

Son of a Dog

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By

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Abstract

Son of a Dog is inspired by a real-life figure whose exploits captured the Nigerian public imagination in the 1980s. Famously known as Ovbigo (“The Law”), Lawrence Anini unleashed a nationwide reign of terror against law and order.

Set against the backdrop of the political turmoil following the Nigerian civil war, the novel traces Anini’s formative years in menial jobs to his rise to the leadership of a notorious criminal gang. It fuses the established facts of his short meteoric career with my imagined version of his inner life and the contemporary myths that sprung up around his legend. It finally crosses the boundary between the real and the mythic as Lawrence Anini becomes truly invincible and elusive after a lust-struck encounter with a fantastical character. I draw inspiration from the dark visceral fiction of Michael Cisco and Brian Evenson, AyiKwei Armah’s unflinchingly descriptive prose and E.C. Osondu’s sharp contemporary humour.

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‘Son of Sam was the son of a dog! Jack the Ripper was the son of a dog! Lawrence Anini is the son of a dog!’ – DELE GIWA, Nigerian journalist (1947-1986).

1

Day of the Execution

March 29, 1987

From 10:05am on National Environmental Sanitation day when the nation's monthly filth was buried.

Lawrence dragged himself across his bed till he was close enough to grasp the iron bars of the window. He was careful this time around. The last time, a broken mattress spring stabbed him in the arse and set his buttocks on fire. He'd howled as he excreted blood-tinged stool into the canister. Still, it wasn't the worst thing he'd experienced here. He had endured the noxious odour of decomposition emanating from the canister, which was covered with a halfrotten piece of plank. He had endured the daily ration of bean porridge shoved at the condemned inmates. The smelly, milky water. What he could not endure was the blindness of not being able to see through her one eye, of being condemned to the present, of not being able to foresee, to stare into the darkness of the future and see the out-of-sight things lurking behind his back. And then there was the silence. The hush of the day and the deathly quiet of the night, pierced only by the distant sounds of trains. The dense silence animated the concrete walls: they grew hands and feet, they laughed at him. The roaches he'd befriended sometimes got swallowed up by the walls. During his first days condemned to the cell, he touched himself to allay with the anguish in his loins. He conjured up images of round, tantalizing buttocks. He stirred up memories of warmth and moisture. But then the walls and the silence choked him, fogged his brain. His memory of pleasure melted, giving way to pain. Lawrence closed his eyes and sighed deeply. He summoned all his strength as he grasped the bars and lifted his chin above the edge of the window to gaze out. He surveyed the courtyard, the heavy gates, the administrative building and chapel. He did not see her. He

tightened his grip on the bars, his biceps straining, sweat trickling down his face. He refused to give up. He refused to let go. She was not there.

He collapsed onto the bed when he could no longer bear the weight of his body. He heaved another deep sigh, fear lodged in his chest. Then he heard the squeak of tires rolling across the concrete slab of the corridor. It was time. A prison guard with a gaunt, expressionless face pushed the wheelchair. He did not greet him as he inserted his key into the rusty locks, opened the cell, and wheeled the chair in. He produced a manacle. Lawrence slipped his hands into the handcuffs and allowed the skull-faced man to lift him onto the chair. The guard wheeled him out through the corridor, past the storerooms and offices and into the blinding sunlight. The tip of his stump began to itch. He stretched his manacled hands and worked his fingers to soothe the itch. His handcuffs clanked. His hands were unsteady. Sweat beaded on his forehead, rimmed his upper lip. The wheelchair squeaked again. He hated that squeaking sound. He hated how Skullface wheeled him about. How he pushed, tugged, and veered. He hated what was left of his right leg. It had become a log, a gangrenous lump of decaying tissue. Half dead. Hideous. Useless. A sad reminder of something once proud and complete.... He refused help, meeting every kind gesture with harsh words. Kindness only mocked him. They had not shown him any kindness during the trial when they sat behind their high tables and passed their judgement. Why should they help him now? Skullface grasped him by the arms and heaved him onto the back of the truck. He shuffled the rest of the way in. The air inside was hot and stagnant. Sweat lined his forehead and soaked through his shirt. Bernard climbed into the truck moments later, sucking breaths between sobs. Johnbull jumped in wearing a dirty white singlet and a pair of khaki trousers. Although his face was subdued, his mouth frothed at the corners. Solomon came whistling in, and Monday followed with a bowed head. Finally, Skullface and another soldier jumped in with them. The truck roared to life. The sirens screamed. Lawrence was surprised at his own lack of reaction to his gang members' disregard. They hadn't so much as nodded or glanced out of the corners of their eyes. Nothing. They carried on without acknowledging him. He might as well not have been there. Bernard dried his eyes. He blew air into his shirt with his mouth. Solomon stopped whistling and interlaced his fingers.

The truck was silent. How great had his fall been? Lawrence, who'd commanded the loyalty and reverence of his gang members, meant nothing to them now. They'd watched his dignity peel away day after day as their treachery unfolded before his eyes. Lawrence peered through the gaps between the tarpaulins. Trees rushed past, branches flailing in the air. Street-

side traders with yams arranged in pyramid forms. Buildings destroyed by war. He didn't know for how long he stared into space. He didn't care. As the truck slowed down, a new feeling washed over him. He took a deep breath and held it, closing his eyes. He released his breath slowly. When he opened his eyes and glanced out once again, he scanned the crowd for her. She would come. She said she would. He heard footsteps chasing after the truck and children screaming. He heard the bark of soldiers. The sound of horsewhips. He peered through the cloud of dust. The dreadlocked evangelist Aladura came into his field of vision. Lawrence pressed his face closer to the gap and followed him with his eyes. His locks were flying serpents with trapped tails. He wore a robe that had once been white but was now a dingy off-white collaged with brown streaks. A strip of yellow silk embroidered with a cross served as a belt and two little snail shells hung round his neck on a red thread. He clutched a bell as he ran from two police officers. The evangelist stumbled, his bell clanging, before quickening his gait and lurching away. His torn garments flapped from his sides like wings. Lawrence would've got a laugh out of it had his situation been not so dire. The truck came to a halt. His heart thumped faster. The criminals spilled out and a great noise swept through the crowd. Solomon, Bernard, Johnbull, and Monday trudged ahead, their legs trembling, their eyes protruding wildly. Lawrence swallowed hard against the anticipation rising in his throat. A red-capped officer helped him out of the truck. The sun's light had abated, but not its scourge. A hawk swooped from the sky, landed on the scorched earth and immediately took off shrieking. Nothing was right, even the day was hostile. She was not there. Every time he thought he'd made her out in the crowd, his heart would race. She was everywhere. She was nowhere. Everything would be okay if she showed up. She promised to show up. Everything would be fine if she kept her word. She said she had forgiven him Skullface clutched Lawrence's right arm, steering him forward. A confused scramble, cameras flashing. A wave of excitement surged through the crowd; people pushed closer, struggling, elbowing. Those who had been chased away sprang out of their hiding places. The women wailers launched into fresh cries.

The children jumped with glee and youngsters scrambled up mounds of gravel and empty kiosks to catch a glimpse of him. Lawrence scanned the crowd, his eyes making a final sweep through the bodies whose heads bobbed with hands outstretched like zombies, their faces glistening with sweat or tears. Angry faces. Faces lit up with excitement and laced with suspicion. He spotted a figure moving swiftly through the crowd. He followed her with his eyes, recognizing her hair and the shape of her head. She approached him an angry glare,

sending a volley of insults his way. As she hacked up phlegm and spat it out at him, his heart sank. Something dissolved inside him. The thick yellowish phlegm slid down his temples. He turned toward the execution post. His anticipation wilted into despair and he closed his eyes against the searing sun. What a day to die. Eyes shut, his other senses began to take over. His lungs filled with the stench of unwashed bodies and human waste. The voices around him became liquid and slow, but one rose up and commanded him to move. He felt a face looming close, its hot, rancid breath on his cheek. The voice sounded stretched, a bad cassette. He heard a familiar voice piercing through the din of liquid voices and invading his senses. The voice was silky, gliding through the air as it called out his name, wrapping itself around his head. No one called out his name that way, no one. No other voice had the power to draw him that way. His head filled with a strange, sweet sensation that tingled down his spine. He turned and his eyes found hers. There she was with her brightness, her smiles, her assurances. A flood of relief washed over him. Lawrence inched toward the post, his movements ragged as he dragged his stump across the ground. The din died down into murmurs and finally, fell silent. The officer in charge made his declaration and the soldiers bound Lawrence to the post with fat ropes. The hallowed priests in their saintly robes came forward to perform the last rites.

Ovbigbo, the Law. Ovbigbo, the man covered head to toe with charms that made his body resistant to bullets. Ovbigbo, the man robed with the cloak of invisibility. Ovbigbo, the custodian of the magic mirror that revealed the movements and location of his enemies. Ovbigbo, the Jannes and Jambres of Bendel State, the man who threw his belt to the ground and it became an attacking serpent. Ovbigbo, who drove from Sapele to Benin in reverse gear, and was capable of picking up a clod from the ground while driving at hundred kilometres per hour! Ovbigbo whose real name was Lawrence NomanyagbonAnini. Ovbigbo, the man who sent fear into the hearts of the enforcers of the law knew his time was not up. He would die one day. That day was just not today. When that day came he would turn himself into a hill. Strong. Formidable.

2

Benz Klinik

Lawrence perched on the roof of an abandoned Volkswagen beetle rolling a wee wee with moist palms. He shoved it between his lips and produced a flattened match box from his pocket. His eyes scanned the area. He would smoke till it became dark if no one disturbed his peace. He would smoke for as long as he could, before the older mechanic boys arrived to harass him for being too young to smoke weed. To them he was too young for everything good. He didn't care what they felt. He felt at peace here. He loved to sneak in here when his boss wasn't around and smoke by himself. He dreamt here. This place, where dreams went to perish, was his place of dreams.

When he first started coming here his mind would return him to his earliest memory. In this dream, he would smell his father's warm breath. He would touch the coarseness of his beard with his tiny fingers. He would hear his deep, strong voice. This dream was fleeting. Whenever he probed deeper he probed into darkness. He wanted more. He got nothing. Now he simply dreamed to expunge his past. His darkness. He fashioned new dreams. Dreams of things unattained. Dreams of things that seemed unattainable. He laughed at his own vanity but he didn't stop dreaming. His wild fantasies sustained him.

Lawrence took a long drag from the cigarette. He closed his eyes, filled his lungs with smoke. The smoke touched his skull. It fingered its way up his brain till it groped everywhere. It claimed his being. He jerked his head backwards. His lips curled. He exhaled. Smoke shot out in puffs through the nostrils. Some curled out of his lips, went up, got lost in the bowers of brambles.

He jumped down from the car. The shell squeaked. The sound of rust. Plumes of dust floated into the air. He sneezed and wiped his snot with the back of his palms. He moved away. Coins clinked in his pockets. He patted them as though to be sure the money was still there. The coins clinked again. A smile broke out of the corners of his lips.

Today had been a lucky one for him. For weeks, he had frequented market places and train stations without much luck. His eyes probed, observing patterns, searching for

unsuspecting victims. He lurked by street corners after work. He watched people stroll into shops or buy things from street side stalls. He waited for the moment they became distracted. He worked calmly.

He learnt fast. It almost came naturally to him. He had no qualms about it. He floated expertly in and out of clumps of people, lightly touching an elbow or allowing his fingertips to graze someone's pocket. With a flick of his nimble fingers, he infiltrated pockets and purses before the owners even realized it. Often times his fingers poked into nothingness. Once in a while he got something, but his dreams were bigger than what his fingers could fetch him.

The time came when he acquired enough courage to ply his petty trade around his own garage. He squeezed himself between sweaty bodies when the mechanics gathered to watch soccer at the mechanic village. Master Michelin had fished out an old black and white TV from the crate-stacked store and set it in front of his shed. Lawrence watched soccer too, but did not become too engrossed in it like others. As an apprentice mechanic, he knew about the moneyed bosses of the mechanic's village. He knew they for example charged customers for new carburetors when all that was needed was an oil change. He knew they sold spare parts taken from other customer's car. He knew they overcharged. The customers often didn't have a choice because the next mechanic garage was in the city. He pilfered seven naira today.

The mechanic village had started with one garage many years ago. Its first settler, David Isiokherhe had, occupied a piece of unused land and built sheds with planks and pieces of zinc roofing gotten from a construction site. He named it 'Benz Klinik' although he didn't really repair Mercedes Benz's. His work flourished. Within a short time, customers flooded the garage to cure their sick vehicles. In no time David Isiokherhe acquired the name Doctor Isiokherhe.

Then other mechanics moved to the place. Sheds and kiosks sprang up like stubborn mushrooms. Today, a considerable number of vehicles littered the ground coated with years of grease and grime.

These days, his apprentices secretly addressed Doctor Isiokherhe as Master Michelin because of his resemblance to the iconic Michelin man. A gross-volume of a man with folds of fat behind his neck who had long abandoned mechanic work and now just waddled about dishing out instructions or reading the papers.

On the grounds of the mechanic village, cars lay covered with red dust; vehicles with missing tyres or open bonnets or legs propped on wooden barrels. Horsehair springing from their tattered leather seats.

Vehicles with dented chassis, twisted fenders, and cracked windshields. Vehicles in desperate need of paint-jobs. A Volkswagen in fading blue, a brown Hiace bus that had once been white, a Datsun with so many scrawls and scratches that it looked as though a giant insect had attacked it.

They were cannibalized vehicles. These cars had not stayed in the village for too long, but had somehow managed to be dismembered. First, their engines vanished, part-by-part, then the fittings. After that the padding and upholstery. Then whatever was left of the frame. There were metal contraptions and scraps of all shapes and kinds.

On the borders of the grounds, far away from the mechanics and their machines, lay vehicles that no one had use of. A footpath ran along an unplastered fence to the place. Mounds of decomposing shit strewed the footpath so people generally kept away from that area.

A graveyard of some sort. The cars were arranged under a grove of overhanging trees and shrubbery. Lawrence loved the smell of withered leaves moistened by dew. He loved the gentle noise of animals scampering in and out of the car shells. He loved the chirping of the birds. Everything there granted him peace in a way that brought vision and vitality.

Cars with headlamps missing. Eye sockets hollow and dark. Bodywork in rust red. Sun soaked. Bonnet yawning open. Dangling side panels and doors. Broken grilles like ruined teeth.

The cars had been there for so long, they had become part of nature. A glorious amalgam of greenery and corrosion. Branches sneaked through shattered windows. Clumps of grass sprouted on car floors. Moss and algae-green coated chassis, covering seats and steering wheels. Crawler plants crawled. Metal rods stuck out of entwining plants. Stems thick as ropes ran through seats. Roots lay on the surface of the earth like a mess of tangled limbs

Around the vehicles decayed leaves piled on the ground. The big trees overhead stretched out their long, slender hands, touching the vehicles as though to participate in their corruption.

Lawrence coughed and spat yellow phlegm. He took another drag. His eyes roamed, settled on an automobile close to some tall bushes. The vehicle, a rusting Datsun, had almost no marks of nature. The plants had been weeded off. The upholstery of the seats half

clean. A pair of dirt-crusted shorts hung on over the door to the driver's seat. Close to the vehicle a pair of panties lay half covered in earth. He hoped to bring Itohan here tomorrow.

He now had enough cash to impress the girl who hawked oranges. He hoped to test his virility upon those old and dusty seats like other mechanic boys.

He would corner her while he whispered lofty words in her ear. He would lure her here. But not without buying oranges from her. He would make sure she did not go home with any unsold item. He would watch her swing her pubescent hips while she balanced her tray on her head. He would waylay her on her way home from her daily hawking.

Lawrence imagined helping her with her tray. Peeking through her blouse while she bent down. Small breasts. Gently curved. Big enough to be seen but not so big as to spill out. He would tell her the oranges he truly desired were the ones growing on her chest.

He had also thought about seeing her nakedness. He had pictured undressing her quickly, effortlessly. He wanted to feel her naked skin under his fingers. Red panties. He would remove those too. Lawrence felt warmth flooding through his body. He felt himself grow strong and thick. A soft wind danced on his cheeks. The brightness of the sun receded. Rain clouds appeared. Slivery light appeared flinging shadows on the trees and the corroded vehicles. He shook ash from his glowing cigarette.

It was time to leave. The other boy would soon arrive.

A rat scurried out from under a car, looking at him. It flicked its whiskers. It sniffed the air, throwing a soft insistent gaze at Lawrence. Lawrence looked out of the corner of his eye at the creature, amused. He laughed. The laughter rang in his head. It warmed his belly. He thought the rodent laughed at him for laughing at it. He laughed louder.

He laughed till pulsating vines rose out of the bush and lashed the rodent. What started as another peal of laughter came out of his mouth as a frightened scream. His sprang up, eyes popping open in disbelief. His heart leapt. His prick shrivelled. The rodent now lay belly up, twitching and squealing. Its limbs stretched out. Its mouth caved open. It went still. A thinning streak of red oozed from its crushed head. For a few moments Lawrence was frozen into immobility. His head drained of all thought. The murderous vines slithered on the ground like serpents before disappearing into the bush. Branches writhed. A carpet of withered grass grew limbs and hopped in different directions. Mosses glided over corroded surfaces. The empty sockets from the rusty cars shone light one after the other. The steering wheels spun. The vines snaked out again, this time moving in and out of holes and crevices. They went through the cars, entwining the bodywork.

Lawrence fled. His heart slammed hard against his chest. His head thumped. Gusts of cold wind tore through him. When he thought he was beyond the reach of danger he stopped. He sat on his haunches, taking great gulps of air. He tried to think. He tried to think fast. He tried to justify what he had seen. His head swirled with commotion. He felt warm piss trickle down his legs.

At the garage, mechanics padlocked their sheds. Apprentice boys hunched over buckets of water like vultures, their greasy, nude bodies frothing with soap. The world cloaked itself in gray and black. By the time he made it home, the confusion in his skull had settled. A feeling of shame washed through him. The shame transformed into amusement. He laughed at himself. He laughed loudly. He laughed till he slipped into a dreamless sleep.

Lawrence sat up from his bug-eaten mattress. He stretched and yawned, slid his hands under his shorts and poked his fingers into the crevice of his buttocks. Scratching to the point of pleasure, allowed his hands to roam round to his dick. His fingers uncovered a well-fed bedbug lodged in the inner section of his thighs. He squashed the little thing then wiped his bloodstained fingers on the unplastered wall of his room. He sat there for a few more moments as though trying to decide whether to get up or not. A smile touched his lips as he recalled the strangeness of the previous night.

Shafts of morning sunlight spilled in through the slightly open window. A movement flicked in his peripheral vision. He glanced up to the ceiling. A gecko had been stirred out of its nest. It scurried down the wall and disappeared into the crack above the window. Chickens clucked and goats bleated somewhere in the back yard. The voices of two women trading barbs close by drifted in followed by the distant sound of a locomotive engine. He heard the buzzing of mosquitoes near his ear. He swatted briefly at them but stopped when he realized that the action came too late. Those bastards had had all night to feast on him. Living here with pests and flying insect was what Lawrence got working as an apprentice at Benz Klinik. Apart from the accommodation, there was the paltry monthly sum his boss gave him.

Lawrence sprang to his feet and blundered his way through small bottles of Sapele water, a pair of decomposing slippers, trousers yawning with holes, plastic plates which had been wiped clean by starving fingers, and the dismembered, soot-blackened parts of a

cooking stove. He had barely reached the metal bucket when he began to relieve his swollen bladder. The liquid jet drummed on the metal base of the bucket and frothed. Piss stench filed the room. He broke wind.

After he had furnished himself with a bucket, he went out to the backyard then came back to his room with his bucket half-full and began to wash at the entrance. His mind no longer cloudy from sleep, it occurred to him how good the day was going to be. He was going to meet Itohan today. A smile spread across his face.

He finished washing his face and armpits and picked up his battery-powered transistor radio from the window ledge. A wire, peeled off its plastic encasing, was attached to the antenna of the radio. He turned the dials. The needle flipped back and forth on the scale. He fiddled with the knob and the instrument made a crackling sound. The radio spewed out an advert asking farmers to come for seeds and fertilizers. Green Revolution, the announcer called it, praising the Commander in Chief of the Armed forces for leading the country to the path to Greatness. Lawrence turned the dial again and a burst of upbeat music spewed out. He fished a chewing stick from a plastic bag in the corner of the room and busied himself with it. He bobbed his head to the music as he brushed his teeth.

He dressed hurriedly and snaked through the labyrinth of his neighbourhood, his mouth still fresh with the wet fragments of the stick.

He crossed wide gutters brimming with filth. He ducked underwear left to dry overnight on washing lines. He passed houses with ancestral shrines, charred tree-stumps adorned with feathers and blood-red palm oil, earthen pots containing jawbones, and white eggs. He burst out onto the neighbourhood road. Makeshift stalls lined the street side. Early morning traders stood behind tables heaped with their goods. Women haggled, measured out bowls of grain to customers, their grimy tits lapping at their bone-dry breasts or sticking out their tiny heads from the wrappas tied on their backs.

He hurried across the street and navigated the path through the market, which led to the highway. Bicycle men paddled. Smoke belching tippers travelling to the north swished past. Dust and debris blew. Lawrence powered against the wind, his body tilted forward, his ballooning overalls flapping this way and that. His heart thumped.

He picked up pace. He did not want to be late. Master Michelin would not hesitate to disgrace his apprentice in public because of lateness, or any offence. He would wear out canes on the offenders' buttocks, one of the few things he managed to do. He also loved sending his boys to the latrine with sticks. He made them jab their sticks into to pit while drones of large green flies hovered around the putrid holes. He made them swirl it around to

dislodge the stuck faeces. After that, he made them scour the poo-smearred wall with short handled scrubbing brushes.

This task, usually supervised by Nosakhare, was to be undertaken without showing any reaction or emotion. Wrinkling the nose or showing the slightest hint of disgust constituted a greater offence.

Lawrence walked into the presence of highway police officers and goggled security men in oversized suits. The police officers with starched trousers tucked into their boots surrounded a Black Maria like an army of ants around a St Louis cube. Five tents had been erected on the football field opposite the mechanic village and were dotted with clusters of balloons. Seven women dressed in identical bright coloured clothes stood close to the tent. Victor Uwaifo played and people sat in rows. The aroma of jollof rice drifted from the tent.

Policemen had blocked the street and were waving people away from the cordoned off area. At the end of the road, traffic wardens screamed and made vehement gestures with their hands, directing motorists away. Lawrence wondered why so many people gathered so early in the day, but then he spotted a borehole installation decorated with ribbons and realized it must be a flagging off ceremony. Lawrence walked faster in the direction of the mechanic village.

“Na so so big big cars for that place” said Mama Sample, the woman who sold Sapele Water under the tree near the signpost. The signpost read “BENZ KLINIC: FOR REPAIRS, SERVICING AND REFURBISHMENTS OF MOTOR VEHICLES BY DOCTOR ISIOKHERHE.”

Her face screwed up in envy as she spoke. She wore a patterned scarf around her head and her cheap blue dress with dark stains under the armpit. She stood with arms akimbo and ears straining for the music in the tent

“Na so a see am oo aunty Sample”— Lawrence went to the shed and came back with a box full of tools — “when you get plenty money you can do and undo”

He brought out a three-legged bench black with grease, which he propped against the liquor woman’s bench. Corroded wheel rims and metal levers soon followed in quick succession. He paused to rest, wiped his face with the back of his palms.

His gaze slid to the tent across the street. He idly watched as bands of itinerant drummers milled about, and cars parked. The moneyed guests spilled out, adjusted their headgear or the folds of their flowing Babanriga before walking into the tent. For a brief moment, the thought of pilfering there crossed his mind. He dropped the idea immediately. He reminded himself why the mean looking guards were there. He resorted to asking the caterers for leftover rice. That he could do when the event was over.

A green Peugeot 504 pulled up. A government car, thought Lawrence, because of its colour and the tiny flag shooting out of its bonnet. A uniformed man slid out from behind the wheel and circled the vehicle to open the door by the owners' corner. A woman with an afro stepped out, light complexion and bosomy.

A group of drummers assailed her with their beats. The leader of the ensemble squeezed and tapped the drum, bobbing his head. For a moment, the woman lingered at the door; surveyed her surroundings behind her shades. She ran her fingers through the bangles on her wrist and proceeded in strides as though the drummers did not exist. Her platform shoes clattered on the coarse sand. The band followed her, now more energetic than ever.

The woman did not stop walking. The drummers tagged along like flies, drumming and singing.

A few moments passed and the woman swung around to face the drummer. At first, she gave him a sidelong glance then she began moving her body to his frenetic beat. The guards made way for her. It was as though her response to the drummer's beat was a command

The band tailored their rhythm to fit her. The drummer approached her. He appeared uncertain. The way he inched slowly towards her. As he got closer he gained confidence. He tightened the grip on his drum, his arm clutching the strings to make pitch bend sounds as he struck out the notes, sweat beading his forehead. She was now close to him. She dipped to the floor and came up again, her buttocks rotating in time to the sonorous rhythms. Lawrence reckoned she must be the wife to one of the high ranking officers in the city. Maybe the MILAD. Maybe one of his numerous mistresses. Guests spilled out of the tent. He now fixed his gaze on her body. He watched her innumerable bangles jingle up and down her arms. Her body seemed to fill everywhere. She seemed to use every ounce of her flesh. Her bottom jiggled with subtlety. It giggled independently of the rest of her body. It was as though her backside had assumed a life of its own. It swayed from side to side, rolled, and moved up and down.

Lawrence felt his throat go dry. A bulge angled his crotch. He slowly palmed the bulge, pressing just to keep himself in check. His eyes looked out from the corner of his eyes to see if Madame Sample noticed. She didn't take her eyes off the lady. She planted her hands on her sides.

She stopped as unexpectedly as she had started. She walked on and the uniformed man shoved the drummers aside.

In a few moments, a receiving line appeared before her. Women in bright coloured clothes bowed, curtsied, and smiled.

He heard Mama Sample hiss like a snake. The day was indeed starting out to be a good one for him. The incident of the important woman reinforced his vision of the orange hawk.

His eyes wandered off, settled on a boy hawker selling bread. He beckoned to him and picked a loaf of bread from the tray. Fumbled in his pocket and brought out part of the stolen money for the hawker. Ripped off the polythene and tore off a large chunk of the loaf with his teeth; swallowed. Half of the loaf was gone three swallows later. He consumed the rest in loud smacks as he returned his gaze to the important woman and the people gathered to receive her.

Work soon got into full swing at the village. The other workshop boys arrived. Machines roared into life. Apprentice mechanics leaned over open bonnets. Steam poured out from engines. Boy vulcanizers inflated tyres by the roadside, men in work clothes hammered, tapped, and soldered. The smell of motor oil and gas pervaded the air.

Nosakhare showed up with his stooped shoulders and jutting forehead. He greeted Madam Sample and berated Lawrence for standing outside idle. The muscles of his face tightened in anger and his eyes suddenly drew inward as he spoke. Lawrence muttered an apology and dashed to the shed where he prepared to scrub the radiator of the Datsun brought the previous day for servicing. Lawrence did not like him. As Master Michelin's cousin and his oldest apprentice, Nosakhare took pleasure in lording it over the rest of the apprentices. Lawrence often wondered why Nosakhare managed to look so scrawny with the amount of cash in his custody. It was as though some creature sucked nourishment out of his body. He wondered if he was under a curse. But then he reckoned that if being lean was a result of ill wishes from subordinates then Master Michelin wouldn't be so overweight.

Master Michelin waddled in some minutes before noon with a toothpick sticking out of the corner of his mouth and a rolled copy of the Daily Sketch tucked under his left armpit. He carried a briefcase with the other hand. His shorn head shone in the sun. He paused for an instant to gather strength and shambled on, his breath heavy and raucous.

Lawrence abandoned his work and left the shed. The other boys sprang out of their workplaces. Two of the apprentices ran to meet Michelin, and one of them motioned to carry his bag but he swiped his hand away. Instead, he asked for a seat. The boy vanished and came back with a stool. Michelin dropped his bag, pulled the newspaper out of his armpit and plonked himself on a stool to catch his breath. The boys stood before him, their arms clasped behind their backs waiting for the lecture of the day as they did every time he arrived. Nosakhare sidled up behind him, his hands clasped behind his back like a palace guard. Michelin had a scowl on his face. His feet were covered in dust.

Lawrence stood there with the rest of the boys ready to be addressed. Master Michelin opened his newspaper, splaying it with a force greater than required. The newspaper made a loud rasping noise. He cocked his head and flicked his thumb at one of the pages. Something was wrong. After what several moments, he lifted his eyes from the newspaper then tossed it away. He threw a sweeping look at them. Cleared his throat.

“I won’t beat around the bush so I will say it the way you go understand,” he began. “We get tiffor this garage and I wan make the person come out!” His voice rose.

Lawrence’s heart leapt. His throat felt dry. He feigned a surprised expression to avoid letting his feelings show. His palms suddenly turned moist. He watched the boys shoot apprehensive glances at each other.

“E better make the person come out now. Because thing will be better for you but if you do...” he trailed off. With a swift surge of anger, he heaved his body out of his chair. He waved one finger in the air.

“So I wan know the tiffin this garage! I want to know the person who wants to give us a bad name in this garage!”

Lawrence looked around again. Eyes popped wide with fear. Now attention heaped on them, people emerged from their shops and sheds.

“I say who be the tif,weydeytif money?” he bellowed, his jowls quivering.

“No be me oga!” said one of them, teetering on the brink of tears. His arms stretched out as if in surrender

“I no fit take steal, my oga!” said another.

“I will never do that oga!” Lawrence said, his voice is braided with tension. He half-hoped Michelin would stop probing.

“Wonderful! Wonderful! I know what to do!” Michelin said, breathing heavily now. He shambled back to his chair and reached out for his leather bag. He fished out an object wrapped in black cellophane. Nosakhare sprinted to the shed and returned with a tumbler

filled with water. It was as though Nosakhare and his boss had anticipated and planned for this to happen. Master Michelin untied the cellophane wrapper to reveal a black powdery substance. He placed the wrapper gingerly on one of his palms as though careful not to allow the substance to touch his skin. He poured the powder into the glass of water. The powder effervesced in the glass and frothed over.

“You will drink it and pass it to the next person! If truly a thief is in this garage this concoction will reveal it! You no need to worry if your hands are clean!”

Two of the apprentices broke down in tears as Michelin passed the tumbler to the first boy. He clasped the glass with his two hands and lifted the glass to his trembling lips. He took a swig, his eyes shut, his face screwed into a frown. The liquid dribbled down his chin, and the foam formed an outline around his upper lip.

“Na me oga! Na me! ”

The words came out through Lawrence’s lips without his permission as though there was a short circuit between his brain and vocal cords. Left to him he would close his throat around the sounds and press it back down. But then he was no longer in charge. Lawrence dipped a trembling hand into his pocket, the coins spilled out and scattered on the floor. Silence engulfed the place. Now they all looked at him. Michelin stood back and looked for a minute at Lawrence, his eyes searching and wide.

“Nomanyagbon?”

“Yes sir!” he lowered his gaze. His heart raced. His thoughts could not coagulate.

“Nomanyagbon?”

“Yes sir.” He said. For a brief moment, Lawrence wished for an earthquake to open a bottomless pit beneath him and swallow him up.

“You have become a tif? Is that the news you want me to send to your family?” he growled.

“No oga!” he said, his voice laden with fear.

Lawrence dropped on his knees and clasped his hand in front of him, pleading. His wet palms trembled. His palpitations became so fast that his head spun. He spluttered for breath. It was as though something sucked out oxygen from the air momentarily.

His visions of Itohan vanished like the morning mist in the hot sun and a terrifying one loomed before him. He would be mercilessly whipped. He would spend the entire afternoon attempting to brave the stench of the pit while he poked and scrubbed.

He watched Michelin stomp off to the shed, rummage about and return with a string of electric cord. He stripped off the insulation from the cord to half way. From one end of the

cord, three strands of wires fanned out like thin long fingers. Lawrence felt tears washing down his face. He screamed.

3

Police Is Your Friend

The officer clanked the door shut behind him. Lawrence fumbled in the semi-dark container crying. The heat suffocating; no breeze came in through the box. He found a spot in the corner; put his back against the wall. He dragged his chin to his knees, his bare feet on the cold metal floor. He felt the welts on his back burn. Through the window he saw Mama Sample fling her headscarf to the ground. Master Michelin stood in her way. He shoved her aside when she made a move towards the Black Maria. The two of them wrestled. She caught a fistful of his shirt. He stabbed a finger furiously at her. They traded insults laced with spittle. The Black Maria coughed into life. Seconds later, the truck sped off, creaking with every bump. An unfamiliar sensation bordering on nausea hit Lawrence. He took quick breaths, battling to contain it. For a moment, his mind groped for a way out. He thought about forcing the door open. He thought of jumping out off the vehicle. He discarded the idea when he looked out through the window. He thought about Uncle Titus whom his mother bundled him off to when his father died. He could ask to them at the police station to contact him. However, he drank too much. Uncle Titus's woman had him wrapped around her little finger.

The minutes stretched on to an oppressive eternity. They reached the police station. Three bolts snapped back from the door. He jumped down from the Black Maria. A wave of dizziness hit him. He steeled himself. He was not going to buckle under.

A group of people stood in front of a bungalow with peeling paint. Police officers with rifles hanging from their shoulders surrounded them. Grim faces gestured for Lawrence to join them.

“Line up and hands up! Quick! Quick! Straight line! March like a soldier, one two, one two!” a voice boomed. It was the DPO, who stood by the entrance waving his baton. A man with a shaven skull, thin as a rake, his uniform looking too loose for his dried-up body. He looked around and went in.

Lawrence marched into the station with the others. He raised his hands above his head, his face drawn out in fear. The line crumbled as soon as the people came through the door. They crowded the reception area. Lawrence caught a whiff of urine and insecticide. The DPO edged behind the counter, fished out a snuff box and placed it on the counter. Behind him was a framed picture of the commander in chief. A message written on fading cardboard dangled below to the portrait: POLICE IS YOUR FRIEND; HELP THE POLICE TO HELP YOU.

“Excuse sir!” Someone said as his hand went up to plead for mercy.

“Will you keep your mouth shut” barked one of the officers.

One by one Lawrence heard each of them beg for mercy. Soon a profuse murmur of supplications went up. A teenage boy of about his age broke into tears, calling out for his mummy. He heard someone ask what crime he had committed to deserve such harsh treatment. Another begged the DPO to consider the greyness of his hair. Yet another insisted that he was not a thief but a poor trader trying to survive.

“Will you shut up?” the DPO barked as though addressing one person. The room became a little quieter. He sniffed the content of the box. Silence. *Sniff. Sniff. Sniff.* The dust smeared his nose and jaw.

“Oya everybody off your shirt! Off your watch, your belt, your shoes, stockings! Everything! Remove everything in your pocket. Leave your underwear; I am not a woman so I am not interested in seeing your carrot! Oya, now quick! Quick! Do it!” he barked.

Again a clamor arose. Lawrence fumbled for the buttons of his greasy overalls. Perspiration burst out all over his body.

An ill-looking man emerged from the cluster. He attempted to squeeze a note into the DPO’s pocket without notice. The money fell on the floor, and he scrambled to pick it up.

“Oh, you think say you fit bribe me? Do I resemble a poor man? Did I beg you for money?” the DPO said to the man. The officer looked at him from head to toe.

“No sir, yes sir, sorry sir, no sir!”

“Ok so if I do not look like a poor man, why do you want to give me this wretched money?”

The man had no answer. He stuttered.

The DPO fell silent. He brought a finger to his chin to scratch it as though absorbed in some inscrutable contemplation.

“With more money you can deliver yourself from this mess.”

“Constable Tanko!”

“Shun sir!” Tanko stepped forward, clicked his heels together, stood at attention and brought a hand to his forehead in salute.

“March those who no fit pay into the cell!” commanded the DPO.

“Yes sir!”

The suspects dug into their pockets to bring out cash.

They formed a new line at the other end of the counter. A gun-toting officer stood there to collect. One by one each individual negotiated his own release and presented the cash. Those who had five naira went home. Those who had two naira followed suit.

Some had only coins, but with a great deal of begging, they were released. In the end, only Lawrence, and the teenage boy were left.

One of the constables shoved all their belongings into a bag and tossed the bag into a corner of the office. They shoved them through the damp, dimly lit passage to the cell. Lawrence tried to shut out the intensifying stench of urine, excrement, and insecticide from his nose. The smell permeated the whole place. When they got to the end of the corridor, the officers opened the cell door with its rust-coloured bars. Keys jangled, rusty hinges squealed. The police pushed them into a ten-by-twelve-foot cell. The cell was empty except for a starved army of mosquitoes and a metal slop bucket overflowing with decomposing faeces. Flies buzzed around the corner of the room. The teenage boy threw up.

*

Lawrence sat on the cold, hard floor, resting his back against the wall. His feet were touching something moist and slimy. He slapped a palm on his neck to kill a mosquito. He brought it back stained with his own blood. A curse escaped his lips. Everything had happened so quickly, but in a cell time passed slowly. He tried to call forth Itohan’s image. He tried to picture her. He tried to distract himself. He plunged into nothingness. The tears came again. He shut his eyes. More tears spilled out. He dropped his head. He wailed into his clenched fist.

His mother came for the boy. The lad left quietly, unable to speak, drenched in his own tears. Seconds later Lawrence heard the boy’s mother as she burst into tears. Night came with the shrilling sound of crickets. The cell turned silent except for the drone of the infernal mosquitoes. His body grew stiff with cold.

The next morning a key turned in the lock. Lawrence scrambled to his feet, quivering. The small of his back ached. All his bones ached. He ached everywhere. The constable led him to the DPO's office. The DPO behind a desk in a chair too big for his size. A gigantic table dominated the room. It was difficult to notice anything else. But there was little else in the room. The table was bare except for a transistor radio and a baton. The DPO's uniform, cap, and shiny belt, which looked like a hangman's noose, hung on the wall. The DPO scratched busily on a sheet of paper with his pen. He stopped writing and coughed into his fist.

"Shun sir!" said the constable. He saluted his jaw rigid and chest out.

"Yes, how may I help you?" The DPO stopped writing and looked up. The question confused Lawrence. Didn't he summon him?

"One of the criminals we arrested yesterday, sir," the constable replied.

"I no be criminal, sir!" said Lawrence. The constable lifted his hand and swung it hard across his face. Multi colours appeared before his eyes. They came together in a blurred mishmash. Blood surged in his mouth. Noise erupted in his ears.

"You still think you can use strong head here? If you say you will not cooperate with us, we too we will not cooperate with you. Heaven helps those who help themselves. If you refuse to help yourself, we will finish you, period!" the DPO said.

"Officer, take him back to the cell and lock him up where he belongs!" the DPO directed.

When Lawrence got back to the cell, he tried to analyse the implication of the superintendent's words. He decided he would tell the DPO his Madam Sample would give them some cash if he was allowed to reach her. At least she was the sympathetic one. Things were happening too fast. He felt he was losing control of his life.

Before noon, heavy footsteps thudded down the passage. Three armed men appeared. One of them swung the door open. Another tossed his bag of clothes at him and told him to dress up. They grabbed him and placed him in cuffs

"Where are you taking me? I want to see the DPO! My aunty will pay the money!" he shouted. The men spoke not a word. He struggled and screamed at the top of his voice. They subdued him and clasped him by his arms. They dragged him out of the station. An unmarked green truck waited outside.

The truck stopped before a prison's outer gate—eighteen feet high with spikes on top— and disgorged its passengers like unwanted waste. The peephole of the steel door embedded within the monstrous gates flapped open. Then the gates themselves swung wide open.

A gaggle of heavily armed guards in brown uniforms welcomed them in the waiting area. Some stood in the corners of the hall, idly fingering their automatic rifles. Some held guard dogs on leashes. The truck's door swung shut. The guards removed the metal manacles from the prisoners. They ran their hands up and down their sides.

This time around, Lawrence allowed them without protest. Resisting only brought him greater misfortune. His mouth tasted salty with blood. A great headache brewed on his forehead. His eyes scanned the walls of the prison buildings with grime-laden window. His gaze fell on a fist-sized hole in the soot-blackened wall of the prison. For a brief moment, he felt like reducing himself to the size of that hole. He felt reduced to nothing.

The warden emerged from one of the crumbling buildings. A small-framed man scuffed shoes and a starched brown uniform. His green beret sat at an unbelievable angle on his head. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he spoke:

“I don't bloody care who you are. The moment the government sends you to this place I am in charge. This is my palace. I tell you when to eat. I tell you when to sleep.” He coughed into his fist. Everywhere fell silent.

“I tell you when to shit. If you feel like shitting and I don't give you the permission to shit, you can mess up your trousers. If you disobey, I will waste you and throw your carcass to the dogs. If you fight, I will waste you and throw you to the dogs. If you try to escape, I will catch you and kill you. Some of you will not leave this place alive.”

Foam frothed at the corners of his mouth. He ended his speech and vanished.

The guards ordered them to line up in front of the reception counter. A staff member called out names, checked case files. He took down the personal details of name, date of birth, and address, and handed out clothes and tag numbers.

Lawrence stood in a line.

“Are you deaf?” A voice jerked him back from his thoughts. It was the prison worker behind the counter who now glowered at him.

“Sir? Lawrence is my name, Lawrence Anini.”

“So because you are Lawrence you cannot answer me?”

“No sir!”

The worker registered him, tossed his prison clothes at him. Lawrence held a stiff, light-blue khaki shirt and shorts. A pair of rubber slippers lay on top of the folded clothes. Lawrence had heard once that the light-blue uniforms were for the suspects awaiting trial, deep-blue uniforms for convicts, and mufti for those on death row. He had heard horror stories of the conditions in prison.

After much clanking of keys and locks, the guards opened a heavily barred door. They sent them through. Lawrence and the other prisoners proceeded into the prison yard. They were ordered to sit on the concrete while they waited to be assigned to their cells.

Time passed. Lawrence glanced across the vast compound.

Sweat formed on his forehead, and phlegm gathered in his throat. His head ached, and weariness came over him. Uniformed prisoners with sour looks drifted to and fro within clusters of cellblocks. Faces peered from behind bars to catch a glimpse of the newcomers. Guards, rifles in hand, were stationed at strategic points.

A warder came with a ledger and called out the names of the inmates and their cell numbers. The tingling smell of mosquito coil and urine, the stench and the heat of unwashed bodies assailed him as he entered his cell.

The cell was crammed with skinny, bare-chested prisoners. They sat on bug-infested bunks or reclined on the floor. They smoked, or played cards. Distended Jute bags, backpacks, empty containers and plastic buckets hung on the walls as though they grew out of the concrete. A washing line sagging with clothes ran from one side of the cell to the other. The walls crawled with streaks of stale piss.

Every available space in the cell had been occupied, so Lawrence stood close to the cell door and leaned his aching back on the piss stained wall. A metal bucket covered with a piece of rotten plank sat close to him. Nausea inched up his throat. His lips pressed tightly together as he fought back sorrow that nearly overwhelmed him.

No one paid him any attention. Murmurs filled the room, a heavy, raucous breathing floated from a corner. A few moments passed and a figure rose from the cluster of bodies. He waddled toward Lawrence, swearing and telling the prisoners lying on the floor to get out of his way. His trousers were rolled up to his ankles, and he had one withered leg that he dragged under him, lifting it over their heads and limbs.

“Chairman, dey call you,” the fellow said. His tone was sharp and commanding but laced with irritation.

Lawrence now knew better than to question any instruction. He followed the man to the corner, picking his way through the bodies.

Chairman bent low over a bowl of garri, his mouth smacking noisily. He finished eating, wiped his soiled hands on his trousers, and dislodged a gob of spit into the now-empty bowl. Long fat scars covered his bare torso. His hair looked as though gnawed by rats and where hair was missing whorls of scabby scalp dominated.

A guy stood beside him fanning him vigorously, his face shinning with sweat.

“Mr. Man, what is your name?” he said in a gruff voice, his gaze now fixed on Lawrence

“Lawrence.”

“Lawrence?”

“Yes sir.”

“A small boy like you, what are you doing here?”

“I stole money from my oga”

“You stole money from your oga?”

“Yes sir.”

A small boy like you stealing from your oga?

Lawrence didn't know what to make of the question.

“Good! Good!” Chairman said nodding his head.

“Do you know who I am?”

“He called you Chairman.”

“He was right. I am the Chairman of this place, and it is my responsibility to make sure every newcomer is welcomed,” he said. A mosquito droned, and he swatted the air around his head.

Lawrence said nothing. He simply nodded.

“But you see nothing is free in this life; even the robbers here know that armed robbery comes with a price. It is not easy to force money out of a man's hand. It is not easy to commit the crime of robbery,” he said, addressing no one in particular.

“Money be like a moustache; it is difficult to pull out,” said the fellow fanning him. Those who had been attentive gave a verbal assent to his remark.

“Thank you, my people, thank you.” Chairman smiled, displaying two rows of rotten teeth. “What we are all saying, my brother, is that you need to pay for your rent here. Have you ever lived in a house without paying rent? If you live here without paying your rent then you are a thief and you don't want to commit another crime. Nothing is cheap, in this life my boy, nothing. Nothing is free! Not even in Freetown. So pay us our rent from the money you stole from your oga.”

“Did you hear my chairman? Nothing is free, not even in Freetown!” again the fan guy shouted, sweat dripping down his face.

“I don’t have any money,” Lawrence responded. He had been abused enough and didn’t care any longer.

“Ah! He doesn’t have money!” the Chairman echoed.

“Chairman, throw him out!” someone said.

“Teach him a lesson he will never forget!” said another.

“Let him work for his rent. Hard labour!”

The man with the withered leg grabbed his shoulder. He seemed to be one of the Chairman’s henchmen.

“Mr. Man, pay your money or I will remove your eyes with my fingers!” The man with the withered leg bellowed, his fetid breath almost overpowering Lawrence. Lawrence steeled himself for the blow.

“What is going on over there?” the voice of a guard boomed. He rapped the rusty bar of the cell with a baton and the murmur subsided. The bad-legged man withdrew his hand. Lawrence thanked his stars.

“If I hear any noise from this place again today, there will be trouble,”

The cell became silent.

Not long after they left, the rains began pouring in a raging downpour. The electricity went out. Agitated murmurs filled the air. Soon enough, clattering raindrops whipped by the wind blew in through windows. Someone covered the burglar proofing with blankets, stuffing parts of the clothes through its iron mesh. The wind blew water in. Several minutes went by and the rain showed no signs of letting up. Water now oozed through rotting waterlogged asbestos, and washed over the exposed beams of the ceiling, dripping everywhere.

The henchman armed with a hurricane lamp, hobbled around for containers. He limped back and forth, setting empty containers under dripping rainwater. He shouted for people to make way. His mouth twisted to hold the pain that seemed to shoot through his bad leg. The flood water, brown and muddy swirled in through the entrance of the cell and pooled inside. Lawrence huddled closer to the wall as the other inmates tried to extricate themselves from the flooded area. Bodies pressed together. The smell of unwashed armpits, the heat, the cold, the insufficient oxygen in the air began to make him dizzy. But he was glad that they had forgotten about him. He shook his head to shake the dizziness off.

The henchman kept hopping over limbs. This time around, he held a rag. The chairman rose from his seat and henchman mopped up the thin sheen of water on his stool. He returned to his seat thanking the henchman. Lawrence listened to the shower of the rain against the corrugated iron roofing to distract himself from the thought that the henchman might remember they left business unfinished. The moments seemed to drag. Soon the wind grew weaker. The rain abated. Raindrops tapped unevenly on the roofing. Moments after the guard and the evangelist left, another guard came to the cell.

“Lawrence Anini!” he barked. Lawrence scrambled to his feet, his heart thumping.

The guard led him out of the cellblock to an empty room. He tossed his clothes at him. For a moment he stood there, smothered by a tide of confusion but then it occurred to him that an opportunity for freedom had been offered to him and that opportunity might close any moment. He grabbed his clothes.

The prison gates swung open. As the towering prison walls and all the miseries therein faded, the sweaty, noisy world he was used to, emerged. He walked into cold air and didn't stop walking. Getting away from the place was more important to him than his destination.

4

Sapele Motor Park

Most of wooden shops had been padlocked and the boys had finished scrubbing their bodies when they arrived. A group of mechanic boys chatted and shivered. They grabbed lazily at their crotches as they drew on their cigarettes. Their conversations were punctuated by raucous laughter. One of them broke off from the group and shuffled over to a young girl sitting in a kiosk listening to a transistor radio. He tried to touch her breast but she swatted his hands off. The fellow erupted into laughter.

Lawrence felt people's eyes on him as he walked to Benz Klinik. He was relieved to discover that Benz Klinik had been closed when he got there, but Madame Sample had not closed shop. She rushed headlong to him upsetting her three-legged bench on the way. She shed copious tears while inspecting his body.

When she was done crying, she dug a hand into her bra and whipped out a wrinkled note. She pressed the cash into Lawrence's palms. She told him to go home. Tomorrow they would plead with Master Michelin. If he refused, she would take him, she said. She was looking to expanding her drinking establishment and she needed the strength of a man. Lawrence nodded, thanked her and left. He walked down a row of shops, his hands deep in his pocket, his shoulders hunched.

He gave what Madam Sample said a single thought and dropped it. Another thought flashed through his mind. He dipped his hand into his pocket and brought out the creased note that Madam Sample gave him. He thought about what strong drink would warm him from within and make him forget his troubles. He thought about the guys who sold wee wee at street corners. He thought about the car graveyard. He stopped thinking and abandoned his trip home.

The tray. He first saw the tray. No, the tray wasn't the first thing. It was the sound. A rhythmic, squeaking sound. The dented metal tray sat on the ground. Nicely peeled oranges showing ring-like stripes were arranged in the tray. A small lump of underwear lay on the bonnet of the car. Before Lawrence could process what was happening, his eyes fell on a cup of skinny buttocks shoving itself between legs splayed apart. Lawrence ducked behind a clump of bushes and peered at the couple. He wedged the bottle of Schnapps he carried between his armpits. He thrust his head into the bush where a network of twigs partially obstructed his view. From where he crouched he could see only the girl's feet up to her calves.

They were silent. Only the sucking sound of bodies rocking back and forth in a wet, rusty car. The man's trousers were wrinkled down around his heels. Wet leaves clung to his shirt and trousers, some latched onto his bare arse. His buttocks gleamed with perspiration as he moved up and down. His but-cheeks bunched up with each thrust. Clenching. Unclenching. Her calves heaved, flapping against his sides. Lawrence felt a stir of recognition. He felt his pounding heart against his rib cage. Her hands now cupped his buttocks. A loud grunt escaped from his lips. He rolled away from her. It was Nosakhare. Lawrence clenched his chin in trying to suppress the surge of anger within him. His palms trembled. The resonant beating of his heart vibrated in his skull.

Lawrence continued to stare at Nosakhare, unmoving. Nosakhare stood there, reedy as a broom. His cock hung out of the bush of his hair wormy with veins. Semen dripped down his legs like a blob of honey. He sneezed and wiped his mouth on his wrist.

He walked a few steps into the bush. He held one hand over his half-flaccid prick. With the other hand, he plucked a leaf and cleaned himself. He plucked more leaves to wipe his hands. He hitched his trousers up. Smirk painted on. Nosakhare edged away from his view. Urine chattered against leaves.

Lawrence now had a good look at his orange hawker. *His* orange hawker. Her tousled hair. Her shivering body. Her lust-darkened eye. Her perky breasts mapped with thin veins. Her nipples taut. He had imagined releasing those breasts from their enclosure. He could not believe she could bare her body for that bastard let alone open her thighs. Helplessness seized him. He remembered the sufferings of the days gone by. How he had made futile efforts to liberate himself. How was this going to be any different? Something dissolved in him.

Something he had held onto for so long. Something that would never come back again. The anger that had swelled within him disappeared. For a moment, he thought he could block out his surroundings. Surrendering himself to the illusion that it was not there.

“Who dey there?” he heard Nosakhare yell. Itohan scrambled to gather her clothes. A stone sailed above his head. He sprang to his feet. He broke into a trot. Another stone flew in the air and hit his shoulders. He felt a sharp jolt of pain but walked on. He would not respond. He would not give him the pleasure. The trees danced. The ground beneath him rose up and sank. His teeth rattled with cold. His head swam. He tried to focus.

“Tif! What are you doing here you tif!” he heard Nosakhare shout loudly. He heard Nosakhare say those words again and again. He heard people laugh at him. He heard people call him a thief. His legs brushed against wet leaves and softened shit. Insects chirped in semi darkness. He heard more people laugh at him. He smiled to himself as though he agreed with them. Cars swished past. Headlights beamed back and forth. *Streaks that splayed patterns of light blinded him.* He opened the cap of his bottle with his teeth, spat it away and glugged the liquor. On the street, people marched in different directions. They seemed to be looking at him with the corner of their eyes. Laughing at him. He took another swig of the liquor. He tripped over a sodden box, then kicked it away. He straggled onwards, he trudged in pain with each footstep. Layers of sand loosened by harsh currents of air floated upwards in chaotic whirls.

He walked through the sandstorm. He walked for a long time. He got to the washing line in his neighbourhood. He tried to duck but the wind carved a hollow shape into the body of one of the fabrics. The wind carved out a face. The face laughed at him. The face laughed through his eyes. The face called him a thief. He pulled the fabric down from the line. He destroyed the face. He lurched on. He laughed at himself. He took another swig.

His room stank like a rat’s nest. He fumbled for the switch. He flicked on the low watt bulb suspended from the ceiling. It projected a harsh light into the room revealing the disarray; clothes hanging in odd places, litter all over the place. The urge to laugh intensified. He rummaged frantically amongst his belongings. He tossed some clothes into plastic bag. He shambled out of the room. He staggered and almost fell headlong, but regained balance and continued walking. A street mongrel sprang out of a corner and bounded after him. He spun round and lobbed his bottle at it. The bottle narrowly missed the dog, crashing on the wall. Dashed into pieces. Shards of glass flew. Liquor splashed all over the place.

The dog fled. His pink tongue hung out of the side of his mouth. His tail curled between his legs. He walked on cursing the dog’s genealogy. He walked on until he hit the

highway. For several minutes, he tried to wave a vehicle down. Arms hanging loose. Stoop-shouldered. Finally, a pickup truck pulled over. He held out his rumpled cash. The bus driver took his money. He motioned with his chin for him to join the other passengers jumbled together at the rear of the truck among lumpy sacks of rice and beans. He clambered into the back of the truck. The vehicle moved and he drifted off to sleep.

Lawrence dreamt of men wielding machetes. He heard footsteps and manic screams. They cursed his genealogy like he did to the mongrel. Lawrence turned the corner of a street. He ran past pockets of people and busy passers-by. He sped through alleyways and face-me-I-face-you buildings. He ran until his lungs were at bursting point, his knees ready to give way under him. The world rose and fell to the rhythm of his steps.

He stopped several minutes later, breathless, his chest heaving. He could not quite tell how long he had been running. Although it was not a long time, he was sure he had covered a great distance. He had shaken them off. He did not stop running even when he stopped hearing their curses; he did not stop until he was certain he was safe. He hunkered down on his haunches, panting heavily. He realized he was in a market. He saw people drifting back and forth. The noise of haggling filled the air. Women measured out bowls of grains. Hawkers roamed about. Traders rang bells over heaps of clothes. He also saw people who walked backwards. People with horribly distorted heads twisted away from their bodies. Humpbacks leaping like frogs. Men with wooden limbs hobbling along. Naked women with eyes on their breasts. Eyes like two slits. Men walked with their heads on the ground and their spindly feet in the air. Bloated bodies giggled. Bodies riddled with holes. Nothing seemed out of place. Absurdity and normalcy coexisted. The buying and selling went on without anyone looking at the other strangely. Lawrence felt a strange rush of relief within him. It was as though he belonged there. The cutlass wielding men appeared from nowhere. Lawrence fled again.

He jolted awake in the back of the pickup truck as the gears crunched and the truck bounced along an uneven dirt road, its passengers trembling. Sweat beaded on his throbbing forehead. He felt a rhythmic pulsation behind his eyes. For a moment, he tried to think about the nightmare. His pounding head would not let him. He shivered. A tingling warm sensation spread through his body.

The long commute ended. Two-storied buildings came into view followed by rust streaked roofs of bungalows. The city stretched out to the left and right, with its bungalows and wooden stalls.

Not long after that, the truck plunged into the messy conglomerate of heat, men and vehicles. There was a stir in the back of the truck as passengers began preparing to dismount. The noise awoke a boy with a silvery line of mucus on his cheeks, who started bawling. His mother hitched up her top and held the child to her chest. The child sucked noisily as the mother pushed her breast deep into his mouth.

Lawrence stared at mother and child for a moment. She looked sharply across at him. He turned his head to gaze out into the busy streets inhaling the smog-infected air of the city.

The truck stopped. He jumped down and stood for a while, thinking what to do next. He watched dreams and chaos swirl around him – a forest of legs sweeping under storefront awnings, flying dust, cars roaring on the road. He walked on. A row of shops lined the street interspersed by houses with dust-caked walls. The sweet smell of fried fish drifted up from one of the shops. His throat felt dry and his stomach began to rumble. His headache worsened. He walked the length of the street. He approached a lone pedestrian and was about to launch into the story of his strange and miserable life to stir compassion but the man moved on before he could speak. From that point, he knew he would have to do much more than beg to survive here.

Lawrence lurked behind a kiosk, watching Papa as he had done for days now. He waited for the right time to act. His face gaunt and creased below his receding hairline, Papa wore a brown shirt with a frayed collar. His trousers so short one could almost not distinguish them from shorts.

A solid figure of a man, Lawrence had no doubt that Papa still possessed some of the energy of his youth. He saw strength in his limbs. Papa carried his years well. The way he called out routes with a loud and hoarse voice. The way he lifted heavy goods into his bus. He was as quick on his feet as the other drivers. Not to mention that he had to do the work of a conductor as well. Lawrence even saw him throw a jab once, even though the fellow he assaulted came armed only with insults. He sure did not seem to have the restraint that usually came with old age.

Lawrence watched Papa throw open his greasy metal toolbox, and tumble outspanners black with oil. He had his shirtsleeves rolled up to his elbows. His arms, though sinewy and withered with age, looked strong.

His minibus was an old pale white Toyota HIACE with badly damaged fenders and a fractured windshield, its edges lined with a newspaper cut-out of Sir Victor Uwaifo. Just above the front bumper, in a well-ordered calligraphic rendition, his bus boldly bore the inscription LET ME GET HOME BEFORE IT'S DARK. Stencilled on the rear window in yellow lettering were the words ENJOY YUR LIFE NOW, NO ONE KNOW TOMMOROW.

Lawrence often wondered what he would write on his bus if he got one. He had not seen a single vehicle in Sapele Park that did not have literature or decorative calligraphy. One bus bore the inscription MONEY STOPS NONSENSE, while a taxi boldly declared: SATAN GET LOST! A trailer, embellished with rough paintings, warned ominously: *BEWARE, MANY HAVE GONE*; another declared: *BACK TO SENDER* and *ONLY GOD CAN GEORGE*.

The food market was not far from the park, where swarms of people surged back and forth: trudging load carriers, groaning under the weight of bags of foodstuff, sweat washing down their bodies, their guttural voices telling people to get out of the way; cart pushers carrying piles of farm produce from the market to the vehicles; handicapped beggars on wheel-fastened boards, impostors feigning disability, bearing hospital reports speaking of ridiculous afflictions; yellow skinned mendicants from Niger shuffling after their prospective benefactors, stubborn as leeches; and barefoot hawkers with hard, sun-beaten faces and trays balanced on their heads calling out to prospective customers in high-pitched voices.

Vehicles plying long distance routes occupied a place by the roadside farther down the market. Mammy wagons, big-nosed trailers, and overloaded lorries with unstable bodywork.

Papa pulled up the cushion of the driver's seat to expose the engine underneath and bent over it, poking and screwing and tapping. For an instant, he rubbed his eyes with the crook of his arm then continued his work. His eyes were red. Unblinking. They had wrinkled, puffy bags hanging beneath them. Thick, drawn-out veins stuck out at his temples.

When Papa finished his work, he slammed the seat back into position. Then cleaned his greasy hands with a rag. He used the rag to wipe the glittering droplets of sweat on his face. Papa swung the door in the passenger's section of the minibus open. He began calling out his route, his voice hollow and hoarse.

Lawrence braced himself. He had it all planned out. He had been watching for two days now. He knew the man had no conductor. The other bus drivers, those who had conductors, would set their boys to work. The boys would jostle for passengers. They would call out routes, scream, and gesture. Lawrence observed how some of them employed the bold-faced method of snatching the bags of the prospective passengers and taking them to their buses to secure seats. He learnt by observation that there were conductors who pitched their tents with whoever could pay after the day's job. They lived on these daily incomes, and as a result, they did not hesitate to hurl invective at anyone seeking to undermine their means of livelihood, and threaten them with curses and clenched fists. He also learnt that there were conductors who worked full time for drivers. There were even those who were so indispensable they shared the earnings of the day with their drivers. Lawrence reckoned it was easier to try his luck on a driver without a conductor. He just wanted a decent meal and a roof over his head.

In the days before this, Lawrence had continued accosting pedestrians for money. He rifled through the garbage when no one was generous. He scraped off the crustiness from stale loaves of bread. He drank fermented milk. He emptied dregs left in bottles. He consumed left over rice from parties. His trouser drooped on shrunken hips. He had to tear a strip of cloth from his shirt to use as belt. At night he slept on the abandoned pedestrian bridge close to where he disembarked when he got to Benin. He washed at a stream nearby used by a car wash company. When a lunatic came to join him, he left. These days he just slept anywhere, anytime and in any posture, wherever night fall. The thought of suicide crept occasionally along the edges of his fuzzy mind. He imagined stringing up a noose in some abandoned building and swinging out into the great beyond. But he could not bring himself to do such a thing – which him feel even worse. His miserable thoughts soon fell away in the face of increased hunger and suffering. Again and again life seemed to have struck him a dolorous blow, knocking him to the ground. The future appeared cloudy and still he could move on. It did not matter what he was moving on to.

Now, Lawrence sprang into action. He plunged into the crowd. He weaved his way to the mainroad. There, in the wild, and far away from the other boy conductors, he called out routes.

On the road, stalled vehicles honked. Their drivers stuck their heads out, spewing forth angry words peppered with profanities. Some turned off their engines, quietly seething behind their steering wheels. Hawkers milled about, hoping to benefit from the jam, dangling their wares through car windows. Exhaust-belching Okadas, searching for spaces between the jammed vehicles, tried in vain to wind their way through the confusion.

When Lawrence got his first passenger and grabbed her handbag, he guided her through writhing bodies to Papa's bus. He vanished before Papa could say anything. Again, he dashed through the crowd. He screamed. He accosted pedestrians. He demanded where they were going. His heart became a frantic, frenzied drumbeat. He took in huge gulps of air. He relieved a woman of her heavy load. He hoisted it along. He set it in front of the bus. He crouched on the ground, his hands planted on his knees, his chests heaving hard and fast. Sweat poured down his face. This time Papa did not look as surprised as the first time. He no longer gestured. His voice became subdued.

Lawrence went off again. Screaming. Panting. Sweating. Cajoling. Making excessive hand gestures. A little later, he emerged from the crowd with two male passengers. He left them and sprinted towards the road. He stopped in his tracks when two boy conductors planted themselves in his way. Sinewy. Narrow-chested. Dishevelled clothes. Shaved heads white with lice. He was not surprised. He knew that at some point they would question his audacity.

"Who you be?" one of them demanded. Had Lawrence not been face to face with the boy he could have sworn that what rained on him was water sprinkling from a broken sewer. He wrinkled his nose. He tried to push his way through the wall their bodies made. They sent him sprawling on his buttocks, stirring a plume of red dust. He picked himself up. He saw a fist aiming for his jaw and parried it. The blow made a whooshing sound. Lawrence unravelled a combination of hooks and jabs at the first boy. He reeled back as a groan escaped from his lips. Blood streamed from a cut on his forehead.

No one would stop him. He would not lose this time. He noticed people gathering. He did not care. The second boy moved to grab him by the legs. This time he was not fast enough. He felt his knees go. For some seconds he glided in the air. Vertigo swirled in his head. He crashed to the ground; his back against hardened soil. He did not feel pain. He only felt wetness in the back of his head and a dull thud in his skull. He summoned enough strength to throw a kick, tossing his assailant away. He jumped up. He felt hands on him. Voices shouted into his skull. He saw the blurry image of Papa bearing a gnarled stick in one

hand, warning a group of drivers to put their boys on the leash! The boys stepped back. They cursed and spat.

Lawrence continued hustling for passengers, this time under Papa's orders. Minutes later when the bus had been filled up and Papa had given him some money, he walked away from the glare of the sun. He sat on an empty bus-stop bench. He produced his earnings of the day from his pocket, arranged the notes and counted them hastily before people got to the bus stop. Hidden somewhere beneath his sweaty, exhausted face was a glow of self-achievement.

The adrenaline wore out and now his head felt heavy. It was a huge load on his neck. He touched the back of his head and his hand turned crimson. His clenched his jaw in pain. He shoved the money back into his pocket, rose and began his search for a roadside pharmacist.

Bright lights. Dim lights. A cloud of flies dithering around. Raucous beer parlors. Street-side booze sheds. Constantly pulsating hordes of men. Constantly moving hordes of men. Drunken men with dreams of plunging through wide flung legs. Drunken men too inebriated for dreams. Girls teetering around on platform shoes while negotiating with customers. Girls leading men by the hand into tiny rooms.

Lawrence slipped into the folds of the night. He slithered through bodies and buildings, his face flushed with shame, his cock stiff in his trousers. He moved edgewise through the gap in a row of the chalets and began his search of a girl.

The previous day a salesman had come to the door of Papa's bus carrying a black cellophane bag. He was a bony faced man from the north with tribal scarification etched on his cheeks. He dug his hand into his bag to whip out his merchandise as though conjuring tricks from a hat. The merchandise on sale was a little phial with a label. The phial showed a blonde woman baring her impossible breasts, with the inscription *POWER BOOSTER DRUG*. His eyes, set deep in their sockets, darted to and fro as he spoke. Lawrence saw truth in his eyes. He convinced him because of the truth in his eyes. The salesman told him to take only one spoonful. One spoonful was enough. Lawrence wanted his session to be perfect so he adhered to the prescription.

His interest in women had waned significantly after his former boss Master Michelin humiliated him and threw him to the dogs. However, with his new master came renewed confidence. Lawrence began working for Papa full time. By day, he called out routes and jostled with the other boys for passengers. Whenever the bus moved he dangled from the frame of the side door screaming routes. At night, he made a bed from the back seat of the Toyota HIACE. After brandishing a stick at a passenger and cracking a beer bottle on a conductor boy's skull during a fight, Lawrence felt he was ready to feel the warmth and moisture of a woman. He did not mean to hurt the boy. Working all day, every day in sun, throat parched with scorching thirst, stomach gnawing with hunger could do strange things to a young man. He did not want to go back to begging for alms and scavenging for food.

The pain began with a soft throbbing in his balls. The ache lashed upon him and receded moments later like soft waves. The pain teased him so much so that he even considered it pleasurable. He would clasp his thighs whenever he felt the ache, as a way of extracting the pleasure. Then the waves became more frequent and painful. When it lashed, he would catch his breath and wait for it to pass. It took a long time for it to pass.

Lawrence realized that his sac dangled at a very odd angle. The first sac became bunched and looked crinkled, scaly and dark. The second on the other hand swung low like a pendulum with a faulty rope. He had never seen it this low before which slightly frightened him. His fears were however allayed when he decided to wait until the next day when the drug would have done its complete work. Then he would be ready for the brothel.

Lawrence woke up the next morning with his usual morning erection only that it remained rigid and curved.

Dark varicose veins appeared on the shaft of his cock. It started at the upper end of his shaft close to the end of his foreskin, travelled down through an uneven path and branched out like tributaries before getting lost in the forest of his hair.

He tried masturbating. He fondled himself, gently massaging the length of his shaft. His movements forced the foreskin up and down. The flicking of the skin stimulated the cockhead and clear fluid plopped out through the tip of his dick. Yet he remained stiff as a rod. Then the time came when he thought he saw the varicose veins move, squirm and slip in his cock like little earthworms. He ran to a public bathroom, terrified. He held his warm prick under the tap. He kept it there until he shivered from cold. Nothing happened.

He walked around the motor park before dawn smoking stick upon stick of cigarettes wondering about the strangeness of his predicament. His first thought was to go for herbs to cure his affliction, but then he realized that the street-side women who peddled herbs also

circulated gossip. He thought of going in search of the doggy salesman. He wore a long *Jelibabahto* work that morning to conceal the stiffness in his groin. He kept an eye out for the salesman. A cloud of fear descended upon him. Fear followed him through his day.

He tried to focus. It was difficult jumping on and off the bus with his erection. He was careful not to brush against any passenger, all the while pushing tears back down his throat.

Calling out routes even became a problem; the terrible pain seemed to have extracted all the energy in his voice and his body. Sometimes it itched and he couldn't find a place where he could conveniently and discreetly scratch himself.

He considered going to one of the numerous native doctors in the city. With some money, he could get a cure for his condition. When evening came, he changed his mind, decided to go to the brothel anyway.

A moustachioed woman smiled at him. She dragged him to a room with a six-spring bed and gnawed bedstead. Before the terrible effect of the drug, he had imagined he would undo his fly, whip out the stiffness beneath and get on with it. Now he stood frozen staring at her big frame.

She gave him a knowing smile and reached out to roll up his *Jelibabah*. He felt her hand down below, warm and calloused. He felt no pleasure. She smiled again. Discoloured teeth flashed through her red lips.

He laid his hands on her bosom. He held it firmly and squeezed. She undressed and sat on the bed, which made a creaking sound. An outcrop of hair ran from the valley between her breasts down to her navel and below. The hair on her body looked like a mass of withered grass. He pulled his trousers down to his knees, hopped on to the bed and eased himself into her lowering his head, burying it in the crook of her robust neck. His thrusts matched the cadence of the bedsprings, plunging into her with each distinct squeak.

He felt no pleasure.

It was as though he was plunging into a well dug deep into the bowels of the earth.

His prick went soft and he rolled away and pulling on his trousers.

In the morning, everywhere grew quiet and damp. The breath of human waste wafted from open latrines. Mongrels slouched about with swaying tits in search of their stray puppies. Hens picked for worms. Hens pecked other things that are not worms, like used condoms and cigarette butts. The corridors bled water. Water streamed through the long narrow gutters beside the local cinema.

The girls stayed indoors to sleep off their exhaustion, sore privates, and frayed tempers. Drunkards woke in the pool of their own vomit or with chins caked with drool

before trudging home or wherever they came from. An early morning customer blew into the neighbourhood. He found an open door and shuffled in. Before noon the girls woke up to clean up their filth, their washing hung out to dry like the witchdoctor's snakeskin. Some, disgruntled from the previous night's work, peered at each other from the corners of their eyes. Secret sneers transformed into imprecations. The rest of the girls ignored the territorial conflicts of their colleagues. They busied themselves with eating while tossing food at their mongrel pets. Their turn would soon come. It would always come. Old whores squatted on low stools in their doorways, their breasts weighed down with age, their legs splayed apart. They waved their raffia fans vigorously. Night fell. The girls spilled out of their rooms in short shorts. The hustle continued. Lawrence slipped into the night once again. He thought about the loud music, the fetid smells, and men scuttling like rats in corridors and shadows. He thought about the untamed girls...yes the girls. He stopped thinking and lurched towards one of the rooms.

5

Gordy

The engine growled. The gear ground violently, and the bus jerked forward, spitting clouds of grit and gas. Lawrence tooted the horn, and the steering wheel trembled in his hands as the bus lumbered out of the park, lurching over potholes. He picked up a rag and wiped the film of dust on the windscreen.

Within minutes they reached their destination. Lawrence now drove slowly. The procession crawled along First Cemetery Street. The musicians got down. Drums rolled on. Trumpets blared. The trumpeters appeared to possess an endless gust of air in their lungs. Their cheeks inflated and the veins in their necks were taut as ropes. They played song after song. They played for the hearse as though telling it what to do. They seemed to be urging it on and at the same time telling it to advance slowly. The instruments played songs about hope, death, heaven, angels and Calvary.

*Oh happy day, oh happy day
When Jesus washed my sins away...
When peace like a river attended my way,
When sorrows,
Like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot,
Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well; it is well with my soul.*

The morning of the funeral, Lawrence woke up in the backseat of the bus, stretched and rubbed sleepiness out of his eyes. He picked up a jerrican and plastic bowl. He poured water from the jerrican into the bowl and removed his shirt, scooped some water to wash his hair, and then scooped more for his mossy armpits before bringing out a chewing stick. He walked to the front, wiped the windshield of the bus with a damp cloth while he brushed and spat out juice from the chewing stick. He was meticulous about cleaning the bus these days.

He treated it as though it was his own. It had been two years since he had started working for Papa. A lot had changed for him and some things remained the same. These days Papa allowed him to drive the bus. He loved driving. Driving gave him an incredible power. It gave him control. When he sat behind the wheels of a vehicle he felt as though he could do anything. He felt larger than he was, far imposing than he would ever be. He felt as though he had the body of a machine. The sound of the engine roaring to life. The smell of grease. The grating sound of the brakes. He thought about the things he could do with a good car. He loved driving fast. Rapid motion excited him. The world flying past. Wind buffeting his face to tears. He rolled down the window when he drove to feel the world rush past him. Feel himself dominate distance. Dominate time.

After Gordy died Lawrence heard whispers that Papa was favoured to be the next Union Chairman. The prospect of this excited Lawrence. The job of a union leader hardly gave room for any other engagement so Papa might hand over the bus to him completely. Besides, Papa would have as many vehicles as he wanted by virtue of his position. If Papa offered to sell the bus, then Lawrence would hand over his daily proceeds until he eventually paid him off. Lawrence had even considered the option of getting his own bus. With a few years' savings, he could purchase a bus from a roadside mechanic who was in the business of searching for abandoned vehicles and putting them in working order. They came cheaper that way. Lawrence had little faith in his desires. Dreams no longer boiled inside him the way they once had. He had made the decision not to be disappointed if his desires did not materialize. The only thing he owed himself was survival. The least he could do was to survive. He was just trying to carve out a living and pull himself out of their world of shame and hunger.

Lawrence clambered into Papa's bus filled with union members. Papa sat beside him. They led a convoy of several buses crammed full of people. A band of drummers and trumpeters heralded the hearse, a grey station-wagon with its backseat stretched out flat to accommodate the coffin. Papa gazed into the distance as though daydreaming. He was on the verge of tears.

Lawrence heard about Gordy's death two days after it happened. The fellow who pitched the tale carried out his task as though his existence depended on it. He described, analysed, and touched on every detail with his moving hands.

According to the storyteller, Gordy sauntered out of one of the rooms at the brothel and inched close to a fence where he joined three other customers who were relieving their bladders. They chatted for a few moments. He slumped with his dick still in his hands.

Vigorous jerks followed the thudding fall. The terrified men thought Gordy had been thrown into a fit of epilepsy. They hauled him away from the fence for fresh air. Shouts rent the air. The girls sprang out of their rooms and poured torrents of water on him. Nothing happened. Saliva bubbled between his lips. His mouth flapped open and closed like a fish. He twisted his shuddering body into many strange postures as though frozen demons thawed within him. More shouts filled the air. He made a choked gurgle, the final sputtering of a dying machine. His chest heaved once, then twice, and then stopped moving. The men carried him to the main road then turned into the dusty path leading to the motor park. They stretched him out on the ground. The news bearer concluded that his heart must have given up for taking in too much sweetness.

Lawrence did not really know Gordy, but he felt sad for him. He knew Gordy as the man who coordinated the due collectors. Gordy was the man who armed loafers with sticks and sent them after drivers with unregistered vehicles. Drivers and bus conductors went to him to settle all scores. He had an office in the corner of the motor park, under a decrepit wooden shed. His office had benches and a narrow table with a stack of account books.

Lawrence knew Gordy to be a political party supporter. He received visitors from the National Party of Nigeria. He sometimes allowed them to address the union. They came in their Mercedes Benz. They wore French suits, and flowing *agbadas*. They came with promises and big words. Already there were talks of the forthcoming Benin elections. Papa did not like the NPN. He said they were the party of the North and that no light-skinned Fulani or their cronies would be allowed to rule Bendel State at any level. He tolerated them because he respected Gordy.

Lawrence knew Gordy had two wives and a brood of children. His wives came visiting one day decked with copper trinkets. Their children swarmed behind them like little ducks.

Lawrence applied the brakes when he saw the hearse stop at the pair of rusting iron gates. The priest stepped out of the station-wagon with Gordy's widows. Clad in black, the widows huddled together, handkerchiefs squeezed in their hands. Lawrence switched off the ignition and opened his door. He exited the vehicle. People spilled out quietly, wearing an expression of sadness. Clumps of elephant grass and puny trees dotted the large expanse of the burial grounds. Broken edges bordered the lands. Gravestones peeked out of bushes. White. Grey. Headstones caked with mud. The songs continued.

Oh happy day, oh happy day

When Jesus washed my sins away...

The back door of the station-wagon crashed open. The pallbearers, young men in black suits and dirty white gloves, sprang out like rats out of a hole. They dragged out the coffin and hoisted it to their shoulders. The mourners moved in single file with the priest close to the pallbearers, who lead the way. Lawrence joined the line, his hands clasped behind his back. Sadness coursed through him. Tears stung his eyes. He looked around. He saw drawn faces. He saw tears.

*When peace like a river attended my way,
When sorrows,
Like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot,
Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well; it is well with my soul.*

The band stopped at the waist-high iron gate and they continued the journey in silence. The procession plunged into the cemetery and meandered through the graves until it reached the place marked for Gordy's interment. Lawrence pushed through the crowd to join those lined up at the lip of the grave.

The pallbearers laid down the coffin and within seconds the priest began the funeral service, a short sermon about life after death. The priest declaimed heaven and hell loudly and vigorously. Sweat ran down his temples. Lawrence threw a glance at one of the widows. He watched snot tumble down her nose. Two large tears ran slowly down from the corners of her eyes into her mouth. He watched her pair of trembling green-veined hands. The other widow simply stared into space. Wisps of untended hair sprouted out from under her roughly tied scarf. Some fell onto her face. She wore no makeup, not even a dash of powder. Her face glistened with stale tears.

He wondered what was going on in the mind of the dry-eyed one. He wondered if they knew how their husband died. He wondered if that mattered. The priest ended his sermon by calling sinners to repentance, in order to escape the coming wrath. When he saw that nobody responded, he said, "Let us pray."

Lawrence thought of the strange woman with the hairy chest and the girls after her. Girls with bleached faces, bogus hairdos, spotted complexions, and pears for breasts. Girls whose names he forgot as soon as he asked for them.

The pallbearers lowered the coffin into the grave. They were careful. The coffin went down slowly until it sank into the earth. The snot-faced widow leapt, her tear-stricken face twisted in distress, her unkempt hair over her eyes in a brown mass like seaweed. She threatened to throw herself into the pit. They restrained her. She beat her legs and swayed from side to side as they held her. She bit her lower lip at intervals. The other widow did not utter a word. Her eyes now dripped with tears.

Two bare-chested men emerged from the crowd bearing spades. They sank their spades into the ground and dug out red soil. The widows scooped up fistfuls.

Dust to dust... ashes to ashes

Wretched are we and turned to dust we shall be...

A tiny hole opened up on the priest's forehead. A shiny, well-fed worm squirmed out. The worm slid gently down his face, stretching and compressing. It writhed up the hill of his nose and dived into his gaping mouth. The worm strained out of the skin of his neck as it wriggled further down until it disappeared into his white collar. The priest continued speaking.

Dust to dust... ashes to ashes

Wretched are we and turned to dust we shall be...

Lawrence blinked several times as though to correct his sight. When that did not work, he rubbed his eyes with the back of his palms. The strange sight vanished. Maybe it was not there to begin with and he was just overwhelmed by the feeling of despair in the air.

A rush of relief coursed through his veins, but he still felt on edge. He recalled being confronted with that terrifying mirage at the car graveyard, although did not retain precise memories of what happened. What about the nightmares?

Once in a while the men chased him in his dreams. He still wandered in the market full of strange people and things. Sometimes he could not differentiate between dream and wakefulness so it did not matter on which plane the absurdity existed. Sometimes he drifted in the middle, neither asleep nor awake, avoiding both planes, belonging nowhere.

What about the strange drug that almost ruined his prick? Or the torment he had endured from the hands of the authority figures in his life?

It was as if some kind of ill luck or infernal spirit clung to him. He must have been cursed from his family lineage. Curses from the roots didn't go easily. They follow a person the way flies follow shit. He smiled, trying to hide the nervous tension rising in him.

Gordy's children broke through the crowd to pour sand on their father's coffin, their eyes red with grief. Lawrence fixed his gaze on the priest. He saw nothing strange.

Dust to dust... ashes to ashes

Wretched are we and turned to dust we shall be...

The men shovelled dirt into the grave. They scooped big mounds of clay and fine sand. The soil thudded on the coffin. The sound of the shovel scraping against the coarse sand grated in his ears. The priest said the benediction and people filed out of the burial ground.

A flock of hawkers had besieged the cemetery gate. To those who mourned they offered sweets, bottled water, soft drinks. Bibles and pamphlets, cigarettes packets, sliced bread, wristwatches and belts with shiny buckles. A beggar woman stood amongst them.

Her eyes, protuberant, staring, milky-white with blindness. One arthritic hand rattled a dry stick, while in the other she cradled a plastic bowl that jingled with coins. The beggar raised her voice in spurious invocations.

“May you not die before your time!”

“May the road not open to claim your souls!”

“May you not sow for another man to reap!”

The prayers rolled off her tongue in a singsong moan. The priest walked past her without appearing to give her any notice. Many people walked past her. A woman dug into her purse and dropped a folded bill into her bowl. She rolled back her lips to smile, disclosing decayed dentition.

Lawrence felt her staring at him with her bulbous, glaucoma-eaten eyes as he moved close to her. He shoved his hands into his pocket. He dipped his hands into the bowl to drop his coins as he passed. His fingers touched something soft and slimy. He retracted his hands. His eyes swung towards the beggar and he saw her bowl squirming with worms. For an instant he was transfixed, unable to look away from the horror. The moment prolonged itself

or maybe time ceased to matter. Everything slowed down. He did not know how long that moment lasted. He was ensnared by it.

The worms multiplied. Their mucus-like skin split open. They made way for more of them. The new worms grew big after wriggling out of the mother worms. In time, they also burst open to vomit their own offspring. This split-multiply process continued till the beggar's bowl brimmed over with their slime. Lawrence tore his gaze from the sight to the beggar. But he suffered greater torment from the next thing he saw. The beggar's eyes had transformed into two dark, staring orbs and worms slid out from the corners of the eyes! Lawrence lurched back in fright. A sound of distress rose from within him and sprung to his lips.

For days, Lawrence felt people's eyes on him whenever he moved around in Sapele Motor Park.

He knew it was just a matter of time before Papa chucked him out for sabotaging his chances of winning the election. The news of the incident at the burial had circulated. There were rumours that Papa might have been involved in Gordy's death in order to make room for him to become the next Chairman. Why else did a ghost haunt Papa's boy during Gordy's burial service? There was no other explanation. Lawrence would have thought the same too. He even heard that Apollo, a conductor, had stepped out of contest.

One afternoon, Lawrence got a message that Papa wanted to see him at a beer parlour. Trepidation took over. Why did he choose a beer parlour? Maybe he wanted to get drunk before heaping steaming piles of curses on him. But Papa did not need alcohol to motivate him to do anything. His ability to stay calm after satisfying his monstrous thirst for strong drink was legendary. When drunk he became disoriented, puked and passed out but he was never garrulous or overly excited. He always stayed calm even when his face looked bloated with liquor. It was as though no part of his old brain could be tingled by liquor.

"Take, make una wear am!" Papa said as he handed him an amulet made of cowry shells. Fat green and brown bottles crammed the table in front of him

He said he bought it from a woman in *Kemwinkemwin* business that got it from anative doctor. The necklace was to ward off evil spirits! Lawrence fingered the necklace for a moment, his eyes glistening with unshed tears.

"Give this boy a bottle of stout!" He blurted, waving at a barmaid.

6

Inner Sanctum

Lawrence watched Papa snarl, wave his hand wildly at him at the motor park. Papa then tried to inflict physical pain. Lawrence raised a fist clutched in rage. Lawrence caught Papa's wrist mid-air. He warned him with his eyes. With his eyes, he told Papa: another attempt to strike a blow would not augur well. Papa got the message. He widened his eyes and held his withered head far back in surprise.

He retorted to verbal darts. He called Lawrence a bastard accusing him of treachery. Then he opened his mouth to say something else, but what came out was a stutter. He suffered a coughing fit which nearly choked him. His veins swelled with the effort of the cough. Water ran down the corner of his eyes. It was painful to watch. Bus drivers pleaded with him. The appeal for Papa to abate his anger was wrapped in the gentle warning of a collapse if he worked his nerves too much. Before he stomped off, he threatened to hack off Lawrence's treacherous head if he ever laid his eyes on him again. He cursed Lawrence by the name of the gods. He threatened to make his life a ruin. Lawrence ripped the necklace made of cowries from his neck.

Feelings of pleasure and the pang of conscience gripped him all at same time. It was no contest. The pleasure he extracted from the modicum of power he had far outweighed the guilt coursing through his veins.

He had received the keys of a second-hand Peugeot 504. He had received them with trembling hands, prostrated flat on the dusty ground in front of his benefactor. He had jumped into the driver's seat, clutched its steering wheel with moist palms. He had sniffed its old leather seats and brushed them with his fingers. There came the realization that the car he sat in was not a recently repaired car in need of a test run or a commercial bus belonging to another man. The car belonged to him. When he shoved the key into the ignition and the engine roared into life, great joy swept over him.

He also got a place of his own – a one-bedroom apartment in a tenement building. He furnished the apartment with a king-size bed, refrigerator, stove, TV, and a big couch, all on linoleum carpets. He bought a gramophone and left it on the bedside table covered with polythene sheet. He went to a row of stores in the city centre, fondling a wad of cash in his pocket. He asked for bellbottom trousers, jackets with big lapels and platform shoes. He stopped by a sowing establishment for a French suit. He gave himself a clean shave. At the end of his complete makeover, he stood in front of the mirror to congratulate himself.

A week before his new lease of life, Papa had won the elections and moved to the wooden office. Lawrence was given full access to the bus and sometimes coordinated those who collected the union dues. They came with wads of used tickets and pockets bulging with notes. Lawrence counted the money and stashed it in a sack roped around with twine. The counting took time. He counted slowly and said the numbers aloud.

In the run-up to the elections Lawrence had watched politicians visit Papa in the office asking for support. First, it was the men with flowing babarigas from the National Party of Nigeria. They delivered long speeches about how the country needed change. How they were the party of the masses. How life would become rosy and the streets would be paved with gold. One after the other, Papa told them he was not to be deceived. He showed them the way out the wooden office. Lawrence watched him with surprise. He found it strange that Papa fended them off so easily, those who came with money. He would not have hesitated to take their cash if he was in Papa's position.

Chief Ekpeyoung had showed up in his Mercedes Benz 200. He belonged to the Unity Party of Nigeria, the opposition party. The first time he came, he wore a brown French suit which held his slender shape well. His driver carried a leather briefcase behind him. Papa surprisingly received Chief Ekpeyoung warmly. He nodded a greeting to Lawrence and sat with Papa. They held a long conversation over bottles of beer. Papa hung on his every word. Ekpeyoung spoke sophisticated English and coughed delicately into his fist. He promised good roads, clean water, and free education for all when he became elected into the House of Representatives. He said his party believed that the government was meant to serve the people not the other way round. He talked about their party leader, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Before leaving, Chief Ekpeyoung snapped open his briefcase and gave Papa a brown envelope swollen with cash. Papa thrust it into his pocket with a smile on his face. Lawrence watched him. The way Ekpeyoung dressed. How he spoke.

When Chief Ekpeyoung invited Papa to his home, Lawrence went with him. A gate guarded by a uniformed man. An asphalt-paved walkway. Fences with walls crawling with

bougainvillea flowers. From the low fences, the houses were visible. Satellite dishes hanging atop them. A man in sunshades with a nubile woman clasping tiny dumbbells flitted past. A woman with heavy, squat dogs.

A sign hung in front of the gate bearing the message DANGER ZONE: BEWARE OF DOGS. The driver honked twice. A cacophony of barking dogs greeted them. The gates swung open.

They went through the main door. A spacious room, soaring with crystal chandeliers. Lawrence felt a blast of cold air as he entered. With his sandaled feet, he walked carefully on the sparkling marble floors. He looked down and peered at his reflection. He shivered again. Chief Ekpeyoung led them to the living area and perched on a single sofa. He crossed his legs.

“Have your seats please” he said.

Lawrence looked around. Huge paintings. Walls panelled with shiny wood. Wall lamps. He sat on the edge of the chair across from the Chief. He submerged his toes into the thick fluffy fabric of the living-room rug. The TV in the parlour was as big as the chest of drawers in his uncle’s house. He turned to look at Papa who, from the way he looked out from the corner of his eyes, was affected by the ambiance of the place.

“Yes!” The Chief said, waving a finger. He sprang up and strode to the bar in corner. “What would you like to drink Papa?”

Papa opened his mouth to speak. He stammered at first then said, “Make una give me anything!”

The Chief poured from an opaque bottle with a colourful label into two tumblers and served them. Lawrence held his tumbler with both hands and lifted it to his lips. He felt the liquor burn as it went down his throat. His eyes watered.

Chief Ekpeyoung started talking about how he worked hard to succeed and what he had become. Papa nodded to every word he said. He ended his rant by declaring his intention to run for the House of Representatives.

Chief Ekpeyoung’s Mercedes pulled up in front of the wooden office. His driver stepped out.

“Oga tell me say make I bring you,” he said to Lawrence, who rose from the bench to inform the driver of his master’s absence.

“Me?”

“Yes. Oga wan talk to you,”

Lawrence got into the car hoping it was what he thought it was. He wondered why the Chief’s driver came to fetch him when his boss was not around. He played many possible scenarios in his head as they drove off. When they got to the mansion he dropped the contemplation and decided he would at least enjoy the magnificence. The house had the same effect on him as the first time. The cold blast from the air-conditioning. The glistening floors. The fluffy rugs.

He met Ekpeyoung in the living room.

“Welcome MrNomayangbon. Thank you for coming,” he said with a smile and held out his hand. Lawrence shook it.

“Thank you sir!

“I will take you into my inner sanctum”, he said with a throaty voice.

Lawrence nodded rather fervently. He did not know what inner sanctum meant. He was led into a panelled room with a large mahogany table with a Formica top. The table had a swivel chair and two armchairs. On the table, lay heaps of files, a rotary dial telephone and a jar full of pens. Ekpeyoungslouched in his swivel chair. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose with a tap of a fingertip and began perusing one of the files from the numerous stacks on his table. A metal plate on his table read:

HIGH CHIEF EKPEYOUNGT. A.

Chairman and Managing Director Ekpeyoung& Sons Ltd

Import, Export and General Merchandizing

Lawrence glanced around while he busied himself with the files. Hanging in the office was an array of mementos and grainy photographs. There was Chief Ekpeyoung clinking glasses with a couple of white men in a panelled ballroom, there he was, slender and nervous, posing with the Eiffel Tower behind him, and a portrait of him shaking hands with the state military administrator. There were other pictures too, showing other milestones in his life – matriculation, graduation, wedding. In one, he stood behind a car reaching for a woman’s waist, grinning from ear to ear. It was as though she was pulled into the frame and the shutter clicked before she could protest. Another showed him with his children.

There were also plaques on the wall, tokens from the Federal Military Government and polo trophies arranged in a cabinet. On the opposite wall, and above him, there hung what seemed to be a self-portrait. A black and white picture of him looking like a refugee boy

dressed hurriedly to conceal a scrawny body in a double-breasted suit, shabby and oversized with huge golden buttons, and a pair of worn-out bathroom slippers.

“When I came to this town I was nothing. They dropped me off from the back of a station-wagon,” Ekpeyoung broke the silence as though the remark was a product of lengthy pondering. “I had nothing, but I was determined,” he stood up and swept the file off the table. He walked around the desk. His shirt hung out from his trousers. Lawrence thought about his own life. For a moment, he felt a sense of kinship with the Chief. “I worked hard, I worked very hard,” he hastily placed the file into the drawer of a tall, grey filing cabinet and went back to his seat.

“I worked for every penny I earned and now look at me!” he threw his hands in the air and blew a satisfied sigh. There was a moment of silence before he spoke again.

“Life is not a bed of roses, you see? Life is not a fanfare!”

Lawrence again wondered what fanfare meant. His eyes glowed in fascination. Ekpeyoung groped in his pockets for cigarettes. The cigarette smoke poured from his nostrils like the exhaust fumes from a distressed automobile as he puffed hastily. He squashed the stub in an ashtray and wiped off ash from the trousers of his butter-coloured French suit. He seemed calm. He went back to his seat.

“When I look at you I see who I was years ago. Young, hungry and determined,” he said.

“Thank you sir” Lawrence said. Under the table he rubbed his moist palms together.

“You will be my eye in Sapele Motor Park. You will help me get the votes I need to win the election. You will work for me.”

It took some seconds for Lawrence to process the information. His suspicion turned out to be true after all. This was the reason Ekpeyoung had called him here. This was why he had brought him into his inner sanctum.

“I know what you are thinking,” the Chief broke the silence. “Your oga is a good man, but he is from the old brigade. Only a young mind like you can get the job done.”

Again, silence descended in the room. He rubbed his palms more vigorously.

“I am giving you a chance to be on your own. I will buy you a car. A brand new one. You will stop sleeping in the bus because you will have enough money to stay somewhere decent.”

Lawrence held his head back in surprise. He opened his mouth to say something, but what came out was a stutter. His face assumed a look of confusion and the words in his mouth melted away.

The more the Chief spoke the more his fears became subdued until his mind careered off into the realm of possibilities.

7

Serenity

Lawrence drank three bottles at a stretch to celebrate his good fortune. He poured the fourth one and drank quietly, his eyes fixed on the label of the bottle. The lettering on the label seemed blurred.

He lifted his gaze from the bottle and let it slide across the garden. Cigarette smoke rose in waves. Laughter boomed all around him, louder than it really needed to be. Tables cluttered with bottles. Bodies immersed in lights reflected by disco balls.

A mighty figure with hair trimmed and tinted brown was dancing by herself, moving to the slow melody playing from the speaker. She was out of step with the beat, clicking her heels in a slow, awkward way as though drunk. She swayed her arms slowly in the air, and snapped her fingers, her breasts riding high on her chest. She rotated her bum, pushed it outward. Occasionally she would bring out a dirty handkerchief from the pocket of her tightly fitted jeans and wipe her face down to her collarbone. Her top was dark with sweat around her armpits.

She did not strike anyone as unique. They were so many like her who would drift to the dance floor. Lawrence thought he was experiencing some sort of *de ja vu* then recalled she reminded him of the party woman he saw the day he was arrested - how unlike her she was. She was a centre of attraction, impossible to ignore. She drew people to her like a magnet to filaments of iron. They stared at her, absorbed by the sensual movements of the curvy landscape that was her body.

He grabbed another bottle from a passing waiter and contented himself with following the lone dancer with his eyes. He began feeling dizzy. Now he tasted nothing, but felt a burning in his throat.

After he had peered at her for a long time and taken bottle upon bottle of beer, he felt something sensual. He wiped off the sweat gleaming on his forehead with the back of his hand and licked his lips. His eyes wondered, relished her contours, her buoyed bosoms,

which brimmed over the edges of her top. He imagined how it would be to dip his head in her bosoms and be consumed by them. He imagined pushing his body against hers, up against her cushiony chest. He tipped over a half-filled bottle. Vomit rose in his throat but he could not afford to throw up. Not now. Not him. Not in front of these people.

Then as though she was waiting for someone to be drawn to her, she glanced around while still dancing. She stopped dancing and walked to his table at a languorous slouch. Her earrings trembled at every movement. Her nails were painted red, but they were chipped.

There was no time or need for formalities. He spoke. They whispered a conversation over more bottles of beer and soon he was snaking his fingers inside her top. A patronizing smile played on his lips.

He shot out of his seat gripped her arm and pulled her up. She let out a small squeal and he laughed. The corner of her mouth frothed. He rocked slightly back and forth, tilting his head to one side. They shambled out of the club into the street where he parked his car. Lawrence leaned on her to stay upright with his arm clasped around her waist and his mouth brushing against her ears whispering obscenities. He squeezed her close.

“Wetin be your name” he asked her. She looked at him as though deciding whether to answer him or not.

“Serenity”

“What?”

“Serenity”

“Wish kain name be that?”

The question hung in the air. He felt a blast of cold wind. He lurched towards his car dragging her with him.

At home, he went to the gramophone, and peeled off the polythene sheets with shaky hands. Serenity sat on the bed nursing a bottle of stout, bloodshot eyes. Lawrence ran his hands through the stack of vinyl on the Cabinet TV and pulled out one in the middle. The stack crumbled and some fell off the TV. He fumbled and cursed. Seconds later, Funk tunes spilled out of the turntable. He arose and launched into a dance. He tapped his fingers and whistled. Serenity burst into laughter. She floated towards him. She boogied. She did a bend over. He laughed at him. She fascinated him. She laughed too. Wave upon wave of laughter broke out until their bodies locked in a steamy embrace. He felt her breath warm in his ear.

8

Prison Chore

Lawrence whistled as he chipped off burnt bean porridge from the base of the first cooking pot. Piles of pots sat before him. His boon of occasional liberty within the yard was for prison chores. His chore was to wash the dented, soot-laden utensils in the black-walled kitchen under the watchful gaze of a mean-faced guard with a baton pressed into his armpit. He knew what working there meant. His task to remind himself that he was useful for anything except to stay in one spot and scrub pots and pans. While he used his chipping tool, and smoked cheap cigarettes, he occupied his mind with thoughts, any thought. He welcomed anything that would distract him from plunging deep into gloom.

His thoughts drifted to Serenity. He hated it when he thought about her but he could not help himself. That realization of helplessness terrified him. He remembered the first night with her. He had allowed her to spend many nights under his roof after that first night. With Serenity things were different. Serenity was different. Not special but different. She did not speak much. Not that it mattered to Lawrence. Lawrence usually had nothing to say to her. With her body, she said things her words could not have effectively communicated. Over the course of several days, Lawrence learnt to read her. The way she nodded slowly like a child to show she understood something or lowered her gaze as if overcome by shame. How she winkled her eyes and smacked her gums when excited. How her dark brown eyeballs danced around playfully to show disbelief. How her eyes gazed sharply at him whenever he said something she didn't like. The way her mouth twirled into a smile to suggest something sensual. Lawrence learnt that when she folded her arms across her chest she needed to be left alone. In bed, her body spoke the language of submission. She expressed no curiosity. She asked no questions. Her rhythms were timed. She adjusted well to his thrusts. She was a merely receptacle for him to discharge himself into.

The time came when Serenity began to help him prepare for the outing whenever he was ready to go out. He would get the treatment of a child. She would slather Vaseline on him from head to toe after he took his bath. She would apply a light dab of talcum powder on

his face, comb his hair and dress him up. Lawrence felt odd the first time she prevailed upon him to let her dress him even though he regarded it as a kind gesture. Now he almost couldn't do without it. He loved being pampered by her. He loved it that she never stirred up a fight or employed the sullen, gradual withdrawal of a disinterested partner. She responded to his irascible gestures with a submissive tone. She lowered her gaze as though afraid to look into his angry eyes.

Lawrence would have let her go if she had shown any sign of unhappiness but she didn't. He found it strange, but he loved it. She said nothing when he came home with the smell of other women. She possessed him and offered him freedom at the same time.

His thoughts were interrupted when the mean-faced guard charged towards him and barked "Double up" into his face.

He scrubbed faster.

9

Mercenary

One

Lawrence drove for several minutes before he found Mercenary. Mercenary was not his real name. His house seemed out of place in the community with its soaring balcony and high facade. It was as though the building had been constructed elsewhere and transported to the location. Cement buildings with peeling plaster or ill-painted walls and rusted roofing crouched around the mammoth mansion. The children in those buildings traipsed along the unpaved road which ran through the neighbourhood. They shrieked, played. They wore only panties or vests.

The sky was overcast. The night was closing in. The air smelled of rain. Music blared from within the walls; a clamour of voices, gagging laughter, and the smell of cigarettes and beer permeated the place. He knocked several times and after a while, a woman peeped through the spy-slide in the gate.

Two

In the courtyard, there were people drinking and dancing and chatting loudly. Shoes of different sizes and shapes crowded the doorway. He took the hint and removed his.

Three

The large parlour was filled with long leather sofas and glass stools. A leopard skin rug adorned the centre. A giant television set was housed in a cabinet that also contained crystal trophies and figurines of animals. Above the cabinet was a portrait of Mercenary. Gaunt and naked to the waist, his hairy chest on show. A stump of a fat cigar drooped from his lips.

Four

While he waited he thought about what he was getting into but he was there on Chief Ekpeyoung's instructions. That gave him courage.

Five

He watched drunken, bejewelled men and women sit on sofas. The women with eyes crusted with eyeliner blinked like dolls. They all fondled, grasped, and clasped, and cooed to each other while blowing clouds of cigarette smoke over themselves. One of the men dressed in military uniform was pressed between two portly women. The women had their legs crossed, and smoked with their stubby chins raised. The fellow ran his hands through their bright, coloured wigs, his head thrown back, his eyes alight with lust. Every now and then the girls would take a break from blowing clouds of smoke, and whisper something into his ears, after which he would break into loud, explosive laughter. Not long after that, the man stood up, quivering, the upright swell in his trousers poking out between his thick thighs. With his arms wrapped around the waists of the girls he went into one of the other rooms.

Six

While he waited he wondered why no one gave him any notice. His palms became moist. He wriggled in his seat.

Seven

The woman came back and led him to the master bedroom. Mercenary sat on the edge of a wide bed with rumpled sheets, smoking. He wore a vest and was nude from the waist down. He appeared to feel no shame, and offered no apologies. Mercenary dismissed her rudely with a flick of the hand. He called her Cynthia.

“How are you my friend, sit down?” he said, patting the mattress. His voice was hoarse and wispy. Smoke rolled out of his mouth. Lawrence sat beside him. The smell of perfume and cigarettes cloyed his nostrils. Mercenary gave him his cigarette. He rolled a new one for himself. They smoked in silence for a long time.

“Now to business.” Mercenary broke the silence and jumped to his feet, stubbing out his smoke. He walked to the wardrobe and opened the doors.

On the bed Mercenary arranged rifles with magazines held together with rubber bands, revolvers, a lone magazine and a rifle without a magazine, bullets and knives. Lawrence watched with wonder as he bundled out the weapons one after the other.

Mercenary picked one of the rifles, and shoved the magazine in. The rifle made a clacking sound. His heart became a frantic drumbeat.

10

Yam, Pepper, Scatter Scatter

In the searing heat of midday, a chopper flew over the market. That had never happened before. They had heard the faint roar of airplanes while spotting them shoot across the skies, their steel wings blinking with lights, their vapour trails drawing lines in the clouds. Never had they witnessed a flying helicopter in these parts. It was common in the oil rich region of the country and in the nation's commercial capital but not here.

The tiny speck in the sky transformed into a giant flying machine. The distant sound became a mechanical roar. The aircraft hovered with a massive downwash of motor blades. Leaves hissed and cracked. Tree branches groaning. The gust sheared through the cables which creaked and jangled.

Those who lived in multi-storeyed buildings tumbled out of their homes, their faces turned upwards, or ears plugged with their fingers. A woman stood on the balcony of her house, squinting at the sky. The wind blew in her direction. It lifted her garments around her midriff. She covered herself and scrambled back into the house. Roadside traders scuttled away from their spot carrying their trays and goods and stools away with them. Infants burst into cries behind their mothers' backs. Children dashed away to spread the news and came back their playmates. Others sat on high shoulders or pranced about, drunken with excitement while waving their hands dementedly at the sky. People generally gathered to watch from a distance. They massed in the road, in every corner.

Their palms formed an awning over their faces as they gawked. The crowd of onlookers became larger as each moment rolled by. They continued to look up in wonder. Some looked in anticipation expecting the helicopter to land and shudder to a stop. That did not happen. The aircraft circled the area a couple of times. It descended. It climbed back up. It manoeuvred as though doing some kind of acrobatic display. Then from the flying machine numerous pamphlets and leaflets dropped from the sky like a spray of confetti. At first they whirled in the strong wind, but when the flying machine ascended to a great height, they wafted slowly.

The materials showered themselves upon the onlookers.

The ground convulsed with dust as onlookers clawed at each other's throats to catch the papers in mid-air. They chased the leaflets about as the materials drifted in the air. Those fortunate to have them in their hands marvelled at the godlike quality of the aspirant who caused paper to rain from heaven.

The dust settled. The onlookers went about their business. The helicopter vanished. Moments elapsed. The reprieve was for effect.

A group of men emerged from the corner leading to Sapele Motor Park. A crowd of stall owners, market women and drivers trailed behind them. Banners and placards lifted above their heads, green-white-green flags waving, they chanted, and hooted. A long banner upon which was emblazoned the NPN slogan ONE NATION, ONE DESTINY, hoisted by about a dozen men, soared proudly in front of the moving crowd. Pedestrians and market people gathered on both sides of the road, seized by the spectacle. Children cheered.

The convoy sandwiched a slow moving van. The aspirant for House of Representatives, Captain Godswill, sat on the roof the car, waving and smiling at the crowd of onlookers. He was dressed in patterned babariga and cap.

He was a retired army man who was rumoured to have diverted government funds into his oil business. He owned a chain of filling stations in the town called Godswill Oil and Gas.

Four bodyguards surrounded the van, their chests like blocks of granite. Papa marched with them too. He looked spent. Mopping his forehead with his handkerchief every now and then he marched on doggedly.

Apollo led the procession. He wore a vest and had his shirt tied around his waist. He screamed into a megaphone as the crowd marched on, his face crisscrossed with throbbing veins. His electrically amplified voice cracked.

After marching for a few moments, Apollo stopped the procession. He called and punched the air with a fist. He waited for a rapturous response from the onlookers. When the onlookers responded in a satisfactory manner he led the convoy to sing. After the song had been sung, the procession, Apollo broke into fervent superlatives about Captain Godswill till his voice cracked. Godswill's smile widened. He tilted his head in pride. He squared his shoulders. He adjusted his babariga.

Apollo ended his speech by saying Godswill was the only politician capable of leading the constituency into the promised land. They plunged into another round of chants and marched on.

Half a kilometre away, in a ramshackle building, a witchdoctor dressed in burlap decorated with cowries roamed about in circles, leaping and chanting

He lighted a dry twig with fire and snuffed it out by putting it into his mouth. He picked up a gourd and shook it vigorously. When he was done with the theatrics, he reminded his audience of his ability to make a man strong for a fight and his body resistant to machetes or bullets.

The men had bowed their heads to go through the low doors of the shrine. A cluster of gourds dangled over the door. Red cloth draped the doorframes. His shrine reeked of stale blood.

More gourds hung on the walls inside and strings of cowry shells. The rest of the wall crawled with graffiti etched with native chinks. White dotted earthen pots filled with feathers lay on the floor. White feathers. Feathers soaked in animal blood. Arranged in a heap in a corner were skulls of different shapes and sizes. Lawrence had no doubt some of the skulls belonged to birds. One of them however looked human. Perhaps a monkey.

The witchdoctor squatted on a goatskin mat. He spread a piece of red cloth on the floor and with one hand plucked one of the gourds from where it hung on the wall. He poured the whitish content on the cloth on the ground. From a bag hung around his neck there flashed a razor blade, old and crusty with blood.

Mercenary, who led the gang, did it first. He dropped on his knees and positioned his head before the witchdoctor. The witchdoctor brushed Mercenary's hair apart with his arthritic fingers to reveal the scalp beneath. He made a razor incision on it while uttering incantations and casting spells. A slight *eish* escaped from Mercenary. For a moment the cut showed white then the blood gathered.

The witchdoctor pinched some of the white substance from the ground and pressed it into the bleeding incision. Mercenary made another *eish* sound. He shook his head vigorously when he stood up as though to shake off the pain

Lawrence was next. He clenched his jaw and shut his eyes, waiting for the pain to pass. It didn't pass. He tried to stay still. His head reeled. He got up, and lurched like a drunkard. When he regained balance, he stepped back for the next person. He watched the witchdoctor make slits on scalps and apply the powdery substance with great speed and precision. He was done in a matter of minutes. Before the gang left he went into the room and

came out with a sack full of amulets. Each picked one from the bag and hung it around his neck.

They moved out of the shrine to an abandoned building nearby where they smoked grass. Mercenary passed a big wrap of cocaine around, each sniffing till the whole thing vanished. Lawrence felt a sudden rush of energy move through his body. When he spoke his voice echoed in his ears. Other people's voices echoed in his ears. Everything suddenly became animated.

Mercenary stood up from where he sat and demanded silence. His head seemed bloated. His voice rang out as he addressed them in an oracular tone

"The commander in chief has said they will go back to the barracks come October! And indeed they should go back to the barracks. The barracks is where they belong!"

"Yes" they chorused.

"Although we the masses want immediate end to military rule and transfer of power to a government of national unity, we will not be deceived by their ploy to put their cronies in power! They will not shed their skin. They will not remove their khaki and put on civilian clothes! They cannot bamboozle us!"

"Oh yes!" Lawrence shouted amidst the chorus of voices. He did not know what bamboozle meant but it sounded good to him.

Mercenary worked himself into great sweat. He moved around now, throwing his fist into the air, roaring like a thunder.

"The Northern Oligarchy should be kept from ruling our great nation. They have no plans for the masses. A lot of them have never known a moment of ache in their lives. They send their kids to the best schools abroad while they kill our institutions here. They spend foreign exchange. They live in fenced homes. The decadence of several years must stop."

"Yes!"

"We reject poverty."

"Yes!"

"We reject oppression."

"Yes!"

"Enough is enough!"

"We reject nepotism!"

"Yes!"

"We will beat them up. We will burn their beautiful homes. We will destroy their businesses! We will kill them if we have to!"

The group started to chant. They threw a clenched fist up. They chanted loudly. This time around Lawrence watched them silently for some seconds.

He felt anger well up in him as he spoke. It was no ordinary anger. He did not know whether it was the effect of the drugs he had imbibed or the hate speech or something much deeper than that. He directed the anger at everything and everyone that had made him miserable made him a victim. He directed his anger at the country. He lashed out at the world. It was the kind of anger that could boil over into something violent and irrational. The wild desire to make someone pay for his pain took hold of him. He wanted to make someone pay for every time he was ridiculed. Every time he was tormented. Every time he was ignored. He punched the air. He screamed along.

Mercenary signalled for them to exit the building. He led them to his car and opened the boot to reveal a pile of machetes, knives, and wooden struts. Each furnished himself with a weapon, still chanting. Lawrence picked a metal pipe. He raised his weapon in the air. He charged at an imaginary enemy. He screamed at the top of his voice

Mercenary again signalled it was time to leave. They flocked out of the building. They yelled and twirled their clubs. They turned a corner.

They emerged from the other side of the street. They advanced towards the parade. By that time the crowd had gotten to the fork of a road. They now took large strides. Fervent chants sprang through their lips.

Images from his past passed before his eyes stirring up sour feelings: Lawrence saw Master Michelin lash him. He saw the cramped prison. A henchman yelled at him, he showed his ferocious teeth, some capped with gold. He saw the smug expression on Nosakhare's face after fucking his girl. His skinny, naked, body made rocking sounds over her. He laughed in a full-throated, wicked way like evil creatures do in ghost films.

Lawrence reigned in his gallop and grabbed a piece of rock. He aimed it at one of Godswill's bodyguards. The brick smashed the guard's wide chest. Almost as if they had been waiting for someone to make the first move, the rest of the angry mob sprang into action, hurling stones and bricks. The air became filled with fresh wails as they crowd dispersed, running for their lives. Rocks sailed through the air in strange trajectories.

Godswill's guards jumped into the car and the van fled in reverse gear. Apollo and his men whipped out their weapons. The two groups clashed. Metal flashed. Bones snapped. Screams soaked the air.

Lawrence crouched. He ducked missiles. He crawled on the ground, his stick clasped between his armpits. He moved through the confusion. He gazed at everything through narrow, calculating eyes. He closed in on one of them and lashed at him. The metal pipe sounded off his head. The fellow let out a sharp, shocked bellow before slipping to the ground. Blood gushed out of a gash on his head like a burst pipe. The fellow tried to fumble his way up. He screamed like a wounded beast. Lawrence struck him again. He stretched out on the ground almost lifeless. Some of his blood splashed on his shirt. He felt good. He bent over him and pounded him again and again. The spurting blood only excited him more.

One person had paid for his pain but one person is not enough. He would keep striking till he was appeased. His eyes searched for Papa. He wanted Papa. Rocks flew by his ears. He grappled with another enemy who tried to snatch his steel bar from him. Lawrence's weapon dropped and for a brief moment the two bodies became entangled. The foe's face strained angrily at him. His breath reeked with rotten tobacco. Lawrence freed one of his hands and delivered a flurry of blows. The fellow detached himself from him and rolled on the ground. Lawrence was going for his rod when he heard the shriek of the police siren.

Riot policemen spilled out of their van. They fired teargas canisters from their guns. The canisters bounced on the tar and emitted the tear-jerking gas. The warring sides dispersed, covering their faces and holding their noses to block out the stinging fumes.

"Take cover!! Take cover" Mercenary bellowed. Lawrence darted across the street, his palm covering his face. He blinked several times. His eyes burned. His vision blurred. He joined some of his fellow gang members where they crouched behind the stalls. From the place of refuge, he launched his attack. He gathered smooth stones from the ground and sent them flying towards the police van. Lawrence spotted an officer some distance away. He had received a deep cut on his head. Blood ran in ribbons over his face as his colleagues dragged him into the van clutching a handkerchief to his wounded head. Within seconds the police van raced off, chased by a hail of stones lobbed by both parties from their shelters.

Two thugs left his side and ran into abandoned shops and kiosks and ransacked them to renew their supplies. Not too far from him, parked cars were smashed simply out of rage. Doors of houses were beaten down, for cutlasses and sticks.

A few moments later, a military truck arrived. Armed soldiers surged forth, screaming threats, cocking their weapons.

A shot crackled loudly, then another. The smell of gunpowder filled the air. For a few seconds silence descended on the place as people stood still, looking around to be sure they had not been hit, and then ran for their lives. Those who had been hiding in their shops abandoned them altogether. People ran in different directions, screaming with their hands in their heads. Some, in a furious attempt to escape death forgot to fully clothe their bodies. At first, Lawrence was frozen. One of the men beside him dropped dead, felled by one of the bullets. His comrade stretched out on the ground. Lawrence dived to the ground. He lay still. He allowed his cheeks to be burnt by the hot tarmac. Lawrence gazed at his comrade's dead body. His mouth hung open. Blood flowed from the back of his head across the asphalt, gathering into a little bulging pool beside him before pushing further away.

He heard more shots. He heard an anguished voice saying "My leg! My leg." He felt no fear. Shock maybe but not fear. There was no time for fear. He was more concerned about getting away alive. Lawrence crawled on all fours into a nearby gutter.

He slugged through the filth of the gutter trying to find a place of escape. He peered above the concrete edge of the gutter. He saw people disappear into the maze of buildings surrounding the streets.

The soldiers slung their guns over their shoulders, unleashed their kobokos. They whipped everything and everyone in their path.

A soldier pounced on a bespectacled individual who tried in vain to convince his assailant that he was just a passer-by and not a protester. The soldier hooked one hand into his trousers and slapped him with the other. The man's glasses flew off; he staggered but did not fall because of the soldier's hold. He stared at the soldier in dazed silence. Another slap landed and this time around the fellow lifted a balled fist to retaliate. The soldier was quick to launch another attack. With one swift movement, the officer tackled him to the ground with his right leg. The man's mouth flew open, whether in shock or to scream, it was not to be known. He landed with a loud thud, his hand flailing. The soldier then began to pummel him with his fist. He threw the fellow into the truck himself. He slapped, punched and cursed as he forced him into the back of the vehicle. The man pleaded for mercy, his collar twisted around his neck, his shirt covered with dust.

Lawrence tried to stay still. He took deep breaths. The soldiers picked up three more people from the ground, and the van roared to life and zoomed off. People crawled out from under covers with torn clothes and bloodied shirts. People screamed, cursed and clutched

their bleeding heads. Lawrence sprang out of the gutter and dashed into the maze of buildings.

People counted their losses, picking up the pieces caused by the free-for-all: broken windshields, swollen faces, wounds from falls and so on and so forth. Traders took down their stands and raced home lest they be stripped of their goods by miscreants.

The wounded were dragged by their shoulders into vehicles and carried to the hospital. Soon, the streets became deserted with no one in sight except for two corpses which lay on the tarmac. One faced the ground, spread-eagled. The other lay in a pool of red, staring with blank, upturned eye.

Pro-NPNhoodlums ran amok, crazed by anger caused by the attack of the previous day.

They acted swiftly. Everything happened within an hour. They carried out the task before the soldiers were alerted in the barracks.

With amulets made of turtle shells and cowries, they took to the streets. Blockades were mounted on every street and on every corner were barricades of blazing tyres. Doors were pried open and furniture pulled out of homes and shops to feed the rebellious flames spreading across the city. Thick black smoke, visible from great distances, rose all over the city. The protesters turned back vehicles and the defiant ones had their windshields smashed and their occupants flogged. To avenge the death of their comrade the day before, a UPN thug was overpowered. His hands bound behind his back, he was clubbed down with cudgels, drenched with petrol and set on fire.

The protesters broke into different groups. A contingent led by Apollo went after UPN politicians and apologists. Another coordinated by Papa, targeted everything they owned. They stormed into a Peugeot showroom belonging to a well-known businessman and turned it into ruins. While the irate crowd dealt with the workers, the boss found a way of escape - he climbed over the backyard fence and landed the wrong way, which drew an agonized scream from him. He struggled to his feet dragging a broken leg behind him, howling in pain. He hid himself in an empty kiosk while he bled like a wounded dog without help.

One ran a fleet of buses in the city- the thugs attacked one of the buses. By the time they were done the bus lay on its side, like an abandoned toy, its collapsed chassis and

terribly fractured windshield turned into crystal silver in the morning sun. The headlamps dangled towards the ground from its smashed fenders, held by thin wires.

The same group met an apologist on his way to work, dressed and comfortable in the “owner’s corner” of his Peugeot 504. The driver left the engine idling and came out as they approached. He surrendered into the frantic clutches of the mob while attempting to parley with them. He drew their attention to the leaves tucked behind the vehicle’s windshield wiper, a sign of solidarity.

“My Ogadey behind you,” he said, his eyes imploring them.

“Shut up!” one of them barked.

The fate of the driver hung between those who wanted to bring him to a hasty form of justice and those who wanted to listen to what he had to say. They pulled him here and there. It was not long before a fellow forced himself through the crowd and struck the driver with a stick, in an effort to end the controversy and establish what had to be done. The frenzy increased. Blood poured down the driver’s face from a gash on his forehead. Meanwhile, the man sitting in the car was jabbing desperately at the buttons of his big cellular phone, sweat beading his forehead. Soon it became obvious that his efforts were useless, he pushed the car door open and broke into a run. Two of them went in hot pursuit. The man ran so fast his legs almost touched the back of his head. His Italian leather shoes came off and he carried on with his stockings. When he saw that his pursuers were gaining in on him on the main road, he veered into the bramble bushes, thrashing through a tangle of branches and prickly leaves. He did not go far. Moments later the men dragged him out back into the main road, his face tilted upwards towards his assailants; his palms spread open as he pleaded for mercy. The driver had been beaten unconscious.

11

Ovbigbo

Her knock woke him up. He got up wearing only his underpants and walked to the door. Clothes cascaded from open drawers. The bed heaped with more clothes. Shoes lay here and there. The floor was scattered with socks and underwear. An ashtray overflowing with cigarettes butts, and empty liquor bottles sat on the bedside table. The transistor radio played.

Lawrence opened the door and shuffled over to the bathroom without a word. No greeting. No hugs. No kisses. They just exchanged smiles. He heard her walk in and sit down by the dressing table. Her unassuming air and shyness never ceased to baffle him. What surprised him more was how much their relationship was devoid of any kind of romance. Not that it bothered him. It made him happy. She made him happy.

The toilet flushed and water gurgled through the pipes. He walked back in and let his head fall on the pillow. Serenity removed her earrings, inspected her face in front of the mirror. She touched her cheeks, running her fingers over the skin around her neck and face, checking for pimples.

Her handbag was planted on the table. He eyed her. The music from the radio stopped. Jim Reeves' *I'll Fly Away* hit the airwaves as a prelude to an announcement. It began...

The Family of Ovie announces the sudden death of their father, brother, husband and son, High Chief Dr James Ovie who died at age 40 after a brief illness...

Lawrence wondered when he was going to die. He wondered if his obituary would be announced on radio. He wanted his obituary to be on radio. He imagined a weeklong ceremony during his funeral. Beer flowing, food aplenty. He imagined bare-chested men dancing and chanting and firing guns to celebrate his elevation into the pantheon of the greats. But first he must make something out of his life. He must earn the respect and admiration of people. He must return to the village and show Master Michelin and the workers at Benz Clinic what he had become. He would buy a Mercedes Benz and drive it to the workshop just so for them to see. He would build a mansion in the village, a mansion like Chief Ekpeyoung's and flood the place with dignitaries.

Lawrence had kept his head down for days after the riots, all the while forging his takeover at the park. He had taken refuge in Serenity's place, a one-roomed apartment in the grey crumbling building. Her sister Precious and her children lived there too. Precious was hardly at home and her children were often left wandering on the streets. The first night he arrived at Serenity's place, he went out. Lanterns and candles from stalls lined the streets with anaemic illumination. The crowds assured him, as did the cover of darkness, which made him feel slightly less conspicuous.

He wove through street vendors and bought everything he thought he would need. He loaded two large polythene bags with second-hand clothes, shoes, shaving cream, razor blades, dusting powder, shampoo, soap, five packets of London King Size, bottles of beer.

He slept on a hard mattress in a room divided by clapboards. At night, the room was illuminated by a low-burning candle. He staggered in the dark, trying to avoid the heads and the limbs of the children on the floor in uneasy slumber. Staccato snores bust through half-open lips. The smell of piss permeated the room.

The heavy breathing of their coitus was the only sound they could not control.

The kids farted aloud at night. They murmured unintelligible things in their sleep. Lawrence once froze atop her when he thought one of them had woken up. For a moment the little girl yawned, and raised herself up. Her eyes darted to and fro as though she had woken up in hell. She sank back down onto the mattress and was soon snoring.

In the morning the children and the children of her Ghanaian neighbours lined up in front of the pit latrine, taking turns to shit. The adults formed their line in front of the bathroom made of corrugated iron sheets. Serenity's apartment reminded him where he used to live not too long ago. It served as a reminder never to go back to his former life. When Lawrence was ready to leave he asked Serenity if she would move in with him. He saw in her eyes a combination of complicity and surprise.

Serenity loosened her blouse, pulled it over her head. A newscaster's baritone voice burst forth from the radio.

"The National Association of Nigerian students have commended the Head of State and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces General Olusegun Obasanjo for starting the process towards a return to civilian rule," it began. Concluding, *"This statement was made by the president of the association at a rally held in Lagos today by the association of Nigerian students."*

There a was a slight burst of static and the animated voice of the student union president boomed through the loudspeaker against a background of noise and chants, and songs:

“We are very glad that the journey has already started. Several months ago we protested peacefully for the immediate end to military rule and transfer of power to a government of national unity composed of elected representatives in the country,” said the student union President. *“There is no Nigerian today who does not desire democracy. Even in the military, there is a groundswell of opinion on the need to establish and uphold a culture of true democracy in our country.”*

“We Nigerian students shall not be part of the groups that collect foreign exchange from the government to destabilize the country. Some elements cannot be using Nigerian students for their selfish reasons. Our fragile democracy needs to be protected. We will see this through and by God’s special grace will see the nation of our dreams”

In another statement the newscaster’s voice resumed, *“The Inspector General of Police has charged the Nigerians to shun any form of violence. He decried the spate of electoral crises in the country. He stressed that the security agency will do everything in its power to protect the electoral process and ensure the safety of lives and properties. He warned troublemakers to desist from their nefarious acts. Hear what he has to say:*

‘It has been His Excellency’s dream to bring the citizens of the country to the promised land through democracy. As we all know a new constitution has been drafted and the ban on all political activities has been lifted. As His Excellency has announced, come October 1 1979 he will relinquish power to a democratically elected government. So far he has kept to his promise of making life better for all Nigerians. He is a man known to keep his promises so October 1 will run smoothly Inshah Allah. Any person, whether a politician or a retired military officer or a pro-democratic crusader, who thinks he is in a position to disrupt this transition program is advised in his own interest to tread with caution as security agencies are prepared to act decisively on such matters.’”

She turned away from him now. She undid her black bra gently. He could no longer focus. The newscaster’s voice was nothing more than a sound to him now. He untangled himself from the sheet and sprang from the bed. He slipped his hand around her from behind, and pulled her close to him.

When Lawrence invaded Sapele Motor Park, he was escorted by armed policemen. When he came out of hiding, Lawrence reluctantly agreed to a meeting with the district police officer of Sapele Motor Park as arranged by chief Ekpeyoung. He never made an effort to hide his disdain for policemen. Two days before the riot, a constable visited his gambling establishment.

That day, the joint heated up with talk of politics and liquor as the players slammed and slid the checkers on the boards. They talked about what they would do differently in the new regime, whether the new regime was going to be like the last one, and various theories of what might happen next.

It was in this moment that a policeman breezed in. He had a pencil thin moustache and a film of dust covered his boots.

A baton was clasped under his armpit, a plume of black chest hair erupted through the open button of his worn out uniform. He appeared drunk.

“Who is in charge here?” he barked. Silence fell upon the place as attention heaped on the policeman. From the quietness a murmur grew. When Lawrence came forward the policeman set his eyes upon him. From the look on the policeman’s face it was as though he was expecting a flicker of shock and fright from Lawrence. No shock or fright appeared on his face. He only sized up the policeman.

“Yes?” Lawrence said with a sarcasm born out of a recently acquired and foolhardy confidence.

“Are you the owner of this place?” he said, slanting his head sideways.

“I bin own this company.”

“Who gave you permission to build on this landed property or run this business?”

“I getletter from chief Ekpeyoung.”

“Where did you get that from? Who is chief Ekpeyoung?”

He said chief Ekpeyoung was an important person in Benin. Irritation seeped into his voice. He reached into his pocket, pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to the constable. Unfolding the paper, the officer peered at it. The paper appeared to cause a lot of strain on his eyes as he squinted while reading its contents. He mumbled the words he read as though they were hot coals in his mouth. What he was looking at for so long was not clear since the paper didn’t have much written there. He spoke after a while.

“Rubbish! This is rubbish.”

He flung the sheet away. "You think I am foolish? When we get to the station you will know who is a fool. I am going to arrest all of you here."

There was a quick stab of laughter. They had not planned it. The idea of a baton wielding police officer arresting more than a dozen of them while everyone was brimming with elation amused them. Nothing could have been strong enough to dampen their enthusiasm and courage that day. It was not the day for intimidation.

Lawrence was already seeing himself standing up against the police officer, teeth gritted, knuckles clenched. He was already preparing his mind for a brawl with the officer. He felt his pulse accelerating to a high pitch. He was alert, ready for action.

Two men sprang up from one of the boards before Lawrence could do anything and closed in on the policeman. They eyed him; ready to descend upon him should he make any move.

The policeman looked stricken. He cursed and threatened but in the end had no choice but to waft away. Had he not left, Lawrence would have beaten him up himself. Moments later the games resumed as though nothing happened.

At first, Lawrence took the district officer's offer merely because chief Ekpeyoung instructed it, but the time came when he realized he could use the police force to his advantage. The idea that the police, who once treated him like a worthless dog, now offered to serve him did magical things to his ego.

The police van zoomed into the park raising dust. Lawrence arrived seconds later with his car. His intention was to make a dramatic entrance. He spun his vehicle around twice before skidding to a halt. His hoodlums came out first. Black bandanas. Rolled up sleeves. Eyes rimmed with red. Lawrence stepped out, surveyed the surroundings and stomped ahead. The policemen discharged shots into the air as Lawrence and his hoodlums marched towards the wooden shed. Shrieks broke out. People vanished. Papa was nowhere to be found. The wooden shed was empty except for the pile of account books. Lawrence found a smouldering stick of cigarette on the bench. He didn't think Papa would give up without a fight. Maybe the presence of the police made it all easy? He glanced around. The policemen milled about the motor park fingering their rifles. People crouched under chairs and tables. People stretched across the ground. He saw the fear on their faces as they tried to hide from danger.

He loved their fear. He loved that he intimidated them. He realized instilling fear would earn him the respect he deserved.

That day Lawrence sat on the bench at the wooden shed and installed himself as the Union chairman. His story made the gossip circuit. The story was told of Lawrence Anini as the boy who wandered from the village and ousted his master. Lawrence Anini, the deserter. Lawrence Anini, who was backed by those meant to uphold the Law.

Lawrence always had his hoodlums around. They sidled up behind him when he sat on the bench behind the stack of files. They escorted him wherever he went, two or three of them at a time. There were those who patrolled the park with Billy clubs. They barked orders. They collected dues. They enforced his wishes. His chairmanship wasn't completely totalitarian though. He gathered the leadership of the union. The comrades came looking with suspicion. Lawrence discussed union affairs with them over bottles of beer. After the meeting, he tore off the cellophane wrapping on a bundle of cash. They shifted in their seats. Gentle smiles formed in the corners of their lips. Lawrence did other things that endeared him to people at the park and established him as the union leader.

One

He brought in bricklayers and plumbers to repair the public toilet at the Park. The public latrine had almost fallen apart. Sometimes, when the rain came down in torrents, it flooded and overflowed. Shit seeped out from the ground and turned its surroundings into sickening bogs. There lay a big mound of refuse beside the latrine next to the signage

NO DONPIN OF DOSBIN HERE

BY POLICE ORDER

At the end of the project, two new buildings sprang up with water closet systems. The surrounding bushes were cleared, and the refuse incinerated. The signage however did not go. He organised a commissioning ceremony. He gave a short speech and snipped ribbons amidst a burst of applause.

Two

He replaced the wooden shed with a wooden office. He planted a big mahogany table and swivel chair within its walls. He wanted it to be his own Inner Sanctum. He pictured himself gathering his things in his briefcase and nodding through the “Good day sirs” and “Yes sirs” of comrades and his boys as he passed through the motor park to his office. He installed a second hand air-conditioning system in the office. The air-conditioning made a humming sound punctuated by a violent mechanical thump like a pepper grinder. When he met with people he spoke loud because of the air conditioning. He organised a commissioning ceremony for that too. Cutting of ribbons. Applause.

Three

When a driver ran his bus into a wall and was hospitalized at the emergency unit of the state hospital, he compelled his comrades to donate blood at the blood bank. He led the delegation.

The needle pricked his skin. He stiffened his arm. He winced and pressed his mouth together. A low moan of pain escaped from his mouth. He felt light headed. After the nurse had suctioned blood out of his veins, she gave him a cupful Malta Guinness mixed with milk. The nurse said it was to replenish his blood. He never stopped talking about what he did for that driver. He ordered a carton of Malta Guinness and tins of milk to be stored them in the wooden office. He claimed he needed to replenish his blood whenever he plunged himself into a woman.

Four

Lawrence and his hoodlums went everywhere with Ekpeyoung campaigning for the election. Ekpeyoung sent a bus to Sapele Park. The bus had his image and name crawling on it. A monstrous speaker sat upon it, held firmly by fat ropes. The driver moved around while the speaker poured out his campaign songs. Songs praising Ekpeyoung as the leader the constituency had been waiting for. The one who would take them to the promised land without fail. The song played all day. The song played every day. He sent flyers too. A lot of them. The wooden office became a depot for flyers and posters. Stacks of newly printed materials moved in and out of the office. The place reeked of ink and fresh paper. With brushes and buckets filled with starch they flooded the area with posters. Lawrence also got some of the drivers to paste the posters on their buses. Then the time came for the campaign trail to come to the Park. He shouted into a megaphone from a wooden podium in front of the

Union office. The crowd of people who came to watch him talk stretched to the main road. Women with shiny wrappas sang and danced to the soft rhythm of konga drums. They waved leaves, handkerchiefs, and tiny flags.

Five

The way he walked changed. He walked sideways like a mongrel with ruined testicles. His voice became decibels deeper. His anger manifested itself in unrestrained utterances and the pulsation of his jaws. He sometimes drove his car round the motor park to announce his presence. He spun around, trailing a dusty wake. He skidded. He raced forward. He raced backward. He drove while his hoodlums poked their heads out and screamed and stabbed the air with guns, truncheons and machetes. He boasted about how no one could handle the wheels better than him in the park. Sometimes he moved in a convoy of vehicles.

Six

He upheld union rules in his own way. A group of drivers who refused to pay park fees gathered in front of the wooden shed protesting extortion. In that moment, Lawrence realized that he must not be seen as one who succumbed to weakness. To be forgiving was to be weak. To be calm was to be weak. Lawrence made a lunge at one of them. He planted a tremendous blow on his cheekbone, and made a ruin of that side of his face. He delivered two more quick blows, then lifted the driver up and smashed him to the ground. The comrade's eyes were filled with blood, the nose streamed with blood, the mouth spurted blood.

Seven

"Make una drink whatever beer you want. I go pay for am" Lawrence announced whenever he went to a bar. People cheered and let out loud whoops.

Eight

"Ovbigbo! Ovbigbo! The law! The law!" someone called out of the dark. A reedy individual who had been lurking around drunk emerged. It was one of the hoodlums. The fellow's head drooped forward in a stupor as he approached. He threw his hands up in the air and stamped his foot on the ground as a way of hailing him. Lawrence knew what he wanted. He dug into his pocket, gave him a crisp twenty naira note then walked on, ignoring his bursts of appreciation.

12

Cynthia

The evening before the parliamentary elections.

Cynthia opened the gates and led him in. She swished her hips in a pair of tight fitting jeans. Her lips smacked with gum. Lawrence ogled her ample buttocks. Cynthia, knowing she was being watched, looked over her shoulders, smiled and walked on. The second time Lawrence visited the house Cynthia did not treat him with hostility although she wasn't exactly friendly with him. When he greeted her, her tone in reply was brusque, almost cold. But then he became a regular visitor and Cynthia warmed up to him. They even shared a joke once and he felt good about it.

In the courtyard, girls teetered around on their high heels with men equally drunk. They moved to the blaring sound of the music.

Mercenary sat with a girl on one of the sofas in the large parlour, the table in front of him crammed with bottles of beer. The girl sat gingerly, her hands on her aligned knees. He edged closer and encircled her with his arms, grinning eagerly into her face, his brown teeth on show. At first she tried to wriggle herself free but then all of a sudden she went slack, her arms dangling by her side like withered branches. Mercenary dug his hands beneath her wrappa along her thighs all the way up but stopped midway. A frown appeared on Cynthia's face and she walked out. Lawrence had seen Mercenary humiliate her on a number of occasions. Mercenary once threw a glass of wine at her, which narrowly missed her head. No matter what Mercenary did to her, Lawrence would see her at the next party, receiving guests and coordinating servers.

Mercenary was usually too busy to even talk to him and when he was not treating Cynthia like shit, he was regaling those who gave him audience with tales about his exploits during his student union days.

"Ah my friend how are you doing?" he raised his voice when he spotted Lawrence, his arms spread wide open.

"I am fine, thank you."

"Good, good. Enjoy the party!"

"Thank you."

Mercenary continued his speech about his greatness. A resentful smile distorted his face. As the new chairman he had been the focus of praise and attention but here, he was just like everybody else. He did not like that.

Lawrence joined drunk, tumescent men to philosophize about the fragile nature of life.

“My wife has bewitched me!” one shouted, slamming the table with clenched fist. A slightly bowed man with crinkled face, and heavy-lidded eyes. He had a permanent cynical, lopsided grin on his lips that gave his face a bitter, scowling expression.

The people around him responded with fervent nods as though agreeing with his verdict. He opened his mouth to say more. His listeners stared at him in expectation. The words did not come. His face tightened up in confusion. He ordered another bottle of beer. Lawrence watched women saunter in and out of rooms. Mercenary once said he could have any of them if he so wished. He wanted Cynthia.

He grabbed a bottle of beer from the table and walked out. He gulped the contents and grabbed another bottle from a passing waiter. His eyes veered towards Cynthia who was sitting alone on a bench close to the wall. He went to sit with her. He drank quietly beside her. The men at the table now howled with laughter, tears streaming down their cheeks, banging the table and fighting for breath.

Lawrence decided he would switch to whiskey emptying the bottle. No words were spoken between them. He only exchanged smiles with her. He left.

Lawrence came back with another bottle, this time whiskey. He poured himself a glass of whiskey and sipped it quietly. He felt the whiskey burn his throat, water oozed from the corners of his eyes. He took another sip, then another. Again he drank from the glass; this time around he took a mouthful and swallowed it at once. He gazed at the charred wall of the fence, the mob’s failed attempt to set the building on fire. He felt a tingling sensation run through his body. A few moments passed and he felt her shoulders nudge against his. She leaned sideways. Her lips grazed his ear. He did not hear what she said but he somehow knew what she meant. He glanced at her. She twirled a strand of her hair around a fingernail and giggled. She giggled again. Her tongue frogged out through her blazing red lips.

He took her out in search for a dark corner. They walked behind one of the cars. He pulled down her trousers and plunged himself into her.

He drove home without saying goodbye to Mercenary. He wondered if Cynthia would keep their secret. He wondered if Mercenary would bother.

He lay beside Serenity when he got home, careful not to wake her up. He lay still thinking about the elections.

In the dark, he felt her touch, first snaking down his spine then caressing his thighs. He sighed and rolled over onto his stomach.

‘Darling?’ she sounded surprised.

He did not answer. He felt her roll to the other side of the bed.

13

Elections

One

Lawrence handled the wheels. He drove at breakneck speed. He invaded polling booths and let his boys do the job. Nothing gave him more pleasure than to see his boys do his bidding. They jumped out of the car with their submachine guns and sprayed the air with bullets. One of them went for the ballot boxes. He drove away at breakneck speed.

Two

This electoral officer would not allow Lawrence's boys to do their job so they bound his hands and feet. They stuffed his mouth with his handkerchief. He struggled like a cow in the abattoir.

Three

A policeman tried to fend his boys off. They walloped him with his own baton. The long line of people at the polling station crumbled.

Four

Another electoral officer clutched the ballot box to her bosom as though it was her child. His boys pried it from her arms and thrust the materials into the car. Lawrence ordered them to throw her in the car as well. She kicked and screamed

“She thinks she has strong head we will show her pepper!” Lawrence said. Screams echoed in the trunk. She kicked and punched and cried. Lawrence chugged off. He changed his mind; he rolled to a halt by the sun-bleached highway. They threw her out like a rag doll. She howled as the car left.

Five

In his apartment, he watched his boys stuff the boxes with ballot papers while he tugged at the meat between his teeth.

The Important Lady

Lawrence drifted about with a bottle of beer in his hand. Serenity tagged after him. She cast a shy gaze around.

The compound bloomed with sodium lights from big globes propped on metal poles. The light poles were spread over the expanse of the well-manicured lawn. Flowers of many colours gleamed in the orange glow. Smooth stones painted white, dotted the borders of the lawn. The smell of liquor mingled with the aroma of beer, roasted fresh fish, spice, garlic and smoke. A band dressed in identical clothes played guitars, drums, gongs and rattles.

Lawrence watched guests drift into the compound and exchange pleasantries with those already seated or standing. Ekpeyoung soon arrived dressed in a huge white agbada embroidered with silver thread. He wore a red cap and held a carved walking stick.

There was a burst of applause. He surveyed the crowd, his chin raised, his face tight. He moved from one cluster of guests to another; they droned at him with compliments. Everyone wanted to congratulate him. They called him "Honourable."

Lawrence smiled and turned to Serenity who fiddled with the cheap trinkets she wore while she stole looks at the surroundings. A group of guests now gathered around Honourable Ekpeyoung, gazing at him.

The band struck up a fresh beat and the leader sang a familiar number. Guitars twanged. The men whistled aloud. The women shrieked, but no one made a move to dance. They only swayed to the beat, weaved in their seats. They beat time with their toes and fingers. Serenity began to dance, her eyes shut, her fingers snapping the air. Lawrence also became overcome by the music although not completely. He swayed gently. He kept looking around.

Honourable Ekpeyoung moved to another group of guests. The bandleader sang a praise song now. They greeted him with cheers and throaty laughter. They raised their glasses. Ekpeyoung waddled to the empty floor and began dancing. People joined him. More shrieks filled the air. A man shoved his hands into his pocket and brought out a wad of cash. He drifted close to the celebrant and peeled off a note, which stuck on

his forehead and floated down on to the floor. He peeled off more notes and they rained on the floor. Others dug into their pockets and purses to spray. Those who could not reach Ekpeyoung sprayed the nearest person to them. Each man vied with the others for supremacy, one trying to out-spray the other by increasing the amount of money or the denomination or the currency. One of the men divided the bale of cash into two and flung one half into the air. The sprinkled cash rained on them and littered the ground.

The band too was not left out of the spree. Each cascade of cash falling on them seemed to galvanize them to a more melodious tune.

Lawrence moved to the dance floor dragging Serenity with him. He brought out money from his pocket. His shoulders square with pride; he sprayed Serenity in rather miserly amounts. He peeled off three more notes and he was dry. He however continued dancing. He did not stop looking around.

New guests strolled in.

Lawrence became aware of female guest who arrived with a man, arm in arm.

The lady took superior strides beside the balding man, swaying her waist this way and that.

Lawrence broke off from Serenity and melted into the crowd. He danced alone to get a closer look at the lady. He looked at her face. He looked closer. He had seen her before.

She was the lady from years ago at the commissioning party opposite the mechanic village! The important lady! The memory of her came back to him with the intensity of burning embers. Nothing much had changed about her. She still had purpose in her step. Her body still looked like a landscape of pleasure.

Lawrence wondered if she saw him that day. He wondered if he could recognize her now if she saw him. Two years ago he was a nonentity. Now he commanded a motor park.

Serenity came to him with worried eyes. She didn't seem upset. Just worried. Lawrence smiled. He planted a kiss on her cheeks and they resumed dancing. He offered no explanations. He held her damp body close. Her head rested on his throat. Lawrence looked past her, towards the important lady. He wished it was her breath he was inhaling right now not the rum tinged breath of Serenity. Serenity would always be with him. She accepted everything so easily. If he lost the important lady now it might take another two years to run into her again!

When the music ended, the applause was spontaneous, loud and long. Lawrence went back with Serenity and they grabbed seats. Lawrence slid his gaze across the area. He spotted the important lady and her man exchanging pleasantries with Honourable Ekpeyoung. The

couple soon walked out of the area and became bathed with the orange halogen rays from the streetlamps where cars parked. Lawrence yielded to the impulse to go after them. He walked slowly. He smiled as he moved through the crowd. He was careful not to draw any attention to himself. The man now had his hands around her waist. They stopped to share a kiss then continued walking. Lawrence eyed him with contempt, clenching his fists to quell the rage growing inside him. It disgusted him that the ageing man could bring her any pleasure. He should be kissing those lips not him. They got into their car. Lawrence got into his car. He turned on the ignition. The engine protested, gurgling into life, then spluttered and died.

He tried several times. Their car was already moving. He swore under his breath. He pumped in more fuel. He tried again. The engine roared into life. He grabbed the steering wheel with his moist palms and drove quietly behind them. He turned on the radio. He turned it off. He followed them through the bustle of the night. The roadside lamps. The swarm of pedestrians. The exhaust-streaming traffic. Dust. Danfos. They turned and turned. He navigated a series of turns. He slowed down. He kept a distance. He watched. He halted when they halted at a roadblock. He swallowed. *Relax, you just dey drive. You just dey go your way.* He rolled the car window down and beamed a smile. Holstered gun, eyes heavy with sleep, the police officer peered through the window. He scanned the car with his torchlight.

“Wey your particulars? Wetin you carry? Where to, oga? Where you dey come from?” The officer bombarded him with questions, which he did not bother to answer. He did not have time to waste. From his pocket he produced a note and stretched it out to him. The officer jammed the money into his back pocket, flicked a hand in salute. He drove on.

He followed them till they reached a calm landscape. Fences. Flowers. Dogs yowling from afar. He followed them till the gates of a low-fenced duplex swung open to admit them. When he realized he could not go any further he parked his car and slammed his head on the steering wheel dejected. He sat down there for a few minutes. He fixed his gaze at the building. He heard the faint sound of cutlery, murmurs, giggles. He tried to imagine what the house looked like inside. Were they having dinner? Did she cook? His eyes became heavy with sleep. The cold breeze of the night made him even sleepier. He rolled up the window to block the gentle caress of the wind and create discomfort. He needed to stay alert. He spotted moving shadows in the room upstairs. She came to the window. She undressed slowly as though she had all the time in the world. Did she know he was watching? Was she teasing him? Was she performing for him? Her naked figure emerged. The silhouette of her naked figure behind the diaphanous curtain. It wasn't as he had imagined it. It was much better than

he had imagined or at least that was what he told himself. He watched her. He savoured each moment. The lights in the room went out.

He glanced at his wristwatch and wondered how time had flown past so swiftly. He remembered he had left Serenity at the party.

Lawrence first set out to watch her. He drove out of the motor park early in the morning to her house. Parked under shade in the neighbourhood and observed patterns.

In the evening after the day's work he did the same thing. He was careful not to park his vehicle in the same place more than twice. Sometimes he pretended to take strolls around. Sometimes he went to the stalls close to the neighbourhood and asked people questions.

Lawrence had begun to think of how he would have the opportunity to sleep with the important lady. Months ago the idea would not have crossed his mind. He would have been perfectly contented with constructing fantasies about her. Soon his thoughts became a desire which inflamed his flesh. It took him over. It drove him to near madness.

It was not long before he made a decision to carry out his wishes no matter what. The question of the details of the operation came up so he began to make preparations. He first mapped out the details in his mind. He took walks in the park and chain-smoked. He turned ideas over in his mind. He realized that getting close to her might not be as simple as he thought and that was just the beginning of the process. He would have to draw her to himself, and seek her consent. This aspect he found difficult to conceive. He did not see himself as someone she would be attracted to sexually. Even if she was, the chances were that she would see herself as not equal in status to him. He decided to set a trap for her or create a chance to be alone and offer her sex. If she refused, he would force himself upon her damning the consequences.

But again the question of the logistics arose. The first decision he had to make was to determine where and how he would commit the act. He thought of waylaying her, but reckoned a woman like her would never go out without company. He thought about approaching her during an event and luring her to a secret place. That wouldn't work either. A woman of her class and intelligence would not fall for any bait that would make her follow

a stranger. Then he thought about invading her home. He would wait for her to be alone. He would ensure she was without protection then strike. The idea stuck.

Lawrence learned that the balding man was a retired army officer and that the important lady was a wife he married after he divorced his first wife three years ago. The word out on the street was that she married him for money and Lawrence was willing to believe that. He could not fathom how someone like him could be involved with a person like her. She was also a full time housewife and socialite. Her husband owned a construction company and was handling contracts for the new civilian government.

When her husband was not out of town, he started his day at about eight o'clock. He left the house with his orderly who carried his thick brown briefcase on one hand and a food flask on the other.

When her husband returned in the evening the driver always honked twice. He never honked more than that before the gateman opened the huge gates. The gateman had a habit of his own. He stepped out to buy cigarettes in the next street at noon. He loved his cigarettes.

The important lady usually went out in the afternoons. A driver showed up at the house to drive her anytime she wanted to go out. Sometimes her friends came to fetch her. They came with afros, skin-tight sweat shirts and disco pants. They giggled and shrieked and gossiped. They were not as beautiful and elegant as she was.

After he had finished mapping out the area he gathered his boys and told them about his plans. It was a simple plan but it was important to him. He had imagined the outcome.

He had played the scenario over and over again in his head. He pictured fear in her eyes. He imagined her so afraid that she quaked and begged. He imagined how he would undress her as soon as he hauled her onto the bed. How he would pull off everything she wore in a rough manner. How the pieces he could not remove, he would yank off. How he would meet resistance with blows. He imagined she would resist at some point. He would enjoy her unyielding disdain. He would enjoy beating her into submission. The impact of his blows would turn her screams into whimpers. A bulge would grow in his trousers just by beating her. He would love it when her eyes shone with fear and mucus ran down her nose. How he would love the quivering of her naked flesh. He would keep her on her back and her fleshy, bruised legs spread.

So when his boys accosted the gateman on his way back to the house with his cigarettes. When they held a gun to his head and ordered him to open the gates. When they bound his hands and feet and Lawrence rushed up the stairs to kick all the doors open and comb every room till he found her, he was surprised to see her reaction to his affront.

She sat on the edge of the bed wearing a diaphanous white night dress, her arms folded on her lap. She had no fear in her eyes. Her eyes said nothing - or rather they said everything. She seemed far away as though gazing at something in the horizon of her memory.

Her lips painted slightly red and her face powdered, she looked like an unhappy bride waiting for her groom. And indeed it seemed she had been waiting for him to come. Had she been aware of him watching her? Had he purposefully showed herself that way in front of him? Was she waiting for him to take her tenderly?

He ran his eyes over her. Her body was quite visible through the cloth. She wasn't wearing a bra. He could see the outline of her big breasts, but he was not moved.

She repulsed him now. He no longer felt lust for her, but annoyance. His desperation vanished. He saw no emptiness for him to pour himself into. He needed her to be afraid. He needed her not to be in control. He wanted things to happen the way he saw them. He felt cheated, bruised.

Lawrence walked up to her and struck her on the cheek. Her cheeks gave a quick shout. A great welt appeared. She remained motionless under impact. Her arms on her lap, her eyes levelled straight in front of her. He saw tears gathering in those eyes but they didn't fall.

He could not bring himself to hit her again. Instead he inched closer to her. He poked his hand under her nightdress. His hands wandered up her thighs and lingered on her crotch. He stroked her. She moaned.

He removed his shirt. He wore his gold-plated chain about his neck. He slipped off his copper rings and put them on the bedside table. He was not wearing a belt; neither did he have any underwear on.

15

Home Going

He arrived in a convoy of union comrades and his thugs. The children ran after the car in the wake of the heavy, beige streak of dust the wheels stirred up. His first stop was the mechanic village. His boys spilled out of the car and crowded the place. They hailed and cheered and raised their hands when he stepped out of the car with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He glanced about. Nothing had changed since he left. The screeching of metal. The smell of grease. Slippers flapping on the dusty road. The apprentice mechanics and their bosses stared at him from their shops. He saw surprise on their faces. He recognized some of them. He knew they recognized him and that filled him great pride. He marched onwards to Benz Klinik. He let his boys loose. Some of them set upon Nosakhare. Others turned the workshop into ruins. He made Master Michelin watch everything unfold. Two thugs held his quivering body onto the stool. Giant tears spilled from his eyes. Lawrence went to him, whipped out his pistol and discharged a bullet in his left thigh. A throaty scream rent the air. Commotion erupted in the mechanic village.

Ekpeyoung

Lawrence sat in the office. Empty bottles of whiskey sat on his table. Ekpeyoung uncorked a full bottle with a quivering hand. He took a short pull from the bottle. He poured whiskey into a glass for Lawrence. Some of the content spilled on the table. He cursed and poured a glass for himself. Lawrence held the glass of liquor in his hands wondering why he was there. The last time he was invited to the inner sanctum, he was young and naïve. He had swallowed Ekpeyoung's volley of words and believed every single thing he said.

Lawrence became useful for other things after the election. When Ekpeyoung acquired a fleet of vehicles he referred to as his "official cars", Lawrence was responsible for leading the convoy of vehicles to his home for safekeeping. He covered with tarpaulin sheets. Whenever Ekpeyoung came home, once in six months, in the blare of police sirens, Lawrence and his boys provided "ground protection" and "supplementary Security" against his political enemies. He had the police for crowd control then he made the government employ the services of private guards, a company which belonged to his friend. The guards from the Unbeatable Security Agency never let anyone near him. They planted themselves around him, their hands clasped behind their backs, their chins lifted up. They carried pistols on their hips and hardly smiled.

Whenever Ekpeyoung met with people in his inner sanctum, which became few and far between, his personal assistant went through a visitor's ledger for booked appointments and gave out tallies. He held town hall meetings during his visits. The events were often filled with praise songs and long-winded speeches. Lawrence watched him fill them with lies year after year. The lies peddled for so long that they had begun to assume the properties of truth in the eyes of the people. He watched people lap up whatever he said. In one of the town hall meetings, he declared his intention to run for a higher office during the next elections, the senate. Before leaving a town hall meeting he would speak into barrages of cassette recorders held out by journalists as he squared his shoulders.

Lawrence also carried out special assignments such as "attending" to projects within the constituency, mostly blocks of classrooms, clinics or borehole installations. His job was

to ensure they were vandalized so new contracts could be awarded. Ekpeyoung & Sons Ltd often won the contracts!

Lawrence was sometimes instructed to ferry stacks of cash to people and places. He asked no questions. He just did as he was told. He however harbored a lot of ill feelings. The initial feeling of envy he felt for Honorable had transformed into disdain and many times he considered defecting. But that meant forfeiting the cash he made, even though he was dissatisfied with his income. He might even be ousted as the chairman of the driver's union. He had his own prestige and money to protect.

Ekpeyoung took a sip from his glass. He took another sip, then another. Again he drank from the glass; this time around he took a mouthful and swallowed it at once.

“The President says we have no money! He is implementing austerity measures!

The elections are coming. How can we do a bloody election without money! How do we run the bloody government without money!” he drawled. Ekpeyoung looked miserable with his tie hanging roughly around his neck and bags under his eyes.

After the collapse of the oil market, Honourable Ekpeyoung began to visit Benin more often, but not with the usual pomp and pageantry. He snuck in quietly and conducted his affairs without much attention. Lawrence knew about it because he continued to provide security for him. The number of guards from the Unbeatable Security Agency diminished with each visit until Lawrence became the only protection he had. Lawrence capitalized on his need and demanded upfront payment for his services. Times were hard. He had relocated to a smaller apartment, part of a block of houses demarcated by alleyways and gutters flowing with slimy streams of sewage from burst pipes. During the day dealers of Indian hemp paraded the place and night soil men at night.

The caretaker of the block, a crossed-eyed man with a snake oil smile always showed up on the last day of the month for the rent. A stick wedged between his armpits, he knocked on doors and opened a brown file containing a stack of papers. He leafed through the papers with a shrewd, penetrating eye. As he read, his face would become more pensive, more preoccupied as though his life depended on it. Sometimes he inspected the rooms to see if any damage had been done. Lawrence, like the other tenants disliked him.

Lawrence had asked Serenity to leave, as he could no longer afford to feed another mouth. She moved back with her sisters. He met her in bars and took her home only on weekends. He had also begun to put his car, now a jalopy thing, into proper use to earn money. He ran the taxi himself during the day, suspending union affairs. He gambled part of

his earnings at Golden Chance Lotto a local casino that used several little yellow coloured kiosks as playing terminals.

“I didn’t make this country crash! No I didn’t,” Ekpeyoung said, raising his voice a little, as if defending himself against accusations lodged by imaginary characters.

Lawrence drank from his glass. He felt the whiskey burn his throat, his eyes watered. He still did not understand why he was here. It was getting amusing.

“I have decided to sell all my official cars,” he finally said. Ekpeyoung stabbed a finger at him. “Since you are the chief of all the drivers you will help me sell them...help me sell them and I will reward you,” he said, swallowing like his ego was a painful lump in his throat.

“Yes my Honourable,” he responded. Lawrence maintained a false attitude of deference and deep understanding till he left the house, then, all at once burst into laughter.

Ghana Must Go

“If they do not leave, they should be arrested and tried, and sent back to their homes. Illegal immigrants under normal circumstances should not be given any notice whatsoever. If you break the law then you have to pay for it.”

President Alhaji Shehu Shagari

January 1983

Lawrence padlocked his apartment and took shelter in the wooden office for some days to avoid the crossed-eyed caretaker. He knew it was a matter of time before the crossed-eyed man visited the park to demand his money or worse throw his belongings out. The money his vehicle fetched was not enough. He considered dipping his hands into the coffers, but an overwhelming majority of the union members refused to pay their dues blaming it on the recession. Lawrence saw no solution in sight until the morning when a loud rapping at the office door woke Lawrence up.

He rose up from his mattress, bunched it up and thrust it into the corner of the office. The blast of a police siren filled the air. He paced around for a few moments not sure what to do. A familiar voice called out. One of the comrades. He opened the door and stood on the threshold, surveying the park with sleepy eyes. Lucidity pierced the fog in his skull.

A swarm of people had invaded the park: men, women, and children huddled in their morning clothes, dragging suitcases of all sizes and shapes. There were those who carried filled sacks. Some balanced their loads on their heads. Transistor radios, blankets, heaps of clothes, buckets brimming with kitchen utensils, rolled-up mattresses littered everywhere. The news bearer quickly explained to Lawrence that policemen were scouring every corner of the city for defaulting aliens and sending them west towards the Seme border. He knew. He had heard the Minister of Internal affairs talk about it on radio, but he thought they were just empty threats in the manner in which they made empty promises. A police truck ground to a halt and disgorged more people. They carried sturdy, red and blue striped bags. Their eyes shone with fear. Helmeted policemen herded them forward waving whips and batons

and rifles. Two defiant men tried to break out of the group. The policemen lashed out at them with whips leaving a trail of dust. Briefly the sight absorbed his mind then he snapped back to attention.

The comrade asked him about the next step to take by which time he had already processed what was going on. An idea struck his head. He instructed the comrade to tell the trucks, lorries and mammy wagonsto charge double the transportation fare to Lagos. Since the vehicles were grossly insufficient, Lawrence devised a means to profit from that. He summoned his boys and set them to work.

They issued rubber stamped tallies based on the spaces available, which gave passengers the permission to buy tickets. The tallies did not go for free! They told those who didn't have tallies to wait till the following day. Within minutes they sold all the tallies and raked in piles of money. Fights broke out like stubborn rashes in the crowd as disgruntled migrants protested. In the evening, the boys arranged the notes on the office table. Lawrence moistened the tip of his finger with spittle and counted off some notes for the boys. Lawrence locked the office and went out to a roadside beer joint. He ordered a shot of locally-brewed rum and pepper soup to celebrate the success of the day.

It was in this moment of happiness and fulfilment, in this relaxed state of mind that Serenity injected herself into his thoughts. Then, he realized what he had done.

He sprang out of his seat and dashed to his car. He fingered through his keys, searching in haste for the right one. When he got his car running he made an awkward turn, chugged off, trying to straighten on the road. He zoomed off.

Serenity was gone, so were her sister and her children. One of the neighbours said the police came to bundle them out early in the morning. She had a sad look on her face and fidgeted with the tassel of her scarf. Lawrence left with guilt flowing in his veins. He drove back to the bar to unburden himself.

Serenity continued to inject herself into his thoughts. At first he brushed it off as a temporary situation that would melt away. It did not. With each passing day a void accumulated.

At night, he got nervous and tense. He felt an air of abandonment. He moped around the apartment as though sucked into a daydream. He began to forget things no sooner than he committed them to memory.

The stain of regret clung to him like an indelible mark. Maybe if he hadn't taken her for granted so much she wouldn't have left. But wasn't her exit inevitable? He should have

remembered her when he saw her people leaving the country that morning but he didn't. He could have stopped it. He could have hid her somewhere or bribed the police.

Serenity's absence created something deep and ravening with Lawrence. In a new way he began hungering for a chance to be cared for. His desire to be wanted doubled with each passing day. She had created for him a universe of dependency, in which he lived, imprisoned and fettered, and unable to see beyond its walls.

He tried to forget her. It didn't work. He constructed ways of satiating himself. He filled up the gulf within him with other women, sometimes three at a time.

SojaGoSojaCome

Lawrence did not watch TV that morning. He did not see the coat of arms fill the screen with the sound of martial music and fade away to reveal a uniformed man. He was in the wooden office when he heard the sound of trucks. He sprang up, grabbed a bag in the corner of the office and dashed out. He knew things would come to this one day. He knew the new regime would not be kind to him when the civilian government ended so he was prepared, or rather there were really no big preparations to make. Things had already gone downhill for him. Lawrence watched as motorists stopped their cars, and people peeped from buildings or spilled out on the streets to watch the convoy of green trucks approach from a distance. Once again he was on the run, only this time he reckoned he might be running for a long time. Lawrence sighed and walked to the main road where he melted into the crowd.

1986

“Anini doesn’t live in the winds. He lives amongst us. People in this area know his whereabouts so they should be able provide information. It looks like everybody is maintaining sealed lips over his whereabouts”

*Colonel John Mark Ineinger
The Guardian 15th of October, 1986*

Full Payment Gang

Mercenary asked what value guns had if they could not be used. At least they had guns. His face wore a bitter grimace. He took a long sip of beer and wiped his lips. Lawrence nodded. He stirred the beer in his glass with his finger. Sweat soaked the collar of his shirt. He saw people bend like trees lashed by the wind. He was not sure Mercenary was sober either.

Every day they drank themselves delirious at the Pepper Soup Bar. Lawrence, Mercenary and Kingsley Eweka whom they befriended at the bar. Kingsley bought the drinks as long as he could pour out the sad and ugly facts of his life. He talked about how he got neither recognition nor respect despite being a royal prince in the land. People said that he was indeed one of the sons of the Oba of Benin but Lawrence did not care. He only cared about the alcohol. Lawrence drank to his own sad and ugly facts. He had lost the chairmanship. He no longer had a godfather to protect him. Honourable Ekpeyoung returned weeks after disappearing, packed his things and left the city with his family. No one had heard of him since. The car the parliamentarian had gifted Lawrence did not serve him well these days. The seats were tattered and a good chunk of the floor had rusted off. He had to rattle each door vigorously opened it closed.

The caretaker had chucked him out for not paying his rent. He had gone to Lawrence's room with an iron bar and forced the lock opened. He overturned the mattress, ripped open the pillow, broke Lawrence's tumblers and threw clothes out of his shelves. Lawrence moved to an abandoned building with Duke. He slept in the corner of one of the rooms. He had a battery-powered transistor radio and a suitcase for his clothes. He made no effort to improve his lot.

Mercenary also spoke of his woes. He still had his palatial house, but business had not gone well. Time under the military regime had eaten up his possessions. He had held on to his pride desperately.

The conversation drifted away from guns. They talked about women and the government and drifted back to women. Mercenary stood up to leave. Minutes later Lawrence stood up cradling an empty bottle. He merged with the dark, weaved through figures, clung to walls. His feet got caught in potholes. His legs grew longer with every step till he towered above everyone. He felt a drop of wetness on the crown of his head. Looked up, waved the bottle in the air and cursed, thinking a bird had pissed on him. More wetness splattered his head. The floor beneath his feet swayed. He toppled to the floor, falling from a

great height. Arose covered in dust, but his bottle remained intact. He would not allow the bottle to break no matter how hard he fell. Would not let his pride go. The rain pelted on his head and face and body like liquid pellets. He shambled around looking for shelter. He found an awning and plonked himself down on the ground. He curled up in a foetal position in the corner of the shade, clutching his bottle tightly between his legs. He glimpsed a figure in the rain. At first Lawrence had assumed it was a man, an adult, but a momentary sight of the figure running and the laughter made him think of a young girl. It seemed strange to him for a girl to be running and laughing in the heavy rain.

The laughter continued even though he couldn't see the figure. For a while no sound emerged. Then he heard the whistling of the wind followed by another burst of laughter. He saw a shape for a moment before it bolted around a corner and disappeared. He heard the laughing again. The wind carried the sound. The laughter rose in intensity and abated. The laughter became more playful, more like a giggle as though teasing him. For a moment he thought he heard the laughter close enough to be in his head but he was not sure.

He was too tired to make anything more of what was happening. He closed his eyes to get some sleep. The laughter rang out again and again. He surrendered to the sound. He allowed it to calm his nerves. Darkness descended.

He woke up to the blaring of horns and the trampling of legs. Disoriented, he tried to get up, but fell down again. His bottle rolled away from his body and clattered on the asphalt. He was assailed by a lacerating pain in his right arm. A gaping cut. Pain surged through his skull. He saw the mess he had made, dust all over his body, his shorts riddled with holes, his knees bruised and bleeding. He picked himself up and trudged home. His joints ached with cold. His lower back ached. He tried to recall what happened the previous night. He wondered if he had merely dreamt it up.

When he got to the refuse dump beside his shelter, he opened his fly for a pee. Steam arose from the wet soil.

Duke came to him, sniffing and whining, his tail wagging, his dark brown eyes begging Lawrence to pet him. The dog flattened his ears in anticipation as Lawrence closed his fly and reached out to rub the scruff of his neck all the way up its head. The dog fawned on him, his head raised up.

A thin, filthy strip of cloth around his neck served as a collar; Lawrence used the rope to hold the dog down whenever he felt it needed to be saved from his self-destructive tendencies. The dog dragged the rope about and tumbled down whenever he trod upon its end running too fast, but Lawrence did not care.

Duke had been staying with Lawrence ever since he'd found two touts brandishing sticks and the dog whimpering and limping in a corner. One of them held a chewing stick in one hand, his eyes were blood red and he had sweat stains in his armpits. The other wore no shirt and had a curved spine. The dog, one leg broken and one ear torn off, struggled to break free from the enclosure.

Curved-spine dropped his stick, picked a large piece of rock and closed in on the mongrel. He walked as though he had something lodged between his thighs.

On an ordinary day, Lawrence would have looked the other way. He would have passed the situation off as two angry men trying to screw a dog over. It happens all the time, people constantly searching for inventive ways to vent their frustrations on the universe—errant kids, street thugs seeking sick amusement, or dog-meat connoisseurs.

But this time around something was different. He felt a sudden kingship with the dog. He was gripped by hatred for the men. It grew beyond hatred, becoming a consuming urge to rescue the dog from destruction.

The stone hurtled silently through the air and caught the dog on the side of the head. He crumpled to the ground with a loud yelp. Lawrence lunged for Curved-spine with a yell, pushing him to the ground. Curved-spine broke free, gasping for breath, his clenched fist raised to deliver a blow as the other fellow, who came to his friend's rescue, threw Lawrence to the ground. Coarse earth stuck to his face and dust filled his nostrils.

Lawrence struggled with the men, till they broke free and left with shocked looks on their faces. Why was he fighting them over a mere dog? The adrenaline churned up by the fight suddenly ebbed away. Strength drained from him. The dog was lying on its side, its jagged breathing punctuated by loud, hoarse sounds. He reached out to touch the dog, but thought better of it and walked away. Pity went straight to his gut. Lawrence felt sad for the dog, very sad, abysmally sad. He couldn't tell why he was so sad.

The next day he saw the dog foraging in the refuse dump beside his shelter. He was relieved and overjoyed.

The dog whined aloud and turned to go, but Lawrence quickly pulled the animal towards him by the broken leash that had hung around its neck, and calmed him down.

He named the dog Duke. Duke, however, did not exhibit the behaviour of a dog of noble breed. He would wander off for two or three days at a time in search of bitches and come back limping or with his ear bleeding. Lawrence would flog him; then nurse his wounds, cleaning them with water.

Duke once came back with his broken foreleg wounded. Lawrence saw his laboured breathing and the saliva as it dripped from his mouth. He bandaged his legs with rags and tethered him to the electric pole close to the shelter. He ignored his yelps for freedom and fed him from the little he ate. He forced shots of rum down his throat. When the mongrel's leg finally healed, he took him out for long walks.

Duke rewarded him with his absolute loyalty: he whined and licked his feet. He ran to Lawrence whenever he heard his name or a whistle. He followed him everywhere, breathing heavily through his mouth, tongue hanging, except when Lawrence commanded him to stay behind. Then he would instantly fall back on his haunches and wail in sorrow. Lawrence often came back with leftover rice or half-chewed chicken. He became fond of that dog.

Lawrence moved into the shelter. For a while he talked to himself, his lips moving in a soft incantation of half-formed thoughts. Tiredness conquered him. His body sagged forward

A semblance of bedding lay crumpled on the floor of the building. He stretched it out and lay on it. His eyelids got heavy. His fatigue drained his head of all thought.

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The next time Mercenary raised the subject of using guns they were not quite drunk. His eyes darted to and fro as he spoke. He spoke in hushed tones. Mercenary suggested they should start a gang. Kingsley nodded as Mercenary spoke. He volunteered to be in charge of logistics. Kingsley also said his connections would be useful. Kingsley always bragged about his links with top officers in the police force. Sometimes he said the Assistant Inspector General of police did his bidding. He claimed to have helped him climb the steps of the police hierarchy. Sometimes he said the AIG was an uncle he much revered. Which version he told depended on his mood or state of intoxication.

Lawrence listened to them, but he was not convinced. The idea seemed random to him. These days he was wary of things that presented a quick solution to his condition. Of what value was rising up in the world if going back to the ground was inevitable? These days he preferred to live each day as it came and idle away his time at the beer parlour.

When he got home that night, Duke was nowhere to be found. He went to the refuse dumps and the roadside bars, where the dog would usually scavenge for food. He walked

around the neighbourhood calling his name. Lawrence went back to bed that night thinking the dog would show up the next morning. He didn't. Still he had no qualms. He knew a dog would always find its way back to its master. He went to that bar that night. This time around neither Mercenary nor Kingsley mentioned anything about using guns. First Kingsley started a conversation about Michael Jackson. He said the pop star got his power from Lucifer himself – which explained his irresistible voice. *Thriller* was proof of the pop star's diabolical involvement. They talked about the zombies in *Thriller*; people who returned from the dead to eat flesh and suck blood. Kingsley said zombies did not exist and Lawrence almost fought him over it.

The conversation drifted from zombies to the subject of death. Kingsley told a story of how he almost died. He had an accident and ended up in the accident and emergency for a month. He said his father's wives had bewitched him. He told stories of the things he heard and saw during his time in the ward. Like the day a man was brought in for taking an overdose of an aphrodisiac. He almost rolled off the bed in laughter that day and in fact broke his stitches in the process, or when a housewife who was hit in the bum by a stray bullet while standing at the window and pressing out the creases of her husband's clothes. She spent an entire month with bandaged ass. Lawrence laughed so hard, his chest hurt.

Then there was Sergeant Okon, a police officer who was brought into the hospital by his colleagues, and in whom Kingsley took a special interest. The victim was unconscious, his head, bleeding and swollen, looked almost twice the size of average-sized head. He had been run over by a commercial vehicle while trying to extort money from the driver. The doctors tried to save his life. IV tubes were plugged into his arms and his head was wrapped with layer upon layer of bandages. His condition, however, did not improve. He remained unconscious for about a week, when he began to mumble the same words over and over again. He mumbled when the nurses or doctors came to attend to him. Rumours spread through the A& E. It became a secret joke of some sort but no one could laugh because the man's condition was getting worse. When Kingsley got a little better, he went about asking questions about the case like a detective untangling a clue.

He was able to get some explanation from a doctor. The physician said the police officer's condition was common to patients with head injury. They have no control over what comes out of their mouth and more often than not it is the most mundane or habitual thing about them that floats to the surface, the doctor said.

"Tell us what he said, what exactly he said that was so important," Mercenary said with an eager look on his face. His eyes were red. His voice husky.

“Yes tell us!” Lawrence said.

Kingsley said the sergeant mumbled over and over again in Pidgin English “Oga, wey the money? Settle me, Mr. Man.”

They all howled with laughter. They banged the table and fought for breath, tears streaming down their cheeks. They went on about why the government should ban police check points. Lawrence went home that night happily inebriated. He fell into a deep sleep, woke up the next morning and realized that Duke had still not returned. The day of happiness turned sour as he combed the neighbourhood till he found his dog on the roadside.

Green metallic flies danced on his dog’s head. Duke’s tongue, whitish, swollen, hung out of the side of his mouth. Small white maggots jerked and crawled out of his nose and mouth. The corpse gave off a rotten stench. Lawrence knelt beside the dog and gathered it into his arms, cradling its head on his shoulder. He did not swat the flies off or stop the maggots from falling on his body. He just held the dog in his arms. Lawrence noticed a little crowd had gathered. He didn’t know for how long he held Duke, but he knew when it was time to leave. He placed the body gently on the ground, and stood up, his shirt smeared with maggots and gore. Lawrence walked through the crowd of onlookers as though they did not exist. They backed off as if he was a lunatic. He did not care.

He heard the sound of some of the flies following him, buzzing around his head. Then suddenly he felt his sadness recede. He didn’t know why. When he got home, he went straight to the backyard. He washed the dead dog’s rotten flesh off his body. He tossed the shirt and trousers he had been wearing into a bonfire he had made.

As he watched the flames turn his clothes into dark coils, then ashes, he thought about the vicissitudes of his life. He wondered if the rest of his life would continue to be filled with dashed hopes and botched dreams. He came to the conclusion that he had been afraid all along. Afraid of death, afraid of people, afraid of poverty, afraid of riches, afraid of becoming wretched after tasting wealth, afraid of himself. He decided to live a life with no fear. One in which he would cede the control to something that would incinerate him. One in which there would be no turning back so there would be no need to fear. At the bar that evening, Lawrence said he was ready to use the guns he had in his possession.

Mercenary declared that the gang would be called BendelUnderworld aka Full-Payment Gang. He whipped out sheets of paper filled with rules and called it “the constitution”. They did not meet for this at the bar. They arranged to meet in Mercenary’s house. Lawrence went there with Kingsley Eweka. The gate was slightly open when they arrived. Lawrence found it interesting the gate was not shut, although not surprising. There was nothing valuable to

protect. Mercenary shouted from the balcony for them to come in. The house was in a state of disrepair, its paint peeling, its lawn overgrown with weeds.

Cynthia came out to greet them. Her face was blotched with acne. Skin lay in folds around her eyes. She wore a cheap looking blue dress stained with dark patches of sweat under the armpits. Time had ravaged her. She looked twenty years older than she was with her prematurely grey hair peeking out of her scarf. She nodded a greeting and walked back inside. The tiles were chipped and the sofas tattered. A film of dust covered the cabinet which was now empty. The crystal trophies and figurines of animals were gone. The stairs creaked as Mercenary walked down.

Before he read out the constitution, Mercenary explained why he had named the gang both Bendel Underworld and Full-Payment. It would be an organisation that rejected half measures. That took back all that the government had taken from them in full. His voice was full of pride. Spittle dribbled from his tobacco blackened lips.

Mercenary handed out copies of the paper to them. Lawrence scanned through it struggling to read the points. Mercenary read it out loud.

After the reading Mercenary asked if anyone was opposed to any of the rules. Kingsley nodded. Lawrence agreed as well.

“Let’s celebrate” he said and vanished. He came back with bottles of beer.

*

BENDEL UNDERWORLD ORGANIZATION AKA FULL-PAYMENT GANG, (THE CONSTITUTION)

1. All members shall unequivocally abide by the rules and regulations of the Full Payment Gang.
2. Bendel Underworld organization also known as the Full-Payment Gang is a clandestine organisation and therefore should be treated as such. No aspect of the gang’s activities shall be revealed by members to any outside party no matter the circumstances.
3. In the event of the unfortunate arrest of any member of the underworld organization, the gang shall do everything possible to secure the release of the incarcerated member, provided he has not yet disclosed the secrets of the gang. If by reason of torture or intimidation the member reveals the activities of the gang or the identity other gang members, he will be treated as an enemy.
4. Business shall always come before pleasure. Members will only be allowed go to the beer parlour and relax with girls after the operation has been completed, the loot shared and loose ends tied.

5. The loot of the operations shall be equally divided amongst participating members irrespective of who made the greatest input or provided the intelligence/ information leading to the operation.
6. The organisation shall establish many hiding places from law enforcement agents. The location of these safe houses will only be known to members of the organisation.

*

Lawrence and Kingsley loaded Mercenary's car with punctured tyres, and loose planks bound for firewood, nails still attached to them. Lawrence drove 16 kilometres out of the city on the Benin Agbor Highway. He swerved off the main road and plunged into the bush, brushing past tall plants and swaths of elephant grass. They drove further and halted. Unloaded the tires, planks and other materials needed for the operation; they set up a makeshift camp with sticks and leaves. They concealed their materials with leaves from a banana tree and left.

Twelve midnight, Lawrence drove back to the spot with Kingsley and Mercenary. They sat on their hunches, sharing a joint and swatting away mosquitoes.

They waited. The wait was long.

The night was shrouded in darkness. The only illumination came from the flashlight planted in the grass. Its beams slanted up, running through the air hazy with ganja smoke, dust particles and tiny flies.

Lawrence rubbed his sweaty forehead with a slow swipe of the hand. He listened to the droning of mosquitoes, the scuttling sounds of nocturnal rodents, the shrieking of birds, the clamoring of frogs, and the faint sound of cars zooming past on the highway. He heard the siren of the highway patrol men. He wondered what it would be like to engage in a gun battle with the police. Except that police were now on their side. Kingsley didn't speak empty words after all. Kingsley had announced that the crack mobile units assigned to that segment of the highway had been given orders "from above" to go home to their women before midnight.

When he felt the strain of his body on his legs Lawrence sat down on the grass. A sudden chill struck him. He took a joint from Kingsley and drew long puffs. Tiny ants crawled up his thigh. He brushed them away with a flick of his fingers. He tried to keep still and alert. They would know when the time was right to launch into action.

Several minutes passed and Mercenary glanced at his watch and gave a nod. It was time. They put on gloves and masks that allowed their noses and eyes and mouths to show. Mercenary slung a bag over his shoulders. Lawrence fished his pistol out from beneath the blanket of long-bladed leaves and stuck it in his back of his belt. They darted to the shoulders of the road.

Mercenary roamed about with his rifle while Lawrence and Kingsley mounted the road block. They piled the tyres on the road one top of the other then arranged the planks across the asphalt so that the nails pointed up. Lawrence felt heat on his face. Sweat accumulated beneath his mask. He took deep gulps to relieve the sense of suffocation. They went back to the bush. Hid close to the road.

They waited again. This time they didn't have to wait too long.

The roar of a cross-country bus approaching. It halted with a pneumatic hiss. Beams of light from its huge headlamps pouring onto the road. Lawrence whipped out his gun and cocked it. Mercenary sprang out of the bush. Shots rang in the air. Lawrence followed his lead. He pumped the air with bullets. His head exploded with the cracking sounds. He drank the smell of gun smoke. The driver of the bus lay face down on the asphalt. Screams erupted inside the bus. Mercenary barked at the driver. He ordered him to stand. The driver rose with his hands up. His lips trembled, his eyes looking here and there. From his fly down to the knee of his trousers was soaked with pee. Mercenary shoved him ahead with the muzzle of his rifle. Lawrence followed. The driver heaved the door open and they entered. Lawrence stood at the entrance with the driver. Mercenary went down the aisle, jumping over bodies prostrate on the floor, pointing his rifle at the passengers, telling them to face the ground. More screams filled the air. Tears flowed. Supplications went up to God.

“Kneel down there,” Lawrence barked at the driver. He kicked him in the back. The man dropped on his knees. Mercenary went up the aisle waving his gun and screaming threats. When he got to the first row he stopped.

“Everybody out! Make all of unacommot for this moto!”

Within seconds the passengers were all out of the bus.

“Lie down! Lie down or I will shoot you!” Lawrence yelled as he herded them to the middle of the road. On after the other they stretched out on the tarmac. A man with a shorn head stood in defiance. He wore a T-shirt and a pair of shorts.

“You can’t do this to us!” he said “We are not animals, we are human beings. Take what you want and go.”

Kingsley charged into him and rammed the butt of his rifle into his face. The man clutched his face, screaming. He wriggled in pain on the floor. Blood gushed out of his mouth and nose. Lawrence felt his face itch. He scratched with the back of his wrist. He was getting impatient.

“Everybody stand up!” Lawrence commanded. For a few seconds Mercenary shot a glance at him with a frown.

Mercenary repeated the instruction. He set his bag on the ground and zipped it open. He moved swiftly through the crowd, demanding cash and valuables. Passengers loosened their watches, slid rings off their fingers and removed necklaces from their necks. People emptied their pocket into the bag. Women handed over their handbags, the men their wallets. Mercenary emptied every one of them. Kingsley ordered the driver to open the luggage compartment and commanded the passengers to bring out their suitcases. Bags were opened and personal belongings tossed out. Underwear and brightly coloured blouses cascaded out of open boxes. Make-up kits, shoes, medication, towels, and containers of different colours and shapes strewn across the road. With the nozzle of his rifle, Kingsley lifted a pair of flimsy panties out of a bag. He lifted it carefully as if it were a dead rat. He tossed the panties away and picked up a bra. The bra dangled from the tip of his gun and dropped when he raised it high.

Within minutes Mercenary had stuffed his bag to the brim with cash and valuables.

Lawrence could see vehicles carrying startled faces screeching to a halt some distance away. The cars swung sharply sideways and turned back.

“Oga I wan go pis,” a female passenger said.

“Piss for your bodi,” Lawrence replied, irritated. Mercenary continued to ransack the suitcases. The lady grabbed a cloth in a box and bunched it between her legs.

“Oya go! Yeyewoman!” Mercenary said as she hauled herself up.

He escorted her to the roadside. She walked slowly, moving farther into the bush. He looked back to see if Mercenary would look away. He didn’t. He stood there, fingering his rifle. She hiked up her skirt, slid her panties down to her heels and crouched down. Lawrence smiled.

When she was done peeing, Mercenary pulled her to him. She screamed. He told her to shut up, but she persisted. He wrapped his arm around her neck and used his palm to cover her mouth. She tried to bite but Mercenary held her still. Her breasts heaved as she tried to jerk away from him. Her screams became muffled. The other passengers tried to plead on her behalf but Kingsley shut them up. He cocked his rifle. He threatened to shoot. Mercenary dragged the woman into the bush. The shorn-headed man arose in anger. Kingsley kicked him and he fell back. Another male passenger sprang up. Kingsley pointed the gun at him. He recoiled. Screams and cries filled the air. Lawrence suddenly felt his body become tense. The screams became loud in his head, louder than they should be. He heard other screams too; voices yelling at him, inflaming rage within him. He tried to shake off the impulse to do something about the voices, to quiet them, to make everyone calm. The more he tried the more the urge increased. The noise grew louder in his head.

He walked to the bald-headed man and fired a shot. Blood splattered on Lawrence. Shorn-head keeled over. The gunshot blew a clean hole through his skull. His body jolted as if charged by an electric shock. On the ground, the man's face slackened. He stiffened. Saliva bubbles appeared at the corner of his mouth. A thick line of blood escaped across the tarmac, gathering into a pool. His fingers twitched.

Screams turned into whimpers. Kingsley gazed in stupefaction. Mercenary approached with anger in his eyes. He hitched up his trousers and stuffed his cock back in.

Pulsating heart. Lawrence steadied his grip on his pistol. He felt the pressure of the recoil in his hands. He would shoot again if he had to. A feeling of satisfaction washed over him. Seeing his gun shatter the man's skull and blood pump forth stirred up pleasure the way it had never been stirred. Even his years of violence had never given him such a feeling. He had crossed the line. Lawrence wiped the victim's blood off his face with the back of his wrist and hacked out phlegm.

"You dey craze?" Mercenary shoved his face at Lawrence, his nose flaring. Lawrence pushed him back and aimed his pistol at him, breathing heavily.

"Fire me!" Mercenary screamed, his eyes red with rage.

"You wan fire me? Make una fire me, you bastard! You wan cause trouble for us? Your blood too hot!" shouted Mercenary

Kingsley intervened. He told Lawrence to put his gun down. He then went to Mercenary and pushed him away, yelling at him to stop.

They gathered their things, went back to the car and drove off. They plunged into the narrow crooked lanes and cloud-dust streets. They parked the car beside one of their safe

houses, an abandoned building. Inside the building, Mercenary hauled the bag out of the trunk and emptied its contents on the dusty ground. Before they shared the booty, he walked to Lawrence and offered him cigarette. He took it with a frown on his face.

*

In broad daylight, Lawrence shadowed a man who parked a 1966 Volkswagen beetle by the roadside. He went up to him while he was searching for his keys in his pocket. He looked left and right. He pulled out his gun and thrust the man in the back. He wore no mask.

The man froze. He didn't try to run away or shout. He raised his hands slowly in the air. Mercenary and Kingsley joined Lawrence. Kingsley rushed at the man, grabbed his key, and tossed it at Lawrence. The key turned rapidly in the lock. Kingsley frisked the man to extract his possessions then shoved him against one of the roadside stalls screaming threats. He was kicking him on the ground when Lawrence got into the car. Mercenary squeezed in after him. Kingsley soon left the man with his face on the ground and joined them. Lawrence revved up the engine and drove off. The Volkswagen sounded like a cement mixer.

He drove as fast as the car would allow him. The beetle wasn't what they wanted. It wasn't cars they were after either. If they had wanted a car they would have gone for a nicer, latest-model vehicle. They just needed a vehicle good enough to get to the upper crust area without arousing suspicion.

Lawrence drove swiftly through dirt streets and neighbourhoods. His eyes roamed. He watched keenly. He calculated. His pulse raced.

"Make we carry this one," Lawrence said to his gang members after spotting a vehicle.

He sped past a Mitsubishi. Slowed down in front of it, obstructing its path. Mercenary and Kingsley jumped out of the car and whipped out their guns. Lawrence abandoned the Volkswagen. He drove off in the Mitsubishi peering into the side mirror, the wheels kicking up sand. The owner, an old lady, sat crying in a haze of dust. Lawrence drove faster now. He wiped sweat beading on his forehead. Kingsley and Mercenary chatted loudly in Èsán. They laughed hard behind him. Each successful operation pumped up their confidence. With the successes came a mutual understanding of the stakes. Each member discovered his place in the gang without the enforcement of roles. They did what they loved. Kingsley handled the police and other related concerns. He was also responsible for supplying arms and

ammunition. Mercenary spearheaded the groundwork and pre-operation investigation. Lawrence drove the gang and he carried out “special” assignments.

Lawrence avoided road blocks as he drove. He had mastered the landscape of the city. Knew every dirt road, every corner, very short cut. Could navigate his way through the assemblage of shacks and the gated housing estates for the wealthy.

Lawrence jerked to a halt on a busy street where one of the most expensive restaurants was located. He tightened his now moist palms on the steering wheel. He watched and waited with the excitement of a predator. Expensive cars lined the street. Leisurely dressed people streamed in and out.

A man wearing sunshades walked out of the bar, punching the buttons of a “brick” cell-phone. He wore a polo shirt and a pair of shorts. Lawrence chose him. The man jumped into his car and started the engine.

Lawrence flicked a glance at his colleagues. They gave him a nod and he started the car. He drove behind the man. Sometimes he slowed down to create some distance between them. The unsuspecting driver drove on till he got to his palatial house and honked. Lawrence stopped a few hundred meters from the house. He grabbed the steering wheel and braced himself. A man opened the iron gates and the vehicle eased in. Lawrence sped across the road, made a swift turn and charged towards the gate. The man at the gate fled. The car stopped in the compound. The robbers spilled out of the vehicle and pulled out their guns.

*

Lagos, 331 kilometres from Benin

Lawrence and his colleagues walked into a discotheque in Victoria Island and sat on bar stools to order drinks. The barman seemed jovial. He smiled as he wiped the Formica of the bar countertop or poured out drinks. His smile revealed teeth eaten away by chewing tobacco.

The discothèque was dark, hot and noisy and the strobe lights didn't reach everywhere. Men and women in shiny, tight-fitting clothes and bellbottoms bobbed their heads to electronic music. Smoke swirled. The noise clogged Lawrence's ears, reached his oesophagus and shook his heart.

Their target, one Mr Dexter, was dressed in a grey suit. He sat not too far from them in the company of three women. He chatted and sipped wine with the women. The job was a

special assignment Mercenary secured for the gang and Lawrence was responsible for its execution.

They sipped their drinks while they threw side-glances at the target. They planned to wait till he was ready to go and follow him home. The women laughed as Mr Dexter chatted. One thrust her shoulders forward and craned her neck to whisper something into his ear.

Lawrence tried to eavesdrop on their conversation but it was too noisy. The man gestured with one of his hands. He had a cigarette wedged between his fingers. The lights cast a glow over his face. He seemed pleased with his life, Lawrence thought. If he knew today would be his last day on earth he would not be so pleased.

Mr Dexter downed his glass of wine, coughed delicately into a clenched fist, muttered something to the women and flashed a smile. He arose, straightened up his suit and walked through the pulsating bodies on the dance floor before disappearing into the latrine. An idea struck Lawrence. He whispered to Kingsley and Mercenary and they got up quickly mingling with the dancers. Lawrence came out of the crowd seconds later and headed towards the men's room. Kingsley and Mercenary walked closely behind him. Lawrence went in. His colleagues stood in front of the door.

The latrine reeked of urine and disinfectant. Mr Dexter nodded a greeting at him while he washed his hands in the basin.

Lawrence immediately charged at him. He grabbed Mr Dexter by the neck and smashed his head against the mirror. The mirror cracked into several tributaries and splintered. Mr Dexter slumped on the floor. Blood ran in rivulets down his face.

Lawrence clutched his tie and squeezed. He squeezed and squeezed. When strangling him with his tie proved not to be effective, he took hold of his neck. Squeezed. His mouth flapped open. Lawrence felt the veins of the man's neck throb under his fingers. He applied more pressure. The man tried to defend himself by launching one of his feet at him. He tried to use his hands but Lawrence was on top of him. The man's body shrieked against the scuffed linoleum floors of the room. He emitted a choked scream.

He squeezed until the muscles at the corners of the man's mouth began to spasm. He squeezed until his tongue drooped out. He squeezed until his mouth foamed. Lawrence looked into his wide-open eyes. He saw the moment the man lost that last glimmer of consciousness in his eyes. He saw the moment death crept into his eyes. He saw death and death did not scare him. In that moment, he feared nothing.

The man kicked his legs up once then twice before growing still.

Lawrence detached himself from him and sat on the floor for a while, exhausted, like a wild beast sated after a successful hunt. His chest swelled and collapsed drawing in breath.

He plucked off some tissue paper, held it under the tap. He first wiped the blood smeared all over his face and neck in front of the mirror. He then crouched to clean the cadaver. He started with the blood on his face. He tried to wipe off the stain on his shirt. He tried to straighten his rough shirt. He hauled him up and pressed his back up against the wall. He stepped back and surveyed the room. He frowned. There was the sitting corpse with his head hanging down. There were splattered stains of blood on the walls. Glass shards strewn the floor of the bathroom. He shook his head, scolding himself for not doing a clean job. He walked out to join his colleagues and they strolled back to the counter. They ordered another round of drinks.

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The Nigerian Observer

All out war on armed robbery: reinforcement for Police in Bendel State to combat increased armed robbery

If you are one of those engaged in violent activities your Waterloo is here! This is because Bendel State police command has received reinforcement of men and materials to increase its firepower. Disclosing this in an interview, the acting Police Public Relations Officer Mr Deji Adekeye said the reinforcement was also meant to supplement the command's manpower needed in curbing the escalating activities of criminals in the state. The police spokesman remarked that Bendel Police stated that three armed robbery suspects are now in the police net.

The names of the suspects are given as Kehinde Adams, Ben Jamin Oaikhena and Polety Danla. They were reportedly found with a locally made pistol and two lamp holders said to have been removed from a bakery.

Police sources hinted that the three armed robbery suspects, including others yet to be identified, robbed one Dr Abel of Central Hospital, Benin. According to Mr Adekeye the suspects will appear before the Robbery and Firearms tribunal as soon as investigations are completed by the state CID and their degree of involvement in other robbery operations is ascertained.

He therefore appeals to the public to rise to the challenge and cooperate with the police to eliminate criminals in our society.

When armed robbery first assumed a frightening dimension in the 70's it was blamed on the civil war which caused a lot of dislocation of millions of people, many of whom had easy access to guns. But in the early 80's soon after the oil boom began to bubble, the presence of illegal aliens was partly blamed for the escalation of violent crimes.

Mass expulsions of illegal aliens have been mounted twice in the past four years. First in 1983 by deposed President Shehu Shagari's government and in 1983 by Mohammedu Buhari's military regime.

Mr Adekeye said it was no longer tenable to blame violent crimes on illegal aliens. He attributed the recent economic collapse as a factor

Meanwhile, a blue Santana car belonging to one Mr Ambrose Iheaken has been reported stolen along Durnez road in Benin.

Anyone with useful information about the car has been advised to contact the nearest police station.

*

Benin Military Hospital

Lawrence asked for a smoke before agreeing to speak to the pressmen. First, a nurse came to apply a much smaller bandage on his wounded ear and trim off the excess thread on the edges. He winced and pressed his lips together. After that she cleaned the pus and the surge of dark clot from the dressing on the stump of his leg. The pain spread up his spine all the way to his skull. He stiffened his arm as a low moan of pain escaped from his mouth, which brought him close to tears. He waited for it to pass. It did not pass. He swallowed. He felt his calves twitch under his shorts.

An officer unfettered his right wrist. His left wrist remained chained to the bedpost so his right arm fully extended above his head to show the brown bush between his armpits. Clumps of matted hair dotted his bare-chest.

Lawrence smoked a stick of Benson and Hedges with his free hand. His hands trembled while clasping the cigarette. His wrist ached from the long contact with the handcuffs. He felt as though the hand belonged to someone else.

He smoked as he thought about the different ways he could respond to the journalist. He felt a touch of pride that he had once again turned the nation's attention to him. He would have savoured the moment even more were it not for the pain that wracked his body in waves, and the *thump thump* sound in his forehead.

Lawrence tried to clear his head. He knew anything he said may be used against him during the tribunal. He knew he had to choose his words carefully.

Minutes passed and a barrage of tape recorders, microphones and cameras assailed him as the journalists jostled for space in the cubicle. He blew a sigh and heaved himself into a sitting position. A nervous sweat broke out across his brow.

"Is it true that you have killed many policemen?" the first person asked.

"I have not killed a policeman before. I have not killed anybody. I only threaten people. My boys are ready to shoot but for me, I don't shoot any person."

“Is it true that you have magical powers?” one said thrusting his recorder at him. Something hovered on the tip of his tongue. He did not give in.

“If I get juju, police go catch me?” he said and the pressmen burst into laughter. A lopsided smile tugged gently on his lips; a sarcastic grin.

*

Ibadan, 280 kilometres from Benin

Lawrence sat on the bench in the midst of two groups of people who worked for the gang. On one side of the road, boys in dirty overalls sprayed white paint on the blue Santana he recently snatched. They worked under a shed with aluminium roofing and wooden partitioning. In a corner were crates full of tools, punctured tires and a heap of ill-assorted scrap metal.

Whenever a newly stolen car arrived, the auto mechanics (1) Removed the number plates and scratched out any form of identity: This job was carried out secretly behind a wooden partitioning (2) Replaced or repaired faulty parts.

Trained panel beaters handled the bodywork. Vehicles that were irredeemable were stripped to the bone and sold for parts.

On the other side of the road was a construction site. A tipper arrived to offload fine-grained sand and gravel and roared off. The cement mixer whirred and thumped. The workers pierced bags of cement open. For some days Lawrence had personally supervised the artisans as they piled bricks, one on top of the other. Soon the building would be ready for the coat of paint on doors, windows and walls. When finished, the site would serve as a car sales company. The business model was simple. Vehicles would be bought from different parts of the country, refurbished and sold here. As long as no snatching happened in Ibadan and they greased the palms of the police officers within the jurisdiction, they were fine.

Lawrence produced his last cigarette from his pocket. He puffed away, his chin tilted upward, flies buzzing around him. He became aware of a girl who had been stealing glances at him while she mined her nose with her finger. He threw an inattentive look in her direction. His thoughts were elsewhere so he did not look at her closely. She was sitting on a slab close to the building workers. Her clothes were filthy. He stubbed out his cigarette and walked to a kiosk for a fresh supply.

On his way, he turned and realised the girl was following him. He walked on. He glanced over his shoulders at her. A little smile appeared in the corner of his eyes. He became amused. He was gripped by a kind of boyish curiosity. Maybe she was trying to play some kind of a game? He was willing to participate just for the fun of it. He had the time. He recalled that he loved playing the “Police and thief” with the neighbours next door when he was young. They would divide themselves into groups. The first group was a police group and the other group represented the thief. The thieves hid somewhere then the police group searched for it and acted like they were shooting them with two of their fingers bunched together to look like a gun. Hiding was not the point of the game as the hiding spots were never a secret. The team that won was the team that could run faster. His mother would give him a good thrashing whenever she caught him playing the game. She would say no child of hers would become a thief. A week ago he had sent his arthritic mother a brand new Peugeot station wagon. She went around the village telling everyone what her son had done.

The girl was still following him. He got to the kiosk, bought a packet of cigarettes and turned back. He walked past her without looking at her. He kept walking. The girl was still following him. He walked beyond the site. After a while, he looked back. She was still trotting after him. He sped up. The wind whistled in his ears. He realized she was running. She could not catch up with him but she also ran. He stopped running and hid himself, crouching between two vehicles. He searched for her with his eyes. He could not find her.

He went back to the site and sat on the bench, panting. Game over, back to serious business. He lit a cigarette and smoked. He turned his face and was shocked to see the girl squatting close to him.

He peered at her closely, viewed her profile. She was not as young as he thought she was. He saw her breasts, her face. Her hair was crinkly. A scab covered her right eye, scaly. Snakelike. She rolled her good eye.

He wanted to ask her what happened to her eye but he couldn't speak. He was shocked. He felt pity for her. The girl stared at him, pouting. She chipped off the dry mucus crusted below her nose and tossed it into her mouth. He turned his face away.

The pity he felt for her was banished by the feeling of unpleasantness that overcame him. He dug frantically into his pocket and held out a note for her. She did not take the money. She still gawked at him. He decided to ignore her but he couldn't.

When he looked sideways, she looked directly in his eyes. When he faced away he felt her eyes on him.

He waved her away.

She did not budge.

He grabbed a stick from the ground and stomped over to her. She hurled herself at him, shaking him, pulling him towards her. She reeked of earth. Her breath tinged with an unfamiliar odour. She ran away before he could strike.

Lawrence thought about the girl as he drove back to Benin. He spent several hours trying to erase her image from his head. He tried to wipe her one-eyed gaze from his eyes. Whenever he shut his eyes, he conjured her up. He felt her breath.

When he fell asleep she followed him into his dreams. In his dreams, her voice was soft and syrupy. She came out through a curtain of beads without any clothes. Her body glistening from head from head to toe as though she had dipped herself in oil. He saw her feet, her legs, her perky bosom, the mound of her pubis, the tiny mounds of her nipples. Her good eye rolled lustfully. She groped him all over. She licked his ear. She slobbered on him. He still could not identify her smell.

He woke up feeling wet and sticky.

*

He hoped the dream would dissolve itself with the early morning drinking and a thick fog of cigarette smoke. It didn't. Like many of his strange dreams he put forth a lot of effort to remember the details. He knew it was the girl that appeared in his dreams. He knew she was the one that made him wet although he couldn't quite tell what he saw.

The essence of the dream clung to him. He felt as though she was still around him trying to taunt him. He gave sidelong glances and looked over his shoulders. Imagined bumping into her.

Late in the evening, Lawrence wandered dark streets to breath in the air of the city. There was no electricity and only a few buildings had lights on. In one of the buildings he saw the silhouette of a girl through the curtain. He wriggled forward through passers-by to get a closer look, trying to overcome his heart's frenetic beating. When he got close, the silhouette had vanished. Darkness engulfed the room.

*

Lawrence wondered whether those passing by could hear his heartbeat as he pulled a spare tyre and tools out of the trunk. He unscrewed the ruined tyre quickly.

He looked out of the corner of his eyes as he switched his tyres, his mind playing out possible escape routes in case a police van approached. He was almost certain he had shaken them off. At least they would not be anywhere close to him in the next few minutes. After making twists and turns, after skidding through dirt streets and slipping between alleyways, he had heard one of his tyres flapping loudly. He checked his rear-view mirror, pulled over, and waited for a few moments. When he got out he realized a nail had lodged itself within the tyre. He was on his way to drink with Kingsley and Mercenary when he saw them in front of the bar in the company of armed police officers. The police had manacled the two of them wrist to wrist with a single handcuff. They wore nothing except their underpants, and their faces were swollen and red from blows. The stainless steel of their handcuffs glistened in the sun.

Lawrence slowed down; put the vehicle in reverse gear. Before the police officers could hop into the wagon, he was gone. As he sped through the streets, a disturbing thought, also unfolded at breakneck speed. The thought presented itself as a series of questions. How did they know where they were? The police always looked the other way whenever they carried out their activities, what had changed? Did someone snitch on them? Would his colleagues confess his involvement in the gang after going through much torture?

When he was done fixing his tyre, he got into his car.

He drove carefully through outlying streets and found a place to abandon the car. He continued the rest of the journey by foot all they while searching for a suitable hiding place. Turned into a street lined by houses. Walked faster now, glancing over his shoulder every now and then.

He located a guesthouse tucked within a maze of tenement buildings. Walls stained brown. No signpost. A long passageway led to its entrance. Perfect hideout. As he approached the guesthouse, Lawrence was yet again hit by a wave of realization of the situation. His eyes gleamed with frustration. He had heard about the notorious Robbery and Firearms tribunal, a kangaroo court where proceedings left no doubt that the verdict had been reached in advance. Throwing the case out before it got to the tribunal was the only way his friends could be saved. He could not afford to lose his shit now. He had to be alert.

A stout, light-complexioned woman with bushy eyebrows and chin covered with black stubble stood behind the gritty reception counter of the guesthouse. A huge black and white television hung in a corner, encased in an iron frame, covered with cobwebs.

“You are welcome to Mount Pleasant Guest House. How may I help you?” the woman said.

“I wan lodge for room.”

“Single or double bed, sir?”

“Just gimesontin madam!”

The woman threw a suspicious look at him. Lawrence brought out cash from his wallet and slapped it on the counter.

“Once again you are welcome to Mount Pleasant Guest House,” she said with a smile. She unhooked a key from the rows of keys on the wall. She led him up the stairs to a corridor with six facing doors and turned the key into the lock of the room. She turned the key several times, pushed and pulled before the door finally creaked open. A rancid smell assailed him. Dankness wrestled with the smell of roaches. The woman handed over the key with a smile and left.

He dashed to the window, parted the curtain slightly and gazed outside. Nothing but a wall.

Lawrence paced the length and breadth of the hotel room, interrogating himself relentlessly, frustration coiling around his head like a restless serpent. He went to the loo. His bowels rumbled. He plopped on the toilet bowl and let loose a torrent of shit. Flushed the toilet, watching the eddy in the bowl accelerate then vanish. Flushed again and watched the water disappear. He did it again and again till the water ran out. He walked into the room, sat down on the edge of one of the hard twin beds with floral spreads. A folded, worn out towel and a chip of soap lay on one of the beds. Streaks of black lines and cracks infested the area below the water-bloated asbestos of the ceiling. The rest of the wall was a collage of chipped emulsion. He heard the sound of rats scratching under his bed.

He tried to think. Tried to calm down. Remembered the last time he went into hiding as after the riots. Recalled how Honourable Ekpeyoung solved the situation. How he greased palms and pressed buttons till he got the law enforcements agents on his side.

He knew he had to do something and he did not have much time. For a while he talked to himself, his lips moving in a soft incantation of half-formed thoughts. Tiredness conquered him. His body sagged forward.

*

In the side mirror, he saw the police vehicle slowly stop. He breathed deeply, relaxing his shoulder. He opened his glove compartment, picked up his pistol, and shoved it under his shirt. The gun would be his last resort in case anything went wrong. Not that he expected things to go wrong. He had made all the necessary contacts; spoken to the AIG and officers they had always dealt with from the Force CID in Lagos. The AIG assured him of sorting out the situation. He did not want the case to get to the Robbery and firearms Tribunal. The Tribunal was not a place to plead cases. It was a place where senior military officers sat on high platforms to read out offences and order executions. The case would not get to the Tribunal if the CID destroyed the evidences. For him walking the streets a free man became a crime in the light of his brothers' captivity. Yes, he now saw them as his brothers. It took him so long to realize that. It took their arrest to recognize what he had.

A policeman stepped out of the car. He leaned on an electric pole, let his eyes wander. An uncompleted building overrun with tall elephant grass. Lawrence still sat in the car, peering into the mirror, trying to determine if he came alone. While he waited, he reached out for the bag beside him, unzipped it and brought out a bale of notes. He ran his fingers through the bundle and put it back into the bag. He peered into the side mirror again. The officer was no longer leaning on the pole, but standing in front of his car, glancing at his watch.

Lawrence exhaled, grabbed the bag and climbed out of his vehicle. The street was dark except for the beam from the police vehicle. The police officer lifted his chin in greeting. Lawrence spoke his greeting. Before he handed the bag to him, he asked if things would go as planned. The police officer assured him.

*

Lawrence heard a knock. He peered through the keyhole before rushing to open the door for Cynthia. For a moment, she stood there staring at him, patched mouth, dishevelled hair. Her eyes were reddened and swollen and her clothes rough. She wore a pair of mismatched slippers. She flung herself at him, and erupted into a paroxysm of grief. He felt her quake on his chest as she sobbed. Lawrence knew what had happened but was not ready to believe it was true. He led Cynthia inside the room, made her sit on the bed and asked her to tell him what happened. A few seconds passed without Cynthia saying anything. She sat there with her hands tucked between her knees and her lips sagging, fettered in agonizing silence.

When she finally broke the silence, she told Lawrence in a tear-choked voice that the Robbery and Firearms Tribunal had condemned Mercenary and Kingsley to death. Then she said they had been executed earlier in the day. They had asked her to come for Mercenary's corpse. After that she crumbled on the ground with a shudder, her sobs breaking forth anew. Lawrence's head spun in a haze of confusion as he tried to make sense of the news. Didn't the Assistant Inspector General say he would order the withdrawal the case? When he saw Cynthia he expected her to break the news of their release, although he reckoned he would be the first to know if that had happened. Then the dreadful thought that the police might have betrayed him crossed his mind. His fear proved well founded after all. He now walked in circles, furious, rage building inside him.

His heat pumped faster and faster. He felt as though he carried insufficient amount of blood in his brain. He dashed to the window and flung the curtains apart. He tried to breath slowly, suck in air. He not only felt anger. He felt deep pain and a nagging sense of regret. Maybe he did not do enough. He remembered Serenity and how he lost her. He wondered why people who mattered to him always left him. He stared into space in a daze of despair, unable to shed a tear although tears swelled in his eyes. He walked to Cynthia and held her hand. Now tears rolled down his cheeks. They rolled down slowly as though they did not want to come.

He told her to stay till they could figure out what to do. Darkness rolled into the room. Lawrence switched on the light. The room was silent for a long time. It was a still, ominous silence. They let the silence drag. Lawrence shuffled his feet once. Cynthia let out a sneeze. Apart from that, there were no sounds. After a while, Cynthia yawned, rose from the floor and peeled off her skirt and blouse. She exposed her thighs. Her breasts bobbed within her bra. She lay down on the side of the bed. She curled up on the bed like a millipede. The electricity went off. She swallowed the fresh cry bubbling up to her lips. Lawrence joined him in bed to console her. His fingers found her in the dark. His fingers touched the places underneath her, the cups of her bra, and the knob of flesh under her. Her body responded. Long silence then little moans. He wanted to console her. A sense of guilt gripped him, but did not make him stop. Guilt carried no weight here. Guilt meant nothing now. They became entwined. She pressed herself against him and wound her limbs round him. He felt the warmth of her body. She kissed him. He felt her tongue glide into his mouth. Her mouth always tasted faintly of onions.

The Anini Gang

The car suddenly accelerated. With a sharp jerk of the wheel, it swerved and stopped in front of a uniformed police constable. He was picking his way along the street side with his rifle slung over his shoulders. Lawrence and three heavily armed men spilled out of the car. Three of them, Solomon, Bernard and John Bull worked for Lawrence during his days as the chairman of the Driver's Union of Sapele Park and there was also his lieutenant, Monday Osunbor, whom he met at a smoking joint three months ago.

Monday pumped bullets into his body with his machine gun before he could wield his rifle. The police officer went down, writhing on the floor. Lawrence went to the officer, picked up his rifle with one hand and finished him off with the other. He did much more than that. He fired shot upon shot till the officer became still, then continued firing. He felt blood rushed to his head as he fired. Anger welled up in him. It bloated his veins. His head ached with rage.

He ran out of bullets. He cursed under his breath. As if that was not enough, he handed his gun to Monday, moved back and with his two hands cocked the police officer's rifle.

He wanted this to continue. Wanted to blast him into obliteration.

The shots continued to ring. The officer's body jerked up with each shot fired. At first blood spurted in the air in a haze of gun smoke, and then bits of flesh flew here and there. His skull cracked open. He blasted his head to muck. White brain matter oozed out of the mass of red. A feeling of disgust gripped him. He would stop now. He had done enough.

While he shot, Solomon and Bernard formed a protective cover around Lawrence. The street was now deserted. Headscarves, rubber slippers littered the ground. A bleating goat ran into the maze of kiosks on the other side of the street.

Lawrence stopped shooting and shot a gob of spit on the police officer's corpse. He stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. They jumped back into the car and zoomed off. Lawrence wondered what it would be like to kill a police officer during a gun battle. He knew that time would come soon. He knew there would be many times like that.

*

Lawrence sat with Cynthia in the front row wondering if people recognized him. Cynthia clutched his palm and released it after peering around. She squeezed a handkerchief with the other hand. She had her hair pulled neatly into a bun and her face bright with talcum, stage ready.

The congregation was almost full and people were still coming in. Delicate coughs, murmurs and shuffling sounds floated in the air. Bodies poked and pressed. The last Sunday service of the month was usually a testimony service. The testimony service at Calvary Christian Ministry was a time when testifiers awed and terrified the congregation about claims of the terrible life they had lived or the terrible things that had happened to them before Jesus saved them. Sensational stories sprang from the rostrum during these monthly gatherings, women once betrothed to Satan and who had travelled to a magical location beneath the lagoon for intercourse. Men who made covenants with the devil for wealth and fame before it backfired. Ruthless armed robbers who perished, travelled to the corridors of hell and came back converted. The speaker's words always created grim pictures in the minds of the attendees. Grave silence was the result, but it mostly culminated in bursts of "Praaaaise da leevingiisoo". Sometimes the meetings ended with the attendees walking away subdued, and reflecting upon their lives. But no matter how a service ended people still came back for another with re-fuelled expectations. The testimony service had been cancelled to hold a remembrance service in honour of Mercenary. Lawrence did not know Mercenary or even Cynthia to be a religious person but Cynthia had prevailed upon him to propose it to the pastor of her church. Lawrence had gone to the pastor's office with an envelope filled with cash after which the event had been scheduled.

Lawrence heard a stirring in the back. He turned his head to see the pastor.

A short, big shouldered man, he wore a yellow suit with wide lapels. He moved to the front row. Lawrence rose to greet him. He pumped their hands.

"Sit down please, sit down," the pastor said, and broke into a smile.

The pastor took his position behind the pulpit and shouted, "Praised the Lord!" A hallelujah went up from the whole congregation.

"Today we are having a different kind of testimony service. We want to thank God for the life of our dear brother Friday Abgonifo. Let me say that this is not a service of sorrow," he began. "It is a service of joy. We are here to remember a good man..."

There was a murmur of assent from the congregation. Someone shouted Amen. Lawrence's lips twisted in a mocking smile. He knew the congregants were aware that Mercenary was executed for armed robbery. Maybe that didn't matter. Maybe that aspect of

his life had been obliterated in the minds of the people. Maybe only the good remained. Lawrence took solace in this thought.

The pastor threw his fist in the air as though to emphasis his claim that indeed it was a service of joy. He went on for about ten more minutes surveying the congregation as he spoke, allowing dramatic pauses.

When he was done, he called for the first testifier. He motioned for Cynthia to step forward, and there was a loud burst of applause. Cynthia flipped him a glance. Lawrence smiled to reassure her. She took the stage. Her voice cracked at the first words and she muttered apologies, embarrassed. She continued speaking, her voice trembling. She finished in five minutes and went back to her seat. The pastor sprung onto the podium, and called forth another testifier. The man came up and spoke about Mercenary in glowing terms. How he always welcomed people in his home. How he always provided a lot to eat and drink. How he loved children. How he gave alms to the poor every Friday before the economic downturn. He installed a bore hole in front of his house for the community to fetch water freely he said. Lawrence spotted some women extract their handkerchiefs from their handbags and begin to dab the corners of their eyes as he spoke.

When the man was done the pastor announced the time for offertory and the collection basket went round. Lawrence dipped his hands into his pocket and brought out a wad of cash for the basket. The church's choral group, mostly women in red berets began a song.

*

Monday 11th of August 1986, 3: 30pm & Friday 14th of August. 1986, 8:30 pm

They got into the bank with little resistance. Their intention was not to cause great commotion. They parked their car. They dashed to the gatehouse to restrain the security guards. Lawrence in the company of Monday and Johnbull led one of them through the entrance gate with glass doors. Solomon and Bernard stayed outside. When they had stampeded into the banking hall, Lawrence sprayed the air with bullets, shaking down bits of the ceiling on the marbled floor. Monday cocked his weapon and rushed towards the group of costumers standing in line. They threatened and aimed their guns everywhere and backed people into corners.

“Cooperate with us and we will cooperate with you,” Lawrence said.

Bernard and Monday began kicking down doors and dashing into rooms. They emerged with the manager, dragged him by his collar. The manager smirked as they pulled him into the banking hall. Lawrence stepped forward and pressed his gun against his cheeks. The touch of warm metal on his cheeks wiped the sneer off his face. Lawrence led him through one of the doors, walked down a corridor, made a turn and continued walking till they reached the vault. Monday tagged along with a jute bag slung over his shoulders. The manager produced a bunch of keys from his pocket and fingered through them nervously. Sweat now poured down his face.

“Wetin dey happen?” Lawrence asked him. He got no answer. He kept rummaging through the key, his hands quivering. Lawrence struck him across the face and he went down.

They left the wounded manager in front of the vault and returned to the hall. Lawrence felt a gnawing sense of dissatisfaction. The reward was not commensurate with the effort put into it. They would have to move somewhere else, maybe another bank, before the close of business. Lawrence signalled to his gang members that it was time to leave, but not before stripping both customers and staff of their personal belongings.

They stomped out of the building to join Solomon and Bernard. A police van with two police officers invaded the scene.

Lawrence ducked on the ground behind a pillar and fired two shots in the direction of the police van. He took cover, trying to think about his next action. The police officers shot back at him. Multiple shots rang out from his men. The police officers fired back.

He closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, waiting for them to exhaust their round. He reared up, aimed and fired. A scream pierced the air. His men fired more shots. The police van was now riddled with bullets. Waves of smoke rose from its chassis. The empty cartridge of his gun slipped out. He produced another one from his pocket and rammed it into the handle.

His men stopped firing but this time around the policemen responded with silence. He heard the sound of running footsteps. He sprang after them. His men did the same. One of the policemen ran swiftly ahead. The other one could not keep up with his colleagues. He limped and howled in pain. With one hand grabbed his bleeding leg. His blood trailed behind him in a long thin line. Monday discharged a barrage of bullets from his submachine gun. The bleeding officer went down. The other vanished into a residential compound. Monday fired again, this time shooting into the compound. Lawrence suddenly realized that there might be someone in that house so he motioned for his men to stop shooting. They crouched behind the fence. They waited for several moments. Bernard slipped quietly into the

compound. Seconds later he shouted at them to come in. Bernard stood in the entrance of the door with a sorrowful face. The police officer lay dead in the living room of the house. Supine. Eyes popped out. Teeth barred.

Two children lay sprawled beside him, their limbs tangled, their bodies bathed in blood.

*

An uneven burst of fire rent the air. The bullets seemed to come from all directions but he kept racing. The sun was blazing down. He tried to focus amid the blare of police sirens, the roar of revving engines, and the squealing breaks. A barrage of gunshot from the police had sent his men running in different directions after an office raid. He had been left with no choice but to flee the scene of the robbery. A bullet blew a hole in his windscreen. He swerved to the right, pressed hard on the pedal. The police van continued to follow him.

He heard a loud hiss then a flapping sound. He drove on with the punctured tyres. He sped faster. His tyre continued to flap. He smelt burning rubber. Heard the screeching of metal against asphalt. Signs. Pedestrians. Buildings. A motor park not too far from the bustling marketplace. They all flew past him.

He heard another round of shots. Felt a pinch on his right shoulders. The bullet crashed through the windscreen. A jolt of pain seared through his shoulder. A thought flitted through his mind. After driving for a few minutes, he skidded to a halt and sprang out of the car. He dashed into the market area. A sea of heads surged back and forth. Traders sold heaps of grain and piles of fresh vegetables. Men called attention to their goods spread on tattered clothes. He ran without looking back. He charged swiftly through clusters of people kicking up dust. Bumped into protruding objects but he kept running. Felt pressure build in his chest but he would not stop. The sound of firing stopped but he kept running. The throng had surged in all directions around him, he knew they would stop shooting.

They would not want to cause a bloodbath in a market. He ran till he could no longer control the swelling in his chest then slowed down. His vision became blurred. He felt drained. He stopped and planted his hands on his waist. Took quick breaths with his mouth. Felt pain when the adrenalin began to wear off. Realized that blood had stained his shirt. His blood. He checked the wound on his shoulders. The bullet only grazed his flesh but it stung like crazy. He wished bullets could not pierce into him. Wished guns had no power over him. Wished he did not have to run from these murderous police officers. He wondered what had

become of his men. He did not think more of it. He would search for his men later. Right now, he had to find a way to stay alive.

Again he pressed past bodies. A granular voice screamed at him to get out of the way. He stepped aside for a man pushing a wheelbarrow. His muscles ripped under his shirt. His face shone with sweat. Lawrence saw that he had no legs. Everything from his waist down was gone. It was as though his body had been divided into two, his limbs forcefully ripped off. A network of dangling muscles and flesh bordered the edge of his torso. His upper body glided in the air as he pushed the wheelbarrow forward. His dismembered limbs sat in the wheelbarrow. They moved in fits and starts in the barrow like the severed tail of a serpent. The toes wriggled. Lawrence reeled back in shock. He stumbled, fell. A forest of legs swept around. Slippers wobbled in toes. He sprang up and looked around. The wheelbarrow man had vanished. People with shopping bags drifted to and fro, buyers haggled with market women under awnings. Traders called attention to their goods while flies buzzed noisily around them.

The buzzing of the flies was loud in his ears. So loud, he made swatting movements close to his ears. A man drifted by, walking on his head. His chin covered in sparse grey goatee pointed up, his spindly legs sticking up in the air. Was this one of his strange trances? He tried to calm the rapid beating of his heart. Phlegm clogged his throat. The confusion and the fear were also palpable. He stumbled in fright and crashed into a pile of oranges arranged in a tray. He gathered himself while muttering an apology. No, they were not oranges for they possessed gelatinous constituency. The balls rolled and bounced on the dusty ground. They resembled oversized eyeballs. One of the balls rolled close to him. It had a dark pupil-like globe. Tiny branches of blood vessels ran through the white part of the jelly ball. The dark globe rotated within the ball as though eyeing him. Almost immediately three market women emerged out the nowhere. They closed in on him, berating him for toppling their tray of oversized eyeballs. They said they would make him pay dearly for his actions. Even though they were women, they spoke with masculine voices. They sounded like the men in his visions. Lawrence spun around and took off blindly. This time around, his legs were heavy and slow. His feet felt like it turned into lead. He kept on moving. He summoned all his strength. Sweat oozing from every pore of his skin. He knew they were chasing him. He knew they would not stop. He looked back. For an instant, hardly an instant, more like a flash, the women melted into a herd of dark dusts. The cloud of dark dust rolled after him, threatening to eat up his soul. He knew the cloud was after his soul.

He saw someone beckoning at him from a distance. A female figure stood beside a door as though waiting to admit him. Thick, green vines entwined the doorframe. He ran towards it. His instinct told him to enter. The dark clouds still chased him. He got closer to the door and saw the figure was the one-eyed girl! She winked at him with her good eye and dashed off. Seconds later, he followed her. The door led him down a passageway then he burst out in a footpath.

He heard the throb of car engines, which became louder as he advanced on weakened legs. Vehicle's headlights swept along the road. He had reached a familiar landscape.

*

He rushed home to tend to his wounds and shed his filthy blood-soaked clothes. Got to the room, peeled off his shirt in front of the mirror and inspected the wound on his shoulder. Jumped into the bathroom and worked hard at his skin with a sponge but avoided his shoulders. He soaped himself down body and hair. Went back to the room and towelled himself. Brought out a bottle of mentholated spirits from the drawer. Opened the bottle, soaked a piece of cloth with the liquid. Held his breath, tightened his jaw and pressed the cloth on his shoulders. Groaned and slumped on the bed. His vision soon became clouded and he drifted off to sleep.

In his dreams, she came to him. She spat on her palms and rubbed his shoulder gently with the spittle. He felt warmth on his skin.

When he woke up, he checked where the wound was and saw nothing. His skin was as fresh as it was before the gunshot. He went straight to the mirror, removed his shirt and gave it a closer look. On thorough inspection, he became convinced that something of a miracle had happened. He went through the day thinking about the girl and what had happened to him. He had a sense that she was watching him, he had always felt it. He felt her presence through his fingertips.

She came to him in an abandoned building where he was sitting with his men celebrating their narrow escape from the police. She stood in the gap between two buildings, chewing the hem of her clothes.

None of them had been caught. Each told his story of escape while smoking wee wee and guzzling beer. Monday and Solomon crawled in the gutter for hours before disappearing into a maze of houses.

Bernard said his foot caught on something while the police gave chase because they had run out of ammunition. He stumbled, but rose up and kept running. He dashed into a house, jumped through the window and scaled its fence into the other compound. John Bull hid in an empty kiosk, and waited till the police gave up the search. Lawrence pitched his tale of the car case and mingling with people in the market to avoid being shot. He quickly unbuttoned his shirt to reveal the scratch on his shoulders. He said the bastards fired guns like women.

He did not talk about his strange encounters. Did not talk about the girl who saved him from the police and the cloud women. They descended into peals of raucous laughter each time one of them told his story. It was shortly after Lawrence told his story that the one-eyed girl showed up.

He waved her to the table but she jerked up her shoulders like a petulant child. She then slithered into the one of the side streets opposite the abandoned building. Lawrence left his seat and left them without saying where he was going. He moved hurriedly, spotting her before she turned a corner. He gave chase. She ran off. He heard her giggle. He burst into laughter. He could not help himself. There seemed to be something about her childishness that drew him. It made me feel alive. He felt free. It reminded him of his season of innocence. His stomach ached as he laughed. He wished the sensation would last. Wished he could capture the feeling of the moment, funnel it into a bottle and preserve it for times to come.

Dusk was falling. The city became dotted with light from hurricane lamps. Night traders flooded the streets. The one-eyed girl vanished from view. He looked around for her. His movements suddenly grew panicky. He heard her shriek behind him. He jumped back in fright. Laughter poured out of him again. They sat on smooth stones. Their fingers touched. He moved close to her. He brushed a finger over her hands, the dark veins that snaked along the back of her hands. He felt the edges of her long nails. He held her face caged in his hands. He was not scared to touch her. He was not terrified by her bad eye. He saw no ugliness, only beauty. He pressed his face to hers. He felt her breath on his face. He kissed her. He tasted her lips. Waves of explosive pleasure rushed over him. He sucked her tongue. He kissed her to suck her breath inside him. Her lips, the breath in her mouth ravished him. It was breath, sour and warm, but a breath of new beginnings.

*

She said she would show him the future. She told him to climb onto her back and stifled a chuckle. She told him to ride upon her shoulders. She crouched. He bent his knees to crouch a little, and leaned on her. He still had his feet planted in the ground for the first few moments. He was careful not to put the weight of his whole body on her. He feared her legs might give way. He wrapped his arms around her. Felt his crotch press against the curve of her buttocks. Ripples ran down his nether regions. He giggled into her ears. She raised her hands in the air as though summoning the wind. Then suddenly she took off. He clutched her body tightly, his legs dangling. She hovered above the ground then glided through the air.

Gusts of wind buffeted his skin. His eyes bled tears. His breath emitted from his mouth in quick successions as he tried to push down the panic. She laughed. He closed his eyes. Surrendered his body to her. Allowed himself to be borne by her. He opened his eyes. House, streets and people grew smaller. The world grew smaller till it was just a speck of dust and the future a distance he could measure with his palm of his hands.

*

Lawrence drove a stolen Peugeot 505 along Edebiri road with his men in the back. He had one hand draped over the steering wheel. He hid the other hand away from view in case he had to pull out his gun. Seconds later, he ran into a police checkpoint at a junction. A check point had never been mounted in that junction before so he didn't expect to meet them there. Now they were just a few meters away from him. It was too late to shove the car into reverse gear. They all had guns in the car. A stolen vehicle for that matter. Within seconds, Lawrence weighed several ideas in his head. He knew he had to make a move. He also knew that if he made a wrong move they would all be dead.

Three armed policemen closed in within spitting distance of the car. Two of them inspected the car with their flashlights, while one, who appeared to be their leader, approached Lawrence, leaning his head towards the window. This policeman shone the beam of his flashlight directly on Lawrence's face.

"Oga, where you dey go? Where you they come from?" he asked, gazing at him intently with sharp, red eyes like those of a bird of prey. Lawrence faked a smile. Going to the club, he said. He felt his finger tingling. Sweat beaded on the tip of his nose. He clasped his pistol tightly. The police officer did not buy it.

"All of you come down for stop and search," the police officer said.

Lawrence drew out his gun but the police officer was swift. He aimed at the driver's seat and opened fire.

Lawrence's men returned the shots with a burst of machine guns from the passenger's seat. Two officers thumped dead on the asphalt. The other jumped into the gutter and began crawling away. Through blurry eyes Lawrence saw Monday dash after the officer. He finished him off in the gutter.

Lawrence felt jolts of pain pass through his body. His heart trembled as though a person had struck a gong in his chest. He fought hard for breath. One thought flashed through his mind. He wondered if he felt drained because he had been shot. He looked at himself. His shirt turned crimson right before his eyes. A certain fear of death suddenly came upon him, a fear that death was close by, not some distant, preventable reality. He saw faces looking down at him. He heard voices as though from faraway. Stretched out a hand like a man falling into a pit, hoping to grasp onto something. The faces hovering above him dissolved and only one remained. That one face smiled at him. She clasped his palm and stroked it gently. She stroked and stroked until he no longer felt pain. A shiver of pleasure ran through his spine. He smiled. She vanished. He found himself on the ground surrounded by his men with shock on their faces. Checked his chest for gunshot wounds. Found nothing.

From that day on Lawrence Anini's gang member looked upon him with curiosity. Their curiosity soon transformed into fear and reverence.

*

Lawrence smoked as he watched people deposit cash into the trunk one of the two stolen vehicles they came with. He wore a police uniform stripped off the corpse of an officer during a raid. The uniform he complemented with a pair of black leather shoes gleaming with polish.

The manager, a man dressed in a suit, dragged a sack of cash out of the building and dropped it in the trunk. His face gleamed with fear and perspiration. His tie hung loose on his neck and the hem of his shirt hung out. Others soon came out of the bank with their money and their valuables. They went back in after they had thrown what they had into the boot. Some came quaking with fear or sobbing, others with sombre countenances. They generally averted their faces from the carnage in the premises and indeed corpses littered the gravelled premises of the bank. A guard lay with his face down close to the gate. Another had his back

against the building with protruding eyeballs and legs splayed apart. His blood splattered all over the wall. The smoke of the gunfire still hung in the air.

The last person dropped his belonging and Lawrence stubbed out his smoke. He motioned for his men to come with him as he walked to the car stashed with money. The gravel crunched loudly under his feet.

He slammed the bonnet shut and hopped into the driver's seat. His gang filled the other vehicle. He switched on the ignition and led the way. As he drove he played what happened over and over again in his head. He then wondered why the police didn't show up despite spending several minutes at the bank. This thought was followed by the notion that it might be because they did not linger long enough. That thought stuck to his head. After five minutes of driving Lawrence could not bring himself to continue. He applied the brakes, turned into a dirt road and came out facing the opposite direction. He waved to his men to follow his lead and zoomed back to the bank.

He stepped out of the car and took a leisurely walk around. Fresh screams broke out; people scampered back into their hiding places. He strolled into a beer joint opposite the bank and looked around.

The low-ceilinged room with wooden benches, cooking smoke from the backyard hung thick in the air. Patrons lay prostrate on the ground or hid under the benches. A brown-aproned woman peeked through the iron bars of the serving desk with terrified eyes. He sat on a bench, peeled off his shoes and stretched his legs. He called for a waiter in a brazen voice and the aproned woman materialized in a matter of seconds. She stood, facing him, wringing her fingers nervously. He ordered a bottle of cold beer. She vanished and came back without wasting time. Trembling, she reverently served him a glass of beer in a tray.

*

Newswatch

Who is this Anini?

The crimes and exploits of Anini are seemingly endless. While the police file on him is expectedly fat, information on who he really is remains scanty, if not downright hazy. According to the police, their most wanted man is known as Lawrence Nomanyagbon A.K.A the Law. Though Anini from the underground had said that his pet nickname is "Ovbiudu" (meaning the brave or the Lion hearted) the police and the general public have it as Ovbigo .

Anini, The Law, 26 by police records hailed from Orogho, a village in Orhiomwon Local Government area. He is therefore ethnically of the Edo stock. A driver by profession, he has no fixed address. Though in one of his letters to New Nigeria Bank, he gave his address with a diabolical sense of humour as No 1000. 000, Anywhere, within the City, Benin, Bendel State.

The police sketch of Anini indicates that he is 1.7 meters (5 feet 6 inches) tall. He is said to have a visible scar on the lower part of his left eyelid and cheek. He is also painted as having a soft heart for obituary dances which he frequents. His other hobbies are girls and fights, the latter being an affair he indulges in at any gathering. Besides this sketch the police are dry on hard information on the crime chieftain's life, his background, when he first came to crime and whether he has a prison record. Even Asiabor, the state command public relations officer admitted to *Newswatch* that he did not know what he looked like "I think he is light in complexion and of average height and build".

*

Again he waited eagerly for the police to invade the scene with their sirens and blazing gun.

He dragged a man out of a Mercedes stuck in traffic while his men fired shots. The traffic wardens, upon seeing him, fled. One ran as his beret flew off his head. The other took off, leaving his shoes behind. Motorists abandoned their vehicles and took to their heels. In the end they had more than one car available to them.

Lawrence was glad he had regained his ability to make the public quake in terror and force them into submission. In a way, it was like his days as the chairman of the driver's union only on a much larger scale. There was also fear that lurking beneath his skin in the past. The fear beneath his bravado, and braggadocio. That fear bubbled to the surface in the face of real danger. This fear melted away when she came into his life. A strange sense of calmness washed over him anytime he remembered she was in his life. He saw things through her eyes.

He once told his men that he could not be killed or captured even if the whole police force ganged up against him. The looks on their faces showed that they did not believe him. Then they saw how he knew things impossible for anyone to know, and how he faced bullets without fear. They marvelled at his audacity. He observed as their reverence for him grew.

Lawrence drove the Mercedes down the road and pulled over close to a car-wash. The owner of the cash-wash came out of hiding holding out a wad of cash. Lawrence told him to keep his money. He just wanted his cash washed while he waited for the police.

*

Lawrence sat on roof his car parked in front of an abandoned four-storey building where his gang gathered to smoke wee wee. He bobbed his head to music as he waited for his gang members. The stereo was turned to full blast so he didn't hear when the first shot rang. The next shot crashed through the side window. Lawrence rolled off his car and crawled into the building. The shots continued to ring out. Sporadic sirens rent the air. Lawrence dashed in and out of the empty rooms of the abandoned building searching for a way of escape. The fence was too high. He climbed swiftly up the dusty concrete stairs. He crashed through one of the doors and locked himself in. He looked out through the window. Two policemen stood behind the walls with their guns raised. Frantic footsteps echoed from the first floor.

“Open the door! I say open the door!” a scream boomed from behind then door. The first blow hit the door. He did not wait for next blow. He clambered onto the ledge of the window, mustered all his strength and thrust himself forward. For a moment he braced himself for the great plunge, the sound of fractured limbs with pain deadened by adrenaline. He did not fall or rather he was not sure if he was falling. Air slid into his lungs. The air swirled from her. It swirled from her face. The air engulfed him, drew him close until he glided down into her embrace.

No 1,000,000,
Anywhere street,
Within the city,
Benin, Bendel State

The Manager,
The New Nigerian Bank,
Benin City,
Bendel State

September 11

Dear Mr Manager,

My names are Lawrence NomanyagbonAnini.aka Lion hearted aka the Law. How is the bank job?
If good praises be to our God. Hallelujah!

I know you know who I am. I know you too. I have been tracing you in the past two months. I know your house. I know your wife. I know your children. You are a good man and I know you will listen to my command.

I am writing this letter to tell you to set aside 10 000 naira for me and my boys for our enjoyment. I will branch your office when I am doing operation to collect my money. Please note that you must also add a bottle of whiskey to our money. We are used to celebrating when we finish a successful operation. Thank you for your maximum cooperation. I pray nothing will make us fight. Thank you and may God bless every one of us.

Yours faithfully
Lawrence Anini

Note: Copy this letter to The Nigerian Observer Newspaper. The Commissioner of Police, The Police Command Ugbowo Unit, The Police command Ikpoba Hill Unit, The police command Sakponba Unit

*

No 1,000,000,
Anywhere street,
Within the city,
Benin, Bendel State

The Manager,
The New Nigerian Bank,
Benin City,
BendelState.

September 20

Dear Mr Manager,

I am writing this letter to let you know I am no longer interested in your 10,000 naira as I earlier wrote you. I am doing this to respect his royal highness the OBA of Benin, following his appeal on radio.

I heard that you are going up and down radio and television shouting my name, saying I should not come, telling people to beg me not to do my job. I have heard. I do not want to offend a traditional ruler. As you know, we respect traditional rulers in Bini. I do not want the gods of the land to be angry at me for disrespecting the Oba. Nevertheless, I am not forgot my bottles of whiskey. I will come and take that at my own free time. Thank you for your maximum cooperation. May God bless every one of us. Amen

Copy The Nigerian Observer Newspaper. The Commissioner of Police, The Police Command Ugbowo Unit, The Police command Ikpoba Hill Unit, The police command Sakponba Unit

*

His Kalashnikov in his arms, Lawrence stomped ahead of his men towards Abudu police station. He peered here and there, blinking in the sun. Sweat pooled under his shirt. His soaked shirt clung to his skin. He felt phlegm gather in the roof of his mouth and his patched gullet reach out for moisture. There had been no let-up in the heat for several hours. He ached for a cold bottle of beer but “business before pleasure”. He would be done with this as quickly as possible. Then he would go to a pepper soup bar. Only that thirst and exhaustion made him irascible. He cocked his gun.

A police officer emerged from the front door, a tall person, straight as a pole, pencil moustache. His beret sat on his head in a slanting position. The sun blazed on his forehead, shiny with perspiration. He squeezed a half-finished loaf of bread in his hands and chewed. His jaw moved noisily and his moustache twirled.

The police officer saw them, and his eyes widened. He stopped chewing. His mouth fell open, revealing the half-chewed bread. Lawrence aimed his gun.

He fired a shot. The officer struck the ground. He kept firing. He loaded a new cartridge. His men discharged their rounds. They sprayed the building, windows, and door. The bullets bounced off iron rods, crashed through the window, and gnawed into the plastered walls. Shards of glass crashed on the ground. Grey dusts flaked off.

A bullet pierced through the officer’s gullet. Blood bubbled forth from the wound like a punctured pipe. He took spasmodic gulps as he choked on his own blood. His breath rasped in and out. Bits of masticated bread mingled with saliva frothed from the corners of his mouth. A stream of blood descended his cheeks.

His outstretched right hand still clutched the piece of bread. But not for long. He released his grip the moment he stopped moving. When they saw that, no one returned fire from the building. Lawrence waved for them to stop. Smoke and dust filled the space. Gun smoke soaked the atmosphere.

Lawrence waited for the grey clouds to settle then stepped forward. For a few moments, he stared down at the body. His breath was hard and wheezing as he pushed down the rage building within him. Another rat dead. He would continue to eliminate them. One by one until the blood of his friends had been atoned for. For each of his executed friends he would dispatch fifty police officers into the afterlife.

Lawrence issued a command and his men snapped into action. Solomon went to the dead officer and ransacked his body for his wristwatch and wallet. He undressed him with utmost swiftness and precision. First, he unbuttoned his shirt, removed it and folded it neatly

beside him. He then fished out a knife from the back of his pocket and ripped off the dead officer's singlet. He unbuckled the man's belt, pulled out his trousers and underpants.

He was well hung.

Lawrence peeled his eyes away from the corpse and charged into the station. Their voices echoed as they spoke in the almost empty police station. Roof caving open, and sockets dangling out of paint peeled walls, a wide counter with chipped plywood was the only major furniture in the reception area. A transistor radio atop it played static at a low volume. Caps and batons hung on the wall.

His men stomped around, kicking down doors and searching while Lawrence looked behind the counter. He checked the rooms for something to quench his scorching thirst. He found nothing. He muttered a curse. The feeling of rage boiled within him again. No bloody thing to drink!

They found seven rifles with several rounds of live ammunition in the storeroom. Monday dashed out and returned with a gallon of fuel. He began to douse the counter and the floor with its contents.

Lawrence turned to his heels and went out of the building. He stopped when the wind carried her voice to him. Her whispers went deep into his ears. Her voice tried to say so many things at once or rather one thing in so many ways. The whispers first taunted him but then the whispers became loud and turned into a barrage of commands. His head became full of her words. He knew what she wanted him to do.

His moved his gaze to the naked corpse of the police officer. A pool of blood had formed under his head. His gigantic cock drooped across his left thigh. Lawrence felt his chest tighten. He flashed a knife out of his pocket. The sun's rays flashed off the edges of the knife. He hunkered next to the corpse.

With the deftness of a surgeon using a scalpel, he made an incision on the crotch. Drove the blade deeper into the man's flesh. He stopped. He wiped off the sweat with his forearms and squinted at the sun. He saw his men trying hard to hide revulsion behind smiles. He severed the last bit, lifted the bloodied cock with the tip of his fingers. Dense dark smoke drifted from the station. Flames engulfed the building. Crackling sounds bursts forth. Lawrence stepped close to the fire, tossed the cock into it. He cleared his throat and aimed a blob of phlegm at the castrated corpse. He caught sight of her while he walked back to his car. She gave her a wink. He smiled and jumped into the car.

*

Police want Anini desperately

As the Bendel State police command intensifies effort to arrest crime, especially armed robbery, in the state, it has declared "Wanted" Mr Lawrence Nomanyagbon Anini, a notorious armed robbery suspect. Mr Anini, alias Ovbigo or the law, is alleged to have masterminded a number of armed robberies, assassinations and armed attacks on policemen in the state.

Last month, two policemen, one of them of the mobile police squad, were shot dead by armed bandits at a Benin checkpoint while another policeman was gunned down by armed gangsters in a robbery operation at a bank in Sabongida-ora. A statement from the police command's spokesman, assistant superintendent Dayo Adeleke described the 26-year-old Mr Anini is a man of Bini extraction. He has no fixed address and he is a driver by profession.

*

The station manager of a petrol station howled in pain. He clutched his right thigh as Lawrence and his gang carted away a briefcase full of cash. Lawrence fired shots in the air. He shouted himself hoarse. Today, he did not feel anger or the desire for revenge. Happiness bubbled within him. It rose from the depth of his being and frothed over. His men were infected as well. They burst into cheers. They grabbed sticks from the ground and smashed cars parked by the roadside. They screamed. The wind swirled debris into the air.

Lawrence strode towards his convoy of vehicles, ripping the air with bullets, and yelling. He slung his rifle over his shoulders and got into the car. Monday handled the wheels. The vehicles gathered speed. Tyres screeched and rubber burned. The noise of firing and hoots continued. The convoy snaked through huddled streets with crumbling buildings near the post office. They flew past bungalows smothered by brown dust blowing off the road. The wind grew stronger. Rooftops flapped.

Lawrence stuck his head through the sunroof of the car. The streets were empty. People hidden from plain sight. A sudden desire to spread his joy and good fortune gripped him.

He pulled the briefcase out of the car, opened it to retrieve a wad of cash. He threw the wad into the air. The wad of naira broke up in mid-air. Soft wind carried the notes, whirled them around. A note became two. Two notes became much more. The notes swirled round and round multiplying. Cash exploded in the air and rained on the side of the road. His

eyes popped open. He dipped his hand into his briefcase and threw another wad. The wad dispersed in the air, swirled in the wind and again multiplied. Money moneymoney. A group of men sprang out of their hiding places and began a mad scramble for the free cash. Shock transformed into wonder. Laughter erupted from his throat. He grabbed another handful and flung it out. More people emerged from their refuges, women, little children, adolescents. Swirling clouds of dust rose from the ground. Wads of cash swirled in the air. Littered the ground. The road was green. The convoy moved through the market. He threw more cash in the air. Money moneymoney. A money road. A money trail. Now people hailed him and threw their fists up. He laughed. His belly quivered with pleasure. More people crowded the vehicles, more struggles, more cheers. He laughed harder, basking in the euphoria.

*

He could not wait to share his joy with her. He held her and twirled her around. She shrieked, her eye slanting upward. He sniffed her around the neck. She giggled. They locked hands, laughed, and ran. They breezed through tall grasses blown by the wind. She pranced as they ran, pin-wheeling her arms. He pranced too. She leapt. He leapt. She jumped into the void and did not come back down. He jumped too. He feared he would drop from the sky but he did not. The wind bore him. He rode upon the wind. He rode higher and higher. He felt the wind wrap its fingers around his body, and then he felt as though the wind was twisting through his chest. She saw tears spill out of her eyes, even the bad one. He wiped them away with the edge of his shirt. She laughed. He had never seen anyone laugh like her. With her, he felt inexplicably safe, at peace. Without warning tears flooded his eyes, laughter erupted again from his belly.

*

Lawrence rented all the rooms at Mount Pleasant Hotel and arranged for the door leading to the corridor to be boarded up. He gave the bearded woman enough cash to relinquish control of the place for a year. He got bricklayers to carve out another entrance in the backyard that only gang members and their women could enter. The hotel became the memory and clearing house of the gang. There, information on targets was discussed and plans for operations mapped out. He transformed one of the rooms into his inner sanctum. He

moved a big table in upon which he piled stacks of old newspapers. Every morning Monday Osunbor would read what the papers said about him aloud. He asked for Monday to read only the headlines.

He crossed his legs on the table and took a pinch of chewing tobacco from a box while he listened.

There was headline *ANINI SAGA: POLICE STILL UP TO TASK*, which made him laugh and clutch his stomach. One from the *Nigerian Observer* read: *TRADITIONAL RULERS TO COMPLIMENT GOVERNMENT'S EFFORT TO CATCH ANINI*. Another bore the headlines *SHAKE UP IN BENDEL POLICE COMMAND*.

There was the official release of a sketch of his face on the front page of *Newswatch* with the headline, *ANINI'S WAR ON THE POLICE* and the rider *THE KING OF MAYHEM*.

He held the newspaper with tobacco stained hands and gazed at the drawing. He gazed at it for a long time as though trying to decide whether it was him or not. He then broke into dry laughter. After he stopped laughing, a frown came upon his face.

"These people day craze I swear!" spewed out expletives. He clenched his face in rage. He worked himself into anger and rapped his knuckles on the cracked walls of the hotel. There was the *Daily Times* headline *10 000 REWARD FOR ANINI'S CAPTURE*.

Dear Mr Editor,

This is for the general public. I heard that the police has declared 10 000 naira on my head. This is an insult on my person and my position. That is why I hereby promise to give 30 000 naira to that person that will arrest me or hand me over to the police.

Yours faithfully
Lawrence Anini

Two weeks after that, an article was published that a new commissioner of police delegated by the president had arrived. The Military Administrator announced an imminent dusk to dawn curfew.

That evening, Lawrence announced his intention to attack the new police commissioner and silence descended in the room. He did not get the usual assent. His men cast glances at him, confusion written on their faces. They must think he had gone completely mad but they were already at war with the police. Why should they hold back now? His men usually did what he told them to do without asking questions, proceeding like sheep with the plans laid out for them. This plan seemed too extreme even for them.

The next day, Lawrence furnished his men with information about the commissioner's movements. He would attend the Independence Day's parade after which he would go out for drinks at the officer's mess with his friends.

They complied with the instructions even though reticence showed on their faces.

On Independence Day, they drove through Ring Road and intercepted the commissioner and his convoy on their way back from the officer's mess. Lawrence and his men unleashed a torrent of bullets upon the cars.

*

Mount Pleasant Hotel

Lawrence hunched over a chipped enamel bowl filled with Jollof rice and two chicken drumsticks when the news floated out from a little radio set that the commissioner had survived the attack. The commissioner sat between two men when the volley of bullets hit the car. The men died instantly and the closest bullet shattered the cartilage of the commissioner's nose.

He stopped eating, heaved a sigh and walked to the radio. He turned the knob and the sound stopped. He went to the window. He stared at the wall outside for several moments. He flinched from his thoughts. He returned to his food and emptied the bowl into a polythene bag on his table. He walked out of the building. He walked past the clothing stores and shops selling women's things. He stopped by the blind beggar down the road from the hotel. He was a small, wiry dark man with rotten dentition.

"Good evening," Lawrence said as he approached the beggar. The beggar did not respond.

Lawrence sat by him on the filthy pavement and brought out the chicken from a plastic bag. He was so close to the beggar he could smell him. He wrinkled his nose.

The beggar turned his face in Lawrence's direction. Lawrence noticed the white of his eyes, egg white. His matted eyelashes flickered.

Lawrence shoved one of the drumsticks close to him. The beggar stretched out both hands. He then flashed an enormous smile, revealing his decayed teeth. Lawrence watched as the beggar shredded the drumstick with his teeth, tearing gristle from bone until there were only naked sticks in his hands and grease shining on his lower lip. He then leaned over and coughed chunky phlegm into the dirt. He continued eating, his mouth smacking, his upper lip beaded with sweat. He did not say anything to Lawrence. Lawrence did not need him to say anything.

From where Lawrence sat, he could see the potholed streets, the bungalows with corrugated iron sheets, roadside vendors, buses chugging along. A vehicle with tinted windows passed. He wondered who owned it.

*

No 1,000,000,
Anywhere street,
Within the city,
Benin, Bendel State
The Editor in Chief,
The Nigerian Observer

Dear Mr Editor,

I am Lawrence Anini alias The Robin Hood of Africa alias the Unbeatable alias The Robber's robber. I have a message for our president.

Tell our President, we like him but we are not happy here in Bendel. The payment for everything is too much. That is why I now divide any money I get to the people. Ask them.

For peace to return to the police in Bendel President Babangida must

(1) Put a stop to the persecution of innocent armed robbers;

(2) Put a stop to police collusion with NURTW (Nigerian Union of Road Transport Workers) and Ogboni cult members.

(3) Non-harassment by the police of market women returning from village market.

(4) Abolition of the collection of 50k – N5 (by Highway Patron).

(5) Equal treatment for everybody; and fair treatment for all legitimate drivers by the police.

*

The Nigerian Observer

Anini's mystical powers not from Usen- Elawure

The Elawure of Usen in Ovia Local government Area of Bendel State has debunked a publication in the 27th edition of *The Week* magazine that Lawrence Anini got his mystical power from charms acquired in Usen.

Ufeuirhi II, who was addressing some 200 people on the occasion of the Usasu Yam Festival, denied any link with Anini.

According to the magazine report, Anini allegedly killed the woman who prepared charms for him and later gave her children 6000 naira for her funeral, the Elawure stated, describing the report as incorrect. The Elawure urged journalists to endeavour to cross check information before publishing.

"I am prepared to avail them of the facts relating to happenings in Usen, Ufeuihi II further said.

He advised his subjects not to indulge in acts which the culture and tradition of Usen forbid, adding that such acts are detrimental to society.

He urged Nigerians to uphold their culture and tradition but not to tolerate societal ills, such as the crime now prevalent in the society.

The Elawure said his people would on occasion perform rites to bring peace to the Usen community and all their neighbours.

He seized the opportunity to draw the state government's attention to the deteriorating condition of Usen-Okha road.

*

Monday pointed their attention to the heap of eggs converged at the feet of the statue of Emotan in the city centre. Brown eggs. White eggs. Painted eggs. They laughed. They said nothing. They drove past the statue that day without thinking anything of it.

At a bar that evening, Lawrence and his men talked loudly around a table in the company of some women. The table was crammed with tumblers, ashtrays and stuffed handbags. Lawrence's pistol lay on the table. His men had their rifles on their laps. The other people shifted in their seats, took unusual gulps of liquor and feigned smiles. Some customers as soon as they arrived. They walked out carefully. Lawrence caught two women eyeing him with the corners of their eyes. He smiled and sipped his beer. He slipped his hands into his shirt pocket and brought out a packet of cigarette. He stuck a stick into his mouth. Before he lit his cigarette, he asked everyone at the table about the eggs he has seen at the foot of the Emotan statue. Laughter rippled through the table. John Bull said poultry farmers had run out of eggs. They laughed again. Solomon explained that the Oba of Benin had issued a

proclamation that each man and woman should make a sacrifice of one egg each to end the reign of Anini and his men. They laughed harder. Attention heaped on them. Lawrence could see fear in people's eyes.

"I hear say market women went to complain to him with ordinary breasts!" Monday chipped in, his eyes watery. He licked the beer foam around his chin, used his palm to wipe it.

"Let them summon all the gods of the land. You are greater than them, Ovbigo! You are too hot to handle!" Bernard said in a hoarse, wispy voice. Smoke rolled out of his mouth.

Lawrence smiled. He said nothing. He thought for a long while, smoking. People trickled out of the bar. Servers gathered empty bottles and wiped unoccupied tables. Soon only Anini and his men remained. Lawrence asked for one more round of beer. They finally shuffled out of the bar. His men staggered to the cars each with a companion. Lawrence went home clasped between two of the women.

He rose from his bed the next morning, wriggled out of the naked bodies that pressed on him and walked barefoot to the toilet. He rinsed his mouth from the tap and washed his face. Refreshed, he began to plan to convince his gang to launch an attack the Oba of Benin.

*

This operation brought people out of their hiding places. Fear lost its hold or rather became submerged by something greater, something of the utmost urgency. Incredulity. People spilled out from the street sides and shops, hands thrown back under their heads, mouths hanging open.

Anini's men surrounded the Oba's Mercedes Benz 200 with their rifles slack in their hands. Lawrence dragged the driver out of the car, ordered him to lie flat on the road. He raised his right leg and pressed his cheeks against the dust. A wave of murmur swept through the crowd. The driver sputtered and spewed sand from his mouth. Lawrence kept his feet on his cheeks. He fished a cigarette from his pocket and began smoking. He surveyed the gathering crowd. He could see disdain nestled beneath the shock in their eyes, or rather bridled rage. Some of the bystanders shook their heads as they watched him, as though they feared for his soul. The Oba stepped out of his car with his orderly. He was dressed in his full regalia.

“Respect yourself and move to one side,” he barked at the Oba. Another wave of murmur came from the crowd. A group of women traders burst into tears, slapped their thighs in anguish like hired wailers.

The traditional ruler stepped aside, his arms folded. He had a concerned look on his face.

Anini and his men jumped in the ruler’s car and drove off.

That night Lawrence felt something he had not felt in a long time. A sense of foreboding, like a waking nightmare.

At dawn, before the foot traffic picked up or the rusty metal barriers of the shops were raised, Lawrence heard a knock on the door of his room. Monday’s voice floated into the room. He had a special guest. He yawned, jumped out of bed and opened the door a crack. Serenity was standing in the doorway with short permed hair and a bright smile.

*

Lawrence tossed Cynthia’s clothes into a bag. Cynthia set upon him and held him by his wrist. She pleaded. She wept. She reminded him that she carried his child. Lawrence tore himself from her grip and continued packing. When he was done, he dragged the bag out of the house. She tumbled after. He came back seconds later, breathing heavily.

Serenity leaned against the wall with a smile plastered on face and her arms folded. She had told Lawrence Cynthia could not stay under the same roof. Lawrence listened to her but he could not help but be surprised by her firmness, her confidence. She was not the woman she used to. She had told her stories of her time in Ghana. How she tried to eke out a living for many months before finally establishing a saloon. Her saloon flourished.

In bed, Serenity was ravenous, domineering. At first it was a shock to him then it became a delight. The new Serenity fascinated him. In a new and different way.

The One-Eyed Girl

She chewed the hem of her clothes while she waited for Lawrence. She hovered around and glided in the air. She raised one leg, placed her foot on an electric pole and leaned back. Below, a river of heads surged forward and buses rattled along. She scratched the dry skin on her calf and brushed it off. The skin took on wings and fluttered away in a haze of rust red.

Several moments passed and she swung her head upside down. She peered at the pedestrians with her good eye. She scanned their faces. She let her gaze pierce into their souls. None of them interested her. Not that she was really looking for anyone. Before she spun her web around Lawrence, she was keen to find a mate. She went everywhere. She lurked in alleyways and hid behind garbage bins. She picked random people on the streets or sneaked up behind them while they relieved their bladders in front of beer parlours. Sometimes she transformed herself into a rodent, crawled through filthy pipes to sneak into homes. She peeled off their flesh to lay their souls bare. Now she bored her gaze into people to prove to herself that she would never find someone like Lawrence. No one else mattered to her but Lawrence.

She decided to go in search of him. She swooped downwards and glided through the streets for a few moments. She continued the rest of her journey on foot.

She got to Mount Pleasant Hotel, drifted through the plywood blocking the corridor, and floated into a room. Two men in the company of four girls smoked and laughed. She drifted into the next room. She saw bodies rocking silently in the dark. She sniffed the scent of semen and cheap cigarettes.

In the next room, she found Lawrence straddled by a woman under the gleam of a naked bulb. Little whimpers pierced the air. A frown chiselled his face. She watched them for a while. The woman had permed hair and her large breasts were scooped into a tight top that emphasised her cleavage. Lawrence sat on the desk.

She knew he had a wondering eye and was aware of his many sexual encounters and in many cases encouraged them. She had watched him make his relations with women as businesslike he could, no special interest. In her world, he was free. Free of judgments, free to indulge and explore. He was free as long as he remained in her world.

She blew air through her mouth. The air went up to the roof, curled around the bulb. The filaments blew up. The woman let out a shriek in the dark and there was a scrambling noise.

She slipped into the night.

*

The following day she waited for him and then the next day too. Each time he refused to show up she saw him with the woman with the permed hair who spoke mangled English. She saw them laugh, the way she laughed with him. She saw the way he looked at her with glistening eyes. She saw the way she made him do whatever she wished.

Sometimes he slapped her buttocks playfully. Chased him around the room until they slumped exhausted on the bed. He never slapped her on the buttocks before! Did he ever invite her into his home?

Then the time came when he came to her. They sat in the dark. Silence.

She knew his mind was somewhere else. His soul was not what it used to be. His soul was tainted, like corroded metal. Wind blew in preparation for a deluge. Little eddies of wind were whirling dust and torn paper into spirals. He groped for her. She held his hands still. The wind became more boisterous. He rose up and walked away. He melted into the night. She sat in silence for a while. Pain grew in her. It grew till it became unbearable.

She screamed. The wind answered her. The sky rumbled. The gusts of wind became stronger and swirled dust and debris in small, mad tornados. She heard leaves rustle, tree branches crackle and their stooping trunks groan. The smell of rain filled the air. Clouds hung low, and darkened the sky. She broke into a run. She tried to morph herself. Her body failed her.

She plunged into a bush.

The winds continued to rage. She heard the sound of a tree trunk snapping, moaning and crashing into the earth. After the winds came the storm. The rains came pelting down in full force. The heavy water drops assailed her skin. She launched herself upward for a flight. Thunder cracked. Light blinded her eyes. At first her fingers tingled then the sensation spread all over her body until her entire being quaked. A strangled noise poured out through her lips. She found herself on the ground.

She could hear rushing waters like the current of a river. Muddy wetness gathered around her before she could rise up. The floodwater washed over her. Overwhelmed her. The floodwater washed her into a pit. She clawed the side of the pit, trying to find her footing on the slippery wall. She did not have the strength to fly.

She pushed herself upward, slipped and fell into the murky water. She was unaware of her bleeding fingers, and the cuts all over her body. Rust red dissolved in the water in a widening circle of red. She tried again and clutched a jagged outcrop, propping herself up. Another burst of lightning illuminated the sky, another rumble filled the air. Swirling waters carrying decayed fungus and rotten leaves began flowing over the steep edge. She exhaled moist breath. .

The muddy water closed over her head, she jerked herself up. Another surge of water engulfed her. She came up again, gasping and swallowing, thrusting her arms wildly above her, then sank again. She tried to stay afloat this time around. The current pushed her. For a seemingly endless time she stayed afloat while swimming from one end of the pit to the other looking for something to hold on to or rest her frozen body. She felt light as though her body did not belong to her anymore. Her narrow vision became fuzzy but she shook her head, trying to stay alert.

When she caught sight of the mouth of the pit, an unusual strength surged through her. She lashed across the muddy waters from the other end and clutched a fallen trunk. She forced herself upward, dragged herself from the waters, thrashing through a dark tangle of trees. She juddered all over, icy tears trickling down her face. She ran as fast as she could. Thorn bushes snagged her legs. Strips of green-black weed caught her hair. Another thunderbolt hit. A branch drew dust red from her cheeks, but she was too cold to feel the pain. She stumbled, stood up again, reeled and swayed, doddering like a drunk. In spite of the pain in her soul, and the weakness of her body, she hurried forward. Her feet made a sucking sound on the soggy ground. She jumped into the air to fly again. If she flew high enough the rain and the wind and the lightning and flood would not assault her. The elements of nature seemed determined to keep her on the ground.

She did not know how long she trudged along but it seemed like an eternity. Just when she was wondering at her own strength, her vision became fuzzy. She heard the sound of cars flitting past – or did she? This time she could not shake it off. The adrenaline rush did her no good. She felt the ground buckle beneath her. Her face down upon the ground, her cheeks touched the coarse surface of the asphalt.

*

She thought she saw Lawrence driving in a Mercedes Benz, but it was someone else. She could feel anger lodged somewhere under her chest, a stab of something like pain with each breath. She flared her nostrils. Her breath became ragged.

The driver hit the highway. She glided after him. She picked up speed and touched the brakes of the truck driving on the other carriageway. The truck hit a bus trying to avoid a pot-hole ridden stretch ahead. With a sharp jerk of the wheel, the bus skidded. It began swerving erratically. The driver struggled to yank the steering wheel back into position, to avoid the lunatic truck behind, but spun out of control, and sprang through a broken median strip into the oncoming lane.

Two unsuspecting vehicles advanced one after the other. The first skewed to the left, missing the bus narrowly, but the second, the Mercedes Benz, carrying the startled face of the man with a resemblance to Lawrence went head-on. Tyres screeched. Screams were drowned by the inevitable crunch of contorted metal, snapping rods and shattering glass.

*

The police raided Mount Pleasant hotel. Lawrence and his gang found the walls ridden with bullet holes, and the plywood blockage torn down. Inside, tables and chairs were overturned, mattresses yanked out of their frames. Smashed glasses and ceramics littered the floors. Electronics were cannibalised, curtains ripped apart. Serenity lay on the floor of his bathroom, completely naked, her neck oozing blood freely onto the tiled floors. Her eyes were wide open and her tongue hung out.

Lawrence walked to her corpse, hunched over and shook her. Then he looked into her eyes for a few seconds. His gaze bored into her eyes as though they would provide the answers he so desperately needed. Her eyes said nothing, or rather, they said everything. He held his breath, and tightened his jaw. He shut her eyelids and arose. Monday hurried over with a bed sheet to cover her nakedness.

Lawrence walked out of that place and vowed never to return for anything. Not even his clothes. They moved to a new hideout, a faded yellow building opposite a fish stall. From the fish stall, the smell of decaying fish drifted into the hideout.

There, he sat down on a dusty sofa every day, alone with his thoughts. He smoked while he stared into space. His ashtray overflowed. Packets of cigarette littered the room. Sometimes he muttered things to himself. Sometimes he jumped in his seat as though flinching from a dreadful memory. He moved around the hideout as though sucked into a daydream. He was a hushed image of grief.

He forgot things no sooner than he committed them to memory. Two weeks went by without any operation and he said nothing about it. His existence was reduced to the basest of things. Sleeping. Eating. Shitting. Monday took command of the gang. Lawrence's men regarded him with worried eyes. They became careful around him. They spoke to him in soft tones as if speaking aloud was likely to rupture the already sensitive atmosphere.

They were driving through the centre of the city when Lawrence spotted two pedestrian women, one of whom resembled Serenity. She had permed hair like Serenity. Lawrence told his men to pull over beside them. He jumped out and accosted them. He fired questions at the one woman. He asked why she looked like his Serenity. He asked why she wore permed hair. The woman opened her mouth to speak but her words were swallowed up in stutters. The other woman was gripped by a panic attack. She had a twisted look on her face. She breathed through her mouth. Lawrence brought out his gun. He bombarded the second woman with questions. She stuttered. He aimed his gun at her left leg and fired. Screams. Blood. Two pairs of hands grabbed him and pulled him towards the car. He yelled the questions now. Tears leapt from his eyes and tumbled swiftly down his cheeks. In the car, his face twisted in agony and a sob escaped him.

*

With Serenity gone Lawrence was filled with a renewed desire to be with the one-eyed girl. Although he did not regret the time he shared with Serenity, he often wondered why he drifted away from the one-eyed girl. Why could he not have both? Serenity stepped into his life and filled up every space. She returned with her goodness, her smiles, and the submissiveness of her body. When his body suddenly began to need, when he began to crave to body of another to feast on, she was there.

A part of Lawrence believed the one-eyed girl would return to him. Whatever he had experienced with other women had only lasted for a while. The one-eyed girl had remained there like an old lover, strong and unwavering.

He arose everyday hoping to find her close to him. He looked over his shoulders hoping she was somewhere watching him. When he drove out with his gang, he searched for her with his eyes. His hope was slowly chipped away as the days went by until there was almost nothing to hold on to.

A terrible fear nestled in his throat. Every time he revisited the scene of the police raid, Serenity's body lying in a pool of blood, fear rushed through his veins with such intensity that he perspired. The fear reminded him of what might become of him now that the one-eyed girl was gone.

*

After his bath, his hair still wet, he heard a pounding on the door of his hideout. He walked to the bed from the bathroom, slapped one of the prostitutes playfully on the buttocks and walked to the door in his underpants. Giggles floated in the air. He turned to glance at the naked bodies and smiled before opening the door.

A police officer stood in front of him. Other officers, carrying machine guns hung back, surrounding the house. From the sight of the truck waiting out front and the low hum of its engine, he knew they did not come to kill him.

“Where is Anini” the leader of the squad demanded, looking at him intently.

“He is under the bed in the inner room!” Lawrence said without thinking. His mind flew quickly in all directions. The officer narrowed his gaze even more as though piercing through the lies with his eyes.

Lawrence charged at him and butted him in the face with his head. He made a move to run but the officer, now with a bleeding nose, held him by his underpants. The officer reached his gun and pressed the barrel against Lawrence's ankle. A shot rang out. He heard a crackling noise in his head. His vision lit up with an explosion of bright colours. His legs gave out beneath him. He drew several quick breaths to ease the pain shooting through his ankles. He could smell the stench of his own blood.

“Are you Anini?” the officer said in a commanding tone.

“My brother, I won't tell you a lie. I am Anini” he said, writhing like a trapped snake.

*

A young boy sat in a kiosk listening to a transistor radio.

The news filtered in.

A few moments passed and the boy dashed to his group of market women and began jumping and shouting with glee, unable to speak. Finally, he broke the news.

“They don catch am! They don catch am!” he announced between short, quick breaths.

“They don catch who? One of the women demanded impatiently.

“They don’t catch Anini. They don’t arrest am.”

The reaction was shock, disbelief then caution. People brought out their portable radios. A nearby storeowner switched on his TV. There was a flurry of words.

When all doubts had been dissolved, the place erupted into a scene of wild celebration. Market women sprang out of their stalls abandoned their wares and began dancing. A smallish man beckoned to an *akara* seller and ordered rounds of drinks for strangers, urging them to celebrate with him. Men gathered, laughing and shouting passing bottles from hand to hand. Overjoyed, commercial drivers plying routes close to the market offered their services at no cost. Someone however folded their arms and frowned. Someone said Anini robbed for the people and a fierce argument broke out.

The burdens and the business of the day seemed to have been forgotten.

*

Benin Military Hospital

When the pressmen left the premises, a cleaner arrived for his afternoon round. He dipped a mop into a metal pail of Dettol-water and twisted the handle to drain the excess liquid before mopping the floor. The smell of antiseptic arose. The cleaner worked his round the cubicle, making small strokes with his mop. After a while, he leaned his mop against the wall and stretched his body, wiping sweat from his forehead with the hem of his shirt. Lawrence had begun to feel a rhythmic throbbing behind his eyes. Maybe it was the smell of antiseptic or the interview. He knew the police would come back in a little while. They would cuff his hand to the bedpost. They would restrain him like a rabid dog.

He stared at the wall in a daze of despair, unable to shed a tear although tears swelled in his eyes when she floated into the room.

Lawrence stared at her for a long time. He held out his free hand over his bedclothes. He felt shame. Felt remorse. An earnest desire to be worthy of the things she had done for him gripped him. Now he wanted her so badly. Wanted to wrap her in his arms and apologize.

She drew closer. She leaned forward and gently covered his palm with hers. Lawrence drew a breath of relief and closed her eyes. The moment his hands touched hers, a strange calm washed over him. Fresh air slid into his lungs. Now tears rolled down his cheeks. They rolled down slowly as though they didn't want to come.

Time seemed to stop; everything – all questions, answers and pain – was suspended. She didn't speak. He didn't need her to speak. Her touch seemed to tell him what her mouth wanted to. It was an act more intimate than the most caring embrace. For a brief moment everything thinned out, the pale walls, the beds, the cleaner until only the two remained.

Two Birds

Silence. The sound of wind

The Priest administered the last rights and crossed himself with one hand. His other hand clutched a rosary. He stared at him with doleful eyes, sighed and moved to the next person.

She floated out of the crowd.

Her hands cupped his chin. She smiled. He could feel her eyes burning in his flesh. He asked her to save him as she had in the past. He had never asked her to do the things she did for him. But she did them anyway. Why would she do what he asked for now? He told her he was sorry. Sorry for leaving her. Sorry for the pain he caused her. She placed her lips close to his ear so that he was able to smell her breath. He could feel her warm breath on his cheeks. She told him not to say a word more. She drew back her head and smiled. Her smile that made everything simple.

The sound of the commander barking orders. Boots crunching in sand.

Shots crackled like fireworks. He felt hot bullets bore through his flesh. A pain fluttered in his chest. His neck stiffened, his head felt heavy. He felt choked as though a giant snake encircled itself around his body. Blood rushed into his mouth and dribbled down his chin.

He held on to her smile. Ignored the pain. Ignored the invisible snake that restricted his breathing. Ignored the salty, metallic taste sliding up and down his throat.

He looked upon her smile.

She held out a hand and when he grabbed it, she broke into a run. He ran after her. She leapt. He leapt. She rode on the clouds. He joined her.

Their worlds swirled, exploded, and merged into one.

THE END

