather than a flight. I wanted to savour the long twelve-hour journey to Abuja at night so that I could think and take stock of how my life had become this muddled. The overnight journey would shut out the distracting scenic views of the towns and cities we would pass through on the way to Abuja. The towns and cities would be asleep and their beckoning glitters would not disturb me in the introspective journey I wanted to take in searching for my life again. A night journey would allow me to rest and at the same time allow me to see my new city at dawn. A new city, a new dawn and a new beginning. This is what my heart yearned for. I did not inform anybody about this trip. A day earlier, I had disposed of much of what I owned. I wanted to travel light on this journey and to stride forth without any old baggage literally and symbolically. So, on the sixteenth day of June in the year 2000 at six o'clock in the evening, I was at the Executrifix bus terminal. I had a new suitcase, with a set of new dresses and underwear and my credentials. The sum total of my worth in cash was in my new bag and wallet. This was a new beginning.

Sitting at the air-conditioned reception room of Executrifix Bus Service, I looked through the glass and I was shut away from Lagos life. The montage of Lagos life streamed past the window, mute without its attendant noise. A surreal silent film, I saw the stark reality of the city I grew up in – the dirt, the constant rush, the noise, the traffic jam and the disjointed individuals milling on the road outside the glass window of the bus terminal's reception room. Viewing this, my heart broke. I felt fear in my stomach's pit. I was afraid because this journey is a dare for me. Future uncertainty froze my soul and I wanted to run out and join the known and tested script that was unfolding behind the window. Sweat formed on my face and I could see goose bumps on my skin. Suddenly, I wanted to dart out and join the movement beyond that window. Into my ears, a voice warned, "you are taking a big risk, and the end you are unsure of".

I picked up my suitcase and then a calmer voice whispered to me lines from a Robert Frost poem²⁵ 'Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

*I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.'*

I dropped my suitcase and for the first time took in the people in the room where I was sitting and the situation outside the room. There were strains of different music filtering into the room. There was music being played from speakers mounted on the various buses at the bus spot. Jibowu is a terminus for the privately run multicarrier transporters

²⁵ Lines taken from Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*

that operate the various buses servicing the country. From here you can get a bus from Lagos to the East, South East, Middle Belt and Northern part of the country. There are buses from Lagos to Enugu, Onitsha, Abakaliki, Calabar, Uyo, Jos, Abuja, Kaduna and Kano. The overnight journey to Abuja takes off around eight thirty at night, arriving in Abuja around seven thirty next morning. It was now seven thirty, I had my ticket, the bus conductor had stored my suitcase and we were waiting to embark. Scanning my fellow passengers, I played a mental game of predicting my likely seatmate. This I did till it was time to embark. I was among the first to embark. I went to my seat number, adjusted the seat and stretched my legs. Silently, I prayed for someone pleasant, who wouldn't snore beside me. A twelve-hour journey with a jerk, a pig, or a glutton could be unexciting, vexatious and frustrating. Mentally, I constructed the likely person I wanted beside me for this journey: pleasant, well-heeled, influential and someone who could be of help to me in this new land I was heading for.

I wished for someone who might be able to cushion my landing at Abuja because, in spite of my bravado, an inner voice kept whispering to me that I was on a harakiri mission. I was carried away in my daydream. I had started clothing him in a Van Heusen suit, Rolex wristwatch, snakeskin briefcase and Moroccan leather shoes with a deep Barry White voice, and mellow and inviting manners. A voice jerked me back to reality.

Excuse me, do you mind? My seat number is 16; I am sitting by the window. Mind coming out so that I can sit?

I looked at the voice bearer. A disappointment: no TM Lewin's suit, no Rolex and his scent was no Armani, but he had the voice I had imagined: with a foreign 'been-to'²⁶accent. Not bad, one out of four, but he was well dressed, in a blue striped suit, white shirt and a silvery tie. He had this direct look that seemed to see through me. He would be a good Father confessor, young, about my age or a few years older.

No, I don't mind.

I came out to the bus aisle and he went to the window seat. After placing his briefcase on the overhead locker above the seat, he sat down and, as he was the last passenger to enter, the journey started. I expected him to at least say hello but since he kept quiet, I remained mum.

²⁶ **Been to:** A Nigerian pidgin English term referring to those who had travelled abroad

There was the welcome by the head conductor, the how-to-use-seat-belt video, the information on the conveniences on the bus, and then we started driving towards Ibadan. After the preliminaries, one of the ubiquitous Nollywood home videos with predictable title and ending was put on. I started thinking of what I had to do in Abuja, mentally creating a checklist, but sleep soon managed to carry me away. I woke up at Okene, when the bus stopped. Okene is the convenience stop for most bus drivers on the way to Abuja. Here passengers are meant to ease themselves, stretch their legs, eat, buy some snacks and wait for some time. I quickly went to the ladies and then to a record shop with the intention of buying some CDs. As I was going to the shop, I saw my seatmate following me. He did not say anything and I came to the conclusion he must be a very shy person. I couldn't get the Celine Dion and Beyonce CD or DVD that I was looking for and I started back for the bus since the driver had tooted his horn for us to embark on the second leg of the journey.

As the bus moved further into Kogi State and we settled in the bus, my seatmate turned to me.

Here is a bottle of fruit juice for you. Hope you don't mind?

No, I do not mind.

Thanks, for accepting. Will you have some of my biscuits?

Thank you, I will decline. I ate a large late night meal when we stopped at Okene and I don't usually eat between meals. I hope you are not offended?

I am Francis but friends call me Father Francis or F squared.

Not at all. I am Margaret. Friends call me Maggie. Are you a Reverend Father?

No, I am not. My friends used my name as a tool of upping their chances with beautiful women. They know I am handsomer than they are, but when they call me Father in front of the girls, it labels me untouchable and unavailable.

Are you available?

I am not a Reverend Father.

That doesn't answer my question.

Depends on what your question is.

Well, are you married?

Do I look married to you?

You must be, taking into consideration the way you are dodging my question.

Well, that's your own conclusion and opinion. You have a right to them, though.

Well, that seems to be a question you don't want to answer.

If you say so. By the way, what are you going to Abuja for? Business? Resumption? Going for work? Contract? Or just visiting?

None.

What do you mean?

This is my first time and I am relocating.

Oh! Oh!

He went back to the novel he was reading, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. I zeroed him out of my mind. This one seemed unavailable and untouchable. His responses to my questions on being married seemed to be a confirmation – not to mention the fact that I was not even ready for such entanglements again. I started on my mental checklist again but then the bus stopped. The driver turned off the lights inside the bus and put on the parking lights cutting the engine. There was no announcement, but when vehicles following us started parking after us, I knew something was amiss. Some minutes after, the driver informed us that an armed robbery incident had happened some miles ahead, at the T junction where we branch to Abuja and other vehicles going further north, to places like Kaduna and Jos, would continue on the Okene road. We could hear the gunshots and I was terrified, but my seatmate was calm.

Don't be afraid, the robbers won't come here.

Who says?

I say.

What gives you that assurance?

We are covered with the sanctified blood of Jesus Christ.

Hen, Hen, do the robbers recognise that?

Well, they know that the Police would have sent for reinforcement, and look around you. Look at the escorts in each vehicle coming together to map plans in case the robbers strayed to this area.

What if they overpower all those escorts and enter this bus?

Nothing will happen to you or anyone in this bus.

What do you have? What makes you this bold?

Well, I will take care of the motherfuckers.

How?

Don't bother; we will cross that bridge when we get there.

May we never come near that bridge.

Amen, my sister. Don't be afraid, my dear, God is in control. Have faith and not fear.

After-forty five minutes the journey started again. This time everybody was awake until we passed the scene of the armed robbery.

I told you not to fear. See, there was no need for fears.

Thank God. If you had heard the stories of these night buses and armed robbery you wouldn't say what you said.

God is always in control; He has never abdicated His duties, never. Have you not heard that, 'He who safeguards Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps'?

That was Israel, not Nigeria.

Where is your faith, little sister?

Nowhere.

Hun, I hope you do not mind, why are you relocating to Abuja?

I need to explore another part of the country. What about you, what are you on the way to Abuja for?

I am on my way to take up an appointment.

Why didn't you fly?

I missed my connecting flight.

Connecting flight? What do you mean?

I arrived in the country yesterday afternoon but, because I dashed out to see a friend in Ikeja whom I did not meet, the traffic jam made it impossible for me to take the connecting flight. The next flight would not be until tomorrow and I was late already because I should have reported yesterday morning. I phoned and my employers said I can come on Monday, but I want to use the weekend to settle down. Someone suggested taking the luxurious buses that ply Abuja overnight.

What a story? So, you could have checked into a hotel and travelled on Monday. Why go through this hell when your employers said you could come on Monday?

I left the country many years back. I had the urge to see the country again.

But you won't feel anything through this night journey. The cities and towns are asleep.

I know.

What did you study abroad?

Information Technology, specialising in Internet security. What about you?

I am yet to go to the University, I've been working.

Where ?

A Customer Relations officer in a company in Ikoyi.

Why are you then relocating to Abuja?

It's complicated.

Oh! I see.

Dawn broke and the bus pulled into the Executrifix bus spot at Gwagalada. I was thinking of which item I had to tick in my checklist when Francis came to me.

Do you mind coming along with me in the official car sent to pick me up? I'll ask the driver to drop you before dropping me.

I don't mind but I can't.

Why?

I don't have any idea of where I am heading to now. This being my first time in Abuja, I am thinking of getting an inexpensive hotel first before working out my next steps.

Well, let's get to my workplace first, and when I see the accommodation given to me, if it is shareable we will; if not then we will go into town and search for a place for you. What about that?

What about your wife? Won't she mind?

rescuing a sinking sheep

*e je ka burin burin,ka f'ese ko,ka wo eni ti o s'eni pele- a yorùbá
proverb*

let us walk and stumble and see the person that will sympathize with us
– a yorùbá proverb

*17 june 2000
diplomatic quaters,
asokoro, abuja
federal capital territory.*

Maggie, I silently told myself, 'you cannot ask this car to stop now'. I had accepted the offer. Refusing now could lead to actions I can't predict. Why should I not play along? Keep my wits and learn what is going to happen? At least I had mentally visualised a successful and well-heeled man. A man with a Mercedes M350 cannot be low heeled or a cipher in the corporate totem pole. He must be either an important man or have powerful and well-to-do backers. If he were a JJC²⁷ as he said, who would send a Benz to take him to an appointment? Any car would have done. This means he must either be important or he must be a liar. I was so busy mulling over these thoughts that I did not hear what Francis said.

Hen?

Where have you been? I said a penny for your thoughts.

I was reflecting on my life and thinking of what to do next.

'Thou shall not think of tomorrow or what tomorrow may bring, see ye not the lilies, they neither toil nor...'

If one doesn't think about tomorrow and survival in this country, one is dead. Life is not a bed of roses for people like me. I have had to struggle for everything I have ever got in my life.

*Life is never easy for anyone. As Tolstoy said, quoting Krishna, 'Pitiful and foolish is the man who seeks what he already has, and does not know that he has it. Yes, pitiful and foolish is he who does not know the bliss of love which surrounds him and which I have given him'. Most human beings look for what is inside them or as the Yorùbá s say, 'wón n wá ohun tó wà l'ápò Sòkòtò won lo sí Sòkótó.'*²⁸

What do you mean?

²⁷ **JJC**: A common Nigerian term used in describing a newcomer, neophyte or novice. It means Johnny Just Come. This is one of Fela Anikulapo's Afrobeat songs.

²⁸ A Yorùbá proverb meaning that, 'they will be looking for what is in their pants' pocket in Sòkótó. The proverb plays on the word Sòkòtò and Sòkótó. Sòkótó is a city in the far NorthWestern Nigeria, while Sòkòtò means pants.

I'll explain...

Francis did not finish his sentence. The car had reached the building we were going to, and the driver opened the gate electronically. It was a large compound, and, as we drove in, a uniformed guard saluted the man sitting beside me. I became afraid, very afraid. I wanted to shout, 'Drop me, drop me, please!' but I couldn't. A fly, I have walked into a spider's web with my eyes wide open. Then, I remembered what he said when we were discussing the armed robbers on the bus, "I will deal with those motherfuckers". Images raced through my head: headless body story in the media, gang rape, prostitution, white slavery, and drug mule. What have I got myself into, my Lord? I must have gone pale.

What's wrong with you?

By now the car had stopped and Francis was looking at me in trepidation.

Are you all right?

Yes, can the driver take me back to Gwagalada?

But you've not seen the accommodation I wanted you to see.

I don't think...

Some other people came out of the intimidating and expensive building in front of us. They were deferential to Francis.

Welcome, Oga.

One of them collected his briefcase and when they saw that he was with a visitor, they left. The way they deferred to him made me more afraid.

He is more than he had intimated to me. Something is definitely wrong. Will he release me now that I have entered his den with my eyes open? What would happen to me now? Oh! My God, why did I not follow the voice that warned me to stay in Lagos? Is this the way I am going to end my life? Nobody knows where I am. I don't even know where I am. Maybe I should have gone back to my mother and apologised? What will become of me? What should I do, my Lord?

You don't think what?

I mean... mean you are...

Okay, you don't want to take my offer?

Yes. Something isn't right. You are not...

...whom I said I was?

Yes. I feebly nodded my head.

I could see it in your eyes and your reaction. You are right. They are waiting for me in the office now. You have two options.

Options? Oh, my God, where am I? What did I get myself into?

Options? What options?

Fear not. Like I told you earlier, have faith not fear. You can read this while I am gone for this meeting.

He gave me a piece of paper. As he was entering the house, he turned back to me.

If you give me the chance, I will explain everything to you. However, if you insist in going away, Bile will take you back to Gwagalada. With faith, however, and overcoming your fear, Okon will take you to the accommodation. If you like it, you stay there until I finish my job in the office and I'll meet you after and explain everything that is confusing to you now. So, what is it?

I stood dazed, unable to move or say something. My heart was beating as if it would burst from my body. One voice said, 'You have a choice now, you can still walk out' while another one said, 'why don't you take the chance, he who dares wins and life is a risk anyway'.

What's your option, Maggie?

I'll look at the accommodation. If I don't like it, can I leave?

Yes.

Francis called one of those who had come to welcome him but who retreated to the front of the house awaiting his order.

Okon, take her to the guesthouse.

Okon collected my suitcase from me. He led me away from the main building and Francis briskly entered the house. Away from the imposing house, we entered an estate; it was well-planned, and geometrically laid out, with overwhelming and dazzling horticultural wizardry. We passed seven houses then Okon took me into the next one, which was a bit removed from the nearest house and quite distant from the gate. I looked at the house and my mind was divided.

Who would hear if one cries here? Why this isolated house, when there are others? Am I not walking into a trap? How did Okon know which house to take me to? After all, Francis did not specify any one. When did Francis give him the specific one? Maybe they have been doing this for a long time. Find a 'damsel in distress', bring her to this isolated house and secured compound and do

whatever they want with her? Even if someone hears your shout or noise here, won't they ask, 'How did you come here?' and 'What did you want?'

Okon seemed to have read my mind.

Oga Madam, you no like this house?

No, that is not it.

Because na only him empty, others don dey occupied.

Is that so?

Na so, Oga Madam. Na dis one be the best O. Oga no dey give him own guesthouse to unimportant people.

That rang a bell in my head. *What if this Okon is also a part of the conspiracy?* I was on the point of turning back when a car came out on its way to the estate's entrance. Seeing Okon and me, it stopped.

Ah, Okon, Okon, our Oga don come?

Yes, Oga Madam, Hin just arrive this morning.

The woman in the car then turned to me.

Morning, young lady, how are you?

I am fine, Ma.

Okon, things go better now since our Oga don return.

Oga Madam na so. We no get better Oga pass our Oga. No be so?

Na so my dear. I dey rush go do one job wey Oga say mek I do. Tell am say, I go see am tomorrow.

I go tell am, Oga Madam. Bye Oga Madam.

I watched the car drive off. Okon was waiting for me. I nodded my assent and I entered a resplendent bungalow. Okon gave me the access card to the house and went out, greeting and bowing. I locked the door after me and explored the house. As I was going from room to room, I felt the paper Francis gave me in my hand, opened it and read.

have FAITH not fear

things are hard

life is tough and rough

there seems no way

and no light is showing

at the tunnel's end

have FAITH not fear.
you are squeezed
and all that can go wrong
do go wrong.
you've tried
but there seems to be
no BREAKTHROUGH

have FAITH not fear.
you are lonely and depressed
no friend seems to stand by you
your problems are mountains
standing insurmountable
don't... don't give up

have FAITH not fear.
as you try
all things fail
your path is thorny
your dreams are dust
with you branded a FAILURE

have FAITH not fear.
He who makes you
knows you fully
the rough patches of life
may be a test
a trial to strengthen you

have FAITH not fear .

I thought about these words, which so obviously touched on what I was going through. Wondering about other aspects of Francis I did not know, and the time he had to write such a poem, I fell asleep.

The persistent purring of the door videophone woke me. The bungalow I had been ushered into was a state-of-the-art modernised building with all gizmos built into it. This house surpassed my Ikoyi apartment and that one was a luxurious one. I wondered who might be ringing. I went to the door's videophone and saw it was Francis. He came in and the disquiet settled on me again, heavy snow flakes on a very chilly day.

Sit down, Maggie. Have you had anything to eat?

No.

No? What is wrong with this Okon?

I said I don't want to eat anything.

I lied to cover up for whatever offence Francis must have thought Okon committed.

Why? Oh! Oh! You are still afraid.

I am not afraid. I just feel things are not right. You are not the person you told me you were.

Maggie, don't worry. Sit down. Let me clear everything.

Okay.

Truly, I am Francis, a former Reverend Father and I was married.

How come? A Reverend Father and a married man?

I was excommunicated for going against my vow by getting married.

I don't understand.

What I told you on the bus was a true story with gaps. Let me fill in the gaps.

Okay, I am listening. It gets more curious.

I was born into a popular and wealthy family in northern Nigeria. I will not tell you where because, if I do, you will know the family I came from, and I don't want you to be influenced by that. My parents were staunch Muslims but my father sent me to a Jesuit-run school in Ibadan, Loyola College Ibadan. After my secondary school, my father wanted me to further my study and become a medical doctor but I wanted to study theology instead.

Ehn, what happened then?

I was disowned. Where do you hear of an Emir's son becoming a Reverend Father? It was unthinkable and a slap in the face for my father, his religion, and authority. I became a 'person nongrata' to my family. According to my father, I was dead to them.

And you did not beg?

Some important people in the society rose up and tried to mediate in the fracas and proffered a compromise solution. I could study my theology even up to PhD level and become a lecturer, but I could not become a Reverend Father because I was the heir apparent. However, I was like my father – stubborn, unbending and also a rebel. So my father swore never to see me again and the church gave me a scholarship.

So you became a Reverend Father?

Yes.

Then what happened?

I ended up with a Master of Divinity from Rome and later was posted to a church in Chicago after a stint in Cape Town, South Africa.

How did you become married and an ex-Reverend Father?

I met a girl in Chicago. I was defrocked and I married the girl.

Where is she now? Is she in this estate?

She died four years after, leaving me with a boy. The years with her were the most interesting and fulfilling of my life. Her death threw me into a three-year hell.

What happened?

I'll tell you later. You have to eat and it is getting late. Do you mind if I take you to dinner?

the guided tour

bi alejo ba ni ibi yi la sin baba afoju si, o ye ki a mo pe ara ile lo so fun

if the stranger says this is where the blind old man was buried, we should know s/he must have been told by a native – a yorùbá proverb

june 17/18 , 2000

diplomatic estate,

asokoro, abuja.

federal capital territory.

The dinner was a treat. Francis knew Abuja inside out. He took me to an exclusive but posh restaurant at Wuse. He was well known there and we were given a private room. Each of these steps confirmed my belief that Francis was not a run-of-the-mill person, with his present job being a lucrative one to carry the kind of expense chit we were accumulating. It was a five-course meal with champagne. The waiters were unobtrusive

to the point of being invisible. After the first course, while waiting for the subsequent courses, I raised Francis' story.

So, you said you went through three hellish years?

Yes, but Maggie do you mind if we don't start talking about that now?

Sorry.

Don't be, telling it now will leave a sour taste in my mouth and I want to enjoy this dinner.

We had the dinner.

Maggie, Abuja is a beautiful city. Let me take you on a guided tour.

Abuja at night was a dazzle. We went to the parks and the Usuma Dam. Francis showed me almost all Abuja estates, from Gordon Nasko to Federal Housing Estates at Gwarinmpa and other exclusive and posh estates spread over Abuja. We went through Abuja horticulturally manicured, well laid and wide roads as he showed me various eateries, the National Assembly, the Central Bank, the Ecumenical Centre, the roof discothèque and other Abuja landmarks. We went to Njaja, the pottery village in honour of Lady Kwali the potter and he drove the miles to Suleija. He was busy running a commentary on each of the places. I noticed he did not once refer to his story, and I kept thinking it must have been very painful for him and he did not want to be reminded. The grand tour took more than four hours. At around eleven thirty we drove back to the estate. I was so tired.

Don't let me impose myself on you. You seem so tired.

You won't be imposing yourself. Thank you for the tour. I don't think I'll remember the way to most of them. But the tour gave me an insight to Abuja.

You'll soon get a feel for the city. Don't worry; you'll learn how to navigate it.

Thank you so much. I am grateful.

Don't bother. I'll leave you to sleep. Check on you in the morning, then we can go to church. Have a good night's sleep.

I was sleepy but I would have stayed awake if he started telling his story. But he did not and I went to sleep.

Dropping Margaret off at the chalet was a task for Francis. He felt the need to stay with her for as long as possible. He wanted her company, and since the loss of his wife he had never had this feeling of wanting to be with someone of the opposite sex. The feelings were overwhelming. He wanted to sit beside her, hold her hands and tell her his

story, the story that had been within him for a long time looking for an outlet – the problems he went through, the trauma of loss and the fickleness of friendship and friends. The urge was on him and he wanted to start the once-upon-a-time routine again, but he could see her dozing. He wanted her to rest. It had been a long day. *There will always be another day for story telling*, he thought, as he drove towards his own accommodation. Francis remembered their bantering in the bus, her suspicions of him and the carefree woman that sat beside him at the dinner. He could feel the small playful girl that was with him as they toured Abuja. He had fallen in love. He felt as if he had known Maggie for decades or even for life. He wanted her to be his woman.

But, how do you tell a woman you have just met about the turmoil that is going through your mind? The aching want and the need searing through your heart? The gaping hole still deep waiting to be filled, which seemed as if any other person except the one you lost could ever fill it? How do you express such feelings?

After taking his bath, Francis called Maggie at the chalet. It was just ringing. *She must have slept*, he thought. *I will call her in the morning and get her to church*. As he flipped through Dostoyevsky's *The Dreams of a Ridiculous Man*, sleep caught up with him. With the sentences doubled, fuzzy and unfocussed, his hands dropped the book and he slept.

The hours went past very fast and dawn came. It was Sunday. I'm not a churchgoer, and I was in my bed luxuriating and bobbing in and out of sleep. The buzzing of the door's videophone cleared my head's sleep cobwebs. I quickly put on my house robe and went to the door. When I saw it was Francis, I opened the door. Facing me, he was well-dressed in a striped, blue Van Heusen suit, white shirt and a grey, white-dotted silk tie. He looked exquisite and surprised to see me in my house robe.

Are you not ready?

Ready for what?

Are you not ready for church?

Church? Don't kill me with laughter.

Kill you with laughter? I told you last night that we will be going to the church this morning.

Did you? I must have been sleeping, I did not hear.

Well, why don't you go and dress up so that we can go?

Go where? Church? I am not a churchgoer, I don't believe in that mumbo-jumbo superstition...

You are not a churchgoer? You've never attended a church?

Maybe when I was very young. That must have been in my antiquity.

Your antiquity? You are not serious?

I am dead serious. Why is it that churchgoers don't ever believe everyone is not like them or taken in like them?

Because you are missing a lot.

Missing a lot? That must be the greatest joke of the year.

It's not a joke. Well, may I come in?

Why not? Give me some time to change. Would you like a cup of coffee, or is it tea?

Coffee with lots of cream will do. Though I am almost late for service but that notwithstanding, I can wait.

Wait, he did. I came back into the living room after my freshening up to meet Francis watching the Redeemed Church of Christ live service on cable. I was surprised. As a former Reverend Father, he must be a Catholic, so what is he doing following the service of a Pentecostal church? Though not a churchgoer, I was familiar with the Nigerian church system. I was born into one of Nigeria's orthodox churches, the Anglican Church. As the situation in our home reached the boiling point, my mother stopped going to the Anglican Church and started attending one of the indigenous churches, the Christ Apostolic Church. She then switched to a splinter group called Christ Adaptation Church. Our lives in the house became a diet of fasting, revival services, mountain prayer retreats, and numerous night vigils. My mother stopped wearing all her gold, jewellery and other bodily adornments and became a dull, blank-looking woman. According to her, God looks at the insides rather than the external. All this outer makeover, however, did not affect what came from within my mother. She still retained her caustic tongue, deepened her strict moralisation and raised her sarcastic singing prowess an octave higher. With the addition of more indigenous songs to her repertoire, she had a choice of adequate songs to put anybody down, satirize or cut anyone to size. I grew up hating churches because I could not see any positive influence the churches had on my parents.

The orthodox churches, like the Baptists, Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians and the Lutherans, were the first set of churches established by the colonials. Most Nigerians attended schools founded by these churches. With development and growth, coupled with anti-colonialism, splinters and indigenous churches came into existence: the Christ Apostolic Church, the Cherubim and Seraphim, the African Church, the United African Methodist Church, The Celestial Church of Christ and a host of others. In the 70s, a new set of churches came to be: the Pentecostals and Evangelicals, called the TREM, Redeemed Church of Christ, Faith Tabernacle, Deeper Life Bible Church, Foursquare Gospel Church and the variations they spawned. This last set are the reigning churches in Nigeria, with members in the millions, and countless parishes spread over the hinterland and coastal towns and villages. I brought the cup of coffee in and interrupted Francis watching the live church service.

Aren't you going to church?

I am waiting for you to accompany me to the church.

Did you not hear what I said? I am not a churchgoer.

What a pity!

A pity? I am not feeling sad, so why should my not going to church be a pity?

A pity because of your wrong perceptions and what you are missing.

Missing?

Yes, missing. You are missing the opportunity of understanding and getting close to your Creator, becoming related to many brothers and sisters from different races, tribes and tongues and of learning about love as the summary of all laws and the ability to reconcile with God.

Reconcile with God, become brothers and sisters with different races... Give me a break. If most Christians are like the ones I have met in my short life, then I have enough of Christians. I don't want any of them again. About getting closer to my Creator, why do I have to get closer to Him or is it Her? Do you think I believe in God? Why should I believe in one who created evil and allows suffering, natural disasters and allow the good to suffer while the wicked thrive?

Praise God for this opportunity!

Which opportunity? The opportunity to put me straight or is it to convert me?

No not that, the opportunity to discuss with you and allow you to make your judgements.

What if I don't want to hear your spiel about Christianity?

Well, you'll want to hear my story, won't you? There's no way you'll hear my story and Christianity not be a part of it.

Have you had breakfast?

No.

Let me prepare breakfast for us and you can use the period to finish your service on television. I will then hear your story. Don't be happy anyway or think you have succeeded because I am as convinced a sceptic as you've ever come across.

I was one before you. Really, I was not a sceptic, I was an atheist.

once upon a time

ijapa ni, omo oun ti o ba fi ogbon ologbon s'ogbon, ki i se omo oun- a yorùbá proverb

the tortoise said, any child of his who does not learn from other people's experience is a bastard – a yorùbá proverb

*june 18, 2000
diplomatic estate,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory*

The speed with which I prepared the breakfast, did my toiletries and rushed to the living room surprised me. I had been waiting to hear Francis' story ever since we met. He had been like a piece of onion to me. As you peel off one layer, there are innumerable layers asking you to peel them. I had already heard he was a Muslim, son of an Emir, renegade Reverend Father, Pentecostalist and now an Atheist. What would I find out next about this friend of mine? I set the table and called him away from where he was glued to the 42-inch LCD television. He asked for a few moments, the service was coming to an end. After the service ended on the TV, he came for breakfast.

So, what is your story?

My story? Where do you want me to start?

You said you were an atheist, at the same time an Emir's son, a failed Reverend Father and now a Pentecostalist. Which one should I believe?

All. Or you think it is not possible for an individual to be all?

I am confused, that is why. You must have gone through a lot and it is hard for me to believe.

Better believe it. Life has different dimensions, comes in stages and is expressed in different colours from the monochrome most cultures, religions and people take it to be.

You think so?

No, I don't think it so. I have experienced it to be so. Look into nature and the environment surrounding you, and you will recognise God's diversity at work. One who created these diversities would never be one with robotic vision or monochromic ideas or creation. If God wanted us to be of only one mould, the creation would have turned out robots instead of human beings in their almost seven billion diverse forms.

We deviate from your story. I am not ready for a philosophy class yet.

Okay, my story. Where do you want me to start?

Start anywhere, but how and when did you become an atheist?

I told you about being an Emir's son. What I did not tell you was the fact that the Emir was my Uncle. My parents died when I was three. My biological father was the Emir's only brother and the heir to the throne. He was, however, uninterested in the position. He was too modern and too academic. Though his father, my grandfather, had so many children, there were only two boys among the fifteen he had. My father rebelled and went to study. His father, however, did not cut him off. He waited for him to finish his degree, a degree that my father stole my grandfather's money to enrol in. When my father's stolen money ran out and he started suffering in Dublin, it was my grandfather who not only knew where he was but also knew about his sufferings and surreptitiously opened an account with the university authorities, which helped him to finish. When my father knew about this, he became obliged to his father. Typical of him, he had crossed another line that made his father angry.

Which line was that?

He had married a West Indian he met in Dublin without informing his parents, and she gave him a son – me.

Your father must have been an interesting character.

I did not grow up to know him. From what I have heard, he must have been and I take after him. My life has been very interesting too.

Don't say it.

After graduating and finishing his master's, my father became a lecturer in the university. This time, my grandfather wrote him a lengthy letter detailing how my father had hurt him by his actions and how my grandfather had helped him achieve his dream. He now asked him to come home and take over his responsibility.

Did he take over the throne?

No, he didn't. He was travelling back home in order to reconcile with his father and ask that the throne be given to his junior brother when he died.

In Ireland?

No, in Nigeria. He came back home with his wife and me. It was on the journey to Koton Karfe. They had an accident and both died and I was the only survivor.

The only survivor?

*Yes. Passers-by saw me by the roadside; I must have been flung out of the car as it crashed. They must have searched through the wrecked car and found information that helped them to take me to my grandfather, who was then very ill and almost dying. The only thing he uttered when they told him about his son and presented me was *Lailah i lah Lahu* "Allah be praised". He died two months after, and I grew up thinking my uncle was my father.*

How did you find yourself in a Jesuit school?

After my grandfather's death, my uncle ascended the throne, a benevolent, liberal and open-minded ruler. He was, however, cursed with his father's curse. He had many children but they were all female. He was advised to marry many wives, but after the third wife and twelve girls, he accepted his fate and started grooming me to take over.

How did going to a Jesuit school become part of the grooming?

It was never part of the grooming. Catholic missionaries came to Koton Karfe. They paid a courtesy call on the Emir. I was at the Quranic School when they came. On the entourage was my uncle's former mate and inJayte friend when they were at Barewa College. Unknown to my uncle, he was a Christian from Southern Zaria who used a Muslim name in the school in order to have less trouble at school.

The story gets more curious.

Yes. He was the one who convinced my uncle to allow one of his children to attend a Catholic school, explaining that the world was changing and that there was the need to have an eye in the enemy's camp.

So, your uncle accepted and sent you?

Yes. It must have been with the idea that it would help me in preparing for the responsibility I was meant to take up, or it may have been his way of making sure I did not take the Emirship position up. Meanwhile he prayed to have a son before I finished my studies.

Well, you did not end up being an Emir but a failed Reverend Father. When were you ever an atheist?

I told you I fell in love with a young lady. She came for confession one Saturday. Her confession was intriguing. She had been having thoughts of murder against her parents because they were forcing her to marry a very rich man and her father's business associate. She, however, did not love this man or want to marry him. What brought her to confession was the fact that she had a strong urge to kill her parents.

How did that lead to your being defrocked?

I went to her parents and was able to convince them to abort the marriage plan. It was not so difficult, most especially when they heard their daughter's plans.

What happened after? Convincing her parents wouldn't have led to your defrocking or did it?

It did not lead to that. It was what happened after that that led to my becoming an ex-Reverend Father.

What happened after?

She fell in love with me. I resisted and refused. When her stomach was pumped out the second time for sleeping tablets I had to relent. My intention was to string her along for some time till she met another person. Her friendship, however, brought me a realisation that I had been deceiving myself. All my repressed feelings and sexual needs that I thought I had overcome came to the fore. One thing led to another and I sent a letter of vow renunciation.

What did the church and your superiors do?

I was sent to Rome for re-education, but when six months of re-education couldn't change my mind, I became a lost cause. I was excommunicated and defrocked. I came back to the lady who had been waiting for me and married her.

Just like that?

Her parents were against the marriage and thought I had taken advantage of their daughter. After she insisted and was ready to walk away from them in order to be with me, the relationship was sanctioned. It was very hard at the beginning.

Why is that so?

I had no job. Who wants to employ a defrocked Reverend Father and what job will you give him, a confessor or a counsellor?

How did you survive then?

My wife carried out the home responsibilities. I had to learn new tricks as an old dog. I went to study Internet technology specialising in Internet security and forensics.

Did your disappointment with the way the church treated you turn you into an atheist?

No, it did not. I started looking for a church to attend. As an ex-Priest, I was a persona non grata in any Catholic church. However, my training had made me a church-going animal. This search led me to becoming a Pentecostalist.

What led to your becoming an atheist? When did you become one? And since you are not an atheist now, what led you back to the church again?

Many questions? Too many I can say. What makes you an atheist?

I am not an atheist. I just don't go to church.

You mean you don't believe in anything?

What is there to believe in in this world? Who are you to believe? Christians who are worse than unbelievers in their behaviour, prejudice and bigotry who don't think twice bombing defenceless civilians because of nationalism, national

security or whatever concept they are defending? Is it those who have turned the church into a commercial enterprise or countless 'devout' Christians, who cheat, lie and commit all crimes in the name of religion? Or are you thinking of those who bomb hundreds of thousands of innocent people who never wronged them because they believed in Jihad? Who should one believe? The conservative fundamentalist religious fanatic or their opposites, the liberalised, anything-goes religious opportunists?

You are confusing the wrapping paper with the gift.

What do you mean?

I'll explain to you later but I am famished.

You are trying to weasel out of telling me how you became an atheist. Are you so ashamed of it?

I am not ashamed. All my experiences prepared me for the job I am now doing.

What job is that?

You are too fond of questions. Are you not hungry? After that breakfast, I am hungry again. Let us go and find something to eat because I am a person who can't think straight or do any other thing whenever I am hungry. I won't be able to tell you the story really well until I have filled my stomach.

Looking at Francis, I wondered where he stocked all the food he consumed and this seemed not to have any effect on his midriff or weight. He ate well and he was a gastronome. His food seemed to be quickly metabolised. I like men who eat but I love them better, when what they eat does not turn them into rolling drums. Francis maintained his shape, and I noticed that whenever he became hungry, he lost attention.

disbelieving belief

***asiwere wi li okan re pe Olorun ko si. Nwon baje, won si n se ise irira,
ko si eniti n se rere***

the fool hath said in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, they have done abominable works, there is none that doeth good –
psalm14:1 (KJV)

*june 18, 2000
diplomatic estate,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory*

What do you mean confusing the wrapping paper for the gift?

You love asking too many questions.

Just as you love dodging them.

Do you intend becoming a lawyer?

Never, lawyers lie a lot. And I don't want to be a liar.

That's a simplistic definition for an honourable profession.

Are you a lawyer? Why are you defending them?

I did a diploma in law once.

You are an enigma. Too many sided. Can I really believe my ears? Are you not spinning tales about yourself?

What makes you think so?

What I have heard so far seems to be fairy tales to me. They are so outlandish that I cannot believe they happened to an individual.

You better believe. Some people's lives are tales from which dramas are written. Some people do live interesting lives. I am one of the rare ones.

So, your being an atheist is another interesting chapter?

You can say that, but like I said, let us eat first or you won't be able to get the meat of the story.

By this time, we had reached another exclusive Abuja eatery. He seemed to be an eatery collector, a gourmet. As the waiters laid down the six-course meal, one after the other on our table, Francis exchanged banter with them. I looked at him, lanky, well spoken with Queen's English enunciation and intonation and very urbane. He sounded too smooth for me and a part of me, while drawn to him, still viewed him as a con man. I still suspected him and felt that he was too good to be true. The sceptic in me had my antennae out. He took his time eating. Each swallow to him seemed to be a well-thought-out and calculated intelligent step. He savoured his food first, seemed to pray and appreciate each bite before putting it in his mouth. However, he enjoyed eating and as we ate and drank, he was not loquacious like some people I had eaten with before. He gave few comments, except on the food and the drinks. His choice of eateries was small, isolated but expensive eateries- posh, exquisite and well decorated. The waiters were always almost invisible and quick in serving you, not like some eateries where you will nearly finish a novel before your first course arrives. We finished the lunch, and instead of heading home, Francis took me to Abuja Silverbird Galleria for a movie. We watched Julia Roberts in the Soderbergh-directed *Erin Brokovich*. Erin's outsider's role appealed

to me; just as her can-do spirit gave me a lot of motivation and hope that my new beginning would not lead me to perdition.

The questions Francis was throwing at me as we drove away from the cinema made me realise he took me to the film to educate me and let me know that there are no limits or constraints for a person if one is determined and believes in oneself. The obstacles Julia Roberts as Erin had to overcome looked so insurmountable: single mother, no job, no education, male-dominated society, lack of belief from those who mattered in her case, the chemical company victims refusal to share their sufferings with her and the expert female lawyer who treated her like trash. She overcame all, becoming a successful person at the end of the film. She did this through grit, determination and a strong single-mindedness that overcame all. I left the film inspired and prepped up to carve a way for myself in this new land. The problem, however, was I did not know what I had to do and how to go about it. We reached the estate and Francis dropped me at the chalet.

If you are not too tired, I am ready to answer your atheist question now.

I could never be tired for that. Please come in. What would you like, tea or coffee?

Check the fridge, you'll probably find a bowl of ice cream. I have a sweet tooth and taking this hot afternoon into consideration, I will take that and some fruit after.

As we were licking our ice cream, Francis went silent again but I did not allow him.

So, how did a defrocked Reverend Father become an atheist? Was it after your being defrocked?

No, it was not.

When was it?

Ah, o fe ma s'aju elede pee de...

(You want to pre-empt a speaker's thoughts...)

You speak Yorùbá so fluently?

I told you I schooled in Ibadan. Do you want to hear the Ibadan dialect: Moomi re n ko, se won mbe nle? (My mother, who is both our mother, is she at home?)

That's enough. You are a bundle of talents. Are you sure you are not a dramatist?

I am not, believe me.

Well, how did a learned, trained Catholic Father traverse the path leading to hell as an atheist? Or is that not what Christians believe, that atheists will rot in hell?

Since you are fixed on this issue of my being an atheist, and I cannot get out of it without answering, I will tell you now.

About time too.

I told you the four years I spent with my late wife were heavenly years. The three years after her death were hell on earth for me.

Why?

She died at the point when she was meant to start enjoying the fruits of her labour. When I married her, I did not know she was a very rich woman. Her parents adopted her after they found out in their middle age that they could not bear children.

What a pity this world is. Many who have the wherewithal and means to take care of children do not have them. Those who are starving and cannot take care of themselves; your God gives them many children. What an irony?

The ways of God are unfathomable and "To whom then will ye liken me or shall I be equal?" saith the Holy One. Despite my wife being adopted and an only child, her parents were strict with her and trained her well. She was a humble and well-brought-up girl and never showed her wealth or thought of it. Her parents' idea of marrying her to a rich businessman was not because they were poor. They wanted her to marry the man because they thought it would consolidate her wealth and guard her against gold-diggers. When she fell in love with me, they opposed it, because I was seen as a gold-digger. A defrocked reverend without any means and job that he can do, what career do you go into with philosophy, church history and Latin?

You could have become a lecturer or a professor.

Yes, but after renouncing my vows, whatever I would be teaching of theology would be a joke.

Yes, I know.

So, I decided to go back to school and was busy searching for government grants, scholarships and doors were being slammed against me. At the time I was at the nadir of helplessness, my wife revealed her wealth. By then, her parents were dead and she had come into her money in her own right.

You wouldn't have suffered much then.

No, I suffered initially. Remember I did not know she was rich and nobody is worse treated than a person who has walked away from a powerful, all-reaching organisation like the church. The church has her tentacles all over the place. Being a renegade priest made me trash and I was treated like it.

Why is this so for the Church?

It is not the Church alone. All organisations punish those who leave them, most especially if they leave in protest. Banks, government organisations and other big corporations deal with those who leave them the way I was. In some cases,

like cults or crime organisations, it may even lead to the death of the one who leaves.

Is that so? Who then saved you from the effects of your misjudged step?

Not misjudged step. I would still take the same step today.

Okay then, not misjudged step.

She financed my education, gave me a beautiful boy and took good care of my house while I studied day and night. After three years, I finished and I got a very good job at IBM.

Then what happened?

She died.

She died?

Yes, of melanoma of the liver. She had been suffering from it six months before her death but she instructed her medical team not to inform or let me know. I was in the midst of my final exams. I only observed she was always tired and when I inquired she said it was the business that was sapping her energy.

What a good woman!

You can say that again. She was not only a good woman but also an excellent young woman who came up to the qualities of the woman Proverbs 31 extolled.

What's that? What type of woman is that?

Go and read Proverbs 31 and you will understand. One day she collapsed at her desk at work, was rushed to Intensive Care Unit and four hours after that she was dead.

How dreadful.

I was shattered. It was nightmare to me. When I saw her laid out in the morgue, I had the feeling she was just sleeping and would wake up. The stream of visitors coming to commiserate with me still did not wake me up from my dream. I was in a state of denial until the day she was buried. When she was placed in the vault and the rites were performed and everybody started leaving, I stood at the graveside in the little drizzle that was falling, with my son until a friend came to take me away.

What did you do after realising she was gone?

Nothing. I was in our large house, a zombie and doing nothing. I did not go to work, take care of myself, eat or look after my son. I just sat down gazing into the horizon.

You must have been deeply hurt.

You can say that again. I was more than hurt. My friends came around. Some of my former parishioners also came, but it seemed I was beyond commiseration. I was a shell just sitting down and doing nothing until something happened.

What happened?

My son fell ill. One moment, he went to school, another moment he was bedridden and three days later he was dead.

Ah! What a tragedy!

It was more than tragedy. I lost all sense of sanity. I lost it mentally and I did not allow them to take the corpse away from me until the police were brought in to forcefully remove the corpse from my room.

Then what happened?

I raved and riled against God. I not only abused God, I castigated Him for being unfair, insensitive and punishing the wrong people. I declared a war between us. I decided I would not be a believer again. I started writing articles, getting on media programs where I projected my views. I was becoming popular. Since my wife left everything for my son and me, I was rich. I left my job at IBM and spent my time on the talk and lecture circuits. Many people believed me. It is not every day you meet a renegade Reverend Father atheist.

How long did this take?

More than two years after the loss of my wife and child.

Were you satisfied and fulfilled then? What did God do then?

Nothing.

Nothing? It seemed God decided that I should enjoy my limelight. I was rising until one talk show program. It was on the program that I heard the statement of confusing the wrapping paper with the gift.

What is the meaning of that?

My opponent on the television program was a professor of theology and an Anglican archdeacon. We had tackled step by step, and I had refuted everything he had said. Remember, I had studied theology, too, and I had my experiences to back my refutations. It was at the tail end of the program that he told me I had been confusing the wrapping paper with the gift.

Meaning?

I had been confusing the Church, what happened to me and circumstances I found myself; with the gift God gave humanity and me.

What gift was that?

The gift of God Himself when He came down to be human and sacrifice Himself for our sins and reconciling us His creatures to Himself.

What balderdash and nonsense!

That was what I thought too. After the program, however, I thought about it.

After your thinking, what conclusions did you reach?

I found out that reasoning about God confirms His existence. The power to reason was not mine; it is external to me. If I begin to trace the source of that

power there is never a time when I will not come to a realisation that there must be something beyond man that made existence come into being.

So, you were converted back to Christianity? What turned you into an Evangelical rather than the Orthodox Church goer that you were?

I realised that what I went through, from my training in Internet security, theology, my wife's death, my son's demise and my flirtation with atheism was to prepare me for my present job.

Your present job, what type of job is that?

After the television program, I went to read C.S Lewis' Mere Christianity as my opponent challenged me to do. My reading of the book touched my core and I realised who God is and His overreaching influence on my life and that of other human beings.

When did you find this out?

When I was called to take up this job.

What job?

That was when his phone rang.

Just a moment. Let me take this call.

He went out of the living room to take the call. After the call, he just peeped in.

Please Maggie, I have got to run. I am wanted immediately in the office. Please, when I come back we will continue our discussion.

nine

ADEKOLA

first meeting

iri ni si, ni i so ni l'ajo

seeing determines judgement and treatment – a yorùbá proverb

*june 17-18, 2000
electoral commission's office,
garki, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

I am a contractor and a businessman. My name is Adekola Muyiwa and I am the CEO of Adekonstrukts. In most Nigerians' view being a contractor equates with a corrupt individual who lives on the government, bids for jobs (any job) including supplies, building or construction (which he may be unqualified to do) and other sundry things we 'contractorize' in Nigeria. The contractor does not have to be the most appropriate person to carry out the job. What qualifies him is his card-carrying position as a member of the ruling political party in the state or country, or his/her relationship with the person in charge of awarding the contract. The contractor, after getting the job, sublets it to qualified people, who should have got the job in the first place, but couldn't because they were not connected. In some cases, there is no need to sublet or even execute the contract. In those cases and on agreed principles, the contractor pays the person who gave him the contract his cut (the present going rate, is thirty-five percent if not more) of the total contract awarded and pockets the remainder. It then becomes the job of the one who awarded the contract to produce fake completion certificates for the contract. If not, completing the contract would be too glaring. The contractor does a shoddy and substandard job, which the inspecting engineers from the awarding organization certify as being perfect. No one loses in this chain. The contractor gets his money, the person who awarded the contract gets his cut and the inspecting engineers and officials get their tips. Smoothly, everybody smiles to his or her banks and the circle continues.

Those who are not in this loop, or 'bad belle'²⁹ people, however, would say some people were cheated. They would talk of the public and the society who had to

²⁹ **Bad Belle:** Pidgin term for envious or jealous people. In this context it stands for critics or those against the shenanigans the contractor is involved in.

deal with roads washed away by the first rains and school buildings that begin to break down within their first year of use. Such 'busy-bodi'³⁰ would shout about government stores full of outdated, useless materials that were supplied not because they were needed but because government departments wanted to use up their allocations at the end of the year. If I told you that I was a different contractor from the one I described above, that would be telling a lie. I did some of those things, but I have always made it a point of duty to execute all my contracts - a little holding back maybe - but I still have my conscience. I have not buried it yet and I don't think I will. One of the contractor's main jobs is to massage the ego of the contract-awarding official. This involves gift giving, kickback transfers to selected accounts, and in the case of a new official, introduction and presentation of gifts. I was a long-time contractor to the electoral commission, even in those days of the farcical musical chairs the military called elections. I had become a fixture and my business was really moving well.

In this year's first quarter, the former Director of Finance and Logistics was kicked upstairs to become the Deputy Chairman of the commission and a new person was put in his place: Pastor Jude Akanmu Babájídé. I had never heard of or met him before. He was in Lagos. I had been in Abuja when it was a virgin land and efforts were being made to build a modern city there. I came in search of contracts then and had never moved back to Lagos. I had it good. Therefore, the pastor coming to office was bad timing from my perspective. I was on holidays abroad. I came back thinking that my bid for a supply contract had been given to another person and blaming myself for not being on the ground to welcome the new czar onto the throne. But there was a surprise waiting for me. Without my normal wheeling and dealing, the computer supply contract to state electoral commission offices, worth more than fifteen million naira, had been awarded to me based only on my bidding papers. No palm greasing, no massaging of giant egos, no seeing anyone or pulling strings, no kowtowing to the person in charge. That, to me, was a miracle and I wanted to meet the miracle man. As a well-known and familiar sight in the office, I was ushered in to meet him without ado.

Welcome, I am Pastor Jude.

I looked at the handsome, urbane, softly spoken and lanky person in front of me. I could not reconcile him with the giant killer and miracle man I was looking for. I was looking for a man full of himself and one we would need to think of ways of massaging and

³⁰ **Busy bodi:** A pidgin term for gossip or individuals interested in other people's business rather than their own; in this context it refers to critics and anti corruption organisations and individuals.

supplying all his needs before we could get anything from him. I was expecting a worldly wise individual who would be a tough nut at the negotiation table. What I saw was this gentleman not meant for an office like this. I wanted to laugh but that would have been bad manners, so I swallowed my laughter and smiled.

Thanks, I am Chief Adekola Muyiwa, MD/CEO Adekonstruks.

Sit down, please. What can I do for you?

Not what you can do for me, but what you have done for me.

I've never met you in my life. What have I done to or for you?

Our company was recently awarded the contract for computer supplies to State electoral offices.

Oh! Oh, any problem with the contract's execution? Is there the need for a renegotiation or reappraisal?

No, no need for that. I came to introduce myself and to welcome you, since you are new to this seat. I also wanted to meet you and say thank you.

For what?

Why are you talking like a non-Nigerian? I came to say thank you for awarding the contract to me without seeing me or my seeing you.

Without seeing me? What do you mean?

Ah! E gba mi, I mean without the usual kolanut being passed.

Ehn, Ehn, I now understand. There is no need for any kolanut to be passed. I don't eat kolanut by the way. The Tenders Board looked at the various biddings and agreed that yours was the most reasonable. So, the contract was awarded to your company. There was nothing I could have done or that I left undone.

Thank you, all the same. If you, the Tenders Board Chairman, do not want the contract to come to my company, you could have done it.

Done what?

Given the contract to your friend, your concubine, mistress, relation or your own phone company. You didn't do that because you are a good person and I thank you for that.

You don't need to thank me; I couldn't have single handedly awarded the contract.

Don't say that. You could. There are ways of doing that.

Ways? What ways?

I am surprised you don't know those ways and means.

I don't. Educate me; I'd like to know how.

Easy. You only need to go through all the bids submitted pre the Tenders Board meeting, ask your chosen company to write a lower quotation and then you pretend to push the board towards picking that, being the lowest. You can also influence the Tenders Board members, financially or otherwise.

Is that so?

Yes, that's the way the government departments and ministries work. Do you see how different you are now from the run-of-the-mill?

I am a pastor. We must all think of Judgement Day. "What profits a man to gain the whole world and lose the kingdom of heaven?"

That's true. Thank you so much. Thank you.

I pinched myself as I went out. I looked around. I was still in the Electoral Commission's office. I mulled over his name, accent and looks to make sure I had just finished talking to a Nigerian and not an alien. I also pinched myself, wondering why I had verbal diarrhoea in his presence. *Now you have had it*, I thought.

This must be the end of your contracts! What made you reveal such industry secrets in his presence? I wouldn't be surprised if he instructs his staff not to allow me into his office again. He must be thinking I cannot be redeemed in my corrupt ways. What pushed you into such idiocy, Adekola? But, all has not been lost, I thought. I still have a card up my sleeve and if that card fails, I could pull some strings. He may not stay in that post for long. It is the tree that bends for the storm that survives; the strict upright ones always have their heads cut off, I consoled myself.

Before going to his office, I had left a hamper basket with his confidential secretary who informed me he would not take it. I laughed it off and told her there was no Nigerian like that. Now I have been enlightened. I insisted she must give it to him, and she had no choice: I got her the job in the first place. To safeguard her job, I told her, she must take the basket in after I had left and, in case the pastor got angry, she should explain that the hamper came through a courier. Seeing me next day, she role-played what had happened.

Sir, this basket was addressed to you and it came this afternoon.

Who sent it and from where?

I don't know, sir, but there is a thank-you card addressed to you inside the hamper.

Let me see. What? A cheque for a million naira enclosed in the card, too? Who issued the cheque? Let me see, Adekonstrukts. Is that the man who came this morning?

Yes, sir.

Make a photocopy of this cheque and let me have it. You are new to me and this is the first time you have worked with me, is that true?

Yes, sir.

You may have been here longer than me and you may just be getting to know me; I don't want things like this. You are my gatekeeper and you are expected to sift out things like these and make sure they do not get to me.

I am sorry, sir.

You don't have to be. If things like this ever come to me again, I may ask for your transfer or your resignation. I won't want that to happen to you because you are an efficient person. Is that clear?

Yes, sir.

Now, send that basket and the cheque back to him and let me have the photocopy before you do that.

Yes, sir.

I was stupefied. I never thought I would ever meet a Nigerian official like that even if he was a pastor. I nearly laughed when he said he was a pastor when we met. I thought to myself 'As if that matters'. Many pastors are greedy, acquisitive beings who only used the veneer of being God's men to camouflage their corrupt acts. This was the first time I had met an honest Nigerian holding a top position who had the potential to corrupt its holder. I had been a contractor for many years and it had been fruitful for me. My thought when I got the basket back was that he would block all my contracts now. I assumed he would label me a corrupt contractor and stop dealing with my company. Thinking of what to do to avert this, an idea started germinating in my mind.

convincing the ascetic

eni ba n pa epa fun afoju, o ni lati ma sufe

the person cracking peanuts for a blind man must be whistling – a yorùbá proverb

*june 23, 2000
electoral commission's office,
garki, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

It was bad, too bad.

Sorry, if I may ask, what is too bad, Pastor Jude?

That's not the best way to treat a conscientious and dedicated officer.

Who are you talking of?

Sorry, Mr Adekola, I was just thinking aloud.

OK then. If you don't mind sharing, I have got listening ears.

Why not?

What is it about then?

I've just come from a meeting in which I was informed that Mr. Ekanem, whose office I took over, has been retired with immediate effect from his position as the Deputy Chairman of National Electoral Commission of Nigeria. We are not in a military regime, for God's sake.

Was that the bad thing?

Yes, reprehensible, he was not prepared. It was not yet time for his retirement; he still had six years before retirement. He is just fifty-nine.

Why was he retired Pastor?

Someone somewhere thought he was a stumbling block to their plans and machinations and they had the ear of the powers that be. Pronto, he was retired.

What a pity?

Yes, it was an act of injustice. He was not caught misappropriating money, not accused of corrupt practices, and not retired because of illness or physical disability. Somebody just did not like his face and they forced him to retire.

He was lucky, Pastor Jude.

Lucky? You call that lucky, Mr Adekola?

Yes, he could have been dismissed. At least they allowed him to collect his gratuity and he will also be able to receive his pension, though that has become a big task in present day Nigeria. If he had been dismissed, he wouldn't collect anything.

Then, he was lucky. Do you think he could have been dismissed?

How long have you been in government service, Pastor Jude?

Long enough. I started work in the Cabinet Office in 1974.

This issue shouldn't be new to you then.

It isn't new, but that does not mean I am not riled by it. Why is it that the best in the service are always forced out? Mr. Ekanem was not only a loyal officer but also an incorruptible and conscientious worker.

Well, they are in danger of extinction. The majority in the civil service does not like them.

Why?

I am surprised you are asking me why. You should know because you belong to the Mr. Ekanem's group.

Yes, but this is my first time of hearing about someone I know very well, have worked with, and who was like a mentor because he was my first boss in the service and squeaky clean.

Welcome to Nigeria.

Hun, what an irony. Hen, hen, what can I do for you today? Sorry, I allowed my reflections to disturb your mission.

No, they rather enhanced it.

How?

I came to tell you that I got your message about the hamper I left for you. I am sorry you rejected it. I would, however, like to share with you my reasons for taking such action. If you are convinced, then I want you to have the gift.

Okay, let's hear the reasons. You listened to my ranting about the service; the only thing I can do to repay you is to listen to you.

Thank you aburo³¹. Looking at me, you will realise I have some years beyond you and must have experienced more things in life than you.

Yes, that is true.

My small brother, life as a civil servant in Nigeria, most especially a loyal, honest and conscientious one, is a big problem. Such a person is not respected, and in some cases the incompetent are promoted above the competent in order to fill federal quota just because they know those in power.

That is true but we do not need to allow that to discourage us. As James said, "We work for God and not ourselves".

We do, but the Bible is not against gift giving. In Proverbs it says, "A gift opens way for the giver and ushers him into the presence of the great".

Yes.

I did not give you the hamper because I was expecting you to approve or award me a contract.

Hen, that is also true.

The hamper and the cheque are a thank you gift, a token of appreciation from me.

Token of appreciation? You call more than a million naira a token? That is almost six months' salary for me.

To contractors like us, it is still a token. Do you know how much profit I make in a month from my businesses? I make more than fifteen million naira. God asks us to be appreciative and that was what I did.

³¹**Aburo:** Term for a younger brother or sister. It is however used generally to mean anyone a person is older than not minding if they are related or not.

Your explanation makes a bit of sense to me, but I don't want such a large sum. It is too much for me.

It may be. You need to realise we are under the politicians now and not the military. Politicians thrive on political jobbery and gratifications.

Yes and so?

You have to be more careful. If the politicians do not have their way with you, they may give you the Ekanem treatment. You won't like that, will you? Looking at you, you still have more years to go in the service.

I am expected to serve for thirty-five years or retire at sixty-five.

If you don't mind, and if it won't be embarrassing to you, may I ask you a question?

Yes, you may.

Do you have a nest-egg in case of an eventuality?

No, how much can one save from take-home pay that does not take one home?

This is where people like us come in. Gifts like the one I left for you, that you have rejected, can be saved and, little by little, you will have something to fall back upon in case you receive the Ekanem treatment.

You do make sense, but I cannot accept such a big sum.

Okay, I'll see what I can do about that. You'll, however, accept a smaller token from me, won't you?

ten

MAGGIE

playing GOD

o ye fun onikaluku lati sin Olorun gege bi idanu re, lai si tipa ti kuku

everyone ought to worship God according to his own inclinations, and not to be constrained by force – Flavius Josephus’ *Life* (37-100AD)

*june 19-24, 2000
diplomatic estate,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Francis’ speech that, ‘I’ll be back’, lasted seven days. I did not see him again until Saturday, twenty-fourth June. When he did not come back that Sunday evening, I thought maybe his work had prevented him. I wondered about the kind of work that takes your Sunday from you. After waiting through Monday and not hearing from him or getting a phone call, I became worried. I did not see anybody the whole of Monday, but before I woke up, the whole chalet had been cleaned. I wanted to catch these nocturnal cleaners but I was unable to see them. On Monday evening, I was panicking. All my fears came floating back into my mind. The treatment, discussions and hospitality of the past nine days began to seem like a preparation to deal with me. All the eating out and telling of life stories looked to me like a means of softening me before the kill.

To worsen my fears and doubts, the food stocked in the kitchen dwindled. By Monday night, I had just two apples and a cup of milk left in the fridge. I was stranded and my worst fears had come alive. Here I was in this beautiful estate in a street I did not know and a city I would be lost in if I ventured out, and there was nobody to ask questions of. I had all the luxuries – a sauna bath, two big LCD televisions, a wired home with the sound system embedded in the ceilings, comfortable beds and all that modern technologies could offer, but I was alone. The phones were there but I did not know the number or numbers to call. It looked to me as if I was in a luxurious solitary detention centre or under house arrest. The only person I knew had become incommunicado. I had been comfortably imprisoned, put in an uncertain state, and now I did not know what to do.

After eating the apples and drinking the last of the milk, I was at a loss. I didn't know what to do, and, for the first time, I recognised how quiet and lonely the chalet was. I was alone, alone with bad thoughts and doubts racing through my head. I went to sleep with my doubts and fears: heavy rocks on my chest. I woke on Tuesday morning in no better shape and nobody to say hello to. I had started painting pictures in my head. Like a rat rooted to the spot by a cobra's killing gaze, I was counting my life's remaining hours. As someone who had not believed in anything, I could not pray. I didn't even know how to pray. With my fears smothering me, I looked up to the sky and I silently prayed to a God I did not believe in, asking God to save me from this quagmire in. I heard no answer. Not that I was expecting any, but in this troublesome spot I found myself, the silent prayer seemed to be succour to me. Without any food to eat and nowhere to go, I turned to the modern-day deadening suppressant, the television. It was the middle of a news item.

The Federal government has called out the Army to take over security in Jos. The religious crisis that erupted last Friday after the Jumat Services has led to many churches and mosques being burnt. Almost six hundred people have been injured and the death toll has risen to eighty. The President, in a statement released by his Senior Special Adviser on Media on the recurrent religious crises, said that this time the perpetrators would be fished out and dealt with as examples. He conveyed his repulsion for the continuous blood letting between believers of various religions and explained that no religion asked its adherents to kill others. He blamed the present Jos riots on the elite who think they have been marginalised in the political arena and are now using the dispossessed as their weapon. He asked for compassion, cooperation and cordial relationships between Nigerians. A dusk-to-dawn curfew has been imposed on Jos and the Army has been given a shoot-at-sight order for any rioters. In the meantime, the Northern Governors Forum has condemned the present crises in Jos. According to a communiqué issued after their meeting in Kaduna, they decried the constant bloodletting in the guise of religion and asked all Nigerians to love one another. The Governor of Lagos...

I changed the channel to BBC television and was just in time to capture the pictures of what had happened in Jos. Marauding youths with machetes, guns and bows and arrows, dead bodies on the streets, the police overwhelmed and unable to do anything, and the burning of churches and mosques. Jos, a pleasant temperate-climate city on the plateau, which was tagged as the paradise on the plateau, had become a hell-hole. The city touted as a place of succour for all tribes and ethnic groups and a harmonious oasis in the midst of trouble-torn Nigeria had become a killing field. Jos had lost her innocence and wouldn't be the same again. There were corpses on Jos streets like Suya³² meat. I

³² **Suya**: a type of skewered and barbecued meat. It is like shish-kebab. It is a loved delicacy in the Northern part of Nigeria but now a national delicacy, though always produced and prepared by Hausas.

felt bad and wondered why human beings want to force others to their ways of thinking and belief. They seem to have forgotten that, as Sophy Burnham said,

To believe in God or in a guiding force because someone tells you is the height of stupidity. We are given senses to receive our information within. With our own eyes we see, and with our own skin we feel. With our intelligence, it is intended that we understand. But each person must puzzle it out for himself or herself

We are all individuals first and foremost. We came to the realization of God individually, and at the appropriate time every individual will come to his or her realisation. Religious fanatics to me are unthinking. If they do think or use their power of reason, they will understand that you cannot serve God by breaking His laws. In all religions, God decrees, "Thou shall not kill". How wrong is it for someone to profess doing what God wants by destroying creatures God created and taking lives, which the fanatic cannot create? I was on these musings, which had taken my mind away from my present predicament, when the chalet's door buzzed open. Somebody had opened it with the access card. I froze, afraid and almost wetting my pants.

They must have come for me. What can I use to defend myself? Do I run to the bedroom? No, the kitchen would be better; at least I could get a knife.

I quickly went into the kitchen but the steps seem to be following me to the kitchen. I was busy checking the drawer for the appropriate knife to use in defending myself.

Good afternoon, Oga Madam

I turned my around and I was sure Okon could see my fear-stricken eyes, but he said nothing..

Good ...good afternoon, Okon. How are you?

I dey fine, Oga Madam. My Oga, say mek I come stock the kitchen.

It was then I observed that he had bags of groceries in his arms. I helped him to place some of them on the kitchen top. After storing the groceries, Okon turned to go.

Okon, na you dey clean this chalet?

Yes, Oga Madam. I dey come for night whom Oga madam don sleep. My Oga say make I no disturb Oga madam

Oh! Oh!

My Oga call yesterday say make I tell Oga madam dat, him go return soon and dat na work take am out of Abuja.

Work? Which kain work?

I no know, Oga Madam

Where hin go?

I no know, Oga madam.

I stopped asking questions because I knew I would not get any answers from him. When I did not ask any other question, Okon went out. I looked around the kitchen; the groceries he brought would last the next two weeks. Okon had gone out before I remembered that I wanted to ask him the way out of the Estate. I missed that opportunity and did not see any other person. As I ate and watched film upon film on the cable stations and slept, I wondered if I was being fattened for a sacrifice?

sober reflections and actions

Olorun ti a le mo idi re, ki i se Olorun. Ta lo le se alaye A mo-i-mo-tan l'oro?

a God that can be understood is no God. Who can explain the Infinite in words? – *The Razor's Edge* – W.Somerset Maugham (1874-1965)

*june 20-24, 2000
diplomatic estate,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

I did not see Okon or anybody again until Saturday the twenty-fourth of June, when Francis came back. The intervening days between Tuesday and Saturday were spent worrying, sleeping and watching television. I surfed the cable stations and fed myself on documentaries, tele-novellas, television series, talk shows and reality TV shows. I was bored after some time, and that made me realise how lonely the whole chalet was. I was however inhibited because I could not go anywhere. I was free and yet shackled. After two days of television diet, and my eyes paining me because of the constant logging in on the LCD screens, I went outside the house. All the houses on the Estate seemed to be locked, but I didn't want to make a fool of myself or in the process disgrace the person who housed me by disturbing another person. I walked to the big house we went to first when we came into the estate. Contrary to when we came in, there were soldiers now guarding the house. There were a lot of people, like the Lilliputians when they were tying up Gulliver, and they were coming in and out very busily. Okon was nowhere to be seen or any of those who welcomed Francis when we came in almost two weeks ago. It seemed as if there was a change of guard. I stood at a distance, afraid someone would

come and ask about my being there, but nobody did. After observing the to-ing and fro-ing of people from the house for some time, I went back to the chalet.

At the chalet, I took another tour and it was then that I stumbled on the study room. It was a part of the master bedroom's closet but hidden. It was full of books on various subjects, some written in Latin, Hebrew and Greek. There were many novels and religious books. The literature was a collection of classics: Plato, Aristotle, Marcus Aurelius, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekov, Gogol, Hawthorne, Steinbeck, Austen, Hardy, Shakespeare, Balzac and others. And there were books on strategy, tactics, management and three editions of Lao-Tzu. I buried myself in the books and started reading Mark Twain's *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I had read the simplified edition when I was in secondary school, but this was the complete version. In between reading, watching television and eating, I dwelt on my life. I searched the uncertainty that now clothed me. I realised that I was inadequate when it came to knowledge. The silence and the restriction around me made me question myself and review my life. I did not like what I saw. I had lived my life up till now without a purpose. I wanted to enjoy myself and I did so without caring about my actions but I was unable to think beyond this until now. Seeing the study showed me how inadequate my education had been. I looked at the books and I found that there were many I had not even heard of. In the study, there was a laptop and a desktop computer, but I could not operate any of them. I had seen them in my former office but I was not using them then. I was more like a saleswoman more than a customer relations officer that I was employed for. I continued to look critically at my life and what I saw was unpleasing to me.

This time alone made me realise the importance of silence and solitude. The time seemed to have been created for my introspection. All I had done before marched past in my mind's screen like soldiers in a march past. Those things I never wanted to accept or think about played their dramas on my mind's stage. I saw myself in multicolour, and this being the first time of seeing such comprehensive pictures, my core was touched and for several hours I cried for what I had become. I liked some of the scenes but showed me in the dirty colours I had wrapped myself in. After watching my life's presentations, I decided on some actions. In the first instance I decided I must search for knowledge and go to school and make something of myself. Secondly, I had offended my mother deeply, and I felt I needed to make amends. Like a revelation, I seemed to realise that her behaviour was just her way of coping with the stresses of taking care of us. Having no work to go to, and her background, must have made her what she was. I

realised that she was happy with my stepfather and had become less truculent, but my act had spoiled that for her. So I wrote her a letter.

Abuja.

22/06/2000.

Dear Mother,

Good day to you. I know you will be surprised receiving my letter from Abuja. You will be shocked too to get a letter from me since you vowed never to have anything to do with me again. I know you have every reason to be angry with me and to turn me away from you. That reason however will not erase the fact that you are my mother and that you carried me in your womb for nine months. I am a part of you as you sustained me during pregnancy and I have got a part of you in me, and there is no way in which I will cease to be a part of you. Dear Mother, I am writing to express my apologies for all the troubles I have caused you. The troubles of my growing up, being a rebel to you and all the prayers you prayed which seem not answered in my case. I am very sorry.

I know I must have hurt you in many ways, most especially my last act that pushed me out of your home. It is more than two years now but it is only now that I started thinking about it. I have not paid you well for all that you have done for me and I am sorry for that. I am very sorry. My dear Mother, we all grow up differently and while my growing up has been problematic to you, I would like you to realise that whatever we become in life is as a result of our background, experiences and the way we handle those experiences. The experiences I went through in my father and stepfather's houses have gone a long way in defining me. I know I have been selfish because I never put myself in your position. This realisation pains me now and I regret that I have not only hurt you but have repaid your care, kindness, and the love you had for me with treachery. I do apologise fervently for this and I hope you will find it in your heart to forgive me.

How is everybody at home? My brother and sisters? I hope my actions have not separated you and my stepfather? If not, please forgive me and take care of him. I was more responsible and I am begging you to forgive. I cannot tell you where I am in Abuja now because I have just arrived in the city and trying to find my feet and place. I will inform you when I get my place and I am well settled. As I said, I am responsible for all the hurt and pains I have caused you and I pray you will find it in your good heart to forgive my iniquities against you.

I remain.

Your daughter,

Evedje

After writing the letter, I felt relieved; it was as if a load was removed from my heart and head. I checked the study and saw a packet of white envelopes from which I addressed the letter. I was waiting for Okon or Francis to come so that I could ask for the letter to be posted or be taken to the post office. I decided, I would have to start exploring Abuja on my own. I needed to take actions that would help me to settle down in this new city. But I didn't see anybody, so I kept my letter by the bedside and slept with the knife under my pillow and the bedroom locked every night.

It was around 4am on Saturday morning and I was dreaming. In the dream I was back in Lagos. I had grown older and more settled, dressed in a corporate suit and had my own car. I drove to my stepfather's house. The house had not changed much, but there was new paint on the walls, and it was as if they had just finished a party. I was wondering why I was not invited when I entered the house and saw my siblings. They were looking at me with pity and bewilderment. They seemed to be questioning me about where I had been. I was not answering them but I asked them about our mother. They did not answer me but only pointed to the inner room that served as the master bedroom where my mother had caught her husband with me in 'flagrante delecto'. I initially resisted going into the room, but after some time I went in and found my stepfather with two other children I didn't know sitting beside him. He was devastated and very sorrowful. I wanted to ask him what happened but I woke up. The door had buzzed.

This meant someone had opened the door with an access card. I looked at the bedside clock; its luminous dial showed 4.05am. I was afraid. I listened to the footsteps behind my locked bedroom. The steps came towards the bedroom, but after some time, the person changed his/her intentions. I waited for some excruciating and fearful minutes, listening hard. I could hear the living room lights being switched on. I was waiting for the vacuum to be switched on or to hear someone cleaning but I did not hear anything. There was silence, and fear crept on me like soldier ants creeping on a fallen person. My hairs stood up and I felt a tingling at my nape. I clutched the knife and decided that I would rather die fighting than allow anybody to take advantage of me or kill me without a fight. After some time I peeped through the keyhole. What I saw was shocking. I dropped the knife and opened the door. I stood looking at Francis: dishevelled, tired, listless, dirty and unkempt. He looked totally different from the urbane and natty dresser that I knew. He was just sitting down looking into the horizon, and when he saw me,

which was a long time after I had been in the room, he just turned, looked at me and seemed not to see me.

What happened to you? Where are you coming from? Why this time?

Contrary to the Francis that I knew, he was just looking and looking through me. It seemed I was not in the room with him. I rushed to him.

What happened to you? Who did this to you?

He never answered any of my questions. He had become dumb and deaf. I quickly went to turn on the sauna. I took his hand, and like a small boy he allowed me to lead him to the sauna. I started taking his clothes off till he was left with his boxers. I cleaned the dirt on him and helped him into the bath. I took his dirty clothes and put them in the washing machine. I went to the bedroom closet and checked if I could see other clothes for him. Luckily, I saw clothes that looked like his size. I laid them on the bed and went back to the sauna. He was asleep. I waited for some minutes, but when he did not wake up, I turned the sauna off and woke him up. He looked a bit better but he was still dazed. I took his hand and was leading him to the master bedroom, he insisted on the guest room, so I took him there.

I went back to the master bedroom to get his clothes but by the time I was back at the guest room, he had tucked himself in. He was fast asleep. I left him to sleep. By now it was around 5.30am and I was unable to sleep again. I started thinking about what must have happened to him. After some time, I slept off and on and woke up around 7.30 and went to check him. He was still sleeping. I went to prepare breakfast and waited. At 9.00am, he was still asleep. I took my breakfast and listened to the news, then I started reading the novel I had taken up after finishing *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. I was reading and trying to understand Soyinka's *Isara* when sleep took me away. I woke up around 2.00pm. I quickly went to the guest room but Francis was still sleeping. I became worried, but I could not wake him because of what I saw in the morning; he was too tired and he needed to sleep. He woke up around 4.30, I was watching the BBC documentary on Religious Crises in Nigeria when he walked into the living room.

No, No, please put it off.

His voice sounded hoarse and shaky. I turned the television off and looked at him. He was shaking where he stood. I led him to a seat.

What happened to you, Francis? What happened? Where have you gone? What did you see there? Who treated you wrongly?

In response to all my questions, he started crying - softly at first, then after some time, he wailed. I allowed him to cry, and he stopped after some time. He stood up, went into the bathroom and washed his face. He came back to the living room.

Maggie, thank you very much.

For what?

For being there and taking care of me and reviving me. Thank you. I was not wrong in coming back here. Thank you very much.

I was looking at him. I did not know what to say.

What will you eat? You look famished.

There is likely to be a tin of soup in the pantry. Just warm it for me; I don't think I can eat a heavy meal now.

I searched the pantry and found some tins of soup and baked beans. I warmed them and brought them to him. As I watched him eat, I knew something drastic must have happened to him because he was not eating like Francis, the gastronome I knew. After eating the soup, which took him a long time, he sat on the couch and looked at me.

Maggie, tomorrow is Sunday. I hope you will come with me to the church.

If that is what you want.

It is not what I want that matters, what do you want? What do you want with your life? Do you intend living and going about without an anchor in your life?

You think the church and your God will be that anchor?

Absolutely. Will you come with me to the church tomorrow?

Yes, I will. Francis, where were you in the last seven days and what happened to you?

I was at work.

Work? What type of work leaves you so tired, dishevelled and fatigued that you slept more than ten hours? What work left you so dazed that you were looking catatonic?

Maggie, human beings are fatally flawed, highly flawed. We need salvation.

That does not answer my questions.

Yes, I know. I won't answer your questions because the less you know the better for you. But I will put your mind at rest. I am the head of the religious extremism unit of the nation's intelligence services. I coordinate this unit for all the intelligence services – military, secret service, police and state security.

What?

This estate is where all my agents live and this chalet is my own guesthouse. My own house is the big house you saw when we first came to the estate.

So, you were not just coming to Abuja to take up a job?

Yes, there are things I cannot tell you because the less you know, the safer you are.

Francis, tell me the plain unvarnished truth now.

What I said now is the truth. All the stories I have told you before were also true. My work involves investigating religious groups that are likely to cause crises and prevent them from precipitating religious crises.

Why then were you not able to prevent the present mayhem in Jos?

My sleeper agent among the extremists was betrayed and killed. It was the call I received last Sunday that took me out of here. I have been in Jos since then. We have been picking up the brains behind this present catastrophe. I cannot tell you more than this, and this is expected to be confidential between us. Nobody, I repeat, no matter how much you trust him or her, must hear what I have just told you now. Nobody, ever. Do you understand?

Yes.

Thank you, Maggie, you do not reliaise what you have done for me. Oh! What these eyes have seen and witnessed. I am going back to my official quarters. I'll pick you up tomorrow for church.

Francis walked out with his shoulders slumped. He seemed to be carrying the world's burden on his head. Seeing him go out, I realised I was falling in love with him, but I would never want to get involved with someone I could not share all secrets with and who would not tell me the truth at all times and share his secrets with me. Living with Francis would be like living in a house of mirrors where you are not sure of the reality of what you are seeing. Watching him go out slowly, contrary to his usual brisk walk, I thought:

What did he see in Jos? What depravities did he witness? What nightmares and demons will he have to battle now?

sermon on the mount

afurugbin kan jade lo lati fun irugbin re: bi o si ti n furugbin, die bo si eba ona; a sit e e mole, awon eye oju orun si saa je... omiran si bo si ile rere , o si ru soke, o si so eso ororun

– Luku Ori Kejo, Ese Karun si Ekejo

a farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up... still other seed fell on good soil, it came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown – Luke 8:5-8 (NKJV)

*june 25, 2000
christ assembly chapel,
wuse zone 2, abuja.
federal capital territory*

The church service was unlike any I had attended. On entering the large church, we were warmly welcomed. Francis was taken to the front set of seats and I followed him. The hall was fully air-conditioned. I could see that he was well known and respected too. I was uncomfortable and busy looking at the big church and decorations as it filled up. People came in dressed as if for a special occasion or a life-changing interview. The ladies wore assorted hats, the men in suits of various shapes, sizes and qualities and the young girls were in pants or body-hugging dresses. It was a full house when the songs started. I was expecting the processional entry as in the Anglican Church and some of the churches I had attended when I was small, but it was not like that here. There were choruses and the choir and congregation moved seamlessly from one chorus to another. I thought the worship songs and choruses were sweet and harmonious to listen to, but lacked the quality of the old church hymns, such as: “On Christ alone”, “Immortal Invisible God only wise”, “It is well with my soul”, that I was used to. The choruses sang in various Nigerian languages with gusto. There was joy and happiness, and I wondered what they were so happy about with all the depressing news around.

After the round of choruses, prayers came, and after that announcements were made about weekly bible studies, prayer warriors’ meetings, the forthcoming church convention, night vigils and revival services. Then the offerings came and testimonies were given. Some testimonies made sense, some were pedestrian and some seemed too miraculous for me to believe. There was a bible reading after and then the sermon. As I sat in the church, I was cynical and sceptical. The man who came out to preach could have been a corporate executive. He was dressed like one. After a short prayer, he

started his preaching and I was transfixed. His sermon was titled ‘How are the Mighty Fallen?’³³ It was based on King David. The bible passage was 2 Samuel 11&12.

He started by saying that God said David was a king and a person after God’s heart but in spite of this David fell. He broke God’s heart by breaking most of God’s commandments. He said that as David mourned Saul in 2 Samuel 1, he said, ‘how are the mighty fallen’, but he also fell. David, however, fell into the hands of sin instead of through battle like Saul did. Despite all, David went through and God showed His hand in David’s life, before he became a king, he could not conquer sin. This clearly affirms our human nature and our helplessness when it comes to battling sin. He went further.

Sin was unconquerable for David because as one pastor said, when he was preaching at the burial of another well-known and successful evangelist, who committed suicide, ‘The best of human is still human at their best’. We are all flawed and the enemy of man, Satan knows this. Satan knows how to deceive us the same way he deceived David. David’s sin haunted him throughout his life and he paid in many ways. Think of the loss of Bathsheba’s child even after he repented and begged God for the boy’s life, Absalom’s rebellion and sleeping with David’s wives in front of Israel, and the war in David’s family. Sin corrupts and destroys. David’s life is a good example of that.

The pastor then listed some steps that led to David sinning. The list he pointed out involved David not carrying out his duty and responsibility. This he showed by quoting 2 Samuel 11 vs. 1, that, “It happened in the spring of the year, at the time when kings go out *to battle*, that David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel; and they destroyed the people of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David remained at Jerusalem.” His staying in Jerusalem instead of going to carry out his responsibilities and duty as a result of laziness, led to boredom, which led him to sin. He saw another person’s wife and was enticed thereby committing adultery. He, the pastor explained, did not make a covenant with his eyes that he will not set any worthless things before his eyes. As Christians, he said, we must make a covenant with our eyes and mind not to set any worthless things before them lest we fall. David’s army, he highlighted, was at war, but David was in his capital city pleasuring. Instead of his going to war, the war came to him. Christians as Christ warriors must fight the war against sin, or Satan will carry the war to them the same way he did to David. On duty, the preacher explained that when we love our duties and carry them out with love and respect, we get God’s grace. When we shirk them, however, they serve as openings for sin the same way it was in David’s life. When we are given a duty to perform, he further reiterated, we are

³³ Pastor Julian Bull at Maylands Baptist Church on Seventh Avenue, Perth Western Australia, preached this sermon in a more comprehensive form on 12 July 2009. I have taken licence on some of the things he said and have cut down some of his ideas. Generally, however, I only reworked the ideas. Most of this sermon was what Pastor Julian preached.

not doing that for the pastor, church or even God as a favour. We are carrying out such for ourselves. He then asked a question.

What do you think would have happened if David had gone to war? What happened to him would not have happened. It was not as if it was humanly impossible for him to do. You contrast Uriah the Hittite to David as one who carried out his duty faithfully. He went to war and even when David brought him back from war in order to cover his sin of adultery, Uriah refused to sleep in his house. Hear what he said, “ The ark and Israel and Judah are staying in tents, and my master Joab and my lord’s men are camped in open fields. How could I go to my house to eat and drink and lie with my wife? As surely as I live, I will not do such a thing”. What a rebuke to a king. The king who was expected to lead his soldiers stayed behind, committed adultery with his soldier’s wife, and the soldier refused to be bribed or allow himself to be used because his sense of duty was far superior to that of the king. How did you think the king repaid this valiant and respectable soldier? He sent the note that would kill him through him to the general on the battlefield. What a complex and wicked thing human mind is? Leaders and people in positions of responsibility can always learn from their followers.

The pastor then went further, explaining that David did not learn from Uriah nor heed God’s warning from proceeding further in his path of sin through making Bathsheba pregnant. Bathsheba’s pregnancy was a warning for David to come open, confess his sins and seek for repentance, but instead of doing this, he went further to commit a greater sin, murder. This sin however did not affect David alone, he said. It ruined the lives of David, Bathsheba, Uriah, the child born, Joab, David’s family and the kingdom. The pastor likened David’s sin to a finger dipped in oil, which soiled other fingers. When we sin, he asserted, we do not sin alone but our sin affects everybody around us, those not connected to us or far removed from us. David, we need to know, had not always been this bad. He referred to the time when Saul was pursuing David and David chanced on Saul powerless in the cave sleeping. He could have killed him but refused even when his followers advised him to do so, saying he could not kill the Lord’s anointed. The same David then not only committed adultery, despite all the women he had at his behest, but also commits murder to cover his adulterous ways. The moment one starts to slide into sin, there is no end to it. By the time the pastor finished his sermon and took the pulpit call, it seemed his sermon was directed at me. The words and examples he was using were like darts to my mind. When he asked for those who had not accepted Jesus into their lives and would like to start a new life to come forward, I was the first. I cried for the remaining part of the service. Immediately after the service, the pastor came to greet Francis.

How Francis? You must have your hands full now?

You can say that, pastor. Pastor Jude, Margaret. Margaret, Pastor Jude Babájidé.

Happy to meet you sir.

Drop the sir. Hope you enjoyed the service?

More than you can think of pastor. She was touched. She cried throughout after the sermon.

Is that so? Are you born again?

No, but I have accepted Christ into my life now.

Praise God!

A meeting was fixed for the coming week with the pastor so that he would be able to counsel me and discuss my new Christian life with me. Before leaving, Pastor Jude gave me a pep talk, prayed with me and asked me to see him in his office the following week.

extending fellowship hands

ka b'urin , bu 'rin ka f'ese ko,ka wo eni ti o se ni pele

let us walk and stumble and see the person that will sympathize with us
– a yorùbá proverb

*26/27 june 2000
electoral commission's office,
garki,abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Where are you working, Maggie?

I am working nowhere, Pastor Jude.

What are you doing then?

Nothing.

Nothing? What do you mean nothing?

Nothing. I mean I am not doing anything now. I am without any work.

Are you not in school?

No, I am not. I have finished my secondary education and I worked for some time in Lagos but after the incidents I told you, I had to leave.

You are in Abuja without a job? Do you intend to further your education?

Yes. However, I am confused about what to do. I have nobody here who can help me with a job and although I want to further my studies, I don't have the means.

What about your father? Can, he be of any help?

No, he couldn't. We ceased to exist in his consciousness the moment his divorce went through.

Ah! That's sad, so sad.

It's the way things are with me. I believe things will work out through God's grace.

Well, what if I am able to get you a job; will you be ready to take it up?

Of course. Getting a job would be like getting a lifeline.

Okay then, but you have to promise me that all your past deeds would stay in the past and that you are ready to start life afresh.

I promise, pastor. I promise to do this.

While you are working, I will enroll you in the university for a part-time course. Be at my office tomorrow. You also have to look for accommodation. You cannot be co-habiting with a man you are not married to.

Yes, sir. Thank you so much, sir. God will bless you.

Don't thank me. Let us all thank God. Nothing is coincidental. God plans everything. We are just his instruments.

Next day I was at his office in one of Abuja's posh areas. It was then that I realised he was a big Oga³⁴ at his workplace. The number of gatekeepers I had to go through was very daunting for me. His confidential secretary's office was large and could have been that of a very senior manager in a well-heeled private company. I sat in her office and I could have waited till kingdom come. In the afternoon, he came into the confidential secretary's office and saw me.

Ah! You've just arrived? What type of person are you? Is this what you'll be doing if you are helped? Why are you just arriving this late? Can't you keep an appointment?

I was not late, sir; I have been here for a very long time.

A long time? How long?

I was here at nine o'clock, as we agreed.

What? It's two o'clock now; what happened?

I was told to wait for you.

³⁴ **Oga:** A term in 'Pidgin English' meaning a boss or a very important person or someone high up in organization, private company or society

Ms. Williams, is that true?

No, sir, she came in here at around twelve noon, sir.

Is that so, Margaret?

Yes, but I had been kept waiting at the security post since nine o'clock.

Ms. Williams, buzz the security post and ask the person on duty to come here now.

Yes, sir.

Some moments after, a man came in but he was not the one who detained me at the security post for three hours.

Mr. Sulayman, is it true that this lady was detained at the security post since morning?

I met her when I took over the afternoon shift from Solomon at quarter to twelve this morning, sir; I was the one who sent her to your confidential secretary after taking over duty.

Did you ask Solomon how long she had been waiting for me?

No, sir.

Tell Solomon to see me after resuming duty tomorrow. You can go. Well, Ms. Williams, why have you kept her in your office for the past two hours? Did I not tell you I was expecting someone?

Yes, sir, you did. I thought you were busy, sir.

Did you check with me?

No, Sir.

Margaret, come into my office.

I was not privy to what happened after I left the office, but I was impressed because in my country, the longer you wait for someone at his office, the greater his level of importance. In Nigeria, time is not what you think about, you think about position and level of importance. In his office he gave me his card to take to the head of Human Resources. Then he phoned her to say that I was the person he discussed with her the day before. He asked her to conduct a preliminary interview with me and send the result back to him. That made me respect him even more. It was unusual because in Nigeria I would more likely be given an appointment letter without an interview or an assessment to find out my level of competence especially in a government office. In order to thank him, I moved closer to place a kiss on his cheek.

What's wrong with you?

Sir?

What do you think you are doing? Will you button up?

Er... Sorry, sir. Sorry, sir.

You better be. Sit down. Look, I know that whatever you have gone through may have coloured your vision of men and what you've known and heard about Nigerian men pushed you to this. I will take it to be a mistake on your part, which I expect you never to repeat again in your life.

Yes, sir.

You are a young girl and your present behaviour doesn't send a good message about you. It makes you look cheap and reckless.

I am very sorry, sir.

You are a new creature the moment you have confessed your sins and repented of them. You are starting life afresh and, as Apostle Paul said, all things of the past have gone and must be discarded with. You are to make a new beginning. Do you understand that?

Yes, sir, I do.

You have to pick up the fruits of the spirit as Apostle Paul listed them. What happened just now never happened? Now, will you take that card to the HR Director?

sowing seeds of discord

egbinrin ote, ba ti n pa kan, ni kan n ru

weeds of discord: as we uproot one , others grow – a yorùbá proverb

june 28/29 2000-october 27 2003

electoral commission's office

garki, abuja.

federal capital territory.

Sometimes I ask myself some questions: Maggie, what makes us human beings inherently flawed? Why can't we maintain goodness and strive for perfection? Why are we so finely made and at the same time intricately blemished? Even when we try to be perfect, why is it always difficult for us? Something happened that brought these questions to mind. To say that the last three years and one hundred and fifty-three days since I got the note from Pastor Jude to the HR Director for the preliminary interview had been the giddiest period of my life would be an understatement. The day after the

interview, I was at his office very early. I stayed no longer than a few minutes at the gates I had so much trouble passing the day before. How true is it that being closer to power changes all permutations? In my hand was the sealed envelope containing the preliminary report of my interview. I gave it to him.

Hope you did not face any more problems coming in this morning?

None, sir

How are you settling down in Abuja?

I thank God, sir. With support from people like you, I am seeing a different picture from the one I had first experienced.

We need to give God all the thanks for allowing us to live. Did she discuss the result of the interview with you?

No, sir, she only gave me this envelope.

That is alright. Come; let's look at the result together.

He moved from behind his big table and sat on the sofa with me. The report's two short paragraphs have stayed with me and have been the best summary of what my life had been and what it would likely be.

She is full of potential that can be tapped but giving her any job at this point is like stifling her potential for shortterm satisfaction. To fully harness her potential and bring out the best in her, it is advisable to get her more educated than present level. It is then that she will move from a rough diamond to a well-cut and shining, unique diamond.

You see, she recommends that you need to be educated more in order to harness all your potential. What do you want? Should I get you a job and satisfy your temporary needs or should you get educated?

I would prefer the job, sir. Though being educated is good, where would I get the money for it? While it is better to defer gratification, get educated and be prepared, how do I survive before the Eldorado?

Ayangbe aja dun, sugbon ki la o je ki aja to gbe? While it is nice to have barbecued meat, what do we eat before the meat is done?

I don't understand, sir.

I am just using a proverb to explain what you said. I agree with your observations, but I ask you to give some time to reflect on your situation and your decision on what would be beneficial to you.

The beneficial decision turned out to be a momentous one. He got me a studio flat in one of Abuja's exclusive areas, facilitated my admission into the University of Abuja to study Business Administration, but instead of the part-time course that I wanted, persuaded me to do full-time study. "*To make sure you are focused and take a shorter time*", he said. The whole situation looked like magic to me. It was a miracle and I was pinching myself, but it was true because here I am, ready to go for my Youth Service with first class results. Today, the 27th day of October, I am on the way to his office to show him my result and my posting letter.

Come in, the new Corper Shun³⁵!

Thank you, sir; it couldn't have been without your assistance and help. Thank you very much, sir.

You don't have to thank me. We have to thank God the Almighty Creator who made everything possible.

God will not come down from heaven to help. You've been that someone, and you don't know how much I appreciate your help.

I don't need anything from you except your determination and brilliant performance. Where are you going to do your National Service? Why have you not read it?

I want us to read it together. I am spending my service year at Abuja. Are you the one who influenced it?

No. Is that what you want? Will that be okay for you?

Yes, I won't mind. At least it will keep me closer to my guiding mentor.

I hope it won't be too boring for you.

No, I won't mind.

You won't know your place of primary assignment until after the one-month orientation?

Yes.

Well, let's keep our fingers crossed then, as they say.

The one-month orientation period went slowly for me because I was eager to find out where I would be having my primary assignment. Getting the letter the last day at the orientation camp, I was so elated as I called him.

Hello, sir, I have just received my posting. I will be serving in the Electoral Commission's Office sir.

³⁵ An endearment term for new members of National Youth Service Corps, a compulsory national service for all new Nigerian graduates of Nigerian or foreign universities; a corruption of the Regimental Sergeant Major's "Attention".

What a coincidence! How lucky you are.

Thank you very much, sir.

It was no coincidence to me. I thought it was too smooth and assumed the hand of the pastor was behind the whole process. That was my first error because, as I found out later, he had no hand in it; events had just worked out that way. My first error led to subsequent ones because I started thinking that the pastor wanted a relationship from me but was too shy to convey his wishes to me. I felt that all the gifts, accommodation, education sponsorship and all other things he had been doing for me, including this present posting, had the same motive behind them: he wanted to keep me as a mistress. To me it was not possible for someone to be philanthropic without any motive, most especially a Nigerian man. A typical Nigerian man expects a payback, and I was ready, even if that was not what he wanted. There would be no harm in giving myself to him. I would be killing two birds with one stone. I would show my appreciation, and at the same time, my position with him would be consolidated. I made my plans to force the issue of becoming his mistress just in case he was thinking that he would be taking advantage of me. I invited him to my studio flat two days after we finished our orientation programme and the weekend before taking my posting letter to his office. I told him I wanted to celebrate my graduation and the beginning of my service year. It took me more than seven visits to his office and innumerable phone calls before he accepted. Maybe if I had been very discerning I would have stopped my schemes, but as the Yoruba proverb pointed out, the person meant to sleep on the floor would roll onto the ground even when placed on a water bed. The evening came and for some time he didn't arrive. I felt disappointed, but then he came. He came to meet me in my most seductive negligee, all see through but which I covered with a lappa.

Welcome, sir.

Sorry for coming late. As I was on my way I got a call that my Boss wanted to see me and that took some time.

I can understand, sir. You are welcome.

Ah! You did not spare anything. What with the candlelight, the mellow gospel jazz! Is that not Kirk Whallum?

Yes, sir.

Why are you dimming the lights?

So that the beauty of the candles will show and make the atmosphere cosy.

Oh! Oh! You must have spent a fortune on this dinner: fresh fish, champagne and this tasty fried rice.

Nothing compared to what you have spent on me.

I am just doing what God has sent me to do for you.

In eating with me I saw another aspect of Pastor Jude. He took his time in eating. He was a gourmet eater. Finicky, slow in taking the food and in chewing before swallowing. When it came to drinking, he sipped his champagne as if he was on an artistic journey of deciphering the drink's aroma, pedigree and taste. One other thing I observed was the fact that there was not much discussion during the meal. The pastor took his meal as a serious and grave issue. Finally after the meal and the packing up which he volunteered to help and which I vehemently refused, I came back to ask.

Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?

Coffee would be better.

Bringing the coffee in and placing it on the table, I sidled up to him where he was sitting on the sofa. I rested my head on his shoulder and looked deeply into his eyes, beckoning and inviting him sensuously; but... but...

eleven

CHRISTOPHER

reconnecting

oju toti mo ni, ko tun ni salai mo ni

one who had known us before cannot refuse to know us again – a
yorùbá proverb

*jan 12, 2003
nicon hotel,
justice sowemimo street,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

My name is Christopher Alkali. I am a banker. The banker's job in Nigeria is like walking through a minefield blindfolded. There is legislation that criminalises every single step or every single act taken by the banker or the customer. Every government that has ruled Nigeria since Independence has passed statutes that make the customer, the manager or banker a criminal first until proven otherwise. These laws, some say, are necessary because Nigerian banks are a different species in the comity of banks. Some writers term Nigerian banks cesspits of corruption, manipulation, money laundering. They point out that Nigerian banks find it easier to swamp you with documents and bureaucracy than give you loans or lend to the nation's productive sectors. To get a loan in any Nigerian bank, for example, the bank expects you to bring a list of collateral and fill many forms proving that you are who you say you are and not an avatar of yourself. After getting the loan, the interest is high sometimes as high as 30%. Putting money in a Nigerian bank is an easier business than getting it out, a fact made fun of in an Equatorial Bank advertisement in the 90s. An old man, played by the popular Icheoku TV character, the Interpreter, comes into the banking hall with a mat ready to sleep before being called to get his money from the teller. Nigerian banks have come a long way since the days of that advertisement. They are now more modern and faster. Most of the banks are alright, most especially the so-called new generation banks to which I belong. Since banks are not run by angels but by human beings, there are errors and problems: like the ATM behaving like a kalokalo³⁶

³⁶ **Kalokalo:** Yorùbá term for a gambling slot machine. It could also mean a Ponzi scheme or any scam that fleeces a person of his money.

and swallowing your card, not giving you money and deducting from your bank balance.

The new market-driven strategy of sending young nubile girls to wealthy individuals in order to get them to open accounts with banks is another new strategy. Men are also meant to solicit for accounts from the same set of people. Sometimes this involves attending parties where such people congregate. I hate parties. In my job, however, I have to attend many lunch dates, business luncheons, cocktail and formal parties. These are avenues for meeting potential investors and big account holders. It was through one of these parties that I met Jude again. Mates in economics at the university, he went into the civil service and I went into banking after graduation. Then we lost contact; he lived in Lagos and I was employed in Kano. As we were members of the same university fraternity, we would have met, but I was attending the northern branch meetings while he was southern branch Chairman. I arrived at the party late because I was kept back at the office. I scanned the crowd for the important guest I was meeting, and my eyes rested on the man chatting with somebody whose back was turned to me. I rushed towards them. Dr. Jorge Ehimokhai was the most influential politician in Nigeria. Mr Fix-it, as he was known, was a strategist, smooth operator and a tactician. He was in intelligence and had dossiers on anyone who was anyone in the society. Feared, respected, kowtowed-to and intensely hated, he was the power behind the throne. No one could ascend the political throne without his backing or approval, while those against him were beggars outside the glittering castles. He was one of my bank's biggest depositors and a substantial shareholder. Missing him would have been detrimental to me, never mind that I was delayed at work.

Evening, Doctor. I am sorry, I was held up at the office.

No need to apologize. You were lucky. I should have gone, but I had to discuss something with someone that people like us in politics, ignore at our own detriment.

Anyone I know?

I can't say. Have you met Pastor Jude Babájídé before?

The man Dr. Ehimokhai had been talking with turned towards me and I was looking into my former mate's eyes. He had changed a bit, more robust and clean-shaven; he had sported a Van Dyke beard on campus.

Oh, we were mates at university.

Is that so?

Yes, Doctor. How are you Jude?

I am fine. Long time hen?

I have been moving around Northern Nigeria since we left university. What about you?

I was based in Lagos but just moved to Abuja last year.

I came to Abuja from Kaduna early this year.

No wonder we haven't met. Please, excuse me, I have to run. This is my card; give me a call so that we can catch up.

After Jude left, Dr. Ehimokhai and I departed for his house for our discussion. I need to tell you about myself so that you will be able to understand my needing Ehimokhai. I am the head of the foreign exchange department of my bank. Part of my duty is to source foreign exchange to complement what we weekly bid for from Central Bank. I was also expected to satisfy the needs of our bank's customers for foreign exchange and, at times, help them transfer it abroad. Customers need foreign exchange for many reasons: travel, importation, and school fees payment. So I occupy a very important position in the bank, and I was promoted a year ago. I have always been lucky in sourcing foreign exchange from my innumerable sources: students arriving from abroad, politicians changing their illegally inflated foreign travel estacode to naira, politicians and civil servants trying to transfer their loot abroad, and businessmen involved in capital flight. The set of people I do not deal with are the money launderers and the drug barons. However, in my job, there are no questions asked about sources.

My bank had been pursuing Dr. Ehimokhai's foreign exchange account for many years. He had, however, remained elusive to us and loyal to his wife's bank. Now that his wife had retired from the bank, I was saddled with getting him to transfer his huge foreign exchange account to us. Tonight's meeting was one of a series. The fact that he had invited me home was a plus to me and, in my view, an auspicious indication of the likelihood of my getting the account this time. As I was being entertained, my mind went to the fact that he was a schemer, which meant I had to give something to get his account. What he asked me, however, was a surprise to me.

It seems you know Pastor Jude very well?

I pretended as if I had forgotten the person he introduced me to at the party.

Pastor Jude?

Your mate that I introduced you to at the meeting.

Oh. Oh, we were mates, though not very close. I lied.

My foreign exchange account is yours if you can do one thing for me.

What is that?

Your friend has just been appointed acting Director of Finance and Logistics at the Electoral Commission. He will be confirmed in the next six months, according to my sources. His position and office is of crucial importance to me. We will soon be in the thick of election and he could be the key to our success or failure.

Is that so? How are you sure he would be occupying the position then?

Forget that. We are in Nigeria and the answer is of no use to you.

Why don't you meet him and discuss it with him? Why use an intermediary?

I need him badly but I have not been able to persuade him. He has remained impervious to all my motivations and inducements.

Why?

Maybe because he is a pastor. I am getting at the end of my tether. I may be forced to take the final decision in his case, but seeing that you know him, and you want something from me, I think I can send you to him in a last attempt.

What message are you sending through me?

Let him name his price or he should be ready to cross me. You know, I am not a person to be crossed.

Yes, I know.

Tell him, I can make it good for him where he or I can make it very hard and uncomfortable for him. Let him understand that there are no limits to what I can do both ways.

I hear you, Doctor. I will see him but I am not promising anything. We left the university twenty-five years ago, and the Jude I knew then could be a different person now.

Come off it. You were friends and fraternity members. Was your Frater's maxim not 'One for each, each for one?'

Yes, yes but ...but Doc, how did you know?

I have my ways.

I will try to talk to him and convince him.

As I walked to my car, I felt shocked, thinking what an octopus Dr. Ehimokhai was. He had something on everybody who mattered and, also, about insignificant people too. Just as I was starting my car, he approached and called to me.

Christopher, in case he refuses to listen to you, tell him he should think of his beautiful wife and two beautiful children in Lagos.

converting the sceptic

bi a ba yo 'pin l'oju, a maa fi han oju ni.

when we take the rheum from the eye, we show it to the eye – a yorùbá proverb

*february 22, 2003
esusu bank headquarters.
wuse zone 3.abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Meeting Jude after the party was like trying to grasp an eel. It took almost two weeks to arrange an appointment, and I was in the vice of my boss and Dr. Ehimokhai. As part of the pressure, my boss summoned me to his office one afternoon.

You know the financial year comes to an end this April?

Yes, sir.

You'll need to get Dr. Ehimokhai's foreign account before then. You have less than a month; are you up to it?

I've been working on it, sir.

I know. I don't want to hear 'I've been working on it', 'I am going to' or 'I am on it'. I need results, my man, results and proof.

Yes, sir.

What stage are you at with his case now?

I've made the initial contact and we have met twice after that.

Why have you not reeled him in?

He asked me for a favour, sir.

Why have you not given it to him? What is it, your head?

No, sir, just a link to a friend.

Why is that difficult for you to do?

My friend has been too busy and I have not been able to pin him down.

You better do that fast. We don't want Dr. Ehimokhai to slip through our hands do, we?

No, sir.

You see, if we are able to get the Doctor, we will be able to get his friends. He will bring his friends in a sort of snowball effect, you understand?

Yes, sir.

Get to it. You have the next two weeks to wrap it all up or ...

I left my boss' office boiling. I have always delivered when it comes to my job but this Ehimokhai's case was fast becoming a problem for me. I needed to wrap it up or, as my boss implied, I would be looking for another job. In this job, your good works are written on water while your mistakes are written in brass. I was thinking of how to get to Jude in order to even have the initial discussion with him when a call came in.

Hello, yes, Christopher speaking. Jude, I was just thinking of you.

I've been away to some States. We are a few weeks away from elections. I have to coordinate material needs with the State Electoral Commissioners; so I have been on the road.

I've been at your office more than five times.

I've been told.

When can we meet? I need to see you. I need your help urgently.

That's why I called. I have one week before going to Yobe state. When can we meet?

This weekend?

What's the hurry? Can't we make it next Wednesday?

It will be too late. Can't we meet tomorrow or at most Sunday, after service?

Okay, I will be attending a wedding tomorrow. Could you meet me there and then we can go somewhere for our discussion.

It's okay with me.

I'll text the location to you. Will one in the afternoon be all right with you?

Anytime will do.

See you tomorrow, then.

bearding the lion

eni ti o ba mu obo, a se bi obo.

the one who will catch the monkey will behave like the monkey – a
yorùbá proverb

*february 23, 2003
continental events hall.
garki, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

It was the typical Nigerian party: an exercise in wasteful spending, dress colour riots, the ubiquitous ‘aso-ebi’³⁷, and loud music. It was a society wedding and a collection of who’s who – politicians, celebrities, hangers-on and a bevy of beautiful women on the arms of society’s high and mighty. As a banker, I hated the waste of resources. Nigerians celebrate anything: house warming, child naming, wedding, ‘washing a new car’, ‘sending off and forth’³⁸, welcoming parties and the ever-constant expensive burials. Nigerians know how to celebrate in style, and they spend millions on burials when often the person being buried has died because there was no money to take him/her to hospital. I see no sense in this, but, as one of my friends explained, the celebrations are a means of economic distribution: the cooks, ice block suppliers, tailors who sew the ‘aso-ebi’, food sellers, caterers, event managers, photographers, videographers, and other sundry workmen that make Nigerian parties work get to share the largesse.

The married couple were arriving as I came in. Looking into the hall, I saw Jude sitting alone and I went to meet him. He must have been waiting for me because his eyes lit up.

Who are you here for, the bride or the groom?

Neither. One of my staff was the bride’s friend and she invited me.

Will it be possible for us to leave soon?

Yes, we can even leave now. I saw my staff member in the church and gave her whatever I wanted to give her. I also gave the couple their present during the photo-shoot.

³⁷ The same dress sewed by Nigerians (most especially the Yorùbás from where the term comes) to be worn at ceremonies, parties and such events. Their prices are according to the class of celebrants. Putting on the dress is a sign of fellowship with those celebrating and all the extended family are expected to put it on. It has become a booming business and a means through which the person holding the party can recoup some expenses. This is sometimes done through adding some amount to the cost of the dress and sometimes making the dress custom made so that a person who wants it cannot get it on the open market. The gifts given during the ceremony in cash also serve as a means of recouping costs.

³⁸ Sending somebody away or celebrating the retirement of the individual. Send forth is like holding a party as means of farewell for someone relocating to another town, city, or foreign country.

It's okay, then. Where can we go?

Let's go to Abuja Park. The weather is okay and we won't be disturbed.

Being Saturday, the park was full of families and lovers. We looked for an empty park bench.

Long time since university. How have you been?

Fine, I've been okay. I am the acting Director of Finance and Logistics at the Electoral Commission. There are indications I may be confirmed as the substantive Director soon. What about you?

I've worked in banks since we finished school but presently I am at Esusu Bank Plc as the Deputy General Manager. I am in charge of foreign exchange and foreign trade.

That's a lucrative section. Are you married now?

Twice. My first wife died but I remarried four years after her death.

Sorry, it must have been a painful loss. Was it that girl you were with on campus? Ngozi, was that her name?

Yes, we got married after a lot of trouble. I am a Northerner and because her father was killed in Kaduna during the 1967 pogrom, her family refused totally. However, it turned out she was pregnant.

What did they do then?

They still refused, convincing her to abort 'the bastard' as they called the child, but when she refused they wanted to disown her. However, an old man in the family reminded some of the main opponents of the marriage how they were saved by their Hausa friends and neighbours.

How long were you married before her death?

Ten years. We had two children, a boy and a girl. How is Carmille? I heard you were engaged when we were in the university.

Carmille died during her youth service year.

I am sorry.

It's part of life. I am married to a banker like you. Her name is Funmi.

Funmi Àkànmú?

Yes.

She's one of the stars of Nigerian banking and very influential and networked. People are peddling her name as maybe the next Central Bank governor and she is more than qualified for the post. I did not know you two were related.

She is using my middle name as her official surname.

No wonder. Is she here with you at Abuja? I lost track of her after she became the Executive Director of Cowrie Bank.

She is still with Cowrie Bank but my family is in Lagos. I am here in Abuja alone.

It must be hard, a bit lonely hen?

I've learnt how to cope with loneliness. Why do you want to see me?

How well do you know Dr. Ehimokhai?

The 'Man Friday' of the Liberal Party?

Yes.

Not so well. We've met on a few occasions like the Electoral Commission's meetings with political parties and their leaders. I do not have any personal relationship with him nor have I been close to him.

I want to see you because of him.

What for?

I need to get his foreign exchange account for my bank.

What has that got to do with me? Why don't you just go to him and pitch?

I've been to him. He wants something from you. He said if you give him what he wants, then he will give me his foreign exchange account. Jay, I need this account badly. My job hangs on it.

What does he want from me?

Your help.

My help? In the forthcoming elections? He must be joking.

Jay, he is not joking. He is very serious. Do you know how powerful he is?

Yes, I have heard about him that he is a fixer and has a hoard of information about the rulers and everybody.

He is more powerful than that. He is very ruthless; I don't want you to cross him.

Why?

You know what he told me when he asked me to talk with you?

What?

He said that in taking your decision, you should think of your wife and the two beautiful children in Lagos.

That's a threat.

Yes, it is and that is why we must treat this issue with care.

God is more powerful than he is. I won't succumb to his pressure.

You are forgetting something Jay, go and read Psalm 17: 13-End. Think deeply on it and let's meet during the week. I may have a way by which this issue may be fruitful for all of us.

There is no agreement between light and darkness.

Take it easy, my friend. This is Nigeria don't forget. If you refuse, another person who comes after you will have dealings with him. When you refuse, he will get you out of that position, that is, if he hasn't killed you.

He does not have my death in his hand.

Yes, you may say that, but look around you. How many of Nigeria's 'saviours' has the nation supported? Murtala? Abiola? Nzeogwu? Imoudu? Fawehinmi? Beko?

Okay, I'll think about it. Let's meet after my return from Yobe next week.

What about before your journey to Yobe?

I'll let you know if it is possible.

twelve

MAGGIE

aftermath

ase sile labo wa ba, eni su s'ona oja, a bo wa ba esinsin l'abo oja

it is what you do that you reap; he who defecates on the way to the market, will come to meet flies on his way back – a yorùbá proverb

*november 29-30 2003
15A, sowemimo close,
abuja.
federal capital territory.*

When Pastor Jude stood up, looked at me and walked out of my house, I felt the ground would open her jaws and swallow me. I stood dazed, and ashamed. For the first time, something told me: “You’ve got your comeuppance now. How stupid can you get?” The night was a torture: I could not sleep. I was asking myself unanswerable questions. I had the whole of the weekend to grill myself, and I decided on feigning illness on Monday. My intention was to use this time to change my posting. It would look like repaying my benefactor in a bad coin, but to me, it would be better than steaming in shame day after day.

Plans work better in planning than in execution. All through Sunday, I practised being ill. Finally, I was able to get the picture I thought would evoke pity on my behalf. Have you ever found out that sometimes when you are trying to fake something, that thing becomes real? Have you ever fibbed or pretended you were ill and it turned out that you fell ill? This is what happened to me. Around nine o’clock, I had a splitting headache and my temperature had risen. I drank a cup of hot chocolate, took a warm bath and went to sleep. It was a fitful sleep, and I did not need to fake being sick any longer. By morning my temperature had soared. I needed to get to the hospital, but I was not in a state to get myself there and I still had to get my posting letter to the office. Not reporting at my duty post on the first day might have led to my service year being extended. The National Youth Service Corps would take it as a sign that I was not serious and my sectional head would not only frown at such behaviour on the first day at work but would count it as being irresponsible. Even in my illness, I felt I could not weasel out of going to the office to present my letter, to show that I was ill and get permission to treat myself. All my charade and pretence had only led me to that which I

was running away from. I had to get myself to the office. As I sat, too tired to get up, my phone rang.

Hello, Margaret here.

You don't sound good. How are you feeling?

Not too well, I have a cold and am running a temperature.

Since when?

Since last night.

Have you taken anything? Do you need to go to hospital?

I've taken some analgesic tablets, but I am still not feeling well.

I will be at your place in the next ten minutes. I'll take you to the hospital and then, if you are not admitted, take you to the office to drop your letter of posting. How about that?

Okay, sir. Thank you, sir.

You don't need to thank me. I called you in the first instance to tell you that I would be picking you up on my way to the office since your house is on my way. I hope you are ready?

I will be ready before you get here, sir.

repentance/contrition

bi elejo ba mo ejo l'ebi, ko ni pe n'ikunle

if the offender realizes his/her offence, s/he wont stay too long kneeling
– a yorùbá proverb

*november 31, 2003
15A, sowemimo close,
wuse, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Morning, Maggie. How are you feeling now?

The temperature has gone down a bit pastor. I am feeling better.

Where will we be going, the office or the hospital?

With the way I am feeling now, I would prefer we go to the office for me to drop my letter and ask for the day off so that I can come home and rest. I think I only need to rest and the cold will go.

You are sure you don't want me to take you to the hospital?

I am sure. I need to drop my letter in the office. If there is no improvement later in the day, I will go to the hospital.

I could take you to the hospital now and also help you drop your letter at the office.

I will be all right, I will last the day.

Good to hear it but you are not looking it.

I am sorry for...

For what?

What I did when you were in my room last Friday.

What did you do, Maggie?

Tried to seduce you.

Was that what you were trying to do?

What did you think I was doing?

I thought you were being nice.

Is that so? Why then did you walk out, eyeballing me?

I am just joking. I understood what you were trying to do, but you did not understand me.

Understand you? In what way?

You see, I have come across women in my life, in work experience and in various other situations I found myself. I have learnt how to deal with them in a way that would not hurt my ambitions.

How?

I love women as friends and acquaintances. They are usually more sensitive than men, more loyal if they decide to be than men and very compassionate. The side of me that has not been able to handle women is my passionate side.

Why, you could have any woman you want! You have the looks, the character and the emotions.

Yes, I do. Women tend to be attracted to me, but my experiences have always served as a barrier to my becoming a Casanova.

Your experiences? Were they so bad as to turn you into a misogynist?

I am not a misogynist. I love women, cherish and respect them, but while I am an intensely passionate man, I am not ready to lie, pretend and deceive as some do to take advantage of women.

What do you mean?

Lies, pretence and deceit and such that is stock in trade of Cassanovas.

That's not true.

Really? Haven't you observed that women run after men who lie to them, treat them like useless and worthless materials and who do not respect them?

That is a generalization. Most women want men who care about them, who love and who are kind to them.

Is that so? Why is it that the kinds of men women fight over are the liars, the seducers, the sweet talkers and the callous?

Why is it that the women men fight over are the whores, the reckless heartbreakers, and the icy-hearted women who do not give a fig for the men who drool over them?

Touché.

I accept that most women are not like the picture I created. The majority of women just like men, want happiness in their lives. Women want men or women who will be their friends, confidants, carers and supporters, who will always be there for them in times of trouble and need.

Well, that's what most men want, too; someone they can lean on, share with, care for and who cares for them.

Why is it then that most stories we hear are about ill treatment, battering and disloyalty on men's part?

Well, that complements the stories of disloyalty, unfaithfulness and gross materialism on women's part.

It does not have to be like that, but the experiences some women have gone through turn them into that: women without the milk of human kindness, men-users and ice queens.

It is not experiences. Experiences, either good or bad, are meant to grow the individual.

How?

If you as an individual take a wrong turning after a bad or a traumatic experience, I don't think it was the experience that changed you. It was what you have inside that the experience has exhumed. You had a choice.

What choice?

The choice of taking over your experience rather than allowing your experience to take you over, colour your perceptions of life and determine your future trajectory.

It's easy to talk, especially if you haven't gone through such experiences. If you have, it's too difficult to not allow the experiences to define you.

That's not true. Every human being has a choice in what to do and what to be, and has the free will of overcoming problems he or she may face.

Hun, deep thought. May I ask you a question?

Yes, you may.

Have you had traumatic experiences?

Too many to count.

Really?

I lost my parents at an early age. I was in secondary school when I lost them.

Sorry.

You don't need to be. It is a fact of life. Some children have their parents with them till they become grandparents, whereas some lose theirs at a very early age. That is the way life is and we cannot change it.

True.

I grew up a loner, constantly alone, and was made to face life single-handedly. My aunt was a good mother-figure to me, and when she married my most loved teacher in the secondary school, I had a family. But this did not satisfy my hunger for love.

Why? Didn't they love you very well?

They did, but there is no way surrogates can be like the real parents. They showered me with love, but it seemed something died in me when my parents died.

Does it mean you cannot love?

No, I can love, but I was sceptical because I believed that if I loved anyone too much, they would be taken away from me the same way my parents were taken away from me.

What gave you such an idea?

My parents' deaths turned me aloof. I found it hard to pour myself into other people.

What a pity!

It's not a pity. It's the hard reality I faced. I felt that my parents abandoned me. I felt so bad that I was unable to trust or love any other person. I withdrew into myself because of the fear of losing any other person who gets close to me.

However, you have changed. You seem to trust more and seem to help and love people more.

That's just a mask to hide my inner turmoil.

Inner turmoil?

Yes, inner turmoil that I cope with daily; the inner conflicts that I have been coping with since. The question I keep asking myself, "To love or not to love?"

Your mask must be working then. Nobody would suspect you're having those conflicts within you.

Well, that's okay with me. I have been fighting my demons. I believe I will overcome them. Here we are. I have a series of meetings today, and I am sure I won't be able to take you home.

It is okay by me.

Finish the processes of getting accepted into the system here and we will talk later. You have to go to the Director of Human Resources first. Do you still remember where her office is?

Yes.

Good luck then. See you tomorrow morning. In case you need to get to the hospital, please call me. I will see to your getting there.

reminiscences

oro lo ko mo ko mo ro wa

it is issues that bring dialogue and discussions – a yorùbá proverb

1 december, 2003-4 december,2003

2/4 danjuma avenue,

asokoro-abuja.

federal capital territory.

My orientation at the National Electoral Commission's (NEC) office went well. I was attached to the Director of Human Resources, a happy posting because I would not be working with the pastor. The work schedule was hectic and, being in training, I had to travel a lot to the state's NEC offices. My contact with Pastor Jude was, therefore, reduced. One day, however, we were in a meeting he chaired. After the meeting, he called me for a chat.

It's been so long. How are you settling down in your work, Maggie?

I am doing fine pastor. It's only that it involves too much travelling.

You don't like travelling?

I do, but it's energy-sapping.

Would you like to change to another section?

No, I am enjoying this. It will soon pass; it's only for a year.

That's the spirit. Will you be around this coming weekend?

I won't be travelling. We have finished our first set of training courses. I have two weeks to stay at the headquarters before travelling again.

Should I pick you up for dinner on Friday night?

Yes, that would be good.

At eight o'clock on Friday night we were on the verge of stepping out of my door when the rain started, one of those heavy falls with howling and powerful winds. We waited for it to subside but it increased in intensity and we had to wait it out. I made some dinner from materials I could lay my hand on, and after, I turned on the TV. A news item filled the room:

St. Bernadine Girls' College, Oturkpo celebrated its 21st anniversary yesterday. Among the events for the celebration was the dedication of a new classroom block, posthumously named after a former NYSC member Ms. Carmille Awaji, who served in the school seventeen years ago. She lost her life in a fire that destroyed the laboratory where she was teaching the students at the time. Ms. Awaji helped all her students escape the burning building but was too weak to leave the building herself. The dedicated classroom was built on the site of the burnt laboratory. The federal government has set up a panel ...

You are crying. It's a moving story, isn't it, a courageous young woman.

Yes, very courageous.

Is it her sacrifice that is making you cry?

No, I knew her very well. We were expected to marry. I was engaged to her.

Ah! I am very sorry. You must have loved her so much to still feel like this after seventeen years.

She left a hole in my heart, one too difficult to fill. I have been searching for the person that could fill it.

You must have felt so bad and shaken then?

I was, and that turned me off women for some time. After getting married, however, my loneliness was reduced. This news item only showed I am still aching.

Anything I can do to help?

Nothing. The rains seemed to have stopped. I'll be going. Take care; we will see one another again. Good night, maybe we may have time to organize another dinner.

I'll look forward to that.

2005

thirteen

WOLE

house collecting

iba kere bi posi eliri, ile eni ni'le eni

if it as small as the eliri's house, ones' house is ones' house – a yorùbá proverb

*february 14, 2005
electoral commission's office,
garki, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

In my ten years as a realtor, I had never come across a person like Jude. Some house buyers are speculators, while some are mere investors. There are those who buy houses because of their acquisitive nature. Jude was a collector for collecting's sake. While some individuals collect cars, electronics or other things like clocks, rare timepieces or cameras, Jude collected houses. To me, he seemed to derive his joy from buying land and houses. Thinking about it, I believe that buying and seeing those houses and land made him feel grounded. I was on the way to his office that morning. There was a house he wanted in Dubai and, with trepidation; I was on the way to tell him that someone else had got the house and not us.

I met Jude through my friend Christopher, the banker. Christopher and I were secondary school mates and we were close to the extent that we shared everything: books, pranks, girls, stories and punishment sometimes. Our closeness transcended the secondary school, and though we did not attend the same university, we were still close. After our university years, we maintained the closeness. When luckily we found ourselves together in Abuja again, we resumed our friendship. It was at one of those visits to my friend that I met Jude. I was not initially drawn to him but when Chris told me about his need to buy a house in Abuja I became interested. That was my business. Two years after he came to Abuja, I bought his first house for him. The negotiation and acquisition were done in a record time and at a beneficial price to him. He then made me his realtor. It was later that I heard he had been duped twice trying to buy a house in Abuja. My transparent and open manner in getting what he wanted recommended me to him and we became friends.

I have bought houses for him in Lagos, Ikoyi and Victoria Island and undeveloped land in Lekki, Otta, Ibeshe and Victoria Garden City. Then, four years later, with my help he acquired houses in Ibadan, London, Jos, Johannesburg, Chicago and Dubai. It was his second house in Dubai that I was unable to get for him. I did not know how I was going to tell him that I had tried so hard and we were almost successful before the owner realised he would not be living in Dubai. The owner insisted on selling his house to someone ready to live in it and who was not using it as a business venture. Despite our readiness to pay more for the house, he rejected our proposal and there I was without the house. I felt bad, too, because the house was a distinctive one, unique in its design and outstanding in its location. Well, for once in our history, we had lost a house we wanted badly.

My driver stopped the car and that brought me out of my musings. I told the driver to wait for me instead of coming back to collect me because I did not visualize staying too long with Jude. I just wanted to tell him we lost the house and ask what I should do next.

Afternoon Wole, you are lucky. I was on my way to Sokoto. If you had come some ten minutes later, you wouldn't have met me. How did it go?

Not so good, Jay. We lost the house.

Why? Was it because of money?

Our bid was more than the person who finally bought it.

That is surprising.

Yes, the owner wanted someone who would be living in it.

Pity, that house's design was unique and I was getting attached to it even before owning it.

Would you have moved to Dubai?

No way. I just love the design, its location and the finishing.

The finishing? How could you know that from the pictures?

No, not the pictures, I went to the house two weeks ago.

What?

When I saw the images of the house, I was intrigued. I wanted to see how it looked like in reality. So, I went. The owner took me around and asked if I was relocating to Dubai. I told him no. He told me about his attachment to the house. How he built it over a long time in incremental manner because he wanted a certain standard. How he enjoyed living in the house but he had to sell it now

because he lost his wife. The house, he said, reminded him too much of his wife. He said he wanted someone who would love the house the way he did.

You did not tell me about your visit nor did you give any inkling that you had seen the house.

I wanted you to do your job. I wouldn't be going to live in Dubai and I know you know that. So, I wanted to find out the truth or otherwise of what the man told me.

You are a different one, Jude. So what do I do now?

Nothing. I am thinking of getting a house in Ghana. Look for another good house to buy for me in Accra or Cape Coast.

Okay, then.

Make sure it is a beautiful house. I prefer an ocean view. I may live in this one.

Are you thinking of moving to Ghana?

Yes, why not? The way this country is going, do you see any light at the end of this tunnel?

What about your job? What about your family? Are you going to leave them and relocate to Ghana?

No, I have not yet made a decision. By December this year, I will retire and start afresh in Ghana. I am tired of power outages, bad roads, bad and incompetent government, corruption and all other things that seem to characterize this nation. Wole, please get a good house for me. I will live in it. I am not buying the Ghana house for investment or business. I want a house I can think of the way that Dubai man thinks of his house. Who knows the number of days remaining for us? Abi, ojo melo la o lo l'ayé, ta n wo ewu irin?³⁹

a model house

a kì í gbó tó Bá'yì-ni-ngó-se-ńkan-à-n-mi.

one cannot be as wise as “Thus-will-I-do-my-thing” – a yorùbá proverb

*april - 14-december,2005.
national electoral commission's office,
garki,abuja.
federal capital territory.*

We got a fully furnished house and for just two thirds of the money we offered for the Dubai property. There was a small snag though. The house had been built by the Ghanaian government for the hosting of the African Union summit, to accommodate an

³⁹ **Ojo melo la o...** How many days are we going to live in the world that we go about in iron dresses?

African head of state. Immediately after the summit in September 2005⁴⁰, the house would revert to the buyer. That day in April, I was happily going to Jude's office to tell him about the house, get him to sign the papers and pay the money. The house had five bedrooms, all en suites. It was in a highbrow estate, facing the beach, watching the rise and fall of the waves.

Because the house was built for a visiting African leader, it was suffused with luxury, with the latest technological gizmos and a beautiful patio facing the sea. I was really very happy to get it. There were other estates built for the meeting, but this one at the beach was the best. There were twenty stand-alone duplexes in the estate and three at other parts of the beach. The estate was a security enclave. To get it, I had to go through my partner, a Ghanaian realtor. I had been in Ghana two days before to get the papers that I was taking to Jude for his signature and approval.

These are the pictures of the house?

Yes.

They are beautiful. How did you get this house?

It's my job to get what my clients want.

Yeah, that's true. I hope it's not costly?

Not as costly as the Dubai property.

Okay. You said there is a condition attached to it. What's the condition?

It is ready and fully furnished. However, you cannot move in until December this year.

That's not bad. I intend moving to Ghana next January. It's okay for me.

I'll leave the papers with you and come back to collect them tomorrow.

Alright, then. I will sign them and leave the cheque with my personal assistant for you. I will be travelling tomorrow for a two months' course in New York.

I will collect the documents from Margaret tomorrow, and before you return from New York, everything will be ready.

When was it you saw Christopher last?

I saw him last week.

⁴⁰ The 4th African Union summit took place in Abuja, Nigeria on January 2005, but I moved it to Ghana and changed the date to fit the narrative.

Please, can you call by on your way, and tell him to see me before I travel tomorrow. My flight is in the night. I have been trying to call him but I've not been able to raise him on all his numbers, both at home and on his cell phone.

I'll do that. Enjoy your trip to New York.

I will. See you when I get back.

Okay. Please, don't forget to sign those papers and leave the bank cheque. If you don't, we cannot do anything for two months. We could lose the house by then.

I will sign them all. You can get them from Margaret tomorrow.

fourteen

FÚNMI

the presentation

ohun a ba fi sile l'aja n gbe

it's what is left unguarded that the dog takes – a yorùbá proverb

*october 15, 2005
metropolitan hotel,
calabar, cross rivers state.*

My laptop pinged. It was mail. In the midst of this retreat at the newly renovated Metropolitan Hotel, Calabar, I hadn't wanted to be disturbed. Two days earlier, I had presented my plans and strategies in repositioning the bank for the coming year. My presentation received a standing ovation, and the Managing Director took an unusual interest in it. His effusive compliments made me proud. Today is the retreat's last day, a Saturday, and I think I will use it to explore Calabar. Being a first timer in the city, I want to explore all the leisure and pleasure spots, which I have heard the city has. My mind was also busy exploring the inner recesses of my heart and the ties to Jay.

I saw my husband six months ago. He has been so busy and my responsibilities made it impossible for me to visit him in Abuja. Six months, what a long period! Trying to zero in on the incident that must have pushed this marriage downhill and at the same time listening to the bank's deputy general manager was too much for me. In the penumbra between hearing the thoroughly boring presentation and thinking, my mind settled on my marriage again. We were married in 1995 and then the sudden realisation: today is our tenth anniversary. I made a mental note to phone Jay after the session, and immediately I get to Lagos, I must find time and go to Abuja to resurrect our marriage.

Our marriage had seemed to be heaven-made. To me, it was a relief after a host of family meetings and my mother's crying, wailing and cajoling, asking me to get married as if I am God or the one who switches on and off the marriage spigot. Everything was thrown at me because, at 30, I had a well-paid job, was comfortable, owned my house and car, but was without a husband or a child. My favourite younger cousin, with three children of her own and countless other cousins, younger aunts and nieces comfortable in their husbands' houses, became reference points. Going about like a discarded and

rejected flower, “whose petals would soon fall and be ground into the soil”, according to my mother, was not only irritating to her but a shame. Marriage pressures were piling up, but I never wanted a fast-food marriage to satisfy everybody. I wanted a man I could love and who loved me too, and if I could not get such a man, thank you, I’d rather stay single all my life. My parents needed a grandchild, my being an only child. Like the girl in Lagbaja’s popular song, prayer warriors and innumerable prophets were being solicited to pray for me. My parents’ various innuendoes, insinuations, coaxing and unnecessary introductions and pairings with wimps and their friends’ sons whom they thought I should be coupled with made me stop visiting them.

Then, I met Pastor Jude: same interests, same expectations, same dreams and same aspirations. We were both comfortable, so no leeching. Five years older than me, unmarried, matured gentleman, he was like the older brother I never had. My parents were ecstatic, and I was elated. His parents were satisfied with me and turned me into a little goddess who had finally helped their son to settle down and who wasn’t a gold digger. We married, and the first five years of our marriage were heady. We were ready to conquer the world. Then, too many good things happened concurrently: I gave birth to my second child, Jay got promoted and moved to Abuja, and I was slated to become one of the bank’s executive directors. I should have been warned but I was not, no intuition pricked me, and I did not have an ominous dream. The only warning, if I could call it that, was that argument we had the night before his relocation to Abuja. Could that have caused this chasm between us? Was it the initial tremor that created this fissure that developed into this gully? It is odd, very odd that my romantic, considerate, consistently trustworthy and loyal husband could forget our anniversary today.

Ah! Lord! Have we reached the nadir of our relationship? What are my trappings for? Of what essence are my wealth, position and achievements if my home is wrecked? What legacy am I leaving for my children? How would the church take my broken marriage? A broken marriage, would it not destroy my well-loved pastor husband? Is this not pride? Am I arrogant? “Wives submit yourselves to your husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church; and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let wives be to their own husbands in everything”. I need to make amends. Forgive me Lord. Forgive me. I put myself in your... I...

Another ping of my laptop brought me out of my ponderings. I could feel the eyes of the MD on me. He was fresh from Harvard: handsome, radiant, highly intelligent and charming. His eyes were questioning me, ‘Are you here with us?’ I felt ashamed at being caught. I felt weak within. It shouldn’t be so but I haven’t seen my husband for

such a long time, and as they say, ‘bodi no be wood’⁴¹. He looked at me again and then he was on his laptop, typing. My laptop pinged again. He looked up from his notebook. Meanwhile, the Investment man droned on, swamping us with figures. I checked my mail.

the correspondence

gbogbo aluwala ologbo, ogbon ati k’eran je

all the cat’s ablution are devices towards eating meat – a yorùbá
proverb

*october 15, 2005
metropolitan hotel,
calabar,
cross rivers state.*

From: bobighinova@cowriebanknig.com

Date: 15th October 2005 11:25:45 am

Subject: What do you think?

To: funmiakanmu@cowriebanknig.com

Funmi,

What do you think of this spiel? Are you getting lost in figures like me?

You are downcast, any problem? Bring yourself back here.

Just joking.

Bob

From: funmiakanmu@cowriebanknig.com

Date: 15th October 2005 11:45:50 am

Subject: Re: What do you think?

To: bobighinova@cowriebanknig.com

⁴¹ Meaning human body is not wood that has no feeling. The term means she has felt the lack of physical relationship between her and her husband.

Sir,

I understand what he is saying, but his presentation makes it boring. No problem. Thanks for your concern.

I am fully here.

Regards.

Mrs. Funmi Àkànmú.

Funmi,

I know you are here. Thanks for thanking me.

Drop this sir thing. I've always told you it's Bob.

Don't bother this will soon finish.

Any plans for you later in the day?

Live, nobody gets out of this world alive.

Bob

Sir,

Thank you sir. You are still my boss.

No fixed plans for later.

Thanks for your advice.

Mrs. Funmi Àkànmú.

Funmi,

Have you forgotten I remember your surname?

You gave a beautiful presentation yesterday and I was wondering if we could get together later in the day so that you can explain it better.

Be cheerful like you were yesterday and not downcast as you are looking now.

Chin up, whatever it is will pass. Life is not a dose of poison.

Bob.

Bob,

Thanks for the compliments.

I know you know my surname. You are my MD remember?

I can't afford to be cheeky and perky.

My job, you know, is on the line.

No problem about later in the day, I'll come.

And I won't be looking downcast.

Funmi

Funmi,

That's better. I am not an ogre. I'm just the MD.

You could have been. You are too good for your job to be on line.

We are afraid of losing you to our competitors.

Be assured.

What about dinner tonight?

Bob

Bob,

Thanks, but no thanks

I am a ma-

Funmi,

You mistakenly pressed the send button?

The dinner is for your brilliant presentation and performance this last financial year.

You are worth it and it's just appreciation for a job well done.

Bob

Bob,

Okay, sir.

Later tonight.

Funmi

Funmi,

That's good.

We'll discuss some ideas I have based on suggestions you made yesterday.

See you later then. Seems our friend is rounding up.

Till later.

Bob

Bob,

Right, sir.

See you then.

Funmi

the dinner date

aja to re 'le ekún to bo...

the dog that went to the tiger's place and came back... – a yorùbá proverb

*october 15, 2005, 8.19p.m.
oceanview restaurant,
metropolitan hotel,
calabar, cross-rivers state.*

You are looking cool and good in this, your beautiful dress.

You are not bad, too, in your tuxedo and I like your bow tie.

You've been most brilliant this retreat and you are looking beautiful.

Thank you very much.

As you were giving your suggestions yesterday, it was as if you were stealing my thoughts.

You don't know? I am a professional thought stealer.

That means I am not safe from you. Yes O. Be careful now, the mind reader is at large.

Really, there is a question I have been thinking of.

Thank you, I will have the pounded yam with white soup, fresh fish and some fruit juice. What will you have?

I will have fried rice, some little salad and 'moinmoin'⁴²,

Drinks?

Get us a Moet et Chardon 1975 Dom Perignon Oenotheque. Thank you.

What do you want to ask me?

Well, I've forgotten. Though I wonder how you maintain your shape. After two children you are still looking like a single lady.

It's God's doing. He is to be praised.

Amen! Sister! Amen.

You want any dessert?

No, thanks, I am watching my weight.

⁴² **Moinmoin:** A kind of pudding made from beans. Grinding beans and adding many condiments like pepper, oil, fish, egg, liver and other things make it. It is then wrapped in leaves and steamed.

Hum, I am watching my weight too.

Have you been to Obudu Cattle Ranch?

No, it is one of the places I would like to visit now that I am in Calabar.

Mind accompanying me tomorrow?

I'll let you know tomorrow. Thanks for the dinner. You have spoiled me silly.

*You are worth more than that. You are worth more than your weight in gold.
You are my most valuable worker.*

Thank you, sir.

Thank you for honouring my invitation.

Thank you for extending it to me.

Good night.

Good night and have a nice sleep.

What's wrong with you? Don't you know you are a married woman? Why are your knees wobbling and your heart jumping out of your mouth? Haven't you seen a handsome man before? He is articulate, young, intelligent and rich and so what? So is your husband. Now, take that phone and tell him you won't be going with him. But he is my boss. So what? Look, you'll be committing adultery and that is not cool in God's eyes. What if he sacks me? He cannot, didn't you hear his calling you his most valuable worker? That's flattery. It isn't, you look at what you've done for the bank. If he sacks you other banks will compete for your services. Don't you know you've become an institution in the industry? Not to mention the fact that he won't sack you but instead he would respect you all the more. But I like him. I wouldn't mind going out with him. Ehn-Ehn, you are now talking. You've always wanted to go out with him, isn't it? Yes, what do you expect? My husband touched me last nine months ago. He is busy, he said. I have been busy, too, but I am human and a woman. So what? Can't you control yourself? You are a pastor's wife remember? Does that make me an angel? It doesn't, but don't you think your misbehaviour will tarnish his reputation? I will call him in the morning to tell him I won't be going to Obudu with him. Call him now. NOW!

the seduction

ohun t'a bá ni je, a ki fi run mu

what we are not going to eat, we don't smell it – a yorùbá proverb

october 16, 2005, 4.19p.m.

executive suite one,

obudu cattle ranch,

obudu, cross-rivers state.

I've always hated heights, Bob.

Really? How did you cope with lifts in the office?

It is an enclosed space and I don't see how high I have gone. I also don't need to see myself going up.

Ehn...Ehn.

I was almost puking on my way up here, but the scenery is so beautiful that I couldn't do anything but look at the beautiful scenes by the mountain. It was hard initially, but my fears started diminishing.

That's the way to go, girl!

But...but it's too cold. One would think we are in a temperate country.

That's because of the height. You can go to the room; it's warmer, while I tidy up the remaining processes.

The room?

Oh! No. It's a two-bedroom suite. Our rooms are separate, though we share the lounge.

Okay.

How are you enjoying this place?

Beautiful, a very beautiful place. This governor is working. See how he has changed the state and this place; it's fantastic.

He has always been a focussed man. When we were in the uni...

You know him?

Yes, we were at UniJos together before I went to Harvard.

A very handsome man, too, and a beautiful soul.

He has always been like that.

No wonder.

You see... there is something I have always wanted to tell you.

What is it?

I find you beautiful, intelligent and a cultured lady.

Thanks for your flattery.

It's not flattery. It's the truth. I've always thought of going out with you.

I am married, you know.

Yes, I know, but that should not be a barrier.

Is that so?

You see, Funmi, right from the day I came into the bank and saw you, I loved you and liked you.

Ehn-Ehn?

I did not hear most of what you were saying while taking me around after taking over as the MD from my dad.

Is that so?

Since then, I've been thinking about you. I like you so much.

Really?

I would give anything to be with you.

Is that so? ... I think this discussion has gone too far.

No, no, Funmi, don't take it that way. Is it wrong to tell the truth?

No, but I am a married woman and there...

Bob took my hands and looked into my eyes. Before I could extricate my hands from him, I was being hugged and kissed, and I was kissing him back. We were locked in the embrace for a long time. I had goose pimples all over my body and as he took my hand, I followed... My mind was going crazy. In my inner dialogue, I chastised myself and then responded with defensive excuses.

Now you've done it and you are done for. How could you do such a thing? Your job surely is on the line now. How could you lead him on when you know you would not be able to carry it through? When you know you won't do anything with him? How dumb can you be? You expect him to forget and forgive then? Why did you egg him on when you know it would end like this? He will take you to be a teaser. I am not a teaser. What do you expect me to do in my situation? Tell him from the beginning, you don't want a relationship with him. And you think I'll still be having my job? You think he would give me any chance? He won't. I would have lost my job by now. It is a bit difficult for him to sack me now. I have facts against him. He would also be hoping that I might still sleep with him. He may be thinking it was the feminine wiles that prevent me from going further with him. I am sure he will still try once more before coming to conclusions. Who knows? I may even sleep with him then. What, commit adultery? Why not? Where is my husband? Where is the person meant to comfort me? Has he not abandoned me? Am I not a widow while my husband is still living? That's a sin, you know. A sin? What sin? My abandonment or my thinking of sleeping with my boss? Am I expected to stay high and dry because my husband has got

married to his job? Am I a reverend sister? Why can't you be? Those who are, are they not women like you? That's their choice; I did not choose to be like them, so why must I suffer? Loyalty. Trust and loyalty? What do I know about what he is doing now? Is he loyal to me, too? Can I trust him? You are a woman, how do you think others will view your actions? Will they not say that you slept with others to get to your position? Will the public not label, tar and punish you for succumbing to your feelings? Yes, I know, but why must it be women all the time. Men can philander but women are expected to be chaste even while the man is busy sowing his wild oats. Why is it always women who are caged? Why us? Why are we in fetters? Men are free to have many women because they are polygamous in nature. Women are, however, meant to be monogamous. Why are our wings cut? That does not answer what you are to do now. What will you do if he sacks you because you played him? It is not only "hell hath no fury like a woman scorned," it is also true that "a man scorned is like an unleashed tornado".

fifteen

MAGGIE + CHRISTOPHER

tying up ends

*ifura l’ogun agba,pansa o fura pansa ja,aja o fura aja jin, aja ti
o fura a d’ohun a mu so*

caution is old people’s medicine, the roof was not cautious and it falls, the ceiling was incautious and it breaks, the dog that is incautious is the one that is put on leash – a yorùbá proverb

*october 18, 2005
national electoral commission’s office,
garki,abuja.
federal capital territory.*

My boss had become different. I had been his personal assistant for more than three years and I could see that he was different in words, tones, movements and actions. He had become more taciturn than before. He thought more, thought differently, and seemed to have less to say but did more thinking. He had also become reflective and introspective, as if something was bothering him and he could not discuss it with anyone. He had always been a quiet person, a methodical quartz clock, but he had become more silent. This started when we began collecting materials for the Ògbèrè meeting. Like most Nigerians, we were very critical of our country and her inadequacies. We did think much on what Dele Giwa, the foremost Nigerian journalist who was bombed in 1986 (though many Nigerians ascribed his death to the ruling military junta then), said about our country. In one of his *Parallax Snaps* columns, he said, “Nigeria is God’s experiment in the impossible, the improbable and the imponderable”. Nigerian iconoclast Fela Anikulapo-Kuti celebrated this in some of his songs too – ODOO, (Overtake don overtake Overtake), Army Arrangement, Colomental and Mr. Follow-Follow. Dele Giwa pointed out that Nigeria was a beautiful country peopled by beautiful, hardworking, industrious and diligent individuals, but her tragedy has always been her lack of progress because of laws, rules and systems that work in other climes but do not work in Nigeria. He gave the Nigerian economy as an example, one he likened to a giant experiment in trial and error and to a roulette table. Nigerians, according to him, were hardworking, decent, foresighted individuals in their private lives, but their inability to work together and be unified in developing their blessed country is a surprise. Their lack of unity and lack of courage when it came to

fighting the cabal made Nigerians difficult to understand. What we found out, as sequestered materials, documents and highly classified data passed through our hands, confirmed what Dele Giwa had said almost twenty years before.

This seems to have made my boss clam up. He would just stand at times and gaze into the horizon. While we were working on an issue or looking at an idea for his presentation, he would stop, become very quiet and sigh. If I had not known him for a long time, I would have come to the conclusion that I was watching my boss slowly breaking down in front of me, piece by piece, and being unable to do anything about it. I know this was not the case because I had seen him many times when under stress or when he had been touched by an act, a word or an image. He had recoiled into his shell like a snail. He had always used these periods to masticate the thought or idea in his mind. He usually got out of these periods. On one such occasion, I broke into his long gaze into the horizon.

Oga mi, is there any problem?

Ehn, what is it? What did you say?

Oga, are you okay? What is troubling you? You look so worried.

Worried? Maybe the pressure of preparing for this forthcoming meeting.

No, Oga mi. I know it is not the main problem. I know something is worrying you. What is it?

Hun, forget it, Maggie. It will soon pass.

Oga mi, no, you've been quieter, more introspective and the worry lines on your face have multiplied.

Hun, Maggie, Maggie, the psychologist.

Oga, please don't divert the discussion. You've always confided in me, why not now?

I know I can never get past you. You are too observant for my liking.

That may be why we make a good team. So, Sir, what is eating you up?

Let's take a lunch break. Where should we go this time, Golden Gate, that fish place in Abuja Park or Le Brassierre beside Usuma Dam?

Le Brassierre will be fine. It is more secluded and we won't be disturbed as we talk.

We closed shop for the day. Whenever my boss suggests going for an outside lunch, I know there are things he wants to discuss within an informal but secure place. There was a time almost two years ago when we had an outing like the one he suggested now.

Then, I thought we were just going for a lunch break, but when waiting to be served and sipping our drinks, the main reason for bringing me out unfolded.

Maggie, what do you think of corruption?

Corruption? Why did you ask, Oga mi?

I just asked. I would like to have your views on it.

Hun, I think it is bad. Bad for the nation. It retards a nation's progress.

Is there a nation in the world that is corruption free?

None, I think. We are all human beings. The main difference between nations is their level of corruption tolerance.

That's true. But the level of corruption in this country is just too high and there is a high tolerance for it.

Most people feel a government job is nobody's job and that stealing government money is getting their own slice of national cake.

You know that destroys the country, don't you?

Yes, Oga mi, but what can a single person do, when the majority do not see corruption as a major problem, most especially among the elite and the leaders.

That is not wholly true. The followers perpetuate and foster corruption. Haven't you been given gifts since you became my PA?

Many times, but since the problem I had with the gift I collected on your behalf from that man who wanted a contract on ballot boxes three years ago, I have learnt how to diplomatically reject them. Oga mi, may I ask you a question?

Yes, why not?

Oga, how many times have your friends and relations asked you if you are making good in the position you now occupy? Also when you were moved to this post, how many people told you this was your chance to make something for yourself?

Many. Too many. And they still put pressure on me, telling me that if I do not use this opportunity, I may remain poor for life. You really have touched the reason for my bringing you to this lunch.

He then went on to say there had been many inducements and attempts to taint him and that he had been able to withstand them until now. However, now there was a bigger threat than all he had faced before. One well-known fixer and powerful politician was leaning on him through his former classmate and friend. He wanted to say no, but he had seen how powerful the man is and he was uncertain about what step to take. He asked for my suggestion. I remember suggesting that he should stand firm in his conviction. I went on my annual leave after this and during that time he was suspended from work. Till today, I did not know the reason for his suspension, but I came back

from my leave to find the suspension lifted. A fact I was happy for because I didn't think I would have survived under any other person. After that, I think the pressure on him eased. I was thinking that this afternoon's discussion at Le Brassierre would be something like what we had discussed two years ago. It was not.

I am getting tired, Maggie.

Tired? Physically?

No, my soul is troubled.

Hun, that's not good. Why don't you discuss it with other pastors or place it in front of God.

You've always been a reasonable person apart from your early period with me when you were trying to seduce me.

I am sorry for that. I wanted to consolidate my position then, and I thought having a relationship with you would have helped.

You were wrong. I really wanted to sack you then. Thank God I didn't.

Really?

Yes, but something held me. You've changed since then, and you've been so conscientious, dedicated, loyal and wiser than your age.

Thank you for the compliments but I refuse to be flattered.

I am not flattering you. It's the truth.

Thank you. Oga mi, what is troubling you now? Why is your soul troubled?

Things I have done. The person I have become. I can't recognize the person staring at me in the mirror any more. Abuja has spoiled me.

How?

Believe me, I can't give you the details now, but when I come back from Lagos after this coming Ogbere meeting, you may need to help me clean up my act.

Clean up your act? What do you mean, Oga mi?

I need to make some adjustments and you'll play a large role in my doing that. Let's leave it at that for now.

Why don't we discuss it now even if in a skeletal form? Never leave till tomorrow...

I know, but let me go to Lagos and come back. I have some things I have to clarify in Lagos. Please, you'll need to arrange some things when I am back.

What are those things?

You'll need to set up an appointment with Bitrus, my lawyer friend.

On what, Oga mi?

I would like to draw up a will, clear my bills and set up a trust account.

Hope you are not thinking of dying now?

Death now, at forty-five? What puts that in your head?

All this clearing-up business and tidying up accounts.

No, I won't die now. I still have a lot to do, including what I want to discuss with my wives.

Wives?

Sorry, I mean wife, Àyókúnnú.

Okay.

There are other things but we'll have to do them step-by-step.

Yes, Oga mi.

Maggie, no matter the situation, never compromises your principles. Never give a little consideration; it may end up changing you totally.

What do you mean, sir?

Maintain who you are and be who you want to be. Don't allow people to live your life for you or use their heads to think for you. No matter what, use your head and think for yourself.

Thank you, sir, but, but...

No but. You are a young, brilliant and forward-looking woman. You've had your bad times, but it seems you have gone beyond those times now. Please, don't be changed and never let anything take you back to that path again. Maintain your integrity, no matter what.

Yes, sir.

Maggie, you know water is not as strong as the rock.

Yes, sir.

Water, however, eats and slowly breaks down the rock. It only needs time and consistent little drops. I'll leave most of the things I will want you to do when I am away in Lagos in your drawer later today. You can take the rest of today and tomorrow off.

Are you sure everything is okay?

Yes, I need some quiet time to prepare for the Ògbèrè meeting and before my flight tomorrow afternoon.

accounts reconciliation

b'ebiti o ba p'eku, a m'eyin f'eleyin

if the rat catcher does not catch the rat, the catcher must return the
palm nut – a yorùbá proverb

*october 19, 2005
orient café and bar,
wuse zone 1,
abuja.
federal capital territory*

It was not a surprise. When I got Jude's call fixing this meeting, I had been expecting it because it was some time since we had met. I had been sending his financial statements to him constantly. We had also been talking on the phone, but for almost a year now, but we had not been able to meet face-to-face. The level and intensity of our work made it so. The preparation for the 2007 election had started and this had taken much of Jude's time. On my part, my responsibilities as Executive Director (Retail Banking) made it impossible for me to see him. Although, I had been kicked up from the banking hall through my promotion to that of Executive Director, I still controlled and supervised Jude's accounts, because I was the only one who knew the maze of his accounts. In addition, there were some codes and symbols within accounts that were only known to Jude and me. My friend had come a long way from when Ehimokhai threatened him and I was trying to convince my friend to 'play ball'.

What seemed to have convinced him was the one-month temporary suspension he suffered. It was exactly a month after our discussion on Ehimokhai and his outright rejection of having anything to do with Mr. Fixer. I pleaded, cajoled and pointed out the dangers involved in crossing Ehimokhai but my friend stubbornly refused. When I talked about the threat to his family, he cut off all communication with me. I was disappointed and did not like what he would be thinking of me, and I could not even explain my motives and fears to him. Then, I started exploring other means of getting Ehimokhai's accounts. I was waiting for a favourable time to link up again with my friend and explain myself. It was his call, however, that informed me what he was going through.

Hello, hello, who's on the line?

You can't recognize my voice? Have you lost my number?

Who is this? I am very busy and I don't have time for this hide and seek. If you don't tell me who you are, I will cut off this call.

It's Jude. Have you deleted my number?

The phone that had your number was stolen. I've never been good remembering phone numbers. I am sorry. This is a new phone. How are you doing?

Fine, brother. What about you? Your family?

They are fine. It's been some time. Hope everything is okay?

Yes. Do you know how I can contact Ehimokhai?

What's happened? Why do you want to meet him now? You vowed never to meet him or have discussions with him.

Yes, but the situation has changed. I need to meet him but I can't discuss the reason with you on the phone.

Is it that serious?

Not so serious. When can I meet you?

What about this afternoon? Do you know the 'bukateria' near the UBA bank at Garki Central District?

Yes. Let's meet there at one for lunch today.

I'll be there.

When I hung up the phone that morning five years ago, I was troubled. I knew something was wrong and that my friend was just being courageous and trying to convey the impression of things being well with him. His decision not to talk on the phone conveyed the seriousness of the issue to me. I was praying that it wouldn't have anything to do with his family. When I saw him, the first thing that struck me was that he was not formally dressed as if coming from his office. He was in a tee shirt and jeans and leather slippers. He looked troubled. I was alarmed. I asked him if he would like to eat but he refused. Then, I realized a lot was amiss. We went to Abuja Central Park.

He told me he was on a month's suspension. He said that based on a petition to his boss, he was being investigated. They found a large amount of money in an account in his name. He said he never opened the account, but could not explain the source of the money because it was not his. He said he was confused and had wondered who was playing this type of dangerous joke on him. He did not have to wait for long. A day after his suspension, he received a call at 4 am. He said there was heavy breathing and a period of silence. He dropped the phone but it rang again almost immediately.

Hello, hello, who is this? This is very early in the morning and I am not in the mood for any pranks.

Pranks? You have bitten off more than you can chew. It would be wicked to pile other things on your plate.

Who is this? Hello, hello?

You don't have to bother. Identification does not matter.

What matters, then? You disturbing my sleep? What type of joke is this?

He calls it a joke. Ah! Ah! Funny, he thinks it is a joke.

What is it, then? If you don't tell me what you want, I'll hang up.

In your own interest, don't hang up. Listen carefully to what I am going to tell you. You still want your job back, don't you?

Jude listened. The caller told him he had offended an important personality and interests. The caller, a woman, then asked him to contact Ehimokhai. Without doing that, she said, the inquiry would find him guilty and he would lose his job. He had become a barrier in the way of powerful people, and they wouldn't think twice before sacrificing him. So this was his reason for wanting to see Ehimokhai. A person who can put a big amount of money in your account without your knowledge and pull strings within your organization to investigate how such money finds its way to your account is nothing but malevolent. You can't know the extent of their reach or what they can do. We made arrangements after the lunch and I was able to link him up with Ehimokhai.

Jude insisted I should accompany him, which I did. Before the meeting, however, Ehimokhai asked me to excuse them. I waited for more than two hours for my friend. To this day, I do not have an inkling of what transpired during that meeting. My friend was recalled to his position after that and the case against him dropped. I was able to get Ehimokhai's accounts and that gave me the Executive Director's post. It seems my friend was taught a lesson he would never forget. Some months after, he came to me to set up this cryptic bank account for him. The money trickled in initially but in the last year, the rivulets had become a gushing torrent. Today, my friend's total worth in liquid assets is over twenty million American dollars spread over accounts in four continents. His worth in Nigerian banks is more than two hundred million naira. We are not talking of property, houses or companies. As I like telling him, the reluctant man has turned out to be wealthy.

There I was, waiting to see him after a year. I was intrigued about his reason for calling this meeting. I took my seat in the Orient Café and Bar, and he came in.

Hi, Chris, long time no see.

Yeah, I have been busy and I know you have been too.

That's true. How is your family?

They are fine. What would you like?

Cappuccino would do. You must be up to your neck in work now that you are an executive director.

Are you kidding? I have been so busy. So, why this meeting?

The reasons are twofold. First, I want to have a reconciliation of all my accounts. I do get the statements you send but I would like you to create an omnibus account for me.

That is not advisable. As your financial adviser, planner and friend, I would suggest we leave the accounts the way they are now.

Chris, I have my reasons. Is it possible for us to have an omnibus account?

Yes, it is possible but it is like putting all your eggs in one basket.

I know but I am on the threshold of something big, and I want to tidy up all my accounts.

It would take some time. It can't be done this week but within the next two weeks I could consolidate.

I'd like you to take a quarter of all the cash in my accounts and invest it in foreign shares in addition to what you have invested before.

Okay.

All those Estacode⁴³ that I have been saving have accumulated to a big sum now.

Yes. Jude, what is happening? Why are you doing this? An omnibus account would be too easy to find and seize. Many accounts, like we have now, give the possibility that if one account is found, others can still remain hidden.

Chris, just do what I asked you to do. All those monies were gifts. I have also invested very well, or I should say, you have invested my money very well with good returns.

I am just doing my job, the best way that I know.

Chris, my conscience is pricking me too much. I am getting out and I want to return much to society.

Why are you worried? It is not as if you stole this money. They were gifts given to you over the years. You've just not been extravagant, you've been prudent. It is your money and nobody can take that away from you.

⁴³ In Nigeria, government officials and company executives are usually given foreign currencies allowance when they travel overseas for official purposes. Politicians most especially inflate this and in most cases travel overseas for inane reasons in order to amass large amount of Estacode. There are also inflated allowances.

Nobody will understand all were gifts. There would be insinuations and aspersions on my character and integrity. Being a pastor, many people will blaspheme God because of my action. I don't want that, Chris, and I cannot bear it. Create the omnibus account and investigate the possibility of setting up a trust account, too. The trust account must be set up as a philanthropic unit.

I will do all that.

I am going for a meeting in Ògbèrè, leaving later today. Please, do all I have asked you. I am expected back on Saturday. When can we meet to review what you have done?

What if I meet you on Sunday evening at 6.30pm and show you all my plans for approval? I will then execute them next week.

That will be good.

See you on Sunday, then.

Sunday will be okay.

sixteen

FUNMI

the gist

a ri i gbodo wi, a mo se hun

seen but unable to say, known but silent about – a yorùbá proverb

*october 24, 2005
murtala muhammed airport(domestic terminal),
to omole estate,
ikeja, lagos state.*

My phone beeped and I heard the disembodied voice alerting me. “This is a message from the dark side.” I flipped open the phone. It was a text from my friend Tuminu.

Tuminu

Hey brainy. Gist boku

Wen una land. How ritrit?

Èkó cool, no yawa

Wen u go land?

Tee

Funmy

Calabar funky.

You check my kids?

What you doing weekend?

Tunde still topping you?

Expect on Monday.

F

Tuminu

I've bin bizzy.

Tunde neva let me rest.

Dat, couple wit biznez lunches.

Ur kids Ok.

Wetin happn 4 una 4 Calabar?

Plenti gist 4 hia wen u arriv?

Wot taim ur flait?

Tee

Funmy

Morning. 8.00am

Won't go to Office.

See you then.

Don't do what I won't do.

F

Tuminu, as usual, came to the airport at 8am sharp. As my plane taxied down the domestic wing of Mirale Mohamend Airport and I came to the arrival lounge, I saw her waiting for me. Very much like her. She did not allow me to reach her car before she bombarded me with questions.

Where you sey you go? Sure sey na Naja or na another place? You no get newspaper for there? No TV, no radio, Funmi?

Too much work to do during the retreat, Tuminu.

Yeah, I fit tell. Your hands, lips and legs must have been so full and occupied sotay you no fit do anything.

I didn't even have time for that, you, this dirty mama. It was one seminar after the other, brainstorming sessions, dinners, lunches and focus groups.

I can imagine, you were so busy your majesty that you were unable to come down come read papers.

You know me; I don't read those gossip pieces. If it's Time, Newsweek, Fortune, Tell or Business newspaper like Financial Times, now I will say I must have read them. Though in Calabar I was even unable to read those ones.

Fortune ko, Misfortune ni. The news dey radio, TV and Naija newspapers. Well mek a gist you. One Delta Way plane on Lagos – Abuja route left Ikeja for Abuja around 8.15 pm on Saturday night. Ten minutes after take off, na hin disappear fiam from radar.

Are you serious? Just like that? You are sure you are not playing any o your practical jokes?

No, I dey serious o. You know the funny part? Dem start searching for am after almost eight hours. Nahim one Gomina sey den don find am for one village for Kogi North. You know wetin happen?

What happened?

The media ran kokoba there and den no find nothing.

This country, what happened to the Federal Emergency Relief Agency?

Den no get enough equipment now and the helicopter wey fit pinpoint wey the plane crash don go for maintenance. The Oga patapata who go give order mek den begin the search with whatever den get don go for weekend somewhere and den no fit get am.

Ah, Naija. Nigeria, my country, so for the past two days there had been no news about DeltaWay flight?

News dey O. Double tragedy.

Double tragedy?

Yes, no be you wey dey think of doing some surgery to firm your boobs?

Get serious, Tuminu. What has that got to do with the tragedy?

So, you never hear?

Hear what?

That place wey you go you sure say na Naija or you dey bobo me?

Calabar is in Nigeria, isn't it?

So you neva hear sey the First Lady don peme?

Which First Lady? Monica?

No Evarita. How many first ladies we get?

Many.

Oh, oh you mean if you take official wives, unofficial concubines, travelling mistresses and donated wives?

No, I mean if you take Local Government, State and the President's wife or is it wives or concubines?

Na you sabi. Na you say am. My mouth no dey O. I dey talk about the official and the only ogbonge First Lady. The President's only known wife. I no talk about your coterie of first ladies or first mistresses or concubines self.

Ah, that's tragic. How did it happen?

Some say hin go for surgery abroad and die. Some say na plastic surgery hin go for. Some say hin don sick before and na the sickness kill am. Rumours, counter rumours but the main fact be say hin quench yesterday morning.

Ah, may God save us in this country. Simple surgery is a herculean task here. Why all these tragedies? God save us in this country. Forgive us our sins.

Amen. We don sin plenty for this country.

And these families who are not sure of what happened to their relations on the plane. Maybe there will be survivors.

Amen. So, when we go meet for the main gist now?

Which gist?

Don't play me jo. You tink say I no see your eyes twinkle twinkle like stars? You must have been a naughty, naughty girl down there.

No, no naughty-naughty, I swear. It was work all through.

Yeah I don see the effects of da work on una. Here we are, I tink say I go run. You know my shop girls every second wey are no dey na jackpot for dem. So, once again when we go meet for main, main gist? Later today? Wetin you thin about dinner? The Lagoon Restaurant or mama Mulika at Isale Èkó?

I'll call you later. Thank you so much. I know how much you sacrifice to meet me so early. You who wakes up late daily.

Na the thing wey friend dey for now.

I'll rest a while, prepare for going to office tomorrow but the remaining part of today is for my children. They've missed me so much. Let's think of tomorrow rather than later today.

Okay, my sister. You go waya me no be so? Mek you take care of yourself O.

back to base

ko si ibi to dabi ilè

there is no place like home – a yorùbá proverb

*october 24, 2005
omole estate,
ikeja, lagos state.*

It was a public holiday. How happy I was that I would be spending the day with my children. It was never easy juggling my career with being a mother. I spent long stretches of time away from home and I was grateful for the help of my niece who was studying for her degree at University of Lagos. My position in the bank was time consuming and energy sapping so that most of the time when I returned home the children were sleeping. Lagos traffic was of no help, so I had to leave very early to reach Victoria Island. With their father in Abuja, I had to play both roles for them. Even today, on this public holiday, I was expected at work, but after explaining my situation, I was given the day off. This was why I had to ask my friend Tuminu to pick me at the airport instead of the bank's driver.

Many of my colleagues, acquaintances and friends were baffled about the relationship between Tuminu and me. Though she has an HND in Business Administration, I have three degrees, two of them Masters. She was richer than I was, divorced with a grown-up child, loud and carefree. Tuminu loved life and strictures were not for her. Owner of a large Supermarket in Victoria Island, she was as hard as nails when it came to business, but underneath all her hard exterior was a child. A constant business traveller

either overseas or within Nigeria, she also enjoyed her various trysts. An African woman to the core, nothing of this bra burning and feminism for her because, according to her, what slavery have women been put under for them to fight for freedom? Women have always been in control, she said, because it is the neck that moves the head and not the other way. If men are heads then a supple neck will control them. In her I saw what I would have liked to be but could not be. I remember the day I met her.

Jay and I had had a big fight - the only major fight of our married life that I can remember. We did have our disagreements but we were so complementary that we always found a way of building bridges. I had taken a call on his behalf that Valentine's Day morning because he was in the shower. We have an agreement of not reading each other's phone texts or answering each other's calls. But this particular caller was insistent so Jude asked me to take the call.

Hello, who is on line?

There was a long silence. Then my husband asked from the bathroom: *Who is that?*

The person isn't talking and has hung up.

Well, call the person back. It may be this network problem; you know we are JJC in the GSM technology.

So, I called the person again and when the call went through, she just started talking.

JAY, I have been waiting for you at Ikeja Airport for more than an hour now. Why are you not around?

By this time my husband had come in.

Who's that?, he asked.

I switched on the speakerphone.

Aren't we going out for the dinner again? You know that's my reason for coming in from Abuja. Why don't you give me your address and I could come and meet you. If I had...

Jay froze.

... an address, I would have been with you now. I am missing you, dear, and I am thinking of what I will do to you when we see each other. I am waiting, dear, and this would be the best Valentine's Day of our lives.

He was just looking at me, expecting me to speak or throw a tantrum. I did no such thing. The voice on the phone went on.

Please come quickly, I am hot. I'll be at the domestic terminal. Love you so much. Can't wait to see you. Missed you.

Jay switched off the speakerphone. I silently left the room. He immediately went out without saying a word and for once I did not ask where he was going. I knew he must have gone out to see the woman. Many scenarios played in my head: cut and burn all his clothes, trash all his electronics that he loves so much, pack all my clothes, take my children and move into an hotel, accuse him stridently and whip up a big fight or just maintain my silence. I chose silence. Something told me, if I chose any of the other options, I would not get to the root of the matter. When he got back, I remained silent. He would have loved me to tear my hair out, accuse him, abuse him, give him a good fight and possibly threaten him with divorce. He would then confess, put his indiscretion in the Devil's lap, beg me and, if I refused to listen or I became stubborn, he would get angry and ask me what has he done that was so unheard of. If I still remained recalcitrant, then his friends, some of my friends, his family, my family and the community would get involved. If, after all these interventions, I still remained adamant, I would be labelled 'Acada woman'⁴⁴, 'Legal wife' and someone in my family or among my friends would remind me of the number of wives other members of my family had, maybe my uncle, my father, my grandfather, my great-great grandfather.

In a fiercely patriarchal society like Nigeria, women have rights but the rights depend on men. When you marry in Yorùbá land, you are not married to the man or woman, you are married to the family, hence the saying: 'Omo buruku se fe, ebi buruku ni o se fe' (*You can marry a bad person but you should not marry a bad family*). I did not want anyone else to come into this, our first fight. I wanted to handle it in my own way and in a way that would be totally different from the way my mates, friends in my position and family members would handle it. When he got back very late, I kept quiet. I gave him my Valentine's Day present, placed his favourite food in a very humble way and made sure we had a romantic dinner. After dinner I put on a tantalizing nightdress and played a mellow R&B musical DVD, and we drank chilled champagne. Normally on days like these, we would have made steamy love. I was waiting for Jude to solicit for such and for me to turn him down but he kept silent after our drinks. I behaved as if the morning's incident never happened. After some loaded silent moments between us, I went to sleep. He was the one struck with a conscience-induced insomnia and who woke me up in the night to talk.

Funmi, I am sorry. I am very sorry.

⁴⁴ **Acada woman:** A term used in referring to well educated women or women in executive positions in government, business or elite female members

Sorry for what?

Look, it's not what you think. Christine is a church member.

Oh. That's her name?

Yes, she is a widow.

I kept quiet.

She lost her husband six months ago and I was counselling her. She was too depressed.

To tell you the truth, I was not thinking when I invited her for the Valentine's Day dinner.

I knew he was lying but I decided to be quiet. My silence made him effusive.

She works at the University of Abuja as a Principal Assistant Registrar. She is one of the pillars of my Parish at Abuja, a member of the Parish Council. I am very sorry I cheated on you. I swear it won't happen again. Funmi please, please, this is my first time that I have cheated on you since we got married. Funmi, please say something. Don't go on looking at me like that.

It's okay. I know the temptation that surrounds you with my staying in Lagos and you alone in that cold, isolating house in Abuja. I was not there for you. I can understand.

Thank you, Funmi, Thank you.

He begged me. The weekend was a new honeymoon. Jay went overboard taking me out and spoiling me silly. I enjoyed it all but kept quiet and refused to make love with him. I pretended to be the classical soft smooching female that he had in his dream. I knew what I wanted to do and I waited for six weeks to take my next step. I wanted to be sure and, if possible, to catch Jay in the act. Almost seven weeks after the call, I made an unscheduled trip on a weekday to Abuja. I went with the last flight from Lagos and arrived in Jay's house at 10 p.m. He was not in. I entered the house with my key, went into the bedroom and I saw signs of a woman's habitation there. There were toiletries that I don't use, nightgowns that were not mine, clothes in colours that I would never wear, and suitcases in the closet that were not mine. I breathed in very deeply.

Gather all the clothes and materials to the backyard, set fire to them. No, set fire to the whole house, at least nobody knows you are around. Take petrol from his official car in the garage, spray the house and take the night bus back to Lagos. Or I could wait for him and beat the useless woman to a pulp. No, deal with your husband, it was not the woman's fault. Phone your lawyer friend in Abuja and start divorce proceedings tomorrow morning.

I was still ruminating when I heard the car turning into the driveway. I quickly went to the bedroom, changed into my nightgown switched off the light and pretended to sleep.

They came straight into the bedroom, kissing and fondling each other. They crashed on me in the darkness and someone put the light on. They were in various stages of undress. After her hurried exit, and Jay's tongue-tied profuse apologies, I slept in the guest room. I locked the door after myself and very early in the morning before Jay got up – he is a late morning person – I was off to my friend's house. When I did not see her, I went to the airport to wait for the first flight out of Abuja. On the plane I met Tuminu. She was sitting beside me in the first class cabin. Maybe I was drawn to her, maybe it was her maturity (she was a bit older than me) or just that I wanted to unload my mind and she was available that led me to confide in her. I, who had been tagged the ice queen, cried all through the one-hour flight to Lagos. After I returned from the plane's toilet the umpteenth time, Tuminu turned to me.

What's wrong, my dear?

Instead of answering, I burst into tears. She gave me her handkerchief and I wiped my face. In between sobs I managed to talk.

It's my husband.

Your husband? Is he dead?

No, he has been cheating on me.

Ah!

I poured out all that I had gone through in the last weeks, and after we landed in Lagos, she telephoned my office, informing them I was indisposed. Taking me to her house at Victoria Garden City, she told me a story.

Her husband had introduced his mistress to her as a distant cousin. So the mistress had free access to the house and Tuminu took good care of her and respected and treated her like a family member. Then one day, coming back from work, she found the house she had shared with her husband of more than fifteen years empty. The only thing left for her was a bed and enough food in the pantry to last the next three days. When she went to the bank the next day, she found that her husband had cleared their joint bank account leaving her with less than five thousand Naira. Two weeks later, after an excruciating and all consuming anguish and constant crying, she received a note from her husband, who was in Canada with his paramour. She almost went mad, she said, because the tickets and the visa to Canada had all been due to her efforts and based on a plan they both made. Her husband's family disowned him, and with help from them and her friends, she was able to survive and pick up her life again.

I stopped crying and looked at her with wonder. She took me back to Ikeja in the evening, by which time I had a clear plan of action that came out of our brainstorming. It was this plan I put into effect, which has kept me in my husband's house. Since then Tuminu and I have become intimate friends and confidants, and she has played the role of big sister. From the Murtala Muhammed Airport, she dropped me at my house and apologized for not staying with me. She had a business meeting. My children ran out immediately they heard my voice. They were at home because of the public holiday.

Welcome, Mummy. How was your trip?

Fine, my dear. Hope you've been good children?

You can bet on it.

How was school? What did you do in school? Hope you were not troublesome?

No, Mummy.

Have you done your homework?

Yes, Mr. Oladimeji, our lesson teacher has just left and we have finished our homework, my son said.

Bring it here.

I went through everything and signed it. Their school made it mandatory for parents to sign their children's homework and assignments. I have always done this whenever I am in Lagos, no matter how late I come back from work.

As good and well-behaved children, where would you like to go? Nando's, Mr. Biggs, Tantaliser, Subway, Silverbird Galleria or Nu Metro Cinema?

None, Mummy, we'll like to go to Aqualand, abi Ayomide, Bólánlé said.

Well, Rosina, get them ready while I freshen up, I instructed my niece. I hope you are not going to campus today?

No, Auntie, today is my free day.

Then prepare them and you get dressed too, we will all go together.

Yes, Ma.

By the way, did their father call them during this weekend that I was not at home?

Yes, he called on Friday night, saying he was going for a Conference and that he might check on us on his way back from the Conference on Sunday.

Did he come?

No, Auntie.

Have you called to check if he will still be coming? I wouldn't want him to come today and find out we have gone out. You know he would have to be going back to Abuja today.

I've been trying to call since yesterday, but the calls were not going through. It went through once, was not picked up and then it went dead.

Well, you go and get the children and yourself ready. I'll try to call him.

They went out happy and I could hear Bólánlé detailing all the activities she would take part in at Aqualand. I tried calling Jay but the calls did not go through. I thought maybe his cell phone battery had gone flat and he had not been able to charge it. The power situation in the country is unreliable. Lagos, the economic capital, sometimes does not have more than six hours electricity per day and sometimes none for weeks. I also found out I could not call his office because it was a public holiday and most staff were not at work. To be sure, I called his direct line but nobody picked it up. We were back at around 9.00 pm and as Rosina went to prepare the children for dinner and I was on my way to the bedroom to take a bath and get ready for dinner, Adamu my security guard came in.

Yes, Adamu, wetin?

Na dis letter den gif me mek a gif you.

Why u no gif me when a dey outside with you?

I wan mek Oga Madam settle down well well before I gif am.

I checked the letter after he had gone out. It was from the bank. I was thinking about opening it when our doorbell chimed.

Sadia, get the door. Somebody is at the door.

Yes, Ma.

I stood at the staircase, waiting to find out who could be calling at this time of the night. Sadia opened the door and I was staring into the eyes of my husband's auntie, my mother, my uncle, my husband's intimate friend, Tuminu and another close friend of mine, Jibola. Looking at them, thoughts started dancing in my head.

seventeen

AYOKUNNU

waiting for news

ore ni won, eniyan soro, ore ni won

there is limit to kindness, human beings are difficult, there is limit
to kindness – a yorùbá song

*october 23, 2005
gordon nasko estate,
maitama district, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

I was worried, highly worried too. This was the first time in three years of our marriage that Jay had not kept his word. I was very worried. I had expected him home the night before because he said he would be taking the eight pm flight from Lagos to Abuja. He phoned me when he left Ògbèrè after the meeting and told me he was on the way to Lagos. Pastor Jay was too precious a person to lose. He was my anchor, who had stabilized me on the tempestuous ocean of life and through life's dangerous and tortuous forests. After the problems of my short and chequered life, finding Pastor Jay was like stumbling on an oasis after many days of dehydration in the desert just as you are having your life's last gasp.

I was soon to be thirty, October fifth, and it had been thirty years of unforgettable adventures and experiences. Friends and foes commend me for being a very beautiful woman. My proportions, they say, are in the right places and there is no part of me that is unfitting. However, I look at myself as an average beautiful woman. The ogling, flirtatious looks and catcalls I get from men whenever I walk by tend to make me think that what they said about my beauty might be true. I have one problem, however, with men. Despite the flirting and the numerous invitations from men, it seems I intimidate them. None of my previous relationships had lasted more than a month, and there were not many in the first instance. God gave me an intelligent mind. I finished my first degree at eighteen with a first in economics at the University of Jos, took two masters, one in operations research and the other in industrial psychology. I also had a good job in the United Nations Development Programme as a Senior Programme Analyst Private Sector, a job I was adequately rewarded in and that I loved.

I was getting reconciled to being a spinster when I met, or should I say stumbled on, Tayelolu Obiora Danladi. His name drew my attention because each part was from the three main Nigerian languages. His first name is Yorùbá; the second is Igbo and the family name Hausa. I asked about the meanings and the reason for such names, and in his soft-spoken voice, he explained he was an only son. He had a sister, Kehinde. He asked me if I had heard of Danladi, Shawae and Company. It was only a stranger to Nigeria who wouldn't have heard about one of the nation's foremost indigenous construction companies. He said the Danladi in the company's name was his father's name, that his mother was Ibo while his paternal grandmother was Yorùbá; hence his names' combination. As he was an intensely shy person, I initiated the courtship and we courted for four years. They were years of happiness because Tai, as I fondly called him, was a gentleman and a considerate person. His parents were good souls and the first day my parents met him they were bowled over by his manners and cultured mien. During the third year of our courtship, I asked him to marry me.

His parents attend one of the largest churches in Abuja, the Pentecostal Christ Assembly Chapel, so we had to attend our pre-nuptial services and counselling there. That was where I met Pastor Jude Àkànmú Babájídé, also known as Pastor JAY. As the church leader and Regional Pastor, he had to conduct the marriage classes and was also the minister at our wedding ceremony. The classes went well and laid a good foundation for the life journey in front of us. I vividly remember the day of our marriage: it was October 6th, 2001, a day after my twenty-sixth birthday. All arrangements and preparations were in place and the church was full. I was resplendent in my bridal gown, waiting for my groom. The waiting became unbearable. It was more than two hours after the ceremony was meant to start, and the bridegroom had not appeared. Members of the congregation were starting to leave, and I was becoming more and more agitated. When my father, who was trying to maintain a cool façade, summoned me to the vestry, I knew something was amiss.

I thought maybe Tai had developed cold feet, but that was not the case. The marriage procession had been caught in the middle of a chase on the road they were taking to the church; there was an exchange of shots and a stray bullet had entered the groom's car, killing Táyé. These details were not given to me until after the burial. At the vestry, I fainted after being informed about the accident and it was the day after, when I came to in the hospital that I was told my husband-to-be had died. I was inconsolable. Pastor Jude became my counsellor and confidant. He saved me from life's precipice. Then I

fell in love with him. He fought my affections away so gallantly that I felt he hated me. He reduced our meeting time and became very formal in dealing with me. I ended up attending his church. It was later that I found out he had gone through the emotional wringer when I was falling in love with him. I started taking care of his house as a means of repaying what he had done for me. I was cooking, cleaning the house, shopping, organizing and taking care of those things most men cannot handle by themselves.

Although close to him, there were many things I was excluded from. He was always going to Lagos but when I asked him about the need for the constant journeys, he told me it was church affairs that demanded constant travel. Little by little, I became indispensable to him, but knowing who he was, I was not surprised when he rejected my suggestion that I move into his place once our relationship started improving.

Why don't you want me to move in?

It is unethical.

But you are single, aren't you?

Many people would think I took advantage of you and your situation.

Let them say whatever they like we are consenting adults.

Yes, we are but it is not what I want now.

Why?

I am not ready for any entanglements or marriage now. I am a pastor, remember. It will not give a good picture to my congregation.

I know, but they will be happy their pastor is getting married, or is there another person?

Àyókúnnú, let us keep this relationship under wraps.

After this, our relationship took on the Nicodemus toga, like that Jewish ruler who only visited Jesus at night. With time, my 'indispensability index' became higher, and when I became pregnant the second time and I refused to abort, I suggested something needed to be done about our relationship. I was ready to live as a single parent, but he would not have it and so suggested a quiet tying of the knot. Having gone through a highly public marriage disaster, it was not difficult for me to accept a secret marriage ceremony. Only four people, Jude and his friend, my friend and I were at the Registry to see us married, and when he asked me to retain my official residence, I acquiesced. He pointed out that, as a top official of the nation's electoral commission and with the risk

of Nigerian politics, he would not want his family to be in harm's way. Nigerian politics and elections are usually war in another name. Officials and their families can be kidnapped, killed or wounded. So I was living in my own house in one of Abuja's posh areas. It had been three years since we got secretly married and I had two children from for him because the pregnancy I refused to abort turned out to be identical twins. They were the image of their father, as if they were cloned. Each day they resembled him more and I became settled and comfortable in my marriage.

Pastor Jay turned out to be all that I expected and wished for in a man. Considerate, quiet, homely, always ready to help, a strong believer and a man of faith. He was compensation for my loss. He had always been a man of his word and that was the cause of my present worries. I was thinking maybe his work was so hectic that he had to go straight to the office and spend the night. I went to the church, knowing he would always attend the services on Sunday. When I did not see him at the first morning service, I left immediately for Abuja Airport. Being a Sunday, there were few staff at the DeltaWay Airline's desk and they were not able to help. I observed they were fidgety when I asked about the previous day's flight from Lagos. They said they were not on duty and that I may need to see their boss tomorrow who would be able to answer my questions. The rain poured as I left the airport, and to increase my worries and anxieties, my car broke down on my way home. As I was dropped at home by the taxi, I met my television blasting away very loud. My boys were watching Tom and Jerry.

Musa, turn down the television's volume.

Yes, Madam.

What are the boys doing at this time watching cartoons? Is it not time for their siesta?

Yes, Ma. I'll take them to Asabe, Ma.

He took them out of the living room and I switched channels to BBC World Service News. I just got the end of the news.

A DeltaWay airline with 117 people on board from Lagos to Abuja has been declared...

news' confirmation

*melo la o ka l'eyin adepele, tinu orun, tode orin, etalel'egbeje
erigi lo f'ori sole lai yo*

how many teeth are we to count in adepele's mouth? there are three hundred incisors, four hundred premolars and uncountable molars that are yet to erupt? – a yorùbá proverb

*october 24, 2005
gordon nasko estate,
maitama district, abuja.
federal capital territory*

We heard the news and that was why we came, Sisk Ayokunnu. Accept our sympathy.

There is nothing yet that says nobody survived, Sade. Pastor Jay could be among the survivors.

Sista, the plane crashed on Saturday. It's three days now. If he survived, don't you think he would have called you by now?

Yes, but I believe he survived, Sade. I believe.

Sista, it seems nobody survived. The news said...

Don't say that. He survived the crash. Maybe he has not been able to get to where he could call. I heard the plane crashed in a village.

My cell phone rang. It was Jay's personal assistant.

Hello...Yes, yes. I have been waiting for his call, too... Yes, I am at home. Okay, I'll be waiting for you. That's Jay's PA. She said she is coming here. Maybe she has a message.

Maybe, Sista.

I had tried getting more news about the crash, but in the typical Nigerian way, it was difficult. I had tapped into my contacts in Government, the Airport Authority and the media but it seemed there was a media blackout. My sister and I had earlier tuned to the AIT channel and they were showing the crash site at Ibafo. AIT was the first station to locate and broadcast the crash site, and for being so daring, they were shut for some time. After seeing the site on TV and the crater dug by the airplane on impact, I started thinking that maybe Jay wouldn't have survived but there was still a chance. The PA arrived.

Afternoon, Madam.

Afternoon, Margaret. What news?

Madam, I've just confirmed that my boss was on the plane. It..

No, no, not again. No, tell me he did not die.

Madam, madam, madam.

I slowly opened my eyes. I was at the Specialist Hospital, Abuja. My father was standing beside my bed.

What happened?

You heard about your husband's death and you collapsed. We had to bring you down here.

Daddy, is it true? Is it true that Jay has gone. Why, Daddy? Why? Why do I keep losing all those I love or who love me?

Only God knows the answer, my dear. Only He can give an answer.

What do I do now?

Well, we will have to inform his extended family.

They are in Kabba. But after the traditional marriage rites, he had not taken me to Kabba again. The only person who may help us locate them is his distant cousin who came to serve in Niger State.

Do you have his particulars?

I'll get them for you. They are on my laptop at home.

You are being discharged. Send them to me when you get home. Please rest when you get home, my baby girl. Your mother and I will make the necessary arrangements.

eighteen

FUNMI

breaking news

a o ri 'ru eleyi ri, eru la fi n da b'oloro

we have not seen this before, it is just a ploy to create fear in the mind of the concerned – a yorùbá proverb

*monday, october 24, 2005
omole estate,
ikeja.
lagos state.*

W*elcome, Maami, Mummy, Uncle, Jibola and Pastor Julius. Please be seated. What am I to prepare for you?
Don't worry. We won't take anything, they chorused.*

No, you must take something; at least you'll take water first. Rosina, please bring water for our guests. Sadia, go and take out the fresh fish stew from the freezer and thaw it. Put water on the fire to boil and when it is ready, call me.

Funmi, don't worry. We all had lunch at my place before coming here. Sit down first, my mother said.

This is an august visit. It's been a long time since I saw Mama Kabba. Even if all of you refuse to take anything, Mama Kabba will have to eat.

Okay, aya mi that will be after our discussions.

Alright, Ma.

My mother and my husband's aunt, who served as his mother because she brought him up after he lost his parents, sat beside me one on each side. I braced myself because something told me the composition of my visitors was not for any good news. Following the usual pattern, my uncle was the one to deliver the news. He had been my surrogate father since I lost my biological father while I was in the secondary school. If my father had been alive, he would be the one to convey the bad news. My friend and my husband's friend were there because they are my age and would be able to reason with me. Sitting between my mothers, I made up my mind that no matter the bad news my Uncle may give, I would not react in a negative way but I would summon my inner reserve to take it in.

Funmi, life is full of ups and downs. The world is dualistic in nature and form. As human beings living in this world, we should prepare to receive the good along with the bad that the world will constantly dole out to us.

The group nodded their assent to this and my uncle continued.

You see, my daughter, if we came here to tell you that whatever we want to say now is something that had never happened before, we would be deceiving you. We are here not to deceive you but to tell you that no matter what seeds life puts in our frying pan, we must accept. Things we cannot change or control we must accept.

Then my mother deflected the train of thought a bit by asking a question that seemed unrelated to what my uncle was saying.

How has it been with you and your husband?

Everything is fine, Ma, I answered.

When she asked this question, I was waiting for my uncle to deliver the killer punch, informing me that my husband had fathered a child outside wedlock or that he had married another wife. I had to be softened so that it would be less shocking to me. My uncle continued by asking.

When did you see him last?

It was some months back. Though Rosina said he called this last weekend promising to visit us after attending a conference. I was not at home, though, because I was at the bank's retreat in Calabar. Since he took up the Abuja job, his workload has become almost triple, making it impossible for him to be with us most of the time.

I said this in order to cover up any gap that they may perceive as existing between us. I made up my mind early in my marriage that, no matter the situation between us, I would not allow any other to come between us whenever we disagreed. It had been difficult, most especially in our culture where you are married to your spouse's family and not to your spouse, but I had kept faith. My uncle continued.

Well, we always pray that in our moments of trouble may the Almighty Father be with us. May God be with you in this period of life you are entering.

Ase, others chorused.

I braced myself but he deflected the telling further.

Have you heard the news?

Yes, a pity for the president. I heard he lost his wife yesterday morning.

May God be with him, my uncle prayed.

Amen, most especially in this his period of mourning, I added.

You know how much that woman meant to him? How he loved her so much and how the woman had been his main pillar of support?

Yes.

Well now, he has to get used to not seeing her again, or hearing her advice.

Death is a common denominator for all of us. A wa le aye ma ku kan ko si, no one gets out of this world alive.

Oku lo n sunkun oku, akawoleri n sukun ara won. The dead are crying for the dead, while mourners are mourning themselves. The first lady's death is not the only tragedy we are facing now. You see, it...

I had heard the news about the DeltaWay plane that disappeared though I had heard it crashed at Ibafo.

Then in low tones and an almost too quiet voice, my uncle said: *Your husband was on the flight.*

I looked at their faces. *Nooooooooooooo.*

He was on the flight and nobody survived the crash.

The two women sitting beside me came closer and got ready to hold me in case I wanted to run. There had been cases of those who heard such news who had bolted from where they had been told the news and run mad. But they did not have to worry. After my initial shout, I went far from them. I heard my name being called but I was not among them. I was far away.

Funmi, Funmi, Fúnmiláyò.

Rosina, Rosina, call the doctor. Call the doctor.

Into my consciousness came my children's cries. They must have heard the commotion in the living room. It was their cries that brought me back to life.

Hen, what did you say happened to my husband?

They all looked at me bewildered. Nobody was ready to say it again. It was my friend Tuminu who, kneeling down in front of me and taking my hands in her hands said, *Uncle Jude is no more, Funmi. He has left us. Why, why is it that good people do not live long while the wicked continuing thriving?*

She then started crying. I just looked at her.

How did you know he was in the plane and he was among the dead?

They all looked at Mama Kabba and then at my uncle. Mama Kabba said:

He also promised to come to Kabba to see me today after he had conducted the Sunday service. What he said was that he would come on Monday morning and then leave for Abuja in the evening of the same day. So I was surprised to see him very late Saturday night. He not only came but he behaved in a very unusual manner, contrary to what he usually does whenever he comes to visit me. He was much in a hurry, and when I asked him to sleep because it was very late, he

refused, telling me he had to go back to Abuja because he would be giving the sermon in the church next day. When I entreated him to eat or drink water, he totally refused. However, I knew he was no more and that he came to inform me so that I may tell others close to him because of the signs I saw around him. I followed him when he went out of my house and I did not see him in the horizon, so my fears were confirmed.

How did my uncle and my mother know about his passing away? Did he pay them visits, too?

No. After I heard about the plane crash on Sunday in the news on the state television, because it was Kogi State where they looked for the plane first, I travelled to Lagos to see your uncle.

My uncle then picked up the story.

I went to the airport to confirm he was on the plane. I met a lot of people who had also come to check about their relations, too. As a retired National Airport Authority staff member, I was able to see a copy of the plane's manifest and his name was on it.

So you confirmed he was on the flight, which does not mean he died. He may have survived.

Nobody survived, Funmi. I went to the crash site and nobody could have survived that crash. The plane created a big crater as if a comet had crashed. Debris was scattered over a very wide area.

news' aftermath

ori ti yoo su opo, ki i je ki olokunrun o ye

a fate destined to make one a widow/widower will never allow the sick one to survive illness – a yorùbá proverb

*wednesday, october 26, 2005
omole estate, ikeja.
lagos state.*

Grief dances with us in different forms. To some, grief dances a waltz or calypso; for others, the tango; and for some people, it is the energy-sapping Bata⁴⁵. Grief's dance with me, Funmi, was the slow, dignified and elegant waltz. I came into grief slowly and deeply. After the news, the entourage stayed the whole day with me, and Mama Kabba and my mother slept in my room that Monday. That day I was confused but on Tuesday morning, my children woke me up.

Mummy, mummy, what happened to Daddy?

⁴⁵ **Bata:** This refers to both the drum and dance. The Bata drum sets consist of Omele – both male and female, and the Bata itself. The dance that is danced to the music of the Bata is also called Bata dance. It is a vigorous and rigorous dance in honour of Sango, the Yorùbá god of Thunder.

I looked at them and for the first time after hearing about their father's death, I wanted to cry but I could not cry.

Daddy has gone on a long journey.

When will he be coming back?

He won't be coming back.

Why?

He won't be coming back because nobody has ever come back from such a journey.

Has he gone to heaven?

I don't know but what I know is that he is no more with us.

That means we won't see him again? Who will be bringing toys for me, take me to Silverbird Galleria and tell me stories like Aja duro ran mi l' eru? Nobody?

No, I am still here and I will be taking you to those places.

It won't be like when Daddy takes us. You are always asking us to keep quiet, not to make noise and you won't allow us to play around.

Well, I'll try to give you more freedom when we go out next.

But, but...we are going to miss Daddy. Why has he decided to go on such a journey without telling us first? He always tells us whenever he travels. Who gave him permission to go on that journey?

Children, this journey was a sudden one. He would not have been able to tell you.

Why? They chorused.

At that moment, their grandmother came and took them out of the room in order to prepare them for school. Left alone, it struck me that I would now have to take care of these children alone. Their father would never be there when they celebrate their lives' landmarks: marriages, their children's birth, their first cars and first jobs. These would serve as everlasting reminders of his death. It was then that I started crying, for the first time since hearing the news. I wept quietly, and I started feeling guilty about my husband's death.

I must have killed him. On our wedding anniversary I was busy getting seduced while he was dying. Maybe it was my infidelity that even made it possible for him to die. I am responsible for his death. What a bad woman I am.

I wondered what was on his mind as the plane started its plunge. I asked myself if it was not pride that made it impossible for me to reach out to him as he was getting away from me. I was hoping that it would not be my recompense for what I did with my boss

in Calabar and maybe God's way of punishing me for killing my husband. I silently mouthed a prayer that I knew within me would remain unanswered.

Please, God, give me another chance. Please return my husband and I will make it right this time.

Then it struck me that I had not gone through the letter Adamu gave me, but I did not know where I threw it. Mama Kabba found the letter where I must have dropped it and gave it to me. I read that the bank had given me four weeks' leave. I was thinking it was a leave preparatory to disengagement and I felt it must have been my MD's reaction to my shunning him at Obudu. When I read further, however, I found out it was not a vindictive letter. The bank must have heard about the crash and my loss and thought it expedient that I should have time to mourn, perform the traditional rites and also rest. I wondered how they could have found out so fast, but after the burial, I found out the crash got copious coverage in the media. I had been the only one who had been immune to the news. My MD was the first person to visit after my family told me the news. I spent the rest of the day in bed, refusing to eat anything despite Mama Kabba and my mother's entreaties.

Who will take care of your children if you go on this way? You cannot afford to break down now. Jay has gone to rest. May God forgive his sins. I don't think he would like you to kill yourself because he died, my mother reasoned with me.

Omo mi, life does not deal anyone a good hand. You have to accept this. It's what you cannot change, Mama Kabba added.

I was not hearing any of it. I felt hollow and all my successes tasted like gravel in my mouth.

remembrance service

bi ina ba ku a f'eru boju,bi ogede ku a f'omo re ro po.

when the fire dies, it leaves embers; when the banana tree dies, it replaces itself with its shoots – a yorùbá proverb

*saturday, october 29, 2005
crash site, ibafon.
ogun state*

Ogun State government organized a national prayer session for the repose of those who lost their lives in the crash. The interfaith and interdenominational service was held on Thursday, 27th October 2005. It was a harrowing experience for the children and me. The extent of the damage caused to the sleeping and rustic village was beyond

explanation. The debris of the crash scattered over a wide area, but at the impact point, in the midst of the dispersed body pieces, properties and broken plane pieces was a big crater – a deep hole like one created by a falling comet. It was around this crater that the religious service took place on a clear morning. Canopies had been arranged around the crater, with chairs placed under them. The government constructed a cenotaph in honour of the one hundred and seventeen people who died there. Under the canopy, directly facing the cenotaph, government officials had arranged the immediate families of the crash victims. There was a lot of wailing and crying from those left behind. However, I was not shedding any tears in spite of the distress I felt. I cannot explain this, but since my childhood, I have detested outward showing of emotions. I looked about me at all the faces.

My gaze rested on a woman who was wailing very loudly. A man I took to be her father or uncle was consoling her. My pity went to her, and if not for the distance between us, I would have extended a hand of fellowship to make her understand that I recognized her pains. She was at the tail end of the semicircle that wrapped itself around the cenotaph. I could vividly see her from where I was standing. I was contemplating what she must have been deprived of, what the dead relation of hers must have meant to her, when I looked at two boys holding and calling her. Ha, poor little things, they are now without their father, I thought. Something made me look at them again and I froze. It was as if I was watching a film. The two boys, identical twins, were my husband's clones. They had all his features, including his very fair complexion that made him look like a mulatto. From where I was standing, I was staring into their faces. Wonders will never cease in this world, I thought. People talk about God creating us in doubles and I had argued with those holding such beliefs but what I was looking at seemed to be confirmation of this possibility. If the boys had been introduced as my husband's children, nobody would have doubted. My own children do not even look this much like their father. I couldn't stop staring at them. Then I looked again and I saw Uncle Tùnji, my husband's first cousin, consoling the woman. For a moment, I wondered what could have happened. My thoughts were like particles colliding in a centrifuge. Throughout the rest of the service I stared at them, and when it ended, I stood and moved towards them but they melted into the teeming crowd.

As we were being driven home, I kept looking at my children and thinking of those twin boys. I could not get the picture of those twins out of my head. Are they my husband's children? Is it possible that Jay had betrayed me?

nineteen

PASTOR JULIUS

inquiries

bere bere kii sina ona.

the person who asks for the way will never be lost – a yorùbá proverb

*october 29, 2005
christ assembly chapel,
wuse zone 2, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Christ's Assembly,
210, Abram Adesokan Street,
Wuse Zone 2,
Abuja. FCT.
29 October 2005.

Dear Bisoye,

I got your letter yesterday. It took the person you sent it through some efforts to locate the church and hand it over. He needed to travel down from Offa three times before finally seeing me and delivering it. When he comes back to you in London, thank him so much for being a patient gentleman and a true friend. How are your studies going?

I was not disappointed with the issues raised in your letter, most especially the confirmation you were asking for of the death of my friend and the church's senior pastor, Pastor Jude. I am sorry to inform you that what you heard on BBC News is true. We lost him many days ago on his way from Lagos to Abuja. He was in that plane that crashed. I do not need to give you the gruesome details, I am sure you would have read a lot about it in the media and on the Internet.

I know what you left unsaid and some of the questions you must have. As human beings, we cannot question God. He is omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He knows all things and allowed whatever happened to happen. The presence of evil does not nullify His existence. He did not create evil but good, since evil is in human beings' minds as a result of human excision from God. Evil, however, makes life rounded. If it

did not exist, how would we recognise and appreciate goodness? If we do not have ill health, can we appreciate health? If falsehood does not tackle truth in the open, how can we understand truth? Think of London being a continuous winter; how dreary it would look. My brother, life is two-sided and this we must never forget in our day-to-day existence. A sound appreciation of these truisms makes life a bit more habitable for us until we get to a place where life's reasons and wherefores can be explained to us, if there is a place like that. Now, we need to accept that there are many things that are beyond our understanding. We do not need to search for their answers because doing so can only aggravate our frustrations about being left without those answers.

The other point left unsaid and unasked in your letter was about the funding of your education and its continuation now that Pastor Jude is dead. They are questions I have been pondering on, too, since my friend died. You are not the only one whose education he was sponsoring. There were five of you, one in the United States of America and three others in Nigeria. Two are in secondary schools while two others are in universities, like you. It may be necessary for you to know that he started the scholarship programme after sponsoring his personal assistant, Margaret, at University of Abuja for her undergraduate and graduate studies. He instituted the funds he had been using for the scholarship funds. The church had no hand in it, but in his humble manner, Jude made it look as if it was the church that was funding the scheme.

It seems he died without leaving a will. If he ever had one, we have not been informed. We, therefore, do not know if he made any allowances for those he was sponsoring. The five of you are those we know, but there may be more than that, because, as you know, your mentor's generosity seemed to be 'non-pareil'. As for coping with your fees and continuing his good works, I am working on it. I hope to get something before the end of next month. I will be presenting your case and that of the others he was sponsoring to the church council at our next meeting next Sunday. Use this moment to pray that our Father in heaven will take control and direct us accordingly in how to do the best for you people.

On your feelings of now being alone since the passing of your mentor, you are not alone. God, your Creator, is in control and is always with you. All things work together for the good of those who love God. I believe this, and also know that God recognises your love for the one He has taken away from you. Count on me, too. I am your brother and I will try to be your mentor too. I may not be as good as my late friend but I will try and I know God will help me in this. Do not allow this incident to separate you from

your Creator. The shortest distance between you and any problem in life is the distance between your knees and the ground. As the Bible says in 2 Chronicles 7:14, “If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn away from their wicked ways; then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land”. My brother, whatever situation or problem you may be facing now or in the future, pray until something happens. I know all obstacles in your way will be toppled. Pray along with me, as I present your case to the church council. My next letter will inform you about the council’s decision.

Your Brother in Christ,
Pastor Julius.

reactions

sasa eniyan ni n fe ni lehin, ba o si n’ile, t’ebi t’ara ni fe ni l’oju eni

few people love us in our absence, all relations and inconsequential
people love us when we are present – a yorùbá proverb

*november 2, 2005
christ assembly chapel,
wuse zone 2, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

November 2 2005.
Abuja.

Dear Bisoye,

You must have been waiting for my letter with baited breath, wanting to know how the meeting went. You must also have been praying ceaselessly because your prayers were answered. Presenting your case and that of others to the church council was not easy and did not bring the reactions I was expecting. In the first instance, it was difficult for me to present because most church council members were against Pastor Jude while he was alive and they took me to be his confidant and most inJayte friend. The council members shot down most of his progressive plans and expectations for the church. You may then be wondering how he was able to start so many successful ministries, outreaches and other plans without the church council behind him. This was where his ingenuity and leadership qualities came to the fore. Whenever the council shot down his programme, he would not fight or try to re-present them. What he did was

to start the programme using his own means and resources, sometimes with the support of church members who believed in the programmes. Most times after the council members had seen the success of the programme, they then joined the bandwagon, proving the truism that failure is an orphan and everyone is success's relation.

I have told you this to let you know the background behind the problem I faced in presenting your case. I am also sure that God was in control. When I presented your case, and that of four others, some of the church council members wanted the scholarship programme to continue. The church had not been financially involved because Pastor Jude had been the one shouldering the whole financial responsibility. Some members felt that the church should take over the responsibility in honour and memorial of him. The majority of the council, however, felt otherwise. I need to give you some facts in order for you to understand the politicking that went on concerning your case. The church constitution stipulated that, for any motion to be carried by the council, three quarters of the members must support the motion. The council, as presently constituted, consists of twenty-four members. With Pastor Jude's death and since he had not been replaced, the council has twenty-three members left.

The first meeting to discuss your case had seventeen members who could vote. Three members came late and, according to the constitution, could not take part in the voting. The vote was taken and we found out that five members were against the motion while twelve were for it. The twelve unfortunately did not constitute the seventy-five percent that the church constitution stipulated. All the council members knew those who voted against the motion. There were no biblical or doctrinal reason/s for their vote and other members of the council knew these five voted for their own selfish reasons. We knew they voted against it because the pastor had not recognised them in the church. They and their cohorts were the foundation members of the church but, when Jude became the pastor, he was equitable in his distribution of church responsibilities and duties. He was against this group who wanted to misappropriate and misuse church funds and property. Since he is no more, they saw an opportunity to get back at him and reclaim their positions. They voted no, and you and the person in US would have been on the way back home.

God, however, works mysteriously because some things happened which saved the day. Bisoye, most times I wonder at the decadent and intense level of church politics. I have asked myself so many times why such evil and wicked machinations rear their heads in churches and religious organisations. If we profess serving God and humanity, why are

we always bothered and immersed in the fight for power and positions in God's house? Are positions and responsibilities in churches and other religious organisations not meant to be selfless? Why do individuals become diabolical when they put themselves forward for God's jobs? Why the treachery, gossip, and tarring of other people within the church or other religious organisations' hierarchy? Why are religious organisations and churches sometimes the cesspits of treachery, backbiting and other ungodly activities in God's house? Why are religious members most times bad representatives of God's people with their meanness, backbiting, illegalities, hatred, and gossip? These questions bother me, Bisoye, and I would like you to think about them. The underhanded and unnecessary politicking about your issue has triggered the questions again in my mind.

As I said earlier, God was in control, because as we were closing the meeting, one elderly council member asked us to wait. He asked those who voted against the motion to give their biblical or doctrinal reasons for voting the scholarship scheme down. Since the voting was secret balloting, nobody owned up, but we all know those who did because they always voted against the pastor while he was alive. The old man's question was not answered and he then suggested another vote be conducted. Before the voting, he enjoined every member to pray for God's guidance and direction so that every person would do what was right. He quoted biblical passages in which God gave injunctions about helping the homeless, the unfortunates, orphans and widows. In the new vote, the five members still voted against the scheme but the three members who were late were able to vote and there were fifteen members against the five. The church therefore took up the responsibility of continuing the scholarship scheme. Activities were organised to raise money for the scheme and levies were imposed on church members. There were donations from well-to-do members, and to show their support, church members raised almost a million naira within a week. The fund is still rising and you can rest assured that your fees will be paid along with your living allowances.

As I pointed out in my former letter to you, we have to thank God for taking control. I am happy for you and I know God will help you in achieving your aims and objectives. Take good care of yourself and remember "the son of whom you are"⁴⁶. I will continue to brief you with church news from time to time.

⁴⁶ It is a saying usually given to Yorùbá children and adults too whenever they are leaving home for a journey to a new place or foreign country. It means the person should not forget his pedigree and origins. He/She should not do anything that will tarnish the name of the family and his predecessors.

Your brother in Christ,

Pastor Julius.

gossip and reputation bashing

eni ti o si n'ile , l'ewure re n bi kan

it is the absent person whose goat gives birth to an only issue – a
yorùbá proverb

*november 11, 2005
christ assembly chapel,
wuse zone 2, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

November 11, 2005.
Abuja.

Dear Bisoye,

I am happy to receive your mail and to be informed that your fees and living allowances have been paid. I am also happy to hear about your good results for the last semester. I am happy for you most especially in the news that you are being considered for a university scholarship. Well done! Keep it up! You need to prove to the doubting Thomases that Pastor Jude saw your potential and he was right. I would like to discuss a few things with you in this letter. In the first place, I need to answer the questions you raised about the gossip/rumours you have started hearing about Pastor Jude. Before doing this, however, I will tell you a story.

In a film called *Doubt*, a Catholic Reverend Father was rumoured to have committed some sexual offences against children in the church he was heading. A woman in the church believed these allegations to be true although they had not been proven. She went about spreading the information to parishioners and generally running down the Reverend's reputation. In reality, however, the Reverend was not guilty of those allegations. One day, prodded by her conscience, the woman went for confession.

Father, I have sinned and have done what I should not do.

What sin have you committed, my daughter?

I have spread information I was not sure was true about another person.

You will need to do penance for your sin.

What penance must I do to be forgiven?

You'll recite one hundred Hail Marys for penance and to show your penitence.

Yes, Father.

The woman went back to confession the next week and told the Reverend Father she had carried out the penance. She then asked the Reverend Father if that would be all she needed to do for forgiveness. The priest asked her to go home to where she lived which was a high rise building, and take a feather pillow, cut it open and allow all the feathers to fly away. The priest asked her to come back after doing this. The woman did as she was asked to do. The next week she came back to the priest.

Have you done what I asked you to do?

Yes, Father.

You will now need to go and collect all those feathers and put them back into the pillow.

That would be impossible, Father!

For your sins to be totally forgiven, you must go back to all those to whom you told the lie about this person and tell them that it was not the truth.

That would also be impossible to do.

The flying away of all those feathers and your inability to gather them back is the same way the reputation of the person you have maligned has been ruined, and you cannot tell all those who have heard it that what you told them was not the truth.

How then will my sin be forgiven?

You'll have to pray to your Creator to forgive you and you must desist from gossip.

Now to your questions, I have heard the rumours. I will take them as rumours until I am able to get the correct facts about the case. Some may say I am doing this because he was my inJayte friend. Such a statement would be untrue because I am taking this stand until I can get all the facts. Even if I do succeed in getting all the facts, I will never be able to know the reasons, motives and circumstances surrounding every decision a man in Pastor Jude' position had taken or what experiences made him take those decisions. In the absence of these, I would like you to err on the side of caution. Like one American Indian proverb, "Don't judge your friend until you have been able to walk the length he has walked in his moccasins". As you know, the Bible asks us not to "judge

because the same measure that we use in judging another person, is what shall be used to judge us". I am not saying the information is either true or untrue. What I am trying to tell you is that none of us living knew what pushed him into taking those decisions that led to the rumours after his death. Even if he has sinned, it is not for us to point accusing fingers, because, like Jesus said, "the first to throw the stone should be those who have not sinned". The way he is being maligned now by church members is mind-boggling, especially from those he had gone to great lengths to help in their time of trouble and sorrow. Those whom I thought were his friends and were close to him are his most vociferous critics now. How things change.

Bisoye, that is life and I would like you take note of this. Whatever you do, say, read, think or participate in, always follow Abraham Lincoln's dictum. He said, 'If the whole world says I am right and God and the angels think otherwise, I would be wrong, but if God and the angels think I am right and the world think otherwise, I would be right'. The only being to whom we have to give an account of our life is the Creator who made us. Bisoye, we are caretakers; He is our landlord and at the appropriate time, He will ask us for an account. It is better for us to leave Pastor Jude in the hands of God whom he worshipped. As we do this, we need to realise that God said, 'His ways are not our ways as His thoughts are far from our thoughts'. Please dwell on the things I have raised in this letter. There is nothing you can do or undo about what Pastor Jude has done. As of now, he will be with his God or, if there was no God as the atheists say, he will be rotting in the ground. We, however, should let him rest. We can never understand all the dimensions of the decisions he took while alive. It is not for us to do, it is only for us to learn from and use what we can take out of it in preparing and living our lives.

Please, quickly finish your studies and come back home to help. You need to realise that without Pastor Jude helping you, you wouldn't have reached where you are now. You also need to pass this on, or as they say, light another candle so that light can overcome darkness. Take care and may success always be yours.

Yours in Christ,

Pastor Julius.

twenty

FUNMI

condolences

bi elekun ba n sunkun, ki a ma ba won sun, bi alayo ba n yo, ki a ma ba won yo

we must weep along with those weeping, and celebrate with those who are joyous – a yorùbá proverb

*saturday, october 29, -saturday november 11, 2005
omole estate, ikeja.
lagos state.*

Many Yorùbá sayings were of no meaning to me until then. I heard them many times but their meanings remained hidden to me until my husband's death. The Yorùbás love to say, “Igba iponju la i mo ore” (True friends are recognized during trouble, sorrow or hard times) and “Owo epo l’omo araye ba ni la, won o je ba ni la ‘wo eje” (Human beings will help us in licking a hand dipped in palm oil, but no one will lick hands dipped in blood). I had prided myself on being a loner, who rarely attended the endless burials, weddings, naming ceremonies, or other parties that my people celebrate. To me they were avenues of waste – waste of time, money, and resources. I believed it was imperative for an individual to face his/her business rather than butt into other people's businesses. Most of the invitations and the like had ended up in my bin. I did send money and sometimes materials to the celebrants. My reason for nonattendance has always been the nature of my work. There were no hard feelings against me for non-attendance because most people realized that bankers keep unusual hours; they open early and close late. My husband's death, however, opened a vista I had never before considered. The various ceremonies that I hated and resisted were the community's means of supporting the individual. They were also economic tools. The visits, the gifts, the commiserations and the company helped individuals to live their grief, share their joys and, at times, help to get them out of financial problems. While some individuals go beyond their capacity in those celebrations, it is a fact that such ceremonies help a lot of people.

As a banker all my working life, I have met a lot of people. I have helped some people to achieve their purpose in life, while I have turned down a lot of people when they asked for loans. My husband's death showed me that I have a lot of well-wishers and

acquaintances. Though I thought I was a slave driver and a no-nonsense boss and with few friends, his death has proved me wrong. My house was like a busy market with people always consoling, helping and bringing gifts. Most of my mates that I had lost contact with turned up at my door, many old friends and those that I was never very friendly with, all came with their condolences. The most surprising were my husband's family, friends, co-workers, former co-workers, classmates and acquaintances. I learnt a lot of things about my husband from them. I heard stories and anecdotes about incidents when my husband had not only been their saviour but also a shoulder for them to cry on. Jude' generosity were unknown to me until after his death. Students he was sponsoring in schools, mothers he had helped by saving their children during ill health, and uncountable unemployed he had helped into employment. They all came with their tales of his goodness to them. After their visits and being left alone on my bed at night, I cried. I cried because I did not know my husband, I did not understand him, and I was confused about his true nature. My closest friend, Tuminu, also came almost every day. She was the only one I could open my heart and feelings to. I did so on one of her visits.

Ah, Ore, ase ara wa ni iso ti n run?

Yes, we didn't know we were involved.

When we were discussing the plane crash, who would have thought you were involved?

To think that as we were talking, my husband had already died.

Your husband had died while you were on the plane from Calabar.

Yes, Tuminu, what will I do now?

Nothing, you'll have to live on. What are you thinking of doing?

I am confused. I don't know what to do. How do I go about it? I am lonely, forlorn and lost.

Find yourself, Ore, find yourself. Life continues and doesn't end with the death of a loved one.

I loved him so much but I did not show it. I was consumed in my work. I left no time for him.

That doesn't make you his killer. It was his time to go and he went. You were not in any way responsible.

I know, but why can't I get this feeling of guilt off me?

It's normal. Every partner who loves the lost partner feels that way. They tend to think that there were things they had left undone that led to the other person's death. It's a normal human reaction but you must get it out of your mind.

I know, Tuminu, I know but ... but Tumi, let me ask you this, is it normal for me to be attracted to another person during this period?

Why not? Are you an angel? This is the period you need someone's shoulder to really cry on. The better if it is a man. There are things a man can do to you that I cannot do. Hunm ... Hmm, you naughty, naughty girl, are you not hiding something from me?

No, I've not been naughty at all during this period. My Managing Director visited yesterday.

Yesterday? Yarn me bo girlfriend. Tell me the unvarnished truth, nothing but the truth girl.

You know I will.

Is he still the handsome debonair young man or have you got another MD?

They haven't changed our MD. He is still the same one you were fantasizing about.

Stop it, naughty girl, I can leave him for you, you need him more than me.

Thanks. Like I was saying, he came yesterday.

It had been early afternoon, and I was staring at Oprah on the television. I had the sound turned off. The house was quiet. My cousin had gone to the university and my children were in school. I was tired, but like most times when alone, my brain kept on playing frames of Jude and me in various places and situations. I was recounting the good times we had and I was close to tears when my Maigaurd came in.

Madam, you get visitor.

Let the person come in. What are you waiting for?

Hin ask if you dey alone or you get visitor?

As I dey so, you see me see visitor?

Sorry, Madam. I go tell am me he come.

I quickly made myself presentable. Not that I was in any way not looking fine, I am a finicky person when it comes to my looks. Even in this mourning period, the only thing that has changed is the colour of my clothes, which are darker than usual. I still maintain myself. I was thinking it would be one of my husband's family, but I was wondering the reason for asking if I was alone. It never crossed my mind that it would be my MD, the day being Monday and the busiest day in the bank. Then he came in.

Funmi, how are you? How are you coping?

I've been trying to come to terms with the fact that my children have no father anymore and that I am without a husband.

Such things happen, Funmi. Such things happen, but life does not stop because such things happen.

I know. I know.

Funmi, you know how busy we are in the bank. I won't stay long. Take care of yourself, rest and don't let grief take you over. We need you so much in the bank and we are waiting for you to come back fit and ready.

I will be coming back after the one-month leave expires.

Don't worry, The board met and decided you should use this period to take your accumulated leave. They instructed me to give you this.

Tuminu, he gave me an envelope and then kissed me fully on my mouth as he was going out.

Kissed you fully on the mouth?

Yes, and I melted. I got wet. Can you believe that, me, in mourning and getting wet for another person? My husband has not been fully buried and I was busy getting wet for another man. Am I not a slut?

Aren't you human? We shouldn't be discussing this now but frankly, Funmi, since when have you been oiled?

You are a bad, bad girl, Tuminu. How could you ask such a question during this period?

Well, it isn't anything bad for you to be wet, my dear. It means you are still a woman and that grief has not shut down your entire machine.

Thank you for your explanation. I opened the envelope and found out that the bank had given me my accumulated leave totalling six months and also a three million Naira cheque.

Wow! What are you waiting for? Take your children and go for the needed rest.

I will but later. The schools are in session, remember? I have also not finished the traditional mourning period and rituals.

I know. Hope your in-laws have not been nasty this period?

No, they've been very good, most especially Mama Kabba. After the breaking of the news, she was with us for a week and since then, she has been travelling down every weekend to be with us.

You are lucky. Most widows go through hell. There is the need to change some cultural practices following the death of a husband. Have you wondered why men are not subjected to the indignities women are subjected to after their partner's death and also that women are usually in the forefront of those who persecute the widow?

Is it not a man's world down here? The man is never suspected of killing his wife unless it is openly done, but every woman needs to swear that she did not kill her husband when the husband dies young.

Well, we have to thank people like Mama Kabba who realize they are women, too. Well, girlfriend, I have to run. See you tomorrow.

Tumi, wait, I want to ask you a question.

Yes, what is it?

Is it possible for Jay to have cheated on me?

He is a man; however, I don't think your late husband would have cheated on you after the Christine affair.

Why?

You told me how sober and remorseful he was, didn't you?

He was very sober and remorseful.

Remember, he was a pastor and your husband was a gentleman. If he was really as sorry as you said, he won't have strayed again.

Yes, I thought so too, but at the memorial ceremony at the crash site, I saw a woman with children that looked like my husband.

It does not prove anything. Your husband was a pastor and he wouldn't like to be known as a bigamist.

Aren't there pastors who have been found out to be bigamists and philanderers?

Those are exceptions to the rule.

I know, but I have the image of that woman with the twins in my mind.

Maybe you imagined it. Our minds play funny tricks at times.

investigation report

awari l'obinrin n wa nkan obe

a woman will successfully find a stew's ingredients – a yorùbá proverb

*friday, november 17, 2005
golden triangle restaurant,
ikeja.
lagos state.*

What did you find out, detective?

We found the woman at Abuja, Madam.

Abuja?

Yes, working at an international organisation and with identical twin boys.

I knew it. I knew it.

What, Madam?

Don't mind me. Go on with your report.

She was married to Pastor Jude Àkànmú Babájídé at Abuja Marriage Registry in 2002.

Married? Married?

Yes, a copy of the marriage certificate is included in the file you have, with the pictures taken during the ceremony.

I see.

We included her photograph and that of her children.

Okay.

What further action would Madam like us to take?

Nothing now. I'll read your report and if there is the need for your services, I'll contact you. Do I owe you any other money apart from the bill you sent?

No, Madam, that's all.

I'll pay you now. May I ask you a favour?

Yes, what favour?

Would it be possible for our transaction records to be deleted from your database? I mean all details, written, audio and video?

It can be arranged. You can count on our discretion.

I know, but I don't want any record of this investigation.

It's going to be costly, Madam. Very costly.

Can it be done?

Yes.

How costly? What figures are you thinking of?

This.

Ah! That's too much.

It isn't, Madam. I'll be placing my job on the line.

Okay, take a zero out of that.

Okay, Madam, I agree.

Do you mean we have a deal?

Yes, a deal.

It means I will get all the data and tapes that you may have on this case.

Yes, Madam.

They are not to be destroyed. I want them all delivered to me.

I will but it will cost more than we agreed. I'll have to see some other people.

Okay, let's agree on your initial figure then.

Alright, give me three days and you will have it all.

There will be no duplicates, no other copy, is that agreed?

Yes, agreed.

Let me give you a cheque.

No cheque, Madam, cash.

That's too much to be cashed at once.

You are a banker, Madam, that should be no problem.

Okay, give me two days. We meet on the third day, not in this restaurant but at the swimming pool side of Prime Hotel, Ibadan. Do you know how to swim?

Yes, Madam.

We will meet in the swimming pool, and you'll later escort me to my car where the exchange will take place.

Yes, Madam.

You are to come alone. If I perceive another person, this deal is off.

Okay. Deal, Madam.

the visit

ki oluwa gba ni l'owo eni ti a o so, ti n so ni

may the almighty save us from the person watching us that we are not watching)– a yorùbá proverb

*tuesday, november 22, 2005
28, sowemimo crescent,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Come in, Madam, you are welcome.

Thank you, I am Ms. Funmi Da Silva.

Mrs. Àyókúnnú Babájídé. What should I offer you? Drinks, tea, coffee or what type of food would you like?

A glass of water will do.

Okay.

My bank sent me to express our condolence for the loss of your husband in the plane crash.

Thank you. My husband left without a cursory goodbye. We did not have this agreement.

Death doesn't inform anybody before taking action.

Yes, but there would have been a small indication, a sort of sign. There was none. He left cheerfully after taking the children out on Wednesday before flying to Lagos for that conference, the conference that collected him.

You have children?

Yes, twin boys who will always remind me of their father.

Is that your husband's picture?

Yes.

The boys look so much like their father.

Yes, it was as if they were his clones.

What a pity. They won't grow up with their father. Did your husband leave any documents with you that give information about his stock portfolio and bank accounts?

No, he didn't. The person who may have any information is his personal assistant, Margaret Ekpan Awaki.

We are trying to reconcile his financial portfolio with us in order to work with his trustees and do what is right for his dependents. Did your husband in any way talk about a will?

None that I know of. He was just forty-five, and at that age, we all think we will live forever.

That's true. I am sorry, Madam, for your husband's loss. It must have affected you so deeply.

Yes, it did. Oh, Jay, why did you do this to me? Why? Why, when our relationship was going so well, you cut it midstream.

Sorry, Madam, I am sorry. You two must have been so complementary and well-blended. He must have meant so much to you.

Too much to say. I am left adrift on life's sea.

You have to pick yourself up. You have to live and have a direction, if not for him then for your children.

Yes, I know. You can't understand the loss. You don't know him, that's why you think it will be easy for me to manage without him. Have you met him before?

No, I was not his account manager. I have never met him, no ... no, I can't say that. I met him once at a dinner the bank organized for premium customers like him.

No wonder you think his loss is one that can easily be overcome.

What type of man was he?

A gentleman to the core and the pastor of the largest Pentecostal church here in Abuja. Quiet, easy going and a good family man. How he loved his children. He was a loyal, trustworthy, gentleman, totally devoted to his family.

Is that so?

Yes. One other thing that strikes me about him is that, unlike most Nigerian men, he was not a philanderer.

Truly?

Yes, since we got married three years ago, I can say he has not had any other relationship with another woman.

Are you sure?

Yes, very sure.

Men cannot be trusted like that, most especially Nigerian men. They are liars and flirts.

That's a generalization. Even if Nigerian men are the way you describe them, Pastor Jude Àkànmú Babájídé, my love, was an exception.

Hen?

Yes, very sure, one hundred percent sure. He was too honest to humiliate a woman, too cultured to cheat and too loyal to be licentious.

Hmm. I now understand you feeling so bad about his death.

We were soul mates and his death is like cutting out my heart. I am left empty and lost.

So would I if I lost a very good person like the one you have just described.

Now you can understand my feelings.

Yes, I do quite well. I'll have to be going now. I will contact you again if there is the need for it. May God comfort us in this period of loss.

Amen and thank you, my sister, thank you for lending me your listening ears in this, my period of sorrow.

I couldn't have done otherwise. May God console us all.

agony and anguish

***eni a ni ko fe ni l'aju, ta lo fi s'enu, eni a ni ko kin ni lehin,
egun lo fi s'owo, eni a ba f'oro lo, lo wa je alarokiri eni***

the person we asked to blow dirt from our eyes put pepper in his mouth, the individual we asked to clean our back has thorns in his hand, and our confidant is a tattler – a yorùbá proverb

*thursday, november 24, 2005
omole estate,
lagos state.*

Thoughts clanged in my head. My flight from Abuja was painful, dull thudding pain and consistent hotness within me. I flew back to Lagos the same day I confirmed the facts about my late husband. Late husband? Can I call him my late husband or is he our late husband? I never quite believed what the private detective gave me. A part of me still disputed the facts as they stared at me from the report. Why is it that it is the wife who is the last to realize her husband's cheating? Why, even when they see all signs pointing to double-dealings, do wives tend to still believe in their husbands? Even after the photographs and the marriage certificate, I still disputed the idea of Jude being a Janus. I could not believe that the man I loved and gave myself to could be that treacherous. I wanted to believe that the investigator must have made some mistake and this led me to Abuja to find out for myself. The truth, however, had been too debilitating for me to digest. As I sat in her sitting room, I wanted to believe that what she was telling me was just a dream that would pass and I would wake up and leave her house with the picture of the man I married intact. The concrete reality astonished me. I was surprised, at my naivety, my gullibility. I have been made a fool.

These were the thoughts that were raging in my head as I flew back to Lagos. I would have gone on this fact-finding journey earlier but I couldn't because I had to go through the traditional mourning rites for a husband who towards the end of his life was not a husband but a deceiver. I was required to be at home, to receive condolences and act the part of a sober, mourning wife. The period of mourning lasted three months. If any family member – either my husband's or mine – had found out that I travelled during those three months, I would have been in grave trouble. So, my journey to Ibadan and Abuja was camouflaged as siesta periods in case anyone asked for me or came to check on me. Coming back home, I saw my children, and for the first time after losing my husband, I wept in front of them. For days I stayed in my room, refusing to eat, instead drinking my tears as sustaining water. I refused to see anyone and cried and cried, oh how I cried.

I cried for lost opportunities, for lost innocence and men's duplicity. I cried for myself who was deceived, for my children who were deprived of knowing their siblings, for corruption of a good man, for the human beings' dualistic nature. I cried for human complexity, for the agony and trouble Jude must have gone through carrying such a big secret in his mind and his day-to-day activities while covering his tracks. I cried, oh, how I cried. I cried for the many women who are made fun of by those they inJaytely trust, for the cuckolded husband. I wept for myself, for the innocent woman in Abuja who is still ensconced in her cocoon, thinking good of her late husband. I wept more for myself, and what rivulets of tears! My refusal to come out in the first two days after coming back from Abuja was taken to mean a resting period by those living with me. My absence on the third day and the various plates of food untouched pushed them to action.

What is wrong with you? You want to kill yourself? Are you the first to lose her husband? Husbands and wives are lost every second in this world. Yours won't be the first nor will it be the last. What's wrong with you? Has your husband's death turned you crazy?

I am not crazy. I am just weeping for my naivety, men's treachery and myself.

Pele o egbere. What treachery, that he died? He has no control over that, nobody has.

No, not that.

What then, that he left you to carry the responsibilities for two people alone? He won't have planned that.

I was not crying because of that.

Then what? Look at you, with your eyes like bread soaked in water. Look around you, at your room disorganized and dirty, you the finicky one when it comes to cleanliness. Look at you. It's never worth it; he is dead and you have to accept that.

I have and there is nothing I can do about that.

Rosina, please clean up this room now. Funmi, up you go into the bath now and clean up. You will also have to take a little soup even if I have to force feed you.

Okay, Tuminu, big sister, I'll go and take the bath.

While you do that let me phone my shop girls and tell them I won't be coming back to the shop.

No need for that. I will be all right, I promise you.

Okay, I hear you but I will wait and stay with you today. I want to hear what makes Mrs. Icy Heart cry for three days nonstop.

I'll be back soon.

So, tell me what were you weeping for.

Tumi, Jude cheated on me.

Cheated on you? With whom, Christine?

No, that was in the past. This was different.

What do you mean? Why should that turn you into Egbere?⁴⁷

He was married to her and they had two children.

No, O ti o. Was it the woman you saw at the memorial ceremony?

Yes.

How did you find out?

After our last discussion, I was not convinced that what I saw was a fluke. I engaged a private investigator who took a week to give me the report. Here, look at it.

This report may not be true. Pastor Jay was too much of a gentleman to do that.

That's what I felt, too, after reading the report. I decided to check out the facts myself, and they turned out to be true.

Tell me it was not so.

⁴⁷ **Egbere:** A kind of ghommid in Yorùbá belief who is always crying. The ghommid is a tiny spirit being walking and crying along in deep forest with a tiny mat, which he carries about. It is believed that any one who is able to take the mat from him will be stupendously rich. It is only the seasoned and powerful hunters with magic and medicine who perceives the Egbere and can collect the mat from Egbere.

It was. I saw the woman myself.

No, Funmi. You mean you travelled during your widow's rites?

Yes.

What is happening to you? Where is my prim and proper, law-abiding aburo?

Gone with your brother-in-law's death.

Ah, your husband's death is turning you into another being.

True, I am being turned into a person I cannot recognize anymore when I look into the mirror.

So, you saw the woman. Did you see the children, too?

I saw her but the children had gone to school, though I saw their pictures with their dad. They are spitting images of my husband. As I told you earlier, my children do not look like their father the way those boys do.

Did she know you were her husband's first wife?

Tumi, I can't explain how I was able to hold myself and that information. I had a strong urge to tell her, most especially when she went on about her husband being loyal and never the cheating type. I wanted to wipe the smirk off her face, to accuse and abuse her for being a husband-snatcher.

You did not do any of such, I suppose?

No, I did not. I do not know where I got the control. Sitting in her living room and hearing her pontificating on how good a husband Jude was to her and the children, I felt like tearing her eyes out. I wanted to get a gun and shoot her, wanted to shout at her to wake her up and tell her she had been deceived.

Thank God, you did not do any such stupid thing. Did you get some information from her?

I only confirmed those facts that I have. Their date of marriage, and most of the things Jude did for her.

What of a will or list of accounts?

One. There is a silver lining in this cloud. On my way from Abuja, I thought the whole thing over. I do not blame her, I blame my husband.

Blaming him will not solve the matter now.

It won't.

What are you going to do?

I don't know yet. However, I am going to carry out more investigations about what he has in properties, bank accounts, vehicles and other materials and then take action.

What action?

I don't know yet until after my investigations. I felt cheated and made a fool of. I don't like that and I would like to get my own back on him.

You have to control your anger in order to take reasonable actions. Don't take any action that will hurt you, your children or that woman's children. They are not in any way responsible.

Yes, I know. Tumi, please tell me, when do dreams depart? When does trust and loyalty wane? When does a relationship hollow out and love becomes an empty shell?

twenty-one

AYOKUNNU

appreciation

bi a ba se ni l'ore, ope laa du

when someone is kind to us, we give thanks – a yorùbá proverb

thursday, november 24, 2005

sowemimo road,

asokoro, abuja.

federal capital territory.

What would I have done without you, Margaret?
Don't think about it, Madam. Your husband was my lifeline. I can only pay back what he did in my life. Your children and you are the first people I need to pay back.

Never think of it that way. You are good and that is why you are feeling this way. What of countless others that he helped that I don't know about? Many did not even call or come to visit me.

Human beings are not the same. How are the twins taking their father's loss?

They are coping well. Children, the moment they have food to eat, space to play and somebody they can cry to, their problems are finished. Oh! How good if we could live like that all over again?

We can't, we have to grow up. Life expects us to be responsible, to face our problems and demons when they raise their heads.

That's true. Very true. Life, however, helps us by placing some people around us during difficult times or when our demons roar so that they can help us navigate the thorny path.

Yes.

You are one of those people. I can't imagine how I would have coped these past weeks without your help. You've been wonderful.

You have been too good to me. You are the first woman who would not take me as her rival or her husband's mistress despite how closely we worked. You have treated me like a sister.

Men will always be men. For you to be less anxious when you are married, let your husband be free. As one wag said, 'Let the bird free, if it comes back to you, it is meant to be yours, if not, it was not meant to be yours in the first instance'.

What wise advice.

I know there was nothing between my husband and you. This is not to say you are not a beautiful woman. You are, but my husband was not having an affair with you. If he had, I would have known. I am a woman.

Pastor Jude was a gentleman in the real sense of the word. I am happy you are the first person I have seen who, instead of internalising her grief, externalises it and openly struggles to cope with the difficult time they are facing.

I couldn't have done it without your help.

Thank you for thanking me but I was just doing my job.

You are doing more than your job. Your meticulous nature and ability to organise has been a stabilising force in my life since the loss.

Well, God always provides one for moments like this.

Talking about order, do you have your boss's will or do you know if he wrote one?

None that I know of. He was thinking of writing one. Really, the week he travelled, he asked me to contact his lawyer friend so that he could write one. He also wanted to give you some vital information.

What vital information? Did he discuss the information with you?

No, he did not tell me the information. He was, however, insistent that I remind him when he got back from Lagos so that he would not forget to tell you. It was on his mind.

Now he did not get back from Lagos and the secret went with him.

Ironical isn't it? By the way, why did you ask about the will?

A woman came on a condolence visit and said she was from Jay's bank. She asked questions about the will and other documents.

A woman? Uncle Christopher is his banker and his account officer. If anybody is to discuss his finance with you it should be him. That's strange.

Strange? She said she was not Jude's account officer but that he was one of their prime customers and that they were trying to put his portfolio in order.

Did you give her any documents?

No, isn't it what I have that I can give?

All right then, if anybody comes asking for any other official or personal information about him, direct them to me. We can't be too careful.

I will do that. Thanks for your care and concern.

I couldn't do otherwise, taking his influence on my life.

Not only your life. He touched everyone he met. Why must good trees always vacate the forest when gnarled and dead ones keep standing?

Part of the mysteries of life.

He was meant to lift burdens and he did.

I think so and to think he was just too humble and non-judgemental even in doing that.

It was his nature, his God-given nature.

Did the woman ask you about anything more than finance? Did she behave in an unusual manner?

No, she was gentle and very concerned. She kept on asking if we were married and she was very interested in my children. She wanted to meet them but they were at school. Why did you ask?

Considering the period you were in, many deceitful people will come around wanting to take advantage of you.

I will take note and take care.

I know you will but don't forget; any help or need at all, just call. I am at your service.

Thank you.

reminiscences

igba ara laa bura, enikan i bu Sango ni 'gba erun.

we take action at the appropriate time, no one swears on Sango
(the god of thunder) during the dry season – a yorùbá proverb

*monday, november 28, 2005
sowemimo road,
asokoro, abuja.
federal capital territory.*

Grief does not strike you like a vision or with a jackhammer's impact on a serene street. Grief seeps in slowly: silent mountain-spring waters, snake on a rock, or the slow dripping of water drops eating a boulder. Drip, drip, drip, then movement, seeping into your bones and consciousness, slowly and unstoppable. It demands your attention every second, minute, day, month and year. Grief is always there, standing by to remind you at every turn, every song, every place and every experience you have ever shared with the person you lost. If the person has been one you cannot cut away, then, grief sleeps and wakes in your house, and walks with you all the time. You are reminded at every turn you make, at every meal you place on the table, every song you listen to and every TV programme or film you watch. When you are outside the house, you are reminded by every car, every café or restaurant you have both gone to, by the person's favourite colour, and every idiosyncrasy that fits him or her.

Jude was still in my head. I had no option but to keep him there. Every morning when I bathed the twins (I haven't delegated it to the maids) I was reminded of him. Kehinde has his body in totality, even the birthmark on his left shoulder. I was not able to help myself. I didn't give away his clothes. As I stood in front of the wardrobe every morning, I remembered him. His jokes, suggestions about what I should wear and why, and his laughter and kisses as he left for the office. I missed the late-night discussions and planning. He was an avid reader, and looking at the bookshelf I remembered his discussions about the books he had read. His side of the bed, now empty of the books he was reading at any time, chillingly echoed his absence. The greatest pain, however, was whenever I slept on the big bed in our room I felt empty. I woke up every day hoping to see him curled up like a baby on the right side like he used to be. The empty space reminded me of him every morning.

The slow thud in my head kept bothering me. Each night as I prepared to sleep, the thud started in the centre of my head and continued till I slept. My relaxation exercises, which I had started again, seemed to be helping. I know it was my constant thinking about him that was giving me this pain. I decided not to make the pain the defining statement of my life. I needed to pick up my life and start living. Why is grief and loss such a lonely job? Why is it so difficult for people to understand what you are going through?

This loss had isolated me. Everybody stepped gingerly around me. People become more careful whenever I was around, careful about what they said, how they behaved and what they did. Here I was crying out to be hugged, touched, talked to, listened to and, can you believe it, made love to? Most people, however, did not know what to do, or say around me. They'd rather stay away or discuss banalities. I did not come from a large family and my knowledge of Jude's family was very sparse. What happened to Uncle Tùnji? After that memorial service in Lagos, he stopped coming around; I hope it was not due to my behaviour. Seeing him would help me get to Jude's family. I needed to show his children to them and this would help my children. They need to know their uncles, aunts and cousins. I must visit him tonight at Kubwa and make arrangements about how we can go to Ìjumu together.

twenty-two

FUNMI

closure

oro akoda, ko da bi oro adagbehin.

first cut is never as deep as the last cut – a yorùbá proverb

december 17-27, 2005

omole estate, ikeja

adeyemi ayoku close, ijumu,

lagos+kogi states.

They were all against me. The whole family were against me at the meeting in Ìjumu. My own family were against me too. After realising Jude's treachery, my first reaction was to go again to the woman's house in Abuja during the mourning rites and beat up the stupid interloper. I also thought of breaking down her house, burning all my husband's clothes and destroying as many things as I could lay my hands on. But knowing that it would land me in jail, lose my integrity, while sending my children into a motherless existence, convinced me otherwise. It was not the woman's fault, I rationalised, it was my husband's, and he was not here to bear his share of the punishment. So I thought very deeply about what to do. However, before I reached my final decision, I got a call from Ìjumu for an extended family meeting. The meeting was to be held two weeks after my mourning, on December 17th. I was to bring my uncle, my mother and some elders from my family. This immediately informed me that there were serious issues to be discussed.

The meeting was held early Saturday morning. We arrived in Ìjumu on the 16th, a Friday night, and were welcomed and treated very well. The next morning at around ten o'clock the meeting started, chaired by the oldest man in Jude's family. He was the last born of Jude' paternal grandmother. Almost ninety-six now, he started the meeting with a prayer and the pouring of libation.

Eyin ara isaju, iba yin o.
Iba ile ògéré afoko yeri.
Iba eyin to l'aye, e je ko ju mi se.
Iba eyin iya mi osoroga, atori je'nu,
A t'ese j'okan.
Iba Eledumare oba aterere ka'ye.
Ojiji firí, a ji p'ojo iku da.
Mo juba o.
T'ori b'ekolo juba ile, ile a la nu.
Ewure ti o si juba, a d'ohun a muso.
E je ko je mi se.

To those who had gone before, I salute.
 Respect and libation to Mother Earth,
 the one who uses a hoe to shave.
 Respect and greetings to those who own the world.
 Please allow me to succeed.
 Salutation and libation to my mothers,
 The witches who eat the insides from the head,
 and the heart from the feet.
 Libation to Elédumarè,
 the one who covers the earth like a cloth.
 The fleeting shadow,
 the one who changes a creature's day of death.
 I pay my respects.
 Because if the earthworm salutes the earth,
 the earth will open her mouth for it.
 The goat that does not pay respects,
 becomes the one that is tied up.
 Please let me be successful.

After the libation pouring and prayer, he sat down and kept silent. Another of Jude's uncles, closest in age to the old man, stood up and started the proceedings.

You are all welcome. We don't pray for this kind of gathering. Since God is God, we can't question Him. Who can reason with Him? Who can understand His ways? Who can think the way He thinks? We just must accept what He gives us. He is the one who gave us and also the one who took Jude from us.

Everybody at the meeting sighed and nodded agreement. Jude's death was an **oku ofo**, that is, a young person's death that should not be celebrated. It was sudden, an unexpected and sorrowful one. Most of those at this meeting who were older than him were not expected at his burial and wouldn't eat anything prepared for his funeral. That they were all present meant something was wrong, and they were holding this meeting to resolve a knotty issue. The family did not know that I had information about what they wanted to discuss and I kept my own counsel. Since I came to Ìjumu I had been on the lookout for my co-wife but I did not see her. That threw me off initially, but then I

told myself that the family would not bring her now. They would inform me first, gauge my reactions, and then hold another meeting where she would be introduced. Since they had not been able to know what my reaction would be, they guided against tragedy happening by first holding a meeting with me. The inclusion of elders was to bring those who can reason with me and prevent me from taking any rash action. There had been cases where legal wives had been told of their husband's treachery and such wives had run mad or collapsed. My family members were at the meeting as shock absorbers.

Life is full of pitfalls and constraints and it is our duty to surmount the constraints in order to live.

The whole meeting murmured in agreement.

In surmounting our constraints or barriers, we are bound to make mistakes. When such mistakes are made, we need to treat them as human errors.

The meeting was quiet but there was a ripple of agreement.

We are all flawed. Who is perfect among us?

No one answered.

In our day-to-day living, we offend people intentionally and unintentionally. When we offend and we know we have offended, the best thing is to apologise and show remorse. If we don't apologise and show remorse, we lose friends, family and colleagues. The one offended is expected to forgive, forget and accept the apologies because we all offend God and He forgives us. If we don't forgive and forget we equally lose friends, family and colleagues. Bi a ko ba gbagbe oro ana, a o ni r'eni ba se're. If we do not forget yesterdays and yesteryear's hurt, we won't find anyone to play with.

There were nods and assents. To me, the speech confirmed what I knew. As if agreeing with this thought of mine, the man went further.

Aya mi, omo mi, my wife and my child; we have to apologise to you. Our son has offended you and that means we are the ones who offended you.

This was directed to me and I had to respond.

Baba, ese ke, oko mi o se mi ko to ku. My father, there was no offence because my husband did not offend me before his death.

Omo wa, Juudu ti se e. O ti se Eleda e. Our son, Juudu offended you and your destiny. Since he is no more, we all have to beg you for forgiveness on his behalf.

The old man then prostrated himself and all other members of Jude' family, including the oldest man and Jude' aunt, Mama Kabba, followed suit. The men were lying prostrate while the women were kneeling. I quickly knelt and my family members also prostrated and knelt, asking the old man and Jude' family to stop the prostration and kneeling. If my family and I had allowed the prostration and kneeling to go on, it would

have been a curse on me. It is a taboo for an elderly person to prostrate or kneel for a younger person. Jude' uncle and others went back to their seats, and the uncle continued his speech.

Our son behaved like the fool that he was. O Gbe eran erin l'ori, o wa lo n f'ese wa ire. He was carrying the elephant meat on his head and he started using his feet to dig the cricket's hole. How could one be blessed by a beautiful, intelligent and hardworking wife like you and remain dissatisfied; most especially when such a wife had given him children of both sexes?

Dissatisfied?

Yes, my daughter. Your late husband behaved badly to you. He abused your trust and loyalty.

How, Baba? How?

You see, my daughter, our dear wife, there are many things in this world that have always existed since the beginning of time and we cannot change them, no matter how we try. They are in our human nature and it is sometimes very difficult to change them. We must just accept them as another aspect of our human make-up.

Baba, what did Jude do?

I knew his offence but I must play the role of the slighted, innocent wife and I did.

My wife, your husband married another wife.

Married another wife?

I shrieked and jumped up and down. I behaved as if I had just lost my husband again. I must show disgust with his action and pretend that I am hearing it for the first time even if I had the information. This gave them the opportunity to placate me and make me accept the situation. I fell down, tears on my face. The old man and Mama Kabba picked me up and sat me down. The message had not been fully delivered and these histrionics had disturbed the message. The old man went on.

We are sorry, my daughter. Your small wife gave our son twins. Two boys.

He fathered children with her?

Yes, my daughter. Nkan eni ki di meji, k'inu o b'eni. Our belongings do not increase and we get angry.

What treachery, what deceit? How could Jude do this to me?

He was a man. A man will always be a man.

Does that excuse being callous and uncaring? Does being a man excuse being unthinking, unfeeling and inconsiderate?

My daughter, it is not a new thing. It has always been part of our lives as human beings.

Meaning the family accepted the woman and her children?

What can we do? What should we do?

Baba, if the woman and her children have been accepted why hold a meeting with me?

We need to beg you, my daughter. We need to ask for your forgiveness. We have to implore you to accept your small wife as your sister and her children as your own.

Never, never. It will never happen. A person who was not there when Jude and I started building our lives together cannot come at quarter to twelve and take over. Never. She will not have anything, or her children.

Ah, life is not like that my daughter. Life is share and share. Life is caring and compromise. It was not the fault of those children for being born and having Juudu as their father.

No, no. No bastard shares Jude's properties.

Bastards? We don't have bastards in our family. We know the father and their mother. They are our children.

That was when my own mother gave me the Brutus stab. She quickly knelt down after the old man's response to my calling Jude's children bastards.

Baba, e am binu. Inu lo si n bi. Those children are not bastards and there are no bastards in your family. Baba, e ma binu. Please don't be angry.

My mother's apologies brought the meeting to a close and made me realise what I said. I had called Jude's family a family of bastards. In order not to project myself as a recalcitrant and stubborn wife, I apologised and said it was because I was angry and that I did not mean what I said about bastards. I thanked the family for informing me and that the action showed the respect they had for me. I accepted their apologies but asked that I should be given time to go and think about the news that I have just been given. They accepted my apologies and asked me to call them whenever I was ready to meet my younger wife and her children, and they talked about using such time to share Jude's properties. Walking out of the meeting room, I heard one of the family members telling others that there was no more problem because I had shown my reaction. The person said that what would have been problematic was my keeping quiet and not saying anything. He reminded them of the duck, the hen and the hawk's story.

I heard the story when I was small. My grandmother told me. It went like this. A hawk was teaching her little ones how to fend for themselves. She sent them out to hunt for birds to eat. The first of them that went out saw a duckling and took her to the mother

hawk. The hawk asked, “*What did the mother of this bird do when you caught it?*” The young hawk said the mother did not do anything but was silent and watching her take the little one away. The mother hawk asked her to return the bird because it was not the one she could eat. Another of the young hawks went out and caught a chicken. The mother hawk asked him, when he came with the chicken in his mouth, “*What did the mother of this one do?*” The young hawk said the mother ran towards me, fought me and tried to scratch my eyes out.” The mother hawk asked her children to eat the chicken.

The one who brought the duckling back then asked the reason for their being able to eat the chicken and not the duckling. The mother hawk then explained to them that the hen that shouted and tried to fight had done what she could do in trying to save her chick from being taken. She had made the noise and that was the only thing she could do, so she won’t do anything more. The duck, however, that had kept quiet and did not utter any word was more dangerous than the hen because nobody knew what she could do. She needed to be feared because quiet and taciturn people were dangerous. What the person was telling the family was that I had reacted and that was the only thing I would do about the case. Like the hen, I had made the noises I could make and they knew what my reactions would be and so they knew how to react to that.

My family members and I left Ijumu for Lagos that same day. In the vehicle on the way to Lagos, I was tongue-lashed by my uncle and my mother. They asked me what I thought I was doing, behaving like an unhinged dog in front of my in-laws. They questioned me about the training they gave me, asking whether it was meant to turn me into an unreasonable woman. After the tongue-lashing, my mother looked at my uncle intensely and then my uncle nodded. My mother then started talking.

Funmi, what are you crowing about? Were you just hearing such stories like your husband’s for the first time?

No, Maami, but I don’t think it is right.

Who’s talking of right or wrong? Your husband misbehaved and so what?

And so what? Maami, you did not see anything wrong in Jude marrying another woman, having children with her and not telling me? Where is the trust? Where is the love?

I am not saying it is wrong or right. Men are men; they have needs that control them.

They have needs that control them? We, as women, have our needs too, but we control them and do not allow our needs to drive us to treachery.

Yes, Funmi, it is not a new thing. As women, there are things we cannot change.

Maybe in your time, Maami. Times have changed; Jude was guilty of bigamy. It is an illegal act. He should have been sent to prison.

Who will send him to prison, you? Let's say he is still living, would you have started a case with him? How would your children look at you? Would his family allow you to send him to prison because he married another woman? Let us say you even have your way because the judge is a woman or man who did not have such cases in his family. What relationship would you have with him when he gets out of prison? Don't forget he is still your children's father. Would your children thank you for sending their father to prison?

Maami, all these are beyond the point. Jude caused me pain. He hurt me. Why am I explaining this to you? You cannot understand what I am going through.

Who says?

I say. You can't understand my pains. I hurt, Maami.

The same way I did?

How?

The same way your father hurt me too.

My father, no, no, that is not true. You are saying it to make me forgive Jude.

Is that so?

It was then that I looked at my uncle closely and, written in his eyes, were yesteryear's pains and the treachery. My mother dropped her head and I queried my uncle with my eyes but he turned his face way from me. I couldn't believe.

My father? He was a nice man, he treated you so well and you both loved each other.

Yes, we did but he strayed.

Strayed?

Yes, you had a half brother once.

A half brother... you mean...?

Yes, your father impregnated another woman. His secretary.

Aunty Lola? No, that couldn't have happened.

But it did happen, Funmi. You remember when you were in the secondary school and your father was away for two years?

When you said he went for a course in England?

Yes, he was in England alright, but it was not for any course. It was the period we agreed to separate for a while.

What?

I was unaware of Lola's relationship with your father. Lola was too nice, too gentle and too close a family member for me to suspect. The boy was seven years old when I knew. Then you were ten and had just entered the secondary school.

Yes, I remember that it was Aunty Lola who went to buy all the materials I needed for the boarding house.

She had always been handy. She took care of everything. The only thing I did not know at the time was that she was also taking care of Táyé.

How did you find out?

Do you remember the disagreement between your father and me when you were in the secondary class two and you were brought home very sick?

Maami, you mean when you rushed me to father's clinic and he was not there?

Yes, he was not there, truly. He was in Lola's house at that time. It was Dr. Rahman who treated you and gave you the emergency care that saved your life. Without his efforts, you could have died.

I remember that incident.

Later that night when you had stabilised and we were alone, I asked your father where he was that he could not be reached on phone and for the whole day when they were battling for your life. He told me a lie about going to the Ministry of Health for an important meeting. I accepted his lie.

How then did you get him to confess?

He did not confess initially but had to when the boy died and we had to go and greet Lola. Your father couldn't ask me not to come and commiserate with Lola; she had been too close for that.

So, what happened?

Lola, on seeing me, started begging me, saying that I had been too nice to her and that I should leave her because she was being punished for her sin. She became very wild and I had to be taken away from her presence.

What was father's reactions to all this?

He confessed. When we got back home, he confessed, crying bitterly. In his confession, I found out that he started the affair two years after we married and you were one year old.

You mean father was in a relationship for almost ten years before you knew about it?

Yes, is that different from your husband's peccadilloes?

I was numbed. I did not know what to say. When my uncle's driver dropped my mother at her home, she asked me not to do anything foolish and accept what I could not

change. I wondered how my mother had been able to carry the burden for so long, without destroying the beautiful picture of my father that I had from his death until now. For many days afterward I was rolling on my bed unable to sleep until I came to some conclusions. I was not my mother. I did not have a forgiving spirit like hers, and I decided to turn the tables on Jude. Tapping into my contacts in the banking industry, and adding the inputs from the private investigator and all other information I had on Jude's properties, I compiled a comprehensive dossier on Pastor Jude Àkànmú Babájídé. It took me two weeks to put it all together after calling up some favours owed me in the banking industry. Getting the details of his bank accounts was very difficult because of the coding and the maze the accounts were robed in. But I am an expert in that area too and I was able to not only unlock the codes but get cooperation from some of my protégées who are now top managers in the banks where he kept his money – and being ladies helped a lot too. Hearing my story alone was enough to get their cooperation and silence because they could relate to my pains. It was a bulky document, with my petition typed though not signed. I know the Crime and Corruption Commission will investigate in spite of it being anonymous because I included original documents of Jude's landed properties, houses and bank accounts. Driving towards the courier DHL Express's office, I started smiling.

*

EXEGESIS

Crafting a Novel

1. Conception and evolution of *Death's laughter*

There is a limit beyond which the novelist can theorize no further on his/her own novels and whence he must know how to keep his/her silence –Milan Kundera in (Elgrably, 1987, p. 24)

There are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal, nor between what is true and what is false. A thing is not necessarily either true or false; it can be both true and false (Pinter, 2005, para.1)

Introduction

Story telling and stories are inherently human. Literature consists of narratives and stories and concerning their histories and functions, a writer avers that:

Literature is as old as speech. It grew out of human need for it and it has not changed except to become more needed. The skalds, the bards, the writers are not separate and exclusive. From the beginning, their functions, their duties, their responsibilities have been decreed by our species. (Steinbeck, 1962, para.6 and 7)

Stories are “descriptions of dramatic events in fact and or fiction or fiction and fact” (Spiro, 2006, p. 15). Stories, written or oral, record events, comments and give insight into human actions, relations and relationships. They explain the noble, the ridiculous, the true, the false, the grotesque and the tragic in human nature and existence, or the writer’s exposes our, “many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement” (Steinbeck, 1962, para. 10). Stories, however, do not exist in isolation, or in a vacuum, nor do they come out of nothing. They are usually anchored in reality as experienced, interpreted or imagined by the writer or raconteur or by those whom the writer knows, or has read or heard about (Bird 1990, pp. 1-2). As for what is real and what is fictional, and the relationship between the two, this is always a mystery to those who are not writers or storytellers (Gordimer, 1995, p. 3; Grenville & Woolfe, 2001, p. 8). Novels do not come out of thin air either. There are stories behind them and their composition is taken from real events, situations and ideas. The novel *Death's laughter* is no different in its evolution. It is anchored in ideas, issues, happenings and people in everyday life. The turning of these elements into fiction does not mean they are not true.

This critical essay is about the processes of turning real life events and situations into fiction. It is divided into two sections. The first section explores the processes of conceiving the novel. It takes the reader through the pre-novel processes, including the novel's source of inspiration, its triggers and its incubation. The second section examines the techniques and tools used in the

novel and compares them to those used in other novels. It also explores the effectiveness of these tools within the novel while examining some challenges encountered in using the tools.

Devising a novel

Introduction

Writers' writings are based on multifarious objectives and motivations (Grenville & Woolfe, 2001, p. 7; Nasta, 2004, pp. 1,94,116 &129). However, there are usually incidents, actions, individuals or events that influence or trigger the writing (Nasta, 2004, pp. 22,34; Trikha, 2007, p. 15) and *Death's laughter* is no exception. An item reported in the media (Adesina, 2006; BBC, 2006) served as the trigger for the conception of *Death's laughter*. It was a story of a Nigerian evangelical pastor accused of bigamy and the duplicity and hypocrisy attributed to him in media discussions triggered these questions:

- i. What turned the Pastor into a duplicitous person?
- ii. Were there conflicts within him as he ascended the pulpit every Sunday, week after week, preaching against what he was practising and involved in?
- iii. How was it possible for him to manage and negotiate the conflicts within him?
- iv. What relationship existed between the Pastor living his belief, his belief leaving him, and the divisive, hypocritical relationship between the Pastor's life and the belief system he subscribed to?
- v. How was it possible for the Pastor to be involved in a bigamous relationship and keep it concealed from his first wife and possibly also those around him?
- vi. How was it possible for the Pastor to read the words from the Bible that forbade adultery and hypocrisy, enjoined moderation and simplicity⁴⁸, and still continue in the way he behaved?

I wondered, just as the journalist Adesina wondered about Pastor Femi Àkànní:

Pastor Àkànní must have preached messages on greed. On corruption. On adultery and fornication, while his congregation listened attentively. Rapturously. Oh! Pastor Àkànní, why did you live like Janus, the mythical god who had two faces? Why were you like Dr

⁴⁸See, for example, 'you therefore who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery" do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob the temple? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonour God through breaking the law? For 'the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2: 21-24(NKJV). "Do not wear yourself out to get rich, have the wisdom to show restraint." (Proverbs 23:4), "Better a poor man whose walk is blameless, than a rich man whose ways are perverse." (Proverbs 28.6) "Man is a mere phantom...he heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it." (Psalm 39:6). "A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children but the wealth of the sinner is stored up for the righteous" (Proverbs 13:22). "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil..." (1Timothy 6:10). "Keep falsehood and lies far from me, give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say 'who is the Lord?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonour the name of my God. (Proverbs 30:8),

Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, a split personality? Oh, why did you serve God and Mammon together? Why? Why? (Adesina, 2006)

Whereas the media stories were baffling to me, I was wondering if he was comfortable or not with acting the way he had and for such a long a time until his death. These questions agitated my mind for a long time and worried me so much after reading the stories in the newspaper. I felt like doing something about these feelings and decided to write a novella based on the story. I wanted to tell the story from a different viewpoint than the way most people had been treating the story: that of judging, blaming and castigating the Pastor. I wanted to paint a picture of the Pastor and his possible circumstances without being judgemental and to leave my readers to reach their own conclusions about him. This objective dictated the path I took while writing the story.

There are at least two ways of writing a novel like this. The first way, which I did not follow, was to conduct comprehensive research into the Pastor's life, acquaintances, relationships and coworkers, investigate the nuts and bolts of his existence, and then write a novel that is as close to these facts as possible in a fictionalised manner. This method would have posed some problems for me. For example, I would have become so involved and taken in by the facts in researching the Pastor's life that it would have become too difficult to be detached while telling his story, just like a kidnapped person can become enamoured with his/her kidnapper. Another problem would have been that of being judgemental and not being able to explore other areas and actions that might have impacted on the Pastor's actions.

If written in that frame, the reception of the story in Nigeria may also have been difficult. Firstly, the bureaucratic delays involved in getting adequate statistics (and current ones at that) and governmental documents (since most are stamped 'Confidential/Secret') in Nigeria would not have given me adequate time to collect all the data and facts concerning the Pastor's life. Also people in Nigeria are not willing to give information that can be easily sourced in more open societies. Secondly, there is the need to think of the legal dimensions of the incidents, which, though they may be in the public domain, are still too young and fresh (as the events occurred in October 2005). Furthermore, investigating and writing a novel based on the facts may open up wounds about events which the Pastor's family wants to forget, especially with the attendant negative media exposure that went along with the story.

The second way was to use the skeletal storyline that is known to every Nigerian and in the public space, and fictionalise it. This approach is in keeping with Vladimir Nabokov's statement that, 'Literature is invention. Fiction is fiction. To call a story a true story is an insult to both art and truth'. This statement to me is valid in the sense that since I was not the person involved in the tale, no matter what I wrote from research would still be an invention because there is no way I would be able to write the complete truth of the matter. I would only be reporting hearsay. The

decision I took then was to fictionalise the Pastor's story in the sense of creating different fictional characters who, in telling their own stories, create a montage of the Pastor. I decided against using the Pastor as my main narrator since the media had created a hated persona for him through their comments and opinions.

There are many novels based on true story or stories and an example is Capote's *In cold blood*. *Death's laughter*, however, is different in treatment from Truman Capote's *In cold blood*. The majority of the characters in *Death's laughter* were invented, whereas Capote stayed true to the events and followed a logical sequence of situations and events after the killing of Herbert William Clutter's family in Holcomb, Western Kansas in *In cold blood* (see Capote, 1966, p. iv).

Novel's objectives

Death's laughter was to be a short novel, that is, a novella. The novella is meant to complete the creative component of my thesis. But it was not to be. The novella took charge and the characters started evolving, with some trying to "take over the story" (Grenville & Woolfe, 2001, pp. 7-8). After consultations with my supervisor, I decided to expand the novella into a novel and submit it as my thesis creative component instead of the ten short stories and the novella as originally intended.

My initial purpose in writing the novella was to tell the story of the renegade Pastor whose actions, media reports showed, ran contrary to the image and beliefs he espoused, and to use the novella as an example of retributive justice. I wanted to examine the Pastor's nature and inner conflicts. As I started writing, however, this main objective became supplanted because of my decision to narrate the Pastor's story through other narrators. This deviation from my initial objective widened when I decided against having these narrators telling the Pastor's story. I decided on this approach, as behind the purpose of narrating Pastor Femi Akanni's story was the goal to give a realistic picture of Nigerian society, 'warts and all'. There was also the desire to transmit Yoruba culture, beliefs and ideas to my readers.

Another objective was to explore the human flaws in the Pastor's character. Contemporary stories of Bernard Lawrence Madoff and his Ponzi scheme (Espinoza, 2008), an Australian award-winner who was found out later to have another wife in another city, and the constant stories of tricksters and conmen in the media fired my intention to dissect Pastor Akanni's character. Also my experience as someone who had been away from family for the first time for a long time, made me to want to explore the effects of distance on relationships, marriage and love.

Influences within and without

We discover that we are not alone as we thought. We are in the company of the words of those who came before us, of other people's stories, other people's books, other people's words. (Pamuk, 2006, para.12)

The novel *Death's laughter* is not without its influences, both within and without. As stated earlier, the nucleus of the story was taken from the media and a range of influences came into play while fictionalising the true story. My background as a poet, playwright and film scriptwriter affected the structure, nature of the novel and its style. The preponderance of dialogue within the novel is a carryover from my film and drama background. The use of the framing technique in the novel is an imitation of filmic technique, and framing as practised in screen writing, transferred to story narration. The copious use of epigraphs and their choice are derived from my Yoruba culture and Christian beliefs. The decision to explore religious hypocrisy, human duplicity and related themes through the subconscious must have had their origin in the philosophic ideas imbibed from reading Aristotle, Soren Kierkegaard, C.S. Lewis and Plato. Character creation, narrative techniques and thematic explorations can be traced to the various writers I have read and these include foreign writers as well as those from my own background. Russian writers like Nicolai Gogol, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and others gave me insight into social realism and engagement with societies dispossessed. Their engagement with the problems of the dispossessed and underprivileged, combined with philosophical exploration and the atmosphere of their works, must have in one way or the other dictated some of the issues I examined in *Death's laughter*.

But Russian writers were not the only writers who affected my worldview and perceptions. Reading authors such as, Charles Dickens, Henrik Ibsen, J.B Priestley, William Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett, Sophocles, Plautus Terence and others made it possible for me to examine social ideas, human nature, human minds and psychology, motivations and conflicts. This in turn influenced character creation and the psychological exploration of my characters' minds and thoughts that I attempted to convey in the novel. My thinking about stream of consciousness as a complex and sometimes ambiguous narrative technique, as seen in Joyce's *Portrait of the artist as a young man*, Woolf's *To the lighthouse* and Faulkner's *The sound and the fury*, prompted me to use inner monologues instead in *Death's laughter* (See pp.27, 45,95-96,118,125,172,178 & 180-181).

Contact with some Nigerian and African writers like Chidiarama Adichie, Heblon Habila, Wole Soyinka, Femi Osofisan, Ayi Kwei Armah, Nagouib Mahfouz and Nurudeen Farrah, to mention a few, influenced my writing. In addition, my cultural baggage as a Yoruba from south-west Nigeria, gave birth to the story within the story, the epistolary structure, and the use of proverbs, folktales, libations and divination poetry in the novel. The examination of the conflicts between Christian

and African traditional religious, beliefs in consonance with the issue of clairvoyance and belief in life after death and appearance of the dead to the living is a residue of my Christian beliefs and the hybridity imposed on me as a postcolonial individual living in an Internet age. The use of email and mobile phone texting as narrative tools in the novel accurately reflect the Internet age and the emergent communication technologies, their convergence and their influences on the writer and the novel's writing.

Thus *Death's laughter* is an amalgam of thoughts, influences and ideas that constituted my being as a person. This, in addition to experiences, education, insights and relationships I have experienced and witnessed, and the society and settings in which I found myself, served as the wellspring from which I drew, not only inspiration, but also templates for my characters, settings and language used in *Death's laughter*. They are the periscope and binoculars through which I looked at life. This in effect created a story and a novel that is both peculiarly Nigerian in conception and an expression of my individuality as a person.

2. Tools and Processes – *Themes and Setting*

A story well told, so that it has the power to enter permanently into the imagination of those who hear it... always tell us two things.

It says, "here is what happened"... and it will say further "this is what it is like to have knowledge of such happenings...and to undertake the task of opening such knowledge to others" (Berthoff, 1969, p.11)

Introduction

Novels are based on, and explore, ideas, ideas meant to convey a story or stories. For example, Achebe's *Things fall apart* is the story of the internal struggles and conflicts going on within a strong man who cannot cope as he watches and experiences new changes introduced by foreigners tear through his community and traditional beliefs, tearing the strong man into pieces. Capote's *In cold blood* is about the senseless murder of an outstanding man and his family by a psychopath and ne'er do well, whose actions were fuelled by a false hint of money the family scion was meant to have on his farm. These stories examine human happiness, truth, weaknesses, passions and natures. Novels, however, like all types of writings, must convey ideas. A novel or story without an underlying idea or ideas is almost impossible to write as Addonizio puts it succinctly:

If your story isn't about anything, there's no reason to write it. A story needn't preach or be didactic, but there ought to be something at stake for the writer -- a question or concern the writer wants to explore. Anyway, it's impossible to write a story about nothing. What's important is that the writer is passionately interested in some aspects of the story. If the writer isn't interested enough to pursue something – an idea, a character, a series of events- the reader won't be either. (Addonizio, cited in Johnston, 2002, p. 172)

Even novels like Kafka's *The castle* and *The trial* and Heller's *Catch-22* that are categorised as novels of the absurd, explore ideas/s. Kafka and Heller explored similar themes: puny human being's struggles against bureaucracy's overriding and grinding power, alienation, basic moral and social dilemmas, the issue of sanity and insanity and war's absurdity, but they created a different set of novels. These novels are contrary to and use different narrative techniques from mainstream novels because, while seemingly without ideas, they still express and transmit various ideas. (see Cornwell, 2006; Harris, 1971; Li & Wang, 2009; Simon, 1960; Waldmeir, 1964).

Themes in Literature

A theme is "a point you -- *the writer* -- wishes to make" (Jute, 1992) (italics added). Achebe's main idea in *A man of the people* is corruption and its impact on the polity, just the same set of concerns as in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The beautiful ones are not yet born*. However, Achebe also examined relationships, the question of loyalty and friendship. Armah, however, while focusing attention on corruption in Ghana also analysed the quality of followership, bureaucratic red tape and honest people's inaction in the face of corruption and its effect on societal development. Orwell's *1984* while treating and explaining the effects of totalitarian regime and regimentation on the individual and society also examined closely privacy intrusion in the face of ubiquitous technologies and thought control by a faceless but gigantic bureaucracy within a technologically advanced nation that is totalitarian.

In writing *Death's laughter*, my intention as earlier stated was not to propagandize or specifically focus on an idea/s when telling the story. The intention was to write a story that can be:

A story well told, 'so that it has the power to enter permanently into the imagination of those who hear it'... one that 'always tell us two things'. It says, "here is what happened" ... and it will say further" this is what it is like to have knowledge of such happenings...and to undertake the task of opening such knowledge to others". (Berthoff, 1969, p. 11)

A story well told conforms to what Forster's avers in the voice of one of his hypothetical characters explaining the relationship between story and the novel: "I like a story... but I like a good story. You can take your art, you can take your literature, and you can take your music, but give me a good story. And I like a story to be a story" (Forster, 1974, p. 40). At the centre of my storytelling, however, there were some ideas treated.

Themes in *Death's laughter*

We have two kinds of morality side by side: one, which we preach but do not practice, and another, which we practice but seldom,
preach – Bertrand Russell

Introduction

Human beings love pretence, hence the prevalence of acting, masks, faces, drama and representations in human life. But the line between pretence and reality is very thin -- thin that sometimes when crossed, there is confusion between what is real to the individual and what is pretence. This may be the reason for the prevalence of tricksters, delusional individuals, conmen, and hypocrites in human politics, religion and other spheres of human existence. Since literature depicts human actions, nature and circumstances, it becomes imperative for it to reflect hypocrisy in human behaviours and life. Religious leaders stand as moral role models in their societies and communities; their fall creates doubts, distrust, loss of faith and consternation (Banerjee, 2007;

Blumenthal, 2007; King, 1987; Osunsanmi, Tangla, & Netter, 2010; Associated Press, 2007; The Sun, 2006; Turner, 2008). Religion by its nature has inherent qualities that make it easy for it to be misused and serve as a cheating tool in the hands of some/the wrong people (Molyneux, 2008). This fact tends to demonstrate the validity of Marx's statement that:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless circumstances. It is the opium of the people. (Marx, 1844, para.4)

To demonstrate Marx's assertion that religion is the 'opium of the people', which, tends to deaden adherents' senses the same way opium deadens pain and suffering, some religious believers (in almost all religions) do not think through or question religious precepts or doctrines as transmitted or translated to them by religious leaders. Followers of weird doctrines and rituals in the name of religion are found in all world religions (Anna, De La, & Rodden, 2008; Chambers, Lagone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Luna, 2009; Robbins & Anthony, 1982). Examples of cults in Christianity, for example, will include groups like People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, the Manson Family and the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas. There are cults in all world religions (Martin & Ravi, 2003; Moore, 2009; Newport, 2006; Richardson, 1993; Saliba, 2003; Wagner-Wilson, 2009). The prevalence of religious hypocrites and cult leaders in human history to date, whose charismatic powers lead masses of people to subjugate their mental power and beings to such leaders, has been a strong theme and source of character creation in literature over the ages. This has led to the creation of deceivers and hypocritical characters such as Tartuffe in Moliere's *Tartuffe*; Hester Prynne, Rodger Chillingworth and Prophet Jeroboam in Wole Soyinka's *Jero plays*, and Eugene Achike in Adichie's *Purple hibiscus*, to mention a few.

Religious Hypocrisy

Religious hypocrisy and hypocrites have been a constant concern in literature and therefore a viable theme in *Death's laughter*. Its treatment in the novel, however, is implied rather than direct. Instead of depicting Pastor Jude's acts and behaviours directly, we are made to see his actions in contrast with his beliefs and avowed precepts through other characters' perceptions and speeches about him. Only four times in the whole novel were there personal references to his feeling guilty about his actions or acceptance of being different from the image he projected (*Death's laughter*, pp.11, 66,191- 192 & 205).

In all these instances, we, the readers are made to glimpse into the conflicts going on inside the Pastor and his responses to those conflicts. However, a general and cursory reading of the whole novel shows the picture of the pastor portrayed from his secondary school days to his final position as a government official, as that of an individual who has the potential for being two-

faced. In the secondary school after his parents' death, he became a truant and joined a school gang but even the so-called 'bad boys' gang while recognizing his brilliance, wanted none of him (pp.47- 50). In the University, he belonged to a fraternity and was the *Capon* (the fraternity's head) (pp. 63-66) but his most intimate friend did not know about this until circumstances revealed the secret and he went to Dubai to look at the house he was bidding to buy without his real estate agent's knowledge (p.166). These acts gave a picture of a silent and smooth operator who acts rather than talks, one who is taciturn and can keep secrets. These portraits of the pastor in the novel prepare the reader for Jude's ability to juggle two faces – public and private -- that was inherent in him without revealing either of them.

In-depth analysis of the actions and effects of Jude in the novel brings religious hypocrisy to the fore. As a Pastor, he is expected to be monogamous but he had more than one wife and did not inform the wives about each other, manifesting gross hypocrisy in his behaviour. As a pastor, he is expected to be corruption-free but in the novel he amassed wealth, had houses all over the world, had bank accounts and assets that were not affordable on his salary, which implies that his behaviour contradict his beliefs and position as a pastor religious model in the church. It also means that he did not give heed to Jesus Christ's injunctions about wealth and the advice of not storing up treasures here on earth but in heaven where they cannot be destroyed. An advice Jesus gave because a focus on wealth may lead to a shift of priorities causing difficulties and distractions for the person wanting to enter heaven. These acquisitive tendencies belie his roles as a pastor and a religious role model. His getting involved in extra marital affairs and keeping it secret until his death, after the Valentine incident involving Christine in chapter sixteen (pp. 193-202), confirms his philandering nature and hypocritical attitudes to his religious beliefs.

Duplicity

In tandem with this religious hypocrisy theme is that of duplicity. Pastor Jude is duplicitous in the same category as Iago in *Othello*, Cassius in *Julius Caesar*, Prophet Jeroboam in *Trials of Brother Jero and Jero's metamorphosis* and Al- Sayid Ahmad Abd-al- Jawad in the *Cairo trilogy*. These are characters who are Janus-faced, living two parallel lives while deceiving and taking advantage of people as a result of the clinical separation between their private and public faces and lives. Barbara Oakley explored characters like this in her book *Evil genes: Why Rome fell, Hitler rose, Enron failed, and my sister stole my Mother's boyfriend* (Oakley, 2007). We may put Pastor Jude into this category. Though we may say that he felt his conscience pinching him before his last journey, there was nothing in the novel to point to the fact that he would have changed his mind and become a better person and told the truth about his situation if he had not died in the plane crash.

Subthemes in *Death's laughter*

Women's oppression

Woman? Very simple, say the fanciers of simple formulas. She is a womb, an ovary: she is a female- this word is sufficient to define her. In the mouth of a man the epithet female has the sound of an insult... females sluggish, eager, stupid, callous, lustful, ferocious, abased- man projects them all at once upon woman -(Beauvoir, 1989)

Women are, oppressed throughout the world, a situation that Anan sums up: 'violence against women is global in reach and takes place in all societies and cultures. It affects women no matter what their race, ethnicity, social origin, birth or other status may be'. (2008, p.3). Oppression of women in African society may be traced to colonialism because at:

The commencement of colonialism (and, of course, Christianity), rigid binaries about everything including gender perceptions were imposed on the African mind. Thereafter, the woman's role has come to be limited to sexual and commercial labour; satisfying the sexual needs of men, working in the fields, carrying loads, tending babies and preparing food. (Hammond & Jablow, 1992,p.150)

This oppression, while pervasive, is reflected in various ways and forms (Adeniran, 2006, p.45; Mama, 1997,pp.69-70; Nkebari & Nyenke, 2005,pp 424-425; Nmadu, 2000, p.165,166; Obbo, 2005,p.22; A. Ojo, 2002,p.127; Omolewa, 2002,p.116; Opaluwah, 2007,p.5; UNDP 2005).

Widowhood

The most debilitating of these oppressive forms of women's subordination is widowhood because it not only threatens women's lives but also affects the most vulnerable in the society. In widowhood the loss is caused through death and is one of the most negative, disorganizing and traumatic events of an individual's life (Bennet, Smith, & Hughes., 2005; Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007a; Kalu, 1989; Nwachukwu, 1993). Widowhood could be likened to "a sordid situation which merely allocated to the widow a position of societal scorn, *exclusion* and permanent membership of the wretched of the earth" (Shehu, Onasanya, Uthman, & Baba, 2010, p. 102) (italics added). Widowhood affects both sexes. There are many studies that examined suffering and the effects of widowhood (Aiken, 2001; Aniekwu, 2006; Connidis, 2009; Nzewi, 1989; Parkes, 1995; Saba, 1997; Sossou, 2002). However, when it comes to the degree of the suffering widows and widowers suffer, Trivedi, Sareen, & Dhyami (2009, p.39) citing many studies on this issue aver that:

There has been considerable controversy as to whether widowhood is a more difficult experience psychologically for men or for women. Widowhood is generally a greater problem financially for women than men, and economic difficulties can lead to lower psychological well-being. Several studies (e.g., (Davar, 1999; Reddy, 2004; Schuter & Butler, 1989; Thompson, Gallagher, Cover, Galewski, & Peterson, 1989) have indeed found that widowhood has a greater adverse impact on the psychological well being of women. Other studies, however (e.g., Jason, Luoma, & Pearson, 2002; Lee, Demaris,

Bavin, & Sullivan, 2001; Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992), have reported stronger effects on men. Still others have found no gender differences at all (Li & Wang, 2009).

The realisation that there are almost no cases in the world where widowers have to die for the loss of their wives, but there are many instances in various world cultures where widows are put to death, could lead to the conclusion that widowhood is a more difficult experience for women more than men. Loss of a spouse or any individual presents a myriad of problems, especially in the first year or so after the person's death. The problems include economic, social and psychological ones (Abdallah & Ogbeide, 2002; Amoran, Lawoyin, & Oni, 2005; Chen, 2000; Fasoranti & Aruna, 2007b). In Africa, however, these problems are compounded, most especially in Nigeria, where widowhood rites are sometimes more primitive and destructive. An example is this widowhood rite among some of the ethnic groups in Nigeria's Niger State:

The widowhood period among the people of Niger state is known as Takaba, which means confinement or mourning process. A widow observes it for four months and ten days exclusively in a separate room. The woman observing the mourning is often placed under different restrictions such as not being allowed to converse or have conversation with people, not eating food prepared by other women except those prepared by women who have experienced widowhood, not allowed to bath regularly and not changing cloth all the time, to mention a few. (Saba, 1997, p.5)

This type of rite is not exclusive to Niger state people in Nigeria. Widows' treatment in Nigeria ranges from the least helpful to the most cruel and obnoxious. Another country that may be said to surpass Nigeria is India where rituals like *sati* (widow burning) and other practices exist (see the Indian feature film, *Water*, Hamilton & Mehta, 2005). India is "perhaps the only country in the world where widowhood, in addition to being a personal status, exists as a social institution" (Trivedi, et al., 2009, p.38). The ill-treatment of this vulnerable group of women who are meant to be empathised with and treated fairly, and the effects of this maltreatment on their children, most especially those who become orphans as a result of the loss of both parents, led to the examination of this issue as a theme in *Death's laughter*. There are three instances of widows' treatment in the novel. The first time is reference to pastor Jude's grandmother, Adunni (pp.19-20), the second is in respect to Jude's mother, Akanke, when it was suggested that she killed her second husband and she had to move to Ijumu from Akure without taking anything or one iota of her property (pp.20-22). The third instance is Carmille's mother's case (p.67).

A more humane treatment of widows, however, is depicted in the way Jude's family treated Funmilayo after her husband's death (pp.228; 243-247). However, if they had been privy to Funmi's breaking of one of the taboos tied to widowhood rites, they may have treated her harshly. A widow in Yoruba land, like widows in Niger State in Nigeria, is "not expected to attend any festival or ceremony. If she does, she will be seen as an irresponsible and unsympathetic woman because the period is regarded as a mark of honour or respect for the dead man" (Shehu, et al.,

2010, p.172). Funmi trampled on this cultural rite by travelling to Abuja while mourning. Her friend, Tuminu, was surprised she travelled during this period (p.237). Some of her rebellious acts against the rites include wearing just dark coloured clothes' instead of totally dark clothes (p.227) and discussing and bantering with her friend. Also, the discussion of issues that are looked on as taboo during this widowhood rites period, like feeling sexually active (p.228), an issue that the late Nigerian playwright, Zulu Sofola graphically and tragically dramatized in her play, *Wedlock of the Gods*. These, her actions, were meant to portray her modern outlook and revolt against these cultural values and practices that are used in intimidating women. It is also to prepare the ground for her final decision in thumbing her nose against societal expectations when it comes to condoning her late husband's peccadilloes (pp.250-251).

The novel also focuses attention on the ill treatment of the dead person's dependents and not just the widow. This is reflected in Akanji and Foluke, Jude's father and Aunt after their parents' death (p.45). Disinheritance and gross ill treatment are prevalent in most Nigerian ethnic groups. Wills sometimes are not a sufficient safeguard against such maltreating of this group in Nigerian society.

Conflicts

Human history is the history of conflicts, conflicts based on resource sharing, beliefs, cultural principles, ethnic hegemonies and women (Helen of Troy as an example). Pockets of wars over the ages in various parts of the world are fought over beliefs, 'otherness' of people and their beliefs. Contemporary disagreements, like the Middle East crises, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Iranian wars and ongoing situation there and the pogroms and killings in the Congo, reflect human beings' inability to live in harmony and peace. Nigeria has had her own shares of conflicts and war. The 1967 Civil war and the ever-recurrent Christian –Muslim skirmishes and inter-ethnic conflicts are veritable examples (Kukah, 2007; A. Ojo, 2002; M. A. Ojo, 2007; Ukiwo, 2006, pp.26-28). The prevalence of human conflicts such as inter-faith or inter-ethnic, economic and other wars makes it a common theme for literature. Rushdie's *Shalimar the clown*, Adichie's *Half of a yellow sun*, Habila's *Measuring time* and Achebe's *Girls at war* are fictional works that look at war, conflicts and their effects. *Death's laughter* also examines this 'uncorkable genie' of human nature. In the novel, there is the reference to conflicts and their attendant problems. There are incidents of family conflicts (pp. 19, 22, 44, 79, 81 & 84), and ethnic conflicts garbed in religious costumes (pp.124, 131-132).

Corruption

One of the markers of economic underdevelopment is corruption. *Death's laughter* delves into this within its pages. In the novel, instances include sexual corruption as in the incident between

Carmille and Professor Adoki and the Professor's penchant for having relationships with girls young enough to be his daughters and who are meant to be his wards (pp.69-71). Corruption within government bureaucracy is reflected in Adekola's discussion of his job as a government contractor in Chapter Nine (pp.115-118 & 120-122). Moral corruption and political intimidation and corruption were reflected also (pp.146 & 147-148). The fact that Funmi had enough materials in her dossier to send to Nigeria's Crime and Corruption Commission confirms Pastor Jude's corrupt nature. An assessment of how he was able to amass bank accounts, buy homes in Nigeria and overseas and have shares in companies shows that he was living beyond his salary and must have appropriated money that did not belong to him. His feeling guilty about corruption confirms this. In fiction authors use characters, as a means of expressing ideas or themes but characters must have a place where their actions can be performed. This is the reason for settings in novels.

Setting

A setting anchors a literary work's location in the minds of the readers. It also serves as the space, or if one uses the theatrical metaphor, the stage, where the characters' actions, situations and incidents are played out. Without this space or playing area, characters' actions will not be seen as acted realistically. An attempted reading of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* would fail without battlefields, without the pathway where Macbeth and Banquo met the three witches, and without the castles and banquet space where Macbeth saw Banquo's ghost. Setting as a location can become the defining symbolic image or place giving meaning to the novel, play or poem. Would Charles Dickens' poignant message in *Oliver Twist* asking for more have been clearly presented without the setting of Oliver Twist's gruel plate in the workhouse in contrast to the table full of victuals of the workhouse's well-fed administrators. What kind of novel would *The castle* have turned out to be without the castle as a setting in Kafka's *The castle*? Is there the possibility of understanding and appreciating Milton's characters and actions as depicted in *Paradise lost* and *Paradise Regained* without his representation of Hell and Paradise? What would Dante's *Divine comedy* have been without the settings of Hell, Purgatory and Paradise in his cantos?

Death's laughter also uses setting as a means of creating space for characters' actions. Unlike many other novels, however, there is a difference in the way in which settings are depicted in this novel. In Thomas Hardy's Wessex novels, for example, he spent a great deal of time exploring and painting the atmosphere and environment of his characters' action, as the situation in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* show. One can vividly see, sense, touch and smell rural Wessex. This is the same in some other novels. One can create Holcomb village and walk blindfolded through William Clutter's River Valley Farm as Truman Capote described both settings in *In cold blood*; likewise

with Umofia in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Settings are, however, minimalist in *Death's laughter*. I used few markers as location points, like the following example.

monday, october 30, 1972
ndidem hall,
oluyole university.
ibadan, western state.(p.57)

There are very few detailed descriptions of these places. The question is: why is this so? This minimalist setting descriptions and minimal physical anchoring of specifically described space was used to universalize the story being told. Religious hypocrisy and human duplicity can happen anywhere. Every country in the world has eateries, secondary schools, housing estates, towns, villages or universities. What I am trying to achieve by giving skeletal descriptions for the spaces and places of the novel's actions is to ask the reader to fill in the gaps in their minds and transport the space markers into his/her own space and place beacons. In other words the actions being described can be happening in an area familiar to the reader. As an example, Oluyole University can be substituted as a university in Australia, Britain, USA, Kenya, Ghana or any other country. The effectiveness of this style is left for the reader to judge.

This is not to say that some other information could have been added in order to make these settings more vivid and locate them in the world and countries at the particular time the incidents were happening in the novel's locations. In addition to just naming the place of action, like ' the electoral commissions office, sowemimo street, abuja, federal capital territory' (p.185), time and period (February 14, 2005) were also used. Adding events of that day in Nigeria and world media would have helped readers to place the novel's actions in perspectives in relation to what is happening in the world the same time the novel's actions are happening. An example can show this:

november 18, 2010

electoral commissions office,
garki ,abuja.
federal capital territory.

Yenogoa, Nigeria- JTF attacks more militant camps, frees 19 hostages. **Lagos, Nigeria-** Two killed, women raped as Mushin crisis escalates. **Lagos-**Seized arms: suspect flees to Iran. **Abuja-**VP Sambo tasks media on security, 2011 polls. **New York-** Detainee- Ahmed Khalifan Ghailain acquitted on most counts in '98 Bombings. **Beijing-** Wu Yen an activist artist goes on trial. **Washington-** US taxpayers recover billions in sale of GM stocks.

All the information above is taken from November 18, 2010 newspapers headlines. This additional information would help the reader to place the actions being described in the novel in local, national and international loci of events. I was unable to use this method while writing this novel because I was outside the country and wasn't able to get all Nigerian newspapers' headlines from 1937-2005. Online pages of Nigerian newspapers have not been fully updated, so one cannot get archival copies of headlines from 1960's to the 2000's. One way is to use the present minimalist mode. However, even in this mode, Nigerian readers who are unable to identify Calabar, Lagos, Abuja and Ibadan will still create approximate pictures in their minds, in the same way as readers from other countries. I welcome feedback from readers as to how effective this style has been.

3. Techniques and Elements – Language and Narrative Devices

Introduction

"The agony it was to switch from Russian to English... not only style but subject undergoes a horrible bleeding and distortion when translated into another tongue" -Vladimir Nabokov

For Samovar, Porter and Jain, (1981,p.24) culture and communication are intertwined since culture not only governs communicators, the communication's content and processes but also shapes people's messages' encoding, meanings and communication's environment in relation to messages sending and interpretation... thus culture is communication's foundation. Cultures "embed meanings which language reflects" (Greenberg, 1971, p.56) and transfer during communication. Language then serves as cultural transmission's vehicle since "any language has a dual character: It is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngugi, 1994,p.13). When a language encounters another language, an exchange of influences occurs and variants of the second language develop. Nigerian English (NE) is a recognised form of English and many linguists have written or attempted to explain NE's existence (e.g. (Adegbija, 1989,pp165-177; Adekunle, 1985,pp. 36,38; T. Ajani, 1994,pp.34-48; T. T. Ajani, 2005,pp.1-23 ; Atoye, 1991, pp.1-6; Bamgbose, 1982; Bamiro, 1991,pp.275-286; Goke-Pariola, 1993,pp.219-234).

As a Yoruba writing in English, I faced challenges such as syntax transfer, diction appropriation and second language interference in my novel and also the use of the Nigerian English variant, which is different from the standard written English language. These can be illustrated with the following examples. The novel's opening sentence, *'My father, a Reverend, like his father, a storyteller'* could be rendered in English as, *'My father, a Reverend, like my grandfather was a storyteller'*. The first sentence as written, however, is almost a literal translation of Yoruba sentence structure into English. The Yoruba sentence would have been written as, *'Baba mi, alufa, bi baba re je asotan'*. Repetition of the word *'baba'* in the Yoruba sentence is because Yoruba language does not have a single word that approximates to the English word *'grandfather'*. Instead there is a phrase *'baba baba mi'* which translates into *'my father's father'* or *'the father of my father'*.

Diction was also a problem while writing the novel. Deciding on the appropriate word to capture Pastor Jude's father's and grandfather's functions in the novel's first sentence was difficult because of the variety of words expressing the type of functions I had in mind for them as their

community's wise men. The following Yoruba words connote someone who tells stories or whose roles include storytelling: *opitan*, *asotan*, *akigbe*, *apalo*, *asunrara*, *akejala* and *akewi*. These words could be translated as *opitan* – historian; *asotan* – storyteller; *akigbe* – chanter, herald; *apalo* -- raconteur or one who tells stories and riddles during moonlight period; *asunrara*- a chanter of a particular oral poetry of the Yorubas in Nigeria's Central region called *rara*; *asunjala* -- a chanter of Yoruba hunters' traditional oral poetry and *akewi*- a traditional poet. Each of those italicized names has storytelling functions in their performances. The use of storyteller in the novel, (which in English language can also mean a fib merchant, a gossip or a liar) was an unconscious attempt at separating and particularising Pastor Jude's father's and grandfather's roles and expertise in their community. I could have used the word '*griot*' but I substituted it with *asotan*- storyteller because that fits into what they will be called in Yoruba culture.

Another example is second language interference. Yoruba tenses are not as many as in English as the following table shows.

Table 1: Comparison of Yoruba and English tense structures'.

Yoruba	Tense	English	Tense
<i>O <u>sele</u> lana</i>	<i>past</i>	It <i>happened</i> yesterday	past
<i>O <u>sele</u> l'oni</i>	<i>present</i>	It <i>happens</i> today	present
<i>O n <u>sele</u> lowolowo bayi</i>	<i>present</i>	It <i>is happening</i> right now	present continuous
<i>O ti <u>sele</u> tipe tipe</i>	<i>past</i>	It <i>has happened</i> long ago	past perfect
<i>Yoo <u>sele</u> l'ola</i>	<i>future</i>	It <i>will happen</i> tomorrow	simple future

The underlined word in the Yoruba sentences is the verb whereas the English verbs have suffixes like –ed, -s, and is in phrases like 'is happening', 'has happened' and 'will happen', the Yoruba verb is only a single word '*sele*' meaning happen and time is the only marker signifying when the action took place-'*L'ana*'- yesterday, '*l'oni*'- today, '*lowolowo bayi*'- this moment, '*tipe tipe*'- long time ago and '*l'ola*'- tomorrow. These are some of the difficulties faced in writing the *Death's laughter* as a result of the differences between my thinking and creating language (Yoruba) and writing language (English).

A literary work must first be conceived, and visualised in the writer's mind. Then, the writer creates images, settings for characters, and develops the characters that will inhabit the places or settings he/she has created and the world he/she is creating in his/her mind. It is most likely that the writer will create the world, the settings and the characters from within his/her cultural

background. The greater part of the creative process and patterns may also be derived from the same milieu. Transiting from conceptualisation to words on paper is usually the next step in writing. This is usually easier for a first language (L1) writer writing for L1 readers. The transfer and translations of thoughts, ideas, cultural motifs and icons by a second language (L2) writer to first language (L1) reader can be problematic. This is because an L2 user like myself struggles to convey clear pictures and ideas to readers who may not have the tools of interpreting the pictures the writer is creating on paper.

The major challenge, however, occurs when an African L2 speaker of English, French or Portuguese tries to convey his/her cultural items or icons to these languages that do not have equivalent cultural motifs or icons. This challenge, which I faced, is in how to transfer or adequately convey these motifs, ideas and issues from the Yoruba language, which is indigenous or L1 to me, to a language that sometimes does not have the words or phrases to express these concepts. I also faced the challenge of making issues, motifs and cultural icons real, plausible and possible in a language that is not second nature to me. The first set of challenges is highlighted above. The second comes in the ability and dexterity of the L2 with a language that is foreign to him/her. In my experience as an L2 user, this is reflected in the choice of the foreign language's diction, my attempts at manipulating and using the imagery that is native to the language, and often the way I use the foreign language's grammar, vocabulary and meanings. Another challenge I faced is that of finding appropriate words, vocabulary or ideas within the foreign language to describe the experiences from my culture that I need to convey. There are usually many ideas, motifs or cultural items in the mother tongue and culture that are difficult to transfer into a foreign language. In trying to translate them, however, there is always a loss or sometimes a mutation or mutilation of the concept, icon or motifs being transferred.

The challenges facing L2 writers are glaring when one looks at African literature and African writers. The reason for this is not far fetched. African writers writing about Africa are writing from a background of colonialism. Colonialism as a system denied Africans their cultures and languages. The imposition of Western religions, culture, education and languages on African colonial societies, and the use of these in postcolonial times, has contributed in determining the worldview of the neocolonial and postcolonial African writer. This situation made the African writer a half-child, that is, one stranded at the crossroads -- not knowing where to go or which language or imagery to use. The ability to craft stories in the indigenous motifs and transfer them into the colonisers' languages of French, English, and Portuguese is not really an advantage to the African writer but something confusing and problematic. Most African writers try to tackle these problems and some African scholars such as Ngugi, Chinwiezu, Wali and others, have explored these problems.

Using the master's language: Language and the African literary writer

Caliban is stripped of his language in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and taught Prospero's language. However, what he profited from learning the new language was being able to curse in a language that is L2 to him:

Caliban: You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is I know how to curse: the red plague rid you,
For learning me your language! -(*The Tempest, Act 1, Scene 2, 364-366*).
(Vaughan & Vaughan, 2005, p. 176)

The above situation raises some issues and questions. Is Caliban stripped of his language because Prospero is the conqueror, civiliser, and coloniser? After taking over Caliban's island, willed to him by his mother Sycorax, why did Prospero not learn Caliban's language instead of forcing Caliban to learn his? Could Prospero teach Caliban a non-cursing version and register of his own language or was cursing inevitable? Is Caliban able to rise above Prospero's curses and use a non-cursing form of Prospero's language? Is there a form of Caliban's language? If there were, what are the effects of depriving Caliban of the language and the effects on his culture? Or, if we assume that Caliban's language was not erased, then we may ask, how did Caliban cope with the two languages he now has to navigate in order to live on the island that was his but now taken away from him?

Shakespeare's play treated few of these questions in the situations he wrote and staged in *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's portrayal of Caliban in the play, however, is germane when discussing language, power position and roles and relationships between the coloniser and the colonised, and the oppressor and the oppressed. Africans under colonialism, postcolonialism and neocolonialism were and still are forced to learn the colonisers' languages and culture. During colonialism the languages were imposed and forced, and in post-colonialism the Africans who passed through the school systems and wanted to interact with the wider world had no choice but to use the international language. The reason is that African indigenous languages and cultures were demonised, treated as heathenish but also made to look inferior and unworthy. In the colonisers' classrooms, pupils were punished and shamed when they used their mother tongue languages even after independence from the Metropolitan powers. This continued as Ngugi (1994) explains in his account that:

In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was the language, and all the others had to bow before it in deference. Thus one of the most humiliating experiences was to be caught speaking Gikuyu in the vicinity of the school. The culprit was given corporal punishment – three to five strokes of the cane on bare buttocks – or was made to carry a metal plate around the neck with inscriptions

such as I AM STUPID or I AM A DONKEY. Sometimes the culprits were fined money they could hardly afford (p.11).

Variations of the scenario above existed in most African nations, no matter who colonised them (Achebe, 1975,p.44; Memmi, 1974, p.151; Zabus, 1991, p.19). Furthermore, Ngugi (1994) shows that the colonisers and colonised peoples' attitude to English was the opposite of the colonisers' attitude to indigenous languages because "any achievement in spoken or written English was highly rewarded: prizes, prestige, applause; this was the ticket to higher realms. English became the measure of intelligence and ability in arts, the sciences, and all the other branches of learning. English became the main determinant of a child's progress up the ladder of formal education" (p.12). Sadly though, this practice continues to this day in most post- independent African countries.

The continuous put down of African cultures and languages, coupled with depictions of Africans as barbaric savages and less than human, in many years of Europeans' writings about Africa (Hammond & Jablow, 1992) deprived Africans and blacks of their dignity and integrity Achebe, (1973) observes that:

The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self-respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. There is a saying in Ibo that a man who can't tell where the rain began to beat him cannot know where he dried his body. The writer can tell the people where the rain began to beat them (p.8).

In order to carry out this onerous responsibility, the writer needs to use language that will convey situations and conditions appropriately to his readers and hearers, that is, his fellow Africans. The question is: what language will the writer use, the coloniser's or the writer's native language? This is a situation that becomes complicated, given that most African languages pre-colonialism were oral and unwritten. The colonisers – through administrative staff, missionaries, scholars and traders – developed orthographies for most African languages. So, when the writer writes in the modern version of his native language, he/she is still in contact with the colonisers' influences, though indirectly.

This 'heads you lose, tails you lose' situation has faced many African writers since colonial times until today. African literary writers write with a borrowed language and like the Yorubas say, 'the borrowed cloth never fits appropriately, it is either too short or too big'. How did the writers react to this dilemma? Did they accept the situation meekly and use the colonisers' language without any protest? Did they desert the colonisers' language and decide to use their native languages as transmitter of cultural idioms and ideas to their people? Their reactions have been a mix. Some accept the language and try to make something out of it. Some initially wrote in the foreign languages but later switched to writing in the native languages.

Language dilemma and coping mechanisms

No man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and 'language' here does not mean simply words, but a man's entire world view) (Achebe, 1975, p.44)

A language is a marker depicting a person's personality. A person's language, however, is a total summation of a person's being because through it communication takes place and the individual becomes embedded in his/her culture since "language is not inherent in man- the capacity for language, yes; but not language" (Achebe, 1975, p.30). Language, however, also serves as a vehicle of cultural transmission since, "any language has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (Ngugi, 1994, p.13). Taking a mother tongue away from the individual leaves him/her flailing and left at crossroads, neither rooted in the new language opened to him/her, nor well versed in the language and culture that was native to him/her. Having been deprived of expertise in the mother tongue through its suppression in the schools and the learning of the foreign one, the individual is left to use the acquired language, which he/she might never be well versed in like the mother tongue.

The individual then becomes a bilingual or polyglot whose expertise in the language that would have been most appropriate to express his/her being – the native language -- becomes suspect. This predicament is where most African writers who write in the colonisers' language find themselves. There is a need to share their stories with fellow Africans and non-Africans, but the challenge is how to do this effectively. Is it through the native languages spoken by their ethnic group alone or is it through the foreign language that is a world language? In using the foreign language/s, how easy will it be for them to transfer items, idioms and elements rooted in their native culture into the foreign language? What are they expected to do in cases where it is impossible to transfer such elements and idioms? And will the masses who do not speak the foreign language understand what the writer is saying?

Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (2002) discuss how postcolonial writers answer the questions above when they espouse how postcolonial writing defines itself through two distinct processes, namely:

The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English' involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege. (p.37)

African writers' defining processes are two-fold. One is accepting the "fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature" (Achebe, 1975, p.59), and deciding to write in the colonisers' languages. The second is writing in the indigenous or native languages.

Accept the obvious and appropriate

African writers need to be rooted in Africa and talk about Africa while giving the African viewpoints because “the African novel has to be about Africa and Africa is not only a geographical expression; it is also a metaphysical landscape – it is in fact a view of the world and of the whole cosmos perceived from a particular position” (Achebe, 1975, p. 50). This need arises because “there is such a thing as absolute power over narrative. Those who secure this privilege for themselves can arrange stories about others pretty much where, and as, they like” (Achebe, 2000, p.24). Only Africans can tell African stories most effectively. They are within the culture, understand the environment and speak the continent’s language. As one Yoruba proverb explains, a person’s head should not be shaved without his/her permission; Africans’ heads cannot and should not therefore be shaved without their approval or in their absence, which is what telling African stories without their input turns out to be. Being able to tell their stories, however, creates challenges about what languages to use in telling African stories. Is it the native languages, which restricts them to Africa, or is it the colonisers’ languages that reach beyond Africa and the writer’s own immediate ethnic group?

Achebe and others feel that, taking history and colonialism into consideration, the best option will be to use the colonisers’ language. Their argument is that it is not their fault or wish to be saddled with the colonisers’ languages, but having been coerced into learning and using the language, it becomes imperative that they must use the language. If the intention is to create cultural content and contribute Africa’s quota to the world’s cultural productions, then it is acceptable to use the imposed foreign language since, as Achebe (1975) puts it, ‘there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it’ (p.62). This option, however, raises a question, which is: how is the writer expected to use this imposed language? In response, there have been many efforts to indigenise the foreign languages Africans have been forced to use.

Among the Nigerian writers using a foreign language to express the African experiences are Amos Tutuola, Gabriel Okara, the late Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chinua Achebe, the late Ola Rotimi, Wole Soyinka and Femi Osofisan to mention a few. The intention of these and other African writers is to use the foreign language, to express and transmit their cultural experiences and highlight their societal and native environments. This has led to various experiments, which has led to an expansion of the foreign language in a way that it accommodates and reflects the writers’ cultures. The writers make the acquired language take on their culture’s inherent idioms, colours and linguistic tools like panegyrics, proverbs, riddles, indigenous terms, words and phrases -- the way a chameleon takes on the surrounding environment’s colour. When this is not enough, they resort to sheer transliteration and wholesale importation of indigenous language, which they then

translate. An example is Amos Tutuola. Take the following excerpt from his *The Palm Wine Drinkard*.

I could not blame the lady for following the Skull as a complete gentleman to his house at all. Because if I were a lady, no doubt I would follow him to wherever he would go, and still as I was a man I would jealous him more than that, because if this gentleman went to the battle field, surely, enemy would not kill him or capture him and if bombers saw him in a town which was to be bombed, they would not throw bombs on his presence, and if they did throw it, the bomb itself would not explode until this gentleman would leave that town, because of his beauty. (Tutuola, 1961, p.25)

One fact is glaring from his experiment and that is he succeeded in breaking the English language's syntactical rules but also made the language wear Yoruba's garb in order to express Yoruba ideas, idioms and culture. The above excerpt could be written in Standard English as follows:

I find it difficult to blame the lady for following the Skull Man. If I were in her shoes, I would have done likewise. As a man I would have envied him more because if he were to be on the battlefield, it would not have been possible for the enemy to kill him. If a town were to be bombed, the bombers would have postponed bombing until he left the town because of his handsomeness.

This standard rendition, however, does not truly express what Tutuola is saying and how it would be said in Yoruba language. A Yoruba translation of the excerpt shows this clearly to those who know Yoruba.

Nkò lé da obinrin náà l'ébi wípé ó tèle Agbári oku ti o jo okunrin gidi náà lo ilé rẹ̀. Bí n bá j'obinrin, n ó tèle lo àti pé bi n ti j'ókunrin n o jowú rẹ̀ ju be lo, nitorípé bí okunrin yi lo s'aju ogun, nitoto awon ota o ni pa tabi mu n'igbekun ati bi awon ti n yan ado oloro ba ri ninu ilu ti won fe so ado oloro si, won ko ni yin ado oloro na titi ti yoo fi fi ilu naa sile nitori ewa re le-ke-n-ka.

This translation shows that Tutuola did an almost word-by-word transliteration of Yoruba language into English. For example, Tutuola's 'I could not blame the lady for following the Skull as a complete gentleman to his house at all' can be translated into "Nkò lé da obinrin náà l'ébi wípé ó tèle Agbári oku ti o jo okunrin gidi náà lo ilé rẹ̀." These Yoruba word-by-word translation patterns are almost absent in the standard English translation as the translation of the standard English shows, 'I find it difficult to blame the lady for following the Skull Man' is likely to be, "O soro fun mi lati da obinrin na lebi nitori o tele Okunrin Agbari naa." Another Nigerian writer who tried forcing English to follow the patterns and syntactical rules of his native language is Okara (1963).

Explaining his methods in transferring Ijaw idioms and language into English in his novel, *The Voice*, Okara (1963) says:

In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn. I had to

study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in it (sic.) was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. (p. 15)

To him the method and the exercise are “a fascinating exercise”; it is, however, burdensome, because the writer must work in two languages in parallel and try to make sense of them while converting ideas, patterns, idioms and linguistic forms from one into the other. A shortcut in this burdensome journey is what other Nigerian writers who accept using the colonisers’ language have tried. They write in Standard English but use it in a way that expresses the nuances and embedded meanings of their own indigenous languages. They extend Standard English by adding traditional folklore, imagery, and idioms while making them express peculiarities of their native languages. Generations of Nigerian writers in English from Achebe, Soyinka, Flora Nwaku, Tess Onwumere, Ola Rotimi, and Osofisan to present writers like Biyi – Bandele, Ngozi Adichie and Habila Helon, Sefiou Atta have tried this. Their experiments have created a situation where English has been made to express what even native speakers and users of English could not have made the language do. An example will be appropriate here. Osofisan, for example, uses Yoruba riddles, folklores and panegyrics in most of his plays. In *Ajayi Crowther: The Triumphs and Travails of a Legend*, for example:

EMMA. (*Laughing and dodging like the rat*) Adiyee yee I ‘ve got the ransom!

CROWTHER. Then answer quickly! The ball of fire is—?

EMMA. A ripe palm fruit! No amount of water can quench it!

CROWTHER. Bravo, my daughter! Now it is your turn.

EMMA. Well, emmm ... Right, try this one: I am a black, black charcoal. But when I fall into water, I turn white! Asa mbo! (Osofisan, 2006, p.17)

The above excerpt is a transmutation of Yoruba riddles and story-telling techniques into English. Buried within the excerpt, however, are linguistic and cultural nodes that cannot be fully explained or transferred to English. In the same play there are examples of folklore where Osofisan, (2006, p. 34- 44) tells the story of Eyinrola and Ajayi Crowther’s panegyric (pp. 44-46). The writers also use pidgin English as a tool. Pidgin is formed from an amalgamation of words from English and the vernacular to form a new language. The late Ken Saro-Wiwa wrote a novel in pidgin titled *Souzaboy*. Pidgin represents a lower-class language spoken sometimes by people in the upper class. In *From Zia with Love*, Soyinka uses pidgin, as he does in some other plays of his.

Detiba: What did I tell you? It’s business first and last.

Emuke: Wait small. Tell me how this ‘ting dey work

Detiba throws up his hands in despair.

Warder: E get certain ‘ting wey you go say; that’s all. You tie the bandufu for your waist, or put am somewhere it must touch your body... - if you get oriki, you call all your oriki. Then finally, the place where you wan land. Dat one very important, because if no tell this

medicine where it must take you, e fit land you for inside jungle or overseas, or even back inside your enemy hand. (Soyinka, 1992, p.69)

Arguably, Nigerian writers' experiments with English deepen and expand the language's capacity more than the way it is being used in its native form. The Afro- European writer must first accept the fact that for reasons of history and education he/she is privileged among his compeers and compatriots. As message transmitter about his society to fellow compatriots and foreigners, the language s/he uses rests on his/her decision. No matter the choice made, however, the majority of his compatriots or fellow Africans or Nigerians will always be marginalised because they lack the privilege he/she has. There must also be a realisation that whatever language is chosen there will be challenges. To cope with the challenges and transmit the messages should be what the writer devise strategies for.

Death's laughter and the language dilemma

I was born a Yoruba, the ethnic group of Wole Soyinka, the 1985 Nobel Laureate for literature. Like him, I had the rich Yoruba cultural heritage's legacy, but unlike him, I did not have the privilege of a grandfather initiating and immersing me into those cultural traditions and legacies (see Soyinka's (1991) *Isara: A voyage around "Essay"*).

My grandfather, unlike his, was our village's church's Baba Ijo (church's father)⁴⁹. I grew up immersed in Christian doctrines, liturgies and rituals instead of being filled with both the pedestrian and arcane aspects of my inherited knowledge, cultural traditions and customs. My lack of initiation into the community's secret cults and groups, because they were labelled paganistic, further pushed me into Christianity. The erosion of my traditional values and culture became consolidated when I started schooling at the age of five. English became the language of instruction and, until present times, my main language of communication and learning. Paradoxically, my own mother tongue has become an appendage and one peripheral to English. I had become a hybrid and the 'half-child at the crossroad' (Bhabha, 1994; Soyinka, 1963), neither well immersed in my cultural heritage nor adept in the language and culture I was forcefully saddled with as a postcolonial child.

⁴⁹ The term 'church's father' does not approximate the meaning of the phrase 'Baba Ijo'. The Baba Ijo and the Iya Ijo (church mother) are the two most respected, not necessarily the eldest male and female in the Church. They are patron and matron of the church and highly committed adherents of the church. In some cases they are instrumental in bringing the church into the village or at times, their parents did and they inherited and consolidated the power of the church in the community. The two also serve as elders of the church and the powerhouse of the church establishment. As a result they are usually strict and conservative individuals who repudiate all things 'paganistic and heathenish'- Eugene Achike in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*- and overzealous in the service of their new religion and examples to the lost within the village or community who are still in 'darkness'-Nwoye in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

My writings reflected this and language use in the *Death's laughter* is a manifestation of this hybridity. Like other African and Nigerian writers, I tried to bend the English language's overbearing and eroding power to my advantage. This has resulted in various devices used in this novel to subvert the overhanging power of English in my life. These devices include epigraphs, proverbs, folktales, divination poetry, footnotes and Yoruba language in instances that it became difficult for me to find appropriate words or phrases in English to express what I wanted to say in my native language.

Epigraphs

A *dictionary of literary terms and literary theories* defines an epigraph as "an inscription on a statue, stone or building, the writing (legend) on a coin, a quotation on the title page of a book or chapter and a motto heading a new section or paragraph" (Cuddon, 1991). Epigraphs help the writer to quickly summarise the theme/s and focus of his/her writing. A careful reading and interpretation of the epigraph/s gives the reader a quick glimpse into the writer's mind's inner sanctum and perceptions about the piece of writing. Epigraphs in *Death's laughter* are a collection of Yoruba proverbs, songs, biblical passages, one historical quotation and one literary quotation. The majority of these are Yorùbá proverbs and sayings. An epigraph comes at the beginning of every chapter and sub- chapter in the novel. They were teasers meant to whet the reader's appetite while preparing them for what they will be reading. In addition they are a means of transmitting Yoruba culture to both non-Africans and non-Yoruba Nigerians. However, they ended up performing more than the above objectives, as the following analysis will show.

Yoruba cultural items constitute the bulk of the epigraphs, which make a distinction in the novel between a cosmopolitan persona and local or national individuals and serve as a means of differentiation. In Chapter 8, the epigraphs consist of literary, historical and biblical quotations instead of the common Yorùbá sayings, song or proverbs. We may aver that the introduction of Francis, a cosmopolitan individual, as a character is the reason for this. Francis is well travelled and liberal minded. He has followed paths of atheism to diverse religious beliefs and through his life's circumstances has had a personal experience with God. An avid reader, who quotes Dostoevsky and the Bible copiously and also a poet, he needed to have epigraphs that fit his cosmopolitan picture. For this reason Flavius Joseph and Somerset Maugham's quotations were used in his chapter.

The preponderance of Yorùbá proverbs, songs and sayings in the epigraphs becomes germane when one realises the proverb's importance in Yorùbá's speech acts and discourse. Proverbs, as Achebe (1967) opines, are 'the palm oil with which life's yam is eaten'. The Yorùbás, just like the Ibos, believe in proverbs as the glue that fuses ideas and thoughts together. Yoruba culture

attaches great importance to words, speech and utterances because of its perceived psychical and spiritual properties and powers. So, the Yorubas, "approach speech with deliberate care, taking great pains to avoid careless, casual, or thoughtless statements whose damage might outlast lifetimes". The proverb 'Eyin lórò; Bó bá balè, fífó ní ńfó (Speech is an egg; if it drops on the floor what it does is shatter) bears witness to this concern" (Owomoyela, 2004, p.1). The epigraphs also help in categorizing the novel's characters since they give an insight into the character's or narrator's background, as explained in Francis' case above. Other examples include Akanji (Pastor Jude's father), a reverend whose epigraphs were all taken from the Bible (pp.43&46), while those of Jude's mother Akanke (pp.18, 23, 24, 26 & 28) and Aunt, Foluke (pp.31, 33& 36) were all taken from Yoruba proverbs and sayings to confirm their being Yorubas not much influenced by either Christianity or modern ideas.

Proverbs

Those who do not speak a language can never recognise all its proverbs (Taylor, 1985, p.5)

Wisdom is learned through the wisdom of others- Yoruba Proverb

Death's laughter contains many proverbs and they play an important role in the novel. Proverbs are "pithy truths" (Kurien, 1998,p.S2), and "nonliteral language" (Katz & Ferretti, 2001, p.193). Proverbs for Owomoyela, (2004,p.2) are "incisive in propositioning, terse in formulation and deduced for close observation of life, life forms and their characteristics and habits, the environment and natural phenomena and sober reflection on these." Proverbs have been part of human existence and culture since the beginnings of time and are ubiquitous in all human societies and cultures (Adewoye, 1987 ; Ferretti, Schwint, & Katz, 2006; Hussein, 2005; Odeunmi, 2006; Pasichiniuk, 1999). Proverbs functions include:

Mirroring the culture, affording members of the society a means of psychological and emotional release through the venting otherwise prohibited expressions, aiding in education and socialisation; and... maintaining conformity to accepted patterns while also validating institutions, attitudes and beliefs. (Bascom, 1965, pp.279-298).

Proverbs are also 'aesthetic' and use "all of the devices we commonly associate with poetry in English: meter, binary construction and balanced phrasing, rhyme, assonance and alliteration, conciseness, metaphor and occasional inverted word order and unusual construction" (Abrahams, 1972, p.119). Proverbs by their nature thereby contribute to greater understanding among human beings and build a communal ethos. The proverb's nature and importance make it useful in *Death's laughter*. For a novel set in Yorubaland reflecting societal culture and striving to validate Yoruba institutions, attitudes and beliefs, as Bascom postulates above, the novel's use of proverbs is appropriate.

Proverbs in *Death's laughter* when used as an epigraph serve as a means of structuring or summing up the tale or story in the sub-chapter. They also give insight and interpret actions and events within the sub-chapters. By so doing, they add meanings to the story being told. In the second sub-chapter of the novel's Chapter One, titled the flight, with Pastor Jude as the narrator, the epigraph is a Yoruba proverb: 'Eda to m'ola ko si, to dia f'eni ti o ni d'ola; to n d'osu mefa'. This translates as, 'nobody knows tomorrow; the divination for the person who won't last tomorrow but is planning for the next six months.' In this sub-chapter pastor Jude reminisces at the airport lounge on his relationship with his wife. During this time, he met members of his church and invited the pregnant new bride to the church's Pregnant Women's Counselling Group, which he conducts every Thursday. He also made an arrangement in his mind to call his family in Lagos and visit them the following week. All these plans came to nought because he lost his life in a plane crash the same day. The epigraph, therefore, summarised what happened in the sub-chapter because the pastor was not thinking of death while making those plans. The two proverbs used on page 38, 'oro ki sa wuwo ka f'obe bu' (words cannot be too heavy that we cut it with a knife) and 't'ibi t'ire la da ile aaye' (the world is created containing good and evil) summarised the kernel of Chapter Three's third sub-chapter. In this sub-chapter, Foluke, Pastor Jude's aunt is afraid to tell her brother Akanji, a Reverend, the need for traditional rituals and sacrifices for the newly born Jude. Her brother used the first proverb in allaying her fears by pointing out she needs to give the message. Proverbs, such as those in the above examples, give added meanings and explain incidents and events. The proverbs in the novel reflect Yorubas discourse patterns and tools.

Folktales and divination poetry

Nigerian writers use oral literature elements in their writing. One outstanding example is Amos Tutuola whose works, *My life in the bush of Ghosts* and *Palmwine drinkard*, were based on Yoruba folktales. Folktales and divination poetry are forms of Yoruba oral literature and verbal arts. Diviners using special sight, special acuity or clairvoyance, which are enhanced through rituals and medicine, foretell the future or give solutions to people's problems (Bascom, 1980; Douglas, 1984; Eriwo, 1979; Horton, 1964; Meek, 1991). The diviners use objects and other paraphernalia and, in the case of Yorubas, stories and texts called Odu Ifa. Though there are folktales in Ifa verses, the Babaláwo (the diviner) is not expected to tell folktales but Ifa's revealed truth (Bascom, 1969, p.131). This is reflected in *Death's laughter*. On pages 34-35, Foluke, the pastor's aunt, heard Baba Fagbemi's recitation of one of the Ifa corpus, Edi Meji. The recitation uses a folktale to tell the likely end of the newborn babe. This, and the use of folktales in the novel, is a fallback to my culture in order to further my second language use. One other tool I used as the novel's language coping mechanism is footnotes.

Footnotes

Death's laughter has 47 footnotes, yet it is a novel, not a textbook. Though they explain points or ideas unknown to readers or clarify confusing issues, footnotes may be intrusive or distracting for the reader (Hartley, 1999,p.207). Why load a novel with forty-seven footnotes? Of what use are they? Are they really necessary? In *Death's laughter* they are necessary because of the novel's pedigree. The novel, written as part of a PhD in creative writing, is written in a cultural milieu different from the author's own. There were challenges encountered transferring Yoruba cultural idioms and concepts into a non-Yoruba cultural climate as earlier stated in this chapter. The difficulties were in language, perception, beliefs and culture and they were interrelated and intertwined. I used footnotes to foster intercultural and transcultural understanding in this cultural encounter.

Along with epigraphs, *Death's laughter* also used folktales as explanatory tools. For example one of the epigraphs, a Yoruba proverb, ' *Bi ewe ba pe l'ara ose a d'ose, b'obinrin ba pe n'ile oko a d'aje* (When the soap wrapping leaf stays too long with the soap, it becomes soap; when a woman stays too long in her husband's house she becomes a witch) impressed my supervisor as being unusual in its meaning. Though there was no footnote for this, explanations of the proverb's varied meanings had to be made that a woman married for a long time to a man becomes so familiar with him that relations and onlookers will term her a witch because of her ability to predict her husband's actions, behaviour or idiosyncrasies. The same situation occurs on the hawk and the duck's folktale I used in explaining Fúnmiláyò's final act in the novel (*Death's laughter, pp.247-248*). There were queries about the relevance of the tale to my novel. The tale differentiates between a loud and a silent person. The loud or the talkative person is predictable while the quiet or silent person is unpredictable. One is unable to decipher a silent or quiet person's mind. Fúnmiláyò's silence and behind-the-scene actions were unknown to her husband and her husband's relations and this made it impossible for her to be checkmated.

Death's laughter depicts Yoruba culture though it is written for both Yoruba and non-Yoruba readers. Efforts were made to limit the number of cultural references but many were pertinent to the novel. The challenges in using them, however, were in being able to translate them for a non-Yoruba in a way that s/he will get the embedded meanings in these cultural practices. In writing this novel, I found this to be a big challenge because there are instances where a deeper exploration of these cultural items will be confusing. An example will suffice here. Footnote 3 for *Aisiki* is explained as a person's good fortune is brought or predestined from heaven. However, it means more than this because *Aisiki* to the Yorubas summarises an individual's total essence. It goes beyond good fortune, because it is the person's totality and essence of being. When *Aisiki* is

taken from an individual, the person becomes an empty shell without his/her true essence, or as the Yorubas will put it an *Oku Aye*, that is, a living dead or walking corpse. It is not only that the Yorubas believe each individual comes with his/her essence from heaven, but also they believe that this can be tampered with, taken from someone or even transferred to another person through occult means and the work of malevolent spiritual entities. Explaining in-depth what *Aisiki* means entails conceptual challenges and transference gaps. For example, it is possible to write *Aisiki's* meaning contextually into the novel such as,

The Yorubas believe that an individual's good fortune, their *Aisiki*, is brought from heaven and that it can be stolen or used by other people. Since I was becoming richer and more successful, rumours started circulating that I killed my two husbands in order to use their *Aisiki*. (*Death's laughter*, p.22)

Though a non Yoruba reader will be able to have an understanding of what *Aisiki* means through the above but the footnote,

¹ **Áisikí:** An individual's good fortune, which the Yorúbás believe, is brought from heaven. They also believe that spirits, witches, wizards or people through medicine or the occult could change a person's **aísikí**, **and** that a person's **aísikí** could be stolen or used by other people. Hence the prayer, "k'araye ma pa kadara mi da, ki aye ma lo **aísikí** mi. (May human beings not change my destiny, and may they not use my good fortune) (*Death's laughter*, p.22)

extends the meaning thereby deepening the understanding of the word –*Aisiki*– for non Yorubas. *Death's laughter's* footnotes exemplified some of the cultural ideas non-Yoruba readers will not be used to but even in translation many embedded meanings and aspects had to be simplified. The dilemma of what to add or deduct in transferring meanings of cultural acts, ideas practices were not only baffling for me but placed me on a tight rope walk. I have to juggle between explaining the ordinary meanings of the cultural items in context within the novel and writing bulky footnotes that will become a source of distraction and intrusive to the readers' enjoyment and understanding of the story I was telling. I finally decided on using footnotes. How well I have used these footnotes as negotiating tools in conveying the depth of my language and culture is explored next.

Footnotes as Negotiating Tools

How do footnotes transfer cultural ideas? Can they bridge the gap between cultures, meanings and levels of understanding? Footnotes are used as a means for transferring meanings and a tool of clarification. The assumption behind their use is the explanation of what remains unknown to a reader, or what requires clarification or exemplification of specific idea/s to a reader. Footnotes in *Death's laughter* are categorised into those based on cultural insight, proverbs and wise sayings, citations, pidgin-derived terms and common Nigerian terms that I had assumed would be known to any reader until one of my Co-Supervisors queried them and I had to explain. One of the

cultural beliefs used in the novel that I needed to explain through footnotes 9 and 11 is the summary of the *Ese-Ifa (Edi Meji)* that unless the person whose *akosejaye* is divined performs the necessary *etutu* (rituals and sacrifices), the person will be well known, rich and become important but will die an untimely death. Yorubas will ascribe Jude's death in the plane crash in the novel to his father's inability to perform the *etutu* because of his Christian beliefs. This belief is understandable to Yorubas but is likely to be confusing to a non-Yoruba who will be unable to relate to how the inability or refusal to carry a metaphysical injunction given when a baby is less than two weeks old could lead to the death of the baby now a man, forty- five years later.

The decisions on what to footnote and what not to include were determined by my Supervisor's queries and the extent of what to explain was my own decision. Tension existed in determining how far I can go when explaining one concept or the other. Footnote 20- Aransi- for example is explained in the footnote thus:

Aransi: Types of Yoruba occult practice in which words, curses or animals like snakes or other dangerous animals (or in the case of a hunter, mistaking a human being for an animal) is sent to a person through remote means and the person carries out such injunctions without knowing why. This is usually achieved through word of mouth. **Asasi** is almost like **aransi** but the difference is that in **asasi** the person targeted would not realise what is happening until after the event. For example, a man may be called to kill his wife or do harm to his children and he would carry it out without understanding or knowing why and will greatly regret the action when his vision clears.

What I left out of the footnote above includes explanations about *asasi*, *asise*, *asete*, *apeta* and *anperi*. All these are various forms of *Aransi*. A more comprehensive explanation of *Aransi* would have been as follows,

Aransi: That which is sent to an individual and expressed in curses, utterances, masks, dangerous animals like snakes, insects like bees, puppets or effigy or at times unexplainable abnormal behaviour. Aransi is suspected when a perfectly normal person behaves exceedingly different from the normally consistent manner to which the man had been known for. Yorubas will explain such that someone somewhere had uttered some words that remotely controlled such a person to take such action. In cases where puppet, effigy, dangerous animal or insects or daemons is sent, the individual will be the only person seeing those dolls or daemons or in case of animals or insects, they will materialize where they are never expected to be. These stories are not schizophrenic attacks or that of split personality disorders because cases where individuals have been crying out of being beaten by unseen people or forces and later welts were seen on their bodies had been documented. **Aransi** can be manifested through **asasi**, **asise**, **asete** and **apeta**.

Asasi is when the individual's behaviour is affected through occult or deep hypnotism and the person casting this spell on the individual does not need to see or be in the same place with the individual being ordered to do harmful actions to himself /herself or other people. A scene in (Kopelson, Kopelson, Milchan & Hackford, 1997) film 'The Devil's Advocate' where a Haitian performed some rituals by sticking pins into a bull's tongue thereby making a court witness to become dumb in court thereby truncating the case will

be a good example of such as practised in the Diaspora. In Yorubaland, the person may even vomit blood the more he/she tries to talk.

Asise is when through occult and medicine a person is made to start misbehaving and becoming obnoxious most especially to those close to him/her and those who loves him/her or are in position to help him/her. This stage will lead to **Asete** where s/he becomes hated and ostracised by all s/he comes across. People will hate the person without any tangible reason. This phase of the person's life will be totally different from the life the individual had been living before. In most cases this type of **Aransi** is sent to responsible people or those in authority who are blocking evil people from achieving their aims. **Apeta** is where a person's *Ori* or *Eda* is called metaphysically most times when the person is asleep or in the night. The person answers from sleep and die.

The explanations above as a footnote to explain just a reference to the concept on the novel's page 47 would have been a source of distraction to the reader. *Death's laughter* is a novel and not a textbook on Yoruba traditional religion and beliefs. The cultural items were meant to be side dishes and not the main dish. This is what happens in translation and this deprives readers of deeper knowledge. If *Death's laughter* had been a novel meant for the general public in its present form and not for a doctoral examination, I would not have used so many footnotes. Maybe I would have placed a glossary at the novel's end. The footnotes in the present version, however, came out of comments, questions and the need to explain areas that my Supervisor deems unclear. Firstly, this exercise helped me realise the need to find easier ways of transferring my cultural concepts to others who are not from my background. Secondly, it shows the differences existing in cultural perceptions and worldviews of different people when they are of differing cultural backgrounds. This in turn makes me think of devising means of transferring those cultural ideas.

Narrative, narration and the narrator

By the many choices we make when we write, including that of point of view, we attempt to use language to exclude as well as include... a narrator, of course, tells us the story but also appears to be the one who makes up (controls, and chooses the elements of) the story. (Polain in Walker, 2002, p.154)

A novel is a story or a collection of stories. Stories have to be told or narrated, a process involving some elements. A story told in verse or prose includes events, characters and what the characters say or do. (Abrams & Harpham, 2009, p.208) A narrative consists of the narrator (who is doing the telling), the action, events or incidents being narrated and the "narratee, that is, the explicit or implied person or audience to whom the narrator addresses the narrative" (Abrams & Harpham, 2009,p.309). Actions carried out or incidents that happened create a narrative. A novel's narrator possesses a viewpoint or a perspective from which the narrative is narrated. These viewpoints are traditionally classified into "three or four kinds, variables only of the "person" and the degree of omniscience" (Booth, 1983, p.149). Booth explains that the traditional classification is inadequate in expressing the variety and depth of narrative points of view. He

gives examples of great narrators such as Tristram Shandy, Cervantes and Harriet Beecher Stowe, the "I" of *Middlemarch* and Strether. He avers that "to describe any of them with terms like "first person" and "omniscient" tells us little about how they differ from each other or why they succeed while others described in the same terms fail". (Booth, 1983, p. 150)

Booth therefore expects us to be more 'precise and describe how the particular qualities of the narrators relate to specific effects'. Based on this expectation, he makes some 'functional distinctions' that can be applied to both first and third person narration. This he lists as 'dramatized' and 'undramatized' narrators. The undramatized narrator is an implied author who is the 'author's second self' and may be like an author who stands 'behind the scenes either as a stage manager, puppeteer or an indifferent God'. This narrator is different from that of a real writer who creates a superior version of himself, a second self as he creates his work. Example of the real author creating a superior version of himself is the narrator Hemmingway created in *Killers*. The first type of implied author exists in *Death's laughter*. In chapter 1, the narrator is not any of the characters or narrators in the novel but a narrator using the omniscient viewpoint while telling the story about death. It is also used in the chapter 8-sub chapter titled 'guided tour' (p.100) where the implied author narrates Felix's feelings about Margaret.

Dramatized narrators are narrators using 'I' or 'he/she,' who may be different from the authors who create them. Dramatized narrators can be disguised and Booth (1983) gives examples like that of messengers returning to tell the king what the oracle says or wives trying to convince their husbands about unethical business deals. Dramatized narrators' functions and nature reflects roles within the narrative. They can be observers, participants — those Booth calls narrator agents — and participants observers. Observer narrators tend to relate what they see without comment or involvement. In *Death's laughter*, Jude's narration in the prologue is that of observation. There is no involvement or commentary on the narration. Most of the narrators in the novel, however, are participant narrators. They are involved in the actions narrated (see narrators in chapters 3,4,6 and 9). The novel's participant narrators include Funmi, Jiire and Christopher among others. However, there are narrators who are not only involved in the actions but also give comments on the actions they are narrating. Maggie in chapters 8,10 and 12 and Adekola in chapter 9 are examples in *Death's laughter*. They give commentary on issues and topics that are related to their narrations and at times to issues they feel strongly about.

Genette (1983) distinguishes between narrative content and the 'act of narrative production' His work deals with analysis of narrative content. He finds "three major aspects in a story: time, mode and voice" (Pavel, 2004,p.33). Narrative mode stands for the techniques of filtering the amount of story that will be told and Genette lists two major modes, namely distance and perspective. Under

distance, Genette makes the distinction between "*story of events* and *story of speech*. The story of speech allows for three degrees of distance: reported speech, 'narrativized' speech or summary, 'transposed' speech or free indirect style". (p.37)

Perspective, however, is a question of focalisation (or point of view). It is Genette's view that,

There are three types of stories: non-focalized, corresponding to the omniscient author, internally focalized, with a point of view restricted to that of a given character, and externally focalized, where the narrator knows less than the character. (Pavel, 2004, p.38)

Most of the stories in *Death's laughter* are internally focalized. The story in each chapter is given from the point of view of the character telling the story. Genette explains further that, "voice refers to the act of narration utterance, which can be told by a 'narrator (diegesis)' or a 'reflector (mimesis)" (p.38). In the telling or narration one can recognise:

An extradiegetic level, situated outside the events, an intradiegetic level, dealing with the main story, and a series of metadiegetic levels occurring when narratives are embedded within one another. (Pavel, 2004, p.38)

Most of *Death's laughter* narrators are "homodiegetic narrators" (Prince, 1987, p.41) in the sense that the narrators of the various stories are characters with their own stories and are either the main protagonist of the stories they are telling or observers. They are not heterodiegetic stories because the stories do not have outside narrators.

Most of the narrators deal with the main story via their own stories. The novel goes a bit further by weaving their stories into the telling of the stories of a character-Jude- that is outside the events they are telling but at the same time inherent within the stories. For example, chapter two's story is that of Akanke, Jude's mother but the narration is given in order to give a background to how Jude was born. This in itself reflects a metadiegetic level in the sense that various narratives in *Death's laughter* are embedded within one another. This is further enhanced through the story within story structures that exists in some chapters (see chapters 2,6,8 and 10). In classifying *Death's laughter* stories one can thus use Genette's classification that the stories are homodiegetic rather than heterodiegetic (see Prince, 1987, pp.20 & 41). The narrators in *Death's laughter* then become the means and eyes through which we see Pastor Jude as he passes through each narrator's stories. They, the various narrators, are specifically telling us their own peculiar and individual stories, which were only pertinent to the Pastor. My intention in using this multiple first persons' point of view is to create a rounded picture of the pastor that will not make the reader judgmental about him. The fact that all these narrators who are very close to the pastor are telling their stories and not the pastor's story per se confers a semblance of objectivity to their stories and perceptions about the pastor. We are therefore saved from being led by their biases. Although this point is arguable, it is clear that there is an objective treatment of the pastor

which could not have been the case were they to tell pastor Jude's story and not their own stories. The fact that we are made to hear about various facets of the Pastor from many people helps us to have different perspectives about him. The combination of viewpoints about him to an extent contributes to a more rounded image of him. We are able to see a man that means different things to so many people. The fact that some aspects of him known by some narrators are hidden to others confer some modicum of objectivity to Jude's picture that finally emerged in the novel.

Narrative Devices

There are many devices through which novels are narrated. While there is little magical realism and a little deviation from linear narrative structure, *Death's laughter* uses some other devices to impose order on the narration of the story and the novel's structure. Time and period were used to create a linearity in the story telling. Some years were skipped, such as from 1980- 1990. This period would have been the time the pastor would have been climbing the career ladder to reach his final career position that he held at death. The years were skipped because it would have been hard narrating the years without the pastor being the narrator. I wanted the pastor to be the central character, and for him to be seen less, but heard much about. The many narrative devices were meant to add variety to the narration and tone down the monotony of reading through many first persons' points of view and changing from one story to the other. Devices like E-mail (pp.173-176), cellphone SMS or texting (pp.193-194); the epistolary style in chapter 19, inner monologues (pp.27, 45,95-96,118,125,172,178 & 180-181) and cinematic framing help in achieving this aim.

Epistolary style has been used in Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*, Mariam Ba's *So long a letter*, Finuola Dowling's *What poets need* and A.S Byatt's *Possession*. In these examples, the novels were based on letters written to a particular character and through the letters, narration occurs. In *Possession* there was a twist in the sense that instead of letters being exchanged, a dead writer's letter became the investigating trigger used in exhuming the dead writer's life and the politics involved in academic works on him. In *Death's laughter*, the letters from pastor Julius, a co-pastor and intimate friend of pastor Jude, to Bisoye are used to inform the readers about reactions from the church, church members, church officials and the depth of church politics after Jude's death. The correspondence between pastor Julius and Bisoye gives an insight and information about Jude's death and the conditions surrounding them had been treated by the church he ministered while alive. Also, Jude's vision and ministry in helping the needy personally and the opposition against his carrying out these acts are revealed through the letters while giving us a new insight into his character. There is also a revealing of the perceptions of his

church members concerning the nature of his death and rumours and facts of his death. The experiment with E-mail, and SMS or cellphone texting in the novel were attempts at locating the story in the present information age. Language reconstruction and concise transfer of symbols and words seen in E-mail and SMS reflect present use of them in today's communication.

Another of the novel's narrative device is the use of cinematic framing. Incidents and situations in *Death's laughter* are created following the pattern of presentation in cinematography's narration. A cinema frame or film's unit of narration consists of a character, a location and action. The changing of one of these elements bring a new frame into existence. The frames are then joined together to give a total picture of the story being told. In *Death's laughter*, the constant shifting of the three elements in each narrator's story creates a sort of new cinematic frame. The addition of these frames at the end gave us the novel's story and a framed picture of pastor Jude the novel's absent main hero. At the beginning of the novel however, it seems one is reading an almost disjointed and unrelated stories but at the end of the novel these seemingly unrelated narrations gave a complete story and a clear picture.

Abrams and Harpham (2009), explaining Bakhtin's dialogic criticism, state that, " a person's speech does not express a pre-existent and autonomous individuality; instead, his or her character emerges in the course of the dialogue and is composed of languages from diverse social contexts" (p. 77). In order to actualise this type of dialogue, literature, including most novels, clothes their narrators' utterances in circumstances, in descriptions of narrators' psychological states, in the environments the narrators or characters occupy and in the interplay between the narrators as characters or interlocutors. *Death's laughter*, however, deviates a bit from this norm through the use of what can be termed 'naked dialogue'. This is where dialogue is stripped of all the markers that help fixate them in the readers' minds. Markers such as narrators or characters' accoutrement, the location, the circumstances the characters are in, authorial comments and the characters' emotional states. These are sometimes reflected in 'he sighed deeply' or 'she wondered' or in Dowling's (2007, p.155) example, "Beth said something that I don't think she intended as hurtful. She said, 'Theresa is nice to everybody, isn't she?' and so on. Dialogue in *Death's laughter* comprises sequences of two people talking and the readers are asked to fill in all other elements of the conversation in their minds.

The multiple points of view, epistolary technique and experiment with e-mail, texting, inner monologues, cinematic framing and 'naked dialogues' were attempts to cope with the language dillema I faced in writing this novel. It is my attempt to introduce new ways of using English in telling a story that is fully based in my culture to those who are not from my cultural background. The success of these can only be accessed after the novel's publication.

4. Peopling the novel – Characters in *Death's laughter*

Introduction

Characters are not the same as people. People are in life; characters are in fiction. (Grenville, 1990,p.35) Characters, however, can evolve from people and be based on people or beings or at times imagined and not based on people or non-human entities. As a theorist explains,

Characters resemble people. Literature is written by, for, and about people. That remains a truism; so banal that we often tend to forget it, and so problematic that we as often repress it with the same ease. On the other hand, the people with whom literature is concerned are not real people. They are imitation, fantasy, fabricated creatures: paper people, without flesh and blood...The character is not a human being, but it resembles one. It has no real psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act, but it does possess characteristics, which make psychological and ideological description possible. (Bal, 1985,p.80)

Characters in books or written narratives are not people that readers can touch or feel like real individuals. They are a writer's creation. Sometimes, however, the created entity is based on a true individual or person as Shakespeare's Julius Ceaser, Cleopatra, Macbeth or Sir Thomas More in Bolt's *A man for all seasons* shows. There is however, always a great difference between the created person and the real person. The same is true in *Death's laughter* because the picture of Pastor Jude that evolved at the end of the novel will be totally different from that of Pastor Timothy Femi Akanni on whom the novel's story is based on. The writer's treatment of people, beings or imagined entities as s/he turns them into characters is what deepens any fictional characters. Characters qualities and characteristics in literature determine how refreshing and remarkable they become to us. Scrooge's miserliness in *A Christmas carol* and Hamlet's indecisiveness and Lady Macbeth's cold and calculating cold blood planning and instigation of her husband to murder created unforgettable characters in our minds as readers. What however, makes these characters unforgettable whereas countless other fictional characters are hardly remembered? The key to their remembrance rests on the method of their creation in the literary works above.

Characters are the most important element within a novel. (Bird 1990; Johnston, 2002) A novel tells a story or stories. These stories are hooked or hung on people's actions. A novel without characters may be difficult to write or be comprehended by the reader. Characters in novels can be human (Alice in *Alice in the Wonderland*), non-human or machine (Frankenstein in Shelley's *Frankenstein*), spirits/ghosts (Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*) and animals (Boxer or Napoleon in Orwell's *Animal farm*). A novel then reflects what these characters do or did not do, and the interrelationship between the characters and other people or characters within a novel. At the same time, we come to know the characters more through what other characters think and say

about them and the situations and environment/s in which the writer puts the character/s. Character and characters then become moving force within any novel. As we follow the character/s actions or inactions we, as readers, are able to understand what the writer is trying to evoke for, us.

Categorisation of characters

Characters come in various types and categories within any novel. There are major and minor characters as well as heroes and heroines, among which we often have main hero and main heroine who are usually supported by other characters. Eugene Achike is the main hero in Adichie's *Purple hibiscus* as is Okonkwo's in Achebe's *Things fall apart*. Eugene's actions in *Purple Hibiscus* drive the story in the novel. These include the strict upbringing of his children and the refusal to stomach or have anything to do with whatever he thinks 'paganistic'. Things paganistic include his relationship with his father, conducting the mass in indigenous language rather than in Latin and singing of Igbo songs during church service. His strict standards and orthodoxy when it comes to church matters and his abusive relationship with his wife also serve as the triggers and the moving force that drives the stories in *Purple hibiscus*. If his actions were taken out of the novel, the novel would have ended differently from the way it ended. It would also have told a different story. Eugene Achike is the pivotal character on which every action in *Purple hibiscus* rests. This makes him a major character and the main hero because through him other characters in the novel come to life for us since they are reacting to his actions or are being affected by what he does or does not do. Most of the narration in *Things fall apart* centres on Okonkwo's actions and inactions and their repercussions, the same as when we look at Scrooge's actions in Dickens' *A Christmas carol* or Pip's action in *Great expectations*.

Characters' importance in any novel or play depends on how important the character's actions matter in the story or stories being told within the play or novel. One cannot compare the importance of Elizabeth Costello, or Paul Rayment or even Marijana Jokic, to that of Dr. Hansen, or Lidija Karadzic, or Blanka in Coetzee's *Slow man*. In the same way one cannot compare the position and importance of Darl, Vardaman or Dewey Dell or even Cash in relation to the story/ies in Faulkner's *As I lay dying* to that of Lafe or MacGowan. Paul Rayment, Dewey Dell and others like them are major characters while other characters such as Dr Hansen in *Slow man*, MacGowan in *As I lay dying* and Sisi in *Purple hibiscus* are minor characters. They are supporting characters that help to bring out the major characters. These minor characters help in deepening, defining and reflecting the importance of the major characters within a novel or play. The assassins /murderers in *Macbeth* play a very important but minor, role just as the role played by the three witches in the unfolding of Macbeth's actions.

Character Development

The writer in developing his/her characters determines what aspect/s to reveal to us. (Seger, 1990; Day, 2002). These aspects the writer reveals through the characters' attributes, such as physical, psychological, spiritual, religious, philosophical, social and economic ones. The writer then places the characters in specific environments that fit the attributes they possess. Since all characters cannot be developed at the same level and to the same degree, the writer will normally develop some of his/her characters more than others. This, for example, is the reason for a fuller development of Oedipus than Tiresias in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Okonkwo more than Obieirika in Achebe's *Things fall apart*. The degree to which the writer develops the character determines the type of character that they turn out to be. Prince (1987) defines a character as,

An existent endowed with anthropomorphic traits and engaged in anthropomorphic actions; an actor with anthropomorphic attributes. Characters, 'can be more or less major or minor- (in terms of textual prominence), dynamic (when they change) or static (when they do no), consistent (when their attributes and actions do not result in contradiction) or inconsistent, and flat (simple two dimensional, endowed with very few traits, highly predictable in behaviour) or round (complex, multidimensional, capable of surprising behaviour). They are also classable in terms of their actions, or their words, feelings, their appearance etc., in terms of their conformity to standard roles or types and in terms of their correspondence to certain spheres of action (that of hero or that of villain for instance) (p.12).

Death's laughter characters fall into some of the above classifications. There are flat, round, major and minor, consistent and dynamic characters within the novel. In addition to the above classifications, there are some characters within literary works that we do not know so much about. Their role in the literary work is just to serve as a foil or a reflection for other characters especially the major ones. They may be catalyst for actions within the play or novel and, like catalysts in chemical reactions; they remain unchanged at the end of the novel or play. Iago is a kind of foil character in Shakespeare's *Othello* just like the three witches in *Macbeth*. While these characters move the action forward in *Macbeth* and *Othello*, they are really unchanged at the end of play. Mr Jagers in *Great expectations*, the unnamed lady in *As I lay dying* that became the new Mrs Bundren at the end of the novel could all be categorised as foil characters. It was because of her that Anse Bundren forced his family to make the momentous and problem-riddled journey to Jefferson under the guise of a false agreement he reached with Addie for her to be buried there. We may say that without the need to link up with her, repair his teeth (maybe to impress her) and introduce her to his children, Addie would have been buried in the county cemetery and all that the family went through would not have happened. Also, Anse would not have been able to bring the lady home immediately after the burial of his wife if that took place in the county cemetery. Sisi in Adichie's *Purple hibiscus* is also a foil character. At the end of the

novel, she is still the housemaid that she was but she gave Mrs Achike the poison she used in poisoning her husband Eugene. This led to Eugene's death and Jaja going to prison in order to save his mother from being hanged.

The foil character at times is also like a flat character. We do not know as much about him/her. The flat character is usually one-dimensional or sometimes two-dimensional. The writer only informs us about the aspects that are germane to the roles and positions the character is expected to perform in the literary work. Hovstad, the editor, and Billing, the sub-editor, in Ibsen's *An enemy of the people*, Mrs Micawber in *David Copperfield*, Nwoye in Achebe's *Things fall apart*, Blanka in Coetzee's *Slow man* and Mr Jones in Orwell's *Animal farm* are flat characters. They are flat because we know less about them and they are not fully developed within the novels or plays. Fully developed characters are usually main characters that serve as main heroes or heroines. They are also major characters within the literary work. Characters such as Hamlet in *Hamlet*, Macbeth in *Macbeth*, Eugene Achike in *Purple hibiscus*, and Paul Rayment in *Slow man* are round characters. The writers make us see the characters as fully developed and to know almost everything about them. As readers, we are made to privy to their thoughts, backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses. They are characters we can relate to as we know someone who is like them. The rounded characters are fully developed because, in most cases, the whole story of the play or novel rests on them. What kind of play would Ibsen's *An enemy of the people* have been without Dr. Stockman or Shakespeare's *Macbeth* without Macbeth? Would Achebe's *Things fall apart* have the influence and the punch it possessed without an Okonkwo in the story? Round characters are three-dimensional figures the writer creates with depth, height and breadth. They are solid individuals that we empathize with, pity their tragic flaws and who help us as readers to purge our emotions. We, the readers, can empathize with them and appreciate their humanity or inhumanity, their motives and flaws which make them someone to associate with or someone to hate.

Sometimes, the writer creates many characters as a means of telling his/her story. The development of so many characters means that the writer has fewer rounded characters, but many others who are also well developed though not as fully developed as the main characters within the novel or play. Ngugi's characters in *Petals of Blood* are well developed but there are few that are more developed than others. They include Karega, Munira, Wanja and Abdulla. The quartet carries the novel's story. With a deft use of flashbacks, Ngugi then links the quartet's history and background to Chui, Nderi wa Riera and Kimera who were not as well developed as the four main characters but about whom we still know much. It is the same style that Faulkner uses in *As I lay dying* though in a more extended format. In the 59 chapters of *As I lay dying*, Darl narrated the highest number of nineteen, followed by Vardaman's ten. A reading of the novel

shows that Darl is like the main hero of the novel. He was against carrying Addie's corpse to Jefferson, knows too many of the family secrets, especially that of Dewey Dell, and was the person who burnt down Gillespie's barn in order to burn Addie's corpse and became mentally unhinged leading to his commitment to an institution at the end of the novel. The multiple narrative structures, though involving so many narrators, still bring out major and minor characters and heroes and heroines. It is this same type of narrative structure and multiple characterisations that is used in *Death's laughter*. However, in the novel, there are some means used in character development that helps in deepening the novel's narration.

Character development in Death's laughter

In *Death's laughter* twenty-three chapters, the narration of Funmilayo, Pastor Jude's first wife covers five chapters and fourteen sub-chapters, the largest among the novel's narrators. This makes her the narrator from whom we get the greatest insight into the pastor's character. This is not unusual since she is the Pastor's first wife and, in the eyes of the law, the only wife. The next person to her with a large share of narration is Maggie with twelve and a half sub-chapters and three chapters. As the pastor's Personal Assistant, mentee, confidant and Jude's 'Girl Friday', she must have spent more time with him. She can also be seen as Jude's 'office wife' because she works with him and knows him and spends more time with him in the office and therefore privy to many secrets, which even the wives at home do not know. Her stories then helped us to see the pastor at work and understand some of the challenges he faced and the challenges that he faced and the conflicts that went through his mind. Especially towards the end of his life when he could not reconcile his being a pastor with the acquisitive individual he has turned out to be towards the novel's end.

Death's laughter's characters could also be typified as active and passive characters. Pastor Jude is a passive character but in his passivity and absence he is more active within the novel than all the other characters. He is the novel's protagonist and main hero but he died in the first chapter of the twenty-three-chapter novel. The creation of this passive character is intentional. In reading more about him and seeing him through the eyes of others without his narrating his own story or the writer narrating it through the omniscient point of view, keeps him at the back of our minds as readers. However, as each narrator gives his/her interpretation and take on the pastor, we are able, like a piece of onion to peel away layers upon layers of the pastor to find a better picture of his character. Though still using the onion metaphor, the picture of Jude that we have after the montage by all the narrators is not as deep as it would have been if the whole narration has been on him and not in the various stories.

The novel's characters are the various narrators and as they tell us their stories, we are made to learn a lot about Nigerian society, cultural backgrounds and Yoruba culture. The dichotomy between traditional ethos and modern values are well played out through the narrations. In the traditional setting, Pastor Jude's bigamy would not have been a problem because polyandry was tolerated. *Death's laughter's* characters differ a bit from the protagonist/antagonist, villain/hero binary perception in character creation. It is possible to see Funmilayo as the novel's heroine and Pastor Jude as the villain. A closer analysis of their characters, however, will show us the fact that Jude is not an all-out villain. He has some good features and there are reasons for some of his contemptible actions, like bigamy. Funmi, while being, a victim also has within her the potential of being tempted. In the cultural milieu she finds herself, she will be labelled the villain. Her action at the end of the novel, which will invariably lead to Jude's assets being seized by the government, paint her as a vindictive person, a bad mother and a modern woman not ready to follow traditional values. Her depiction as a strong woman ready to deviate from the norm is intentional in the sense that the writer wants to reflect the effects of modernity on the evolving contemporary Nigerian society and the emerging middle class.

In traditional society, Pastor Jude's philandering nature, bigamy and latent materialism would have been celebrated as a sign of masculinity and male virility. Funmi would not have had any reason to protest or even take any action at all. All that she did during the mourning period and her final protest action would have been treated as breaking taboos, during which she would have been expected to perform some rituals to cleanse herself. *Death's laughter*, however, depicts the changing conditions and supports the fighting spirit of the modern Nigerian woman, hence, Funmilayo's depiction in the novel. Creating Pastor Jude's montage and making it plausible when he is not in the novel to 'tell his story' is a method used by the writer to create a different means of characterisation. To achieve this, the narrators that are very close to the pastor are given more space in the novel to tell their stories. In doing so, we are able to have more information about him despite his absence in the novel as a narrator, or one being narrated about by an omniscient narrator. Friends, confidants and family members constitute eighty- seven percent of the novel's narration, and as we read their close encounters with Pastor Jude while telling their stories, we begin to construct a well-rounded picture of the pastor. The type of tight interrelationship among characters that one may find in other novels is a bit absent in *Death's laughter*. The characters come through as being autonomous and only related to one another at a less deep level by knowing Jude. However, the loose relationships help in giving a deepened and enhanced picture of the novel's main hero. This is the experiment in *Death's laughter's* characterisation.

Conclusion

Experimentation has been part of human existence since the beginning of times. Experimentation comes with success or failure, acceptance or derision and innovation or rejection. Experiments bring out new means of looking at old issues and new perspectives to ideas or concepts. The experimentation in *Death's laughter* is reflected in narrative techniques, characterisation, dialogue, setting and structure. The novel's narrative structure is a combination of the discontinuous and linear structure. It is discontinuous in the sense that the various narrators and narratives are not only autonomous but at the same time there is linearity imposed by time demarcated through decades. In characterisation, *Death's laughter*, created a narrative of many characters telling their stories while in the process helping us to build a picture of an absent main character. Novels or stories are usually about a character or group of character told from a point of view of a character or a narrator. In *Death's laughter*, however, there are many homodiegetic narrators instead of one narrator of the stories within the novel. The various narrators are independent. One may say that the novel is a collection of characters and stories tied together by the fact that the narrators and characters are related and have links with pastor Jude who is not really an active, character within the novel.

Dialogue in the novel is unlike dialogue in other novels. Other novels use dialogues with what we can term 'directions' about the setting and environment of the actions, the emotional state of the characters, the characters' accouterment, or the relationship between them and the narrative. *Death's laughter*, however, has naked dialogues without all these directions. What the reader reads is an unvarnished discourse between two individuals. The reader is expected to fill in the gaps so to say and make a sense of what they are saying. To do this, the reader paints the picture of where the characters are, what s/he thinks, and what their emotional state is likely to be. Setting is also not like in most other works. The novel uses minimal setting. The reader is expected to picture and imagine the settings. Although these experimentations in the novel ask much from the reader, they are meant to involve the reader in the process of interpreting the work. In a way this may create involvement between the reader and the novel, or on the other hand, it may turn the reader away from the work. The reactions to the experiments within *Death's laughter*, however, can and will only be fully assessed after its publication.

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