

Flowers

for

Ebun

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**Flowers
for
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DEDICATION

Dedicated To Mothers All Over The
World And All Who Stood For A Better
World And A Healthier Earth For All.

For

Sifau Arinade

CHAPTER 1

The train panted as it laboured up hills. The sun breathed mercilessly down, and the warm breeze blew gently against Demola's face. Absent mindedly, Demola continued to gaze at the moving trees and the crawling Olumo hills. His son, Ade, sat dozing on the opposite seat. He is tall and broad shouldered with a narrow but handsome face. Demola and Ade shared their seats with two young lads, Mohammed and Iwar. They are on semester break and they seem to be enjoying every bit of the journey. These youngsters were recounting excitedly, their experience and exploits while at school:

“There was one Mr. Mshelia who took us regional geography in my final year at secondary school. This teacher, on a fateful day, pointed to a location on the world map that was hanging from the wall and asked the class to repeat after him;

“Tripoli is the capital of Libya”

“Tripoli is the capital of Libya”

“Islamagood is a city in Pakistan...”

“Before the teacher could continue, I sprang up in protest” Iwar pressed on. “But, sir, my own atlas read Islamabad not Islamagood.”

“Allah damn you, By Allah, how dare you pollute the sacredness of this hour with such dirty interruptions”. He rushed at me and gave me a heavy knock on the head. I sat down, more confused than ever.” Ade, trying to conceal his amusement, as his mouth started loosing its siege against an invading laughter, casually raised his hand to his mouth. He did not want the boys to realize that he was listening to their conversation.

“In the examination,” continued Iwar, “I wrote down Islamabad and Mr. Mshelia gave me full marks.”

He was not like one orthodox Muslim who after mistakenly eating pork meat, drank petrol and set his mouth ablaze because he needed to burn off the impurity that had contaminated him. This wretch, though, never survived to regret his action.” They all laughed except Demola who took no pleasure in their conversation. Instead, in his mind, were pictures of his past life, rewinding itself over and over.

“What have I accomplished in all these fifty two years that I have lived. What has become of the family I built with my own sweat. My children, their mother with a nature one could easily put off for foolishness. She was mad enough to return to me after all I did against her.” He shifted his gaze to his son who was sleeping comfortably opposite him and envied him.

“I destroyed his mother, his mother was a great one. When a soul passes away, they say a great soul has fallen. But Eburn’s death was a proof to the contrary. To die is not to fall. ‘Great soul, and ‘fallen’. The last word tasted bitter on the tip of his tongue.

“No, the two words don’t fit and so can’t be welded in wedlock for human convenience. Eburn, like a hallowed soul, sat with me through hard times, helped me grow until material betrayal forced

her out. And as fate will have it, on my way down she was the only one who stood by me. Am I then fit to call this woman my goddess or my wife? Am I worthy of the name 'Father' which Ade calls me. I consider myself crude and so must go through fire in order to shed my unworthiness...yes... fire..." Demola's disturbed mind stumbled further back into the remote past, through the first chapters of his childhood as it was narrated to him, largely by his father and much later, his aunt, Funke:

It was a sunny day. Puff of thick black smoke belched skywards and flame licked the walls with a thousand tongues. The howling of fire men's siren rent the air, while shouts of excitement escaped the mouths of watchers that had gathered at a safe distance from the inferno, their heads and hands raised as in supplication before some weird altar.

One of the fire-men climbed up the stairs and as he thrust himself forward, he was greeted by hot blinding smoke. With caution in every step he waded on. Albeit in the hot darkness, he could perceive the smell of burning flesh. Then suddenly, he stepped on something soft, paused to see what it was but a sharp cry, from somewhere ahead of him, caught his ears. He moved toward the direction of the cry. After a while, he found himself facing a door. Fire had not touched it, only some thread of smoke hovered close to it.

The fire-man softly grabbed the door knob, turned and swung the door open. He stepped in and shut it firmly after him. Moving further into the comfort of this oasis, he drank its content at a glance.

In the centre of the room, a baby lay crying in its cot. In a flash he fished out the baby, nestled it against his breast and retreated towards the door but had to stop. Where the door once stood was a thick, fierce, solid smoke.

“The worst is yet ahead.” He said to himself. “I must do something fast.” Experience cautioned him to be calm but quick.

As he contemplated the next move, he did not hear cracks of paint from burning enamel plates nor did he notice the picture of a mother and child burning from the wall nor the burning of the plastic cover of a television set.

The fire-man with sudden decision moved to the window, peeped down on the sea of excited faces of the crowd.

“I dare not jump from this height,” he thought. “Not with this pearl of breath in hand. Then an idea struck him.

“wrapper, wrapper, spread out a Wrapper.” He thundered. A mother ripped a wrapper off herself and it was spread out tight. The fire-man gently leaned over the window rail and dropped the baby towards the safety of the wrapper and prepared to jump down too; but he felt suddenly dizzy and heavy in the head. His legs tend to bear the weight of an elephant and it was with great effort that he dragged one leg across the window, but could not follow it up with the second leg. He slumped backwards into the smoke filled room. Somewhere from the raucous noise in his head, he could hear faint shouts outside fading away but also louder and familiar voices of colleagues closing up on him.

The baby was lucky or may be unlucky to be alive, for I, Demola was that miserable pearl of flash. My mother died in the disaster and it happened while my father was away from home.

CHAPTER 2

“Uncle Yomi is a kind man. You will enjoy living with him and his wife, and now that you re in your last lap in the elementary school, you must work hard in order to justify the money spend on you. By this, he may be encouraged to send you to a post-primary school.”

Demola heard Funke’s voice coming softly to him. Her tender hands stroking his head and soothing his growing anxiety.

“His wife,” Funke continued, “may be a difficult woman but she will take good care of you.”

Before Demola could look into her eyes, Funke turned away quickly and climbed into the bus that was to take her back to the East. He waved languidly as the bus moved off.

Aunt Funke was leaving Demola behind. He was to continue living with Yomi, his father’s younger brother. Demola knew he would miss Aunt Funke, she had come to take care of Demola’s father, leaving her husband and children at Enugu and now that everything

was over she had to return to her family. Demola recalled his father's last days:

It was a chilly night and Demola's father had complained of headache and cold. Aunt Funke ran to a nearby bush, collected assorted herbs and boil them to prepare a concoction. "Fever is a terrible thing. You will soon get over it." she assured the sick man. And true, like magic, the old man was up again the next day. This relief was to be short-lived, for three days later, his father was back in bed and Funke had to call in a 'chemist' who owned a retail patient medicine store nearby.

"There is nothing to worry about, he will soon get over it. meanwhile, give him this capsule before he retired to bed. It costs only twelve naira." The man advised.

Whenever Funke was away Demola stayed behind to minister to his father. In the evening, the 'doctor' called again. He sat down by the sick man's bed, grabbed the old man's wrist and fumbled for a while with some region of his neck. After a while he straightened himself and asked;

"Has he taken his drugs?" His voice carried the smack of blame. Funke answered him, her face weary and tired.

"Yes, he had, as you directed." She said as one trying to exonerate herself of Doctor then searched desperately for something in his bag but emerged with nothing. He kept the bag on the ground, turned on the sick bed and stirred down at its content.

"What is this fuse all about." Demola wondered.

Funke on her part just stood rooted to the spot like a statue. The light from the lamp continued to burn but with an unsteady flame. Save for the monotonous chirp of crickets, everywhere was silent.

This oppressive silence that had descended on the room grew unbearable as they waited for the 'doctor' to say something, anything to assure them. What must they do? What must they not do? What drug must they buy again from this 'doctors' store. After what was like an endless waiting, the 'doctor' straightened himself and his shadow rose with him, spreading menacingly across the wall. Funke's own shadow shrank as she stepped backward and rest her back against the wall.

"All he needs now is rest" the 'doctor' said as he prepared to leave. As he stepped into the night, the luster of the lantern light started to fade. It's flame blinked, flickered, heaved unsteadily but still held on painfully to its famished wick. Funke softly moved to the stool that bears the lamp, lifted it gently and shook it close to her ear to test the quantity of fuel left in it. "Empty" Funke gasped. The flame liquidly licked its wick, casting yellow light about the room. Funke turned to Demola. She had asked him before leaving for the market that morning to refuel the lamp but Demola had forgotten all about it. she shook her head as if to say "You are good for nothing." While Demola fiddle with an excuse, the feeble flame continued to reduce by degrees. Darkness engulfed the room as it snapped and expired.

When light lifted the veil of darkness and the cock crew the first breath of dawn, the old man was prepared for burial. He has passed away in the middle of the night.

Tears burst over the rims of Demola's eyes and rolled down his cheeks. He preferred to stay with Funke than Yomi, but Funke already had four extended family children living with her and to add him to this number would be to give the poor woman more than her fair share of the corporate family burden.

"His wife is a wicked witch." So said almost all the children that had lived with Yomi

“Those children were only being mischievous,” Funke assured Demola. “You should try to prove them wrong.”

Demola was tempted to believe that Tayo was not as bad as she had been painted. She had, on their arrival; welcome Aunt Funke and Demola with open arms and, and talk tenderly to him. Funke had winked to Demola as if to say....., “I told you, she is an angel.”

As Funke waved them goodbye, the cold wind of loneliness blew over Demola. He walked back home with his guardian, feeling like one walking with strangers.

“I will leave here some day if they dare

” “What are you waiting for, standing like a lost soul? Come on, get into the kitchen.” Tayo’s voice cut the thread of Demola’s thought with such suddenness, it reeled him around.

“Spoilt child, get those dishes washed before you descend on that food, right?

“Yes, madam.” He did her bidding more in dread of his uncle than Tayo’s threats. Yomi was a huge man of over six feet with a relatively small head for the size. Whenever Yomi was at home, Demola avoided him as much as possible and thankfully, Yomi seldom said anything concerning Demola save when he needed him for errands. Otherwise, Demola did not exist. Yomi was to Demola an unreachable god who had an attentive ear for his wife’s endless complaints. Whenever Demola erred, Tayo would smack him on the face or give him several knocks on the head with whatever she was holding in her hand.

“You bastard, I will not touch you further. You will explain why you did what you did when your father returns” She would say and that would be the end of a good day for Demola. Tayo would say nothing further regarding the matter and Demola would remain for

the better part of that day in fear, dreading what punishment awaited him in his uncle's hand. In order to soften her anger and make her forgive, he would try all he could to please her but immediately Yomi settled down to rest after meal, Demola would hear her voice shaking with effusion of pent-up anger.

I don't quite understand what sort of boy Demola is. He is so playful and will not even help with the house chore. So queer. I think something must be the matter with his head." Demola waited for the worst.

"Demola! Where is the idiot? Yomi rumbled from the parlour. Tayo came into the kitchen frowning.

"You heard him calling you, didn't you?" She shouted at the peak of her voice. The spoon Demola was holding in his hand dropped. He bent to pick it up with a shaky hand, then rose to his feet feeling betrayed and lonely.

"Are you deaf? You are wanted in the parlour." Demola entered the parlour quietly then stopped. In Yomi's hand was a horse whip. Demola stepped in casually as if he had not seen it.

"What happened today while I was not at home?"

Happened? Nothing" Demola pretended.

"Nothing"? Yomi queried.

Sir, sir, no one came home to ask for you sir."

"You.....hope.....hopeless rag.....you....you have been causing trou.....trouble again

"No sir, she lied"

Who lied...? "Who....lied...?" Yomi's stammer sized him like a fit.

He laboured, swallowed and sucked several times in an effort to get his words out. And his habitual manner, both in peace and war, was to slowly raise his right leg, and tap the earth gently with it at

every successful pronunciation. Coupled with this movement was his forefinger which was held, pointing toward the person he happened to be talking to and marking time with his right leg.

"I..... Isaid whowho is a liar? You ... ra..... ra.....rat. youyou fool." He puffed, swallowed and spat, his face a contortment of anger. He pounced on the cringing boy and the horse whip shot out like the fang of an adder. It cut Demola on the neck and back, screams escaped through his clenched teeth, Demola cried for pardon.

"Please father, forgive me." The whip flashed again and this time cut Demola in the eye. He ran madly towards the door but his uncle's large hand caught him and flung him against the wall. Demola sank, landing on his knees, his head in his hands and his body bent double, like a frightened centipede. The pain from the merciless whip was devastating. It straightened him again. He rose and lunged for the door but it had been bolted. Behind this bolted door, he could hear the flippant voice of his master's wife asking for mercy on his behalf. Trapped, he turned round and faced his assailant, who, drenched in sweat was heaving heavily. Demola watched the hand that held the whip and within that twinkle of a second he thought to himself.

Why must I suffer so, I have been warned never to play with our neighbours children, why can't I play alone anyway? It must be a great wrong to play with those boys, or why do I suffer so? I will never play with those boys again. His hands dropped to his sides.

"I have done wrong," Demola pleaded, "father, please forgive me." But then, his guardian's anger had simmered. Yomi could now see the timid boy standing before him with one of his eyes swollen and half closed.

“Get out of Of here.” Yoimi shouted. Demola obeyed instantly. He unlocked the door and returned to the kitchen. He sat on the stool he vacated a while ago, his skin burning under his cloth. Tayo stood with her back to him, busy with a cooking pot.

“It wasn’t her fault.” Demola thought. If only auntie Funke were here.” He tried to visualize Funke’s face but it refused to come into his head. Only Tayo’s face appeared.

He shivered and gave up. Suddenly an idea came into his head. He considered it for a while then excitement exploded within him.

“I will do it.” he almost shouted. “I will go back to autie’s place in Enugu, yes I must.”

“She will bring you right back here.” A voice argued

“Not after I have narrated to her all that they have done to me and what with this clear witness.” Demola touched his swollen eye and withdrew his hand, for it was sore with pain. “I must escape from here before they kill me.”

“Okay, you will run away from home, how do you intend to get to Enugu, you have no transport fare. You don’t even know your way from here to the nearest motor-park. How then, you fool, do you intend to get to Enugu.” Demola turned these over in his mind.

“No, I can’t bear it any longer. Train, we came by train and I will leave by train. I must leave today, this evening.”

“It’s not evening yet and you are already fast asleep. Will you ever learn. Despite the trashing given you ...” Tayo’s voice shook him out of his day-dream.

“How! See what you have done to yourself.” She winced at the sight of Demola’s inflamed eyes. She hesitated, then said tenderly.

“Go and put some water on the fire, I will help you massage it a little.” Demola did not answer but simply stood up and walked with slow steps towards the stove.

CHAPTER 3

Demola took a less busy street to the left and continued to walk aimlessly on, his shoulder slightly bent under the weight of weariness and hunger. Now in Kano city for two months, he had no specific place to call a home and how he had survived the two months was a mystery to him.

“If I had taken the Lagos-port Harcourt train” instead of the Lagos-Kano train, I might have saved myself all these troubles.” He lamented as he walk on, his bare dusty feet burning with exhaustion. When he felt like ceasing himself, he took a deserted lane where he looked for a suitable place to answer the call of nature.

Demola noticed here that there was an earlier comer, a man, in the neighbourhood of forty years, easing himself on a heap of rubbish. He had to wait for this elder to finish and leave. The man noticed that Demola was not only waiting, he was also watching, though, surreptitiously. Embarrassed, the man casually changed position and proceeded with his business but he could no longer continue with the previous ease.

“Haven’t you any job to do, or why do you stand there staring at me like that?” The man queried.

“Now, how come he knew I am jobless.” Demola thought to himself. “Can this man help me get a job? Any one will do.” He thought seriously.

“Yes, yes I have no work to do and I have tried all I could to secure one but it had all come to nothing.” The man said nothing, veins stood out from his neck and forehead as he forced tiny brown flints of faeces out of his bowel, accompanied by furious explosions of fart.

“You have no work to do, isn’t it so ? and it is I who should get you one, ‘ko ba haka ba’?” A rude shock of realization greeted Demola.

“How can such a person get me a job. A man of substance would not squat by the road side and shamelessly ease himself like this man is now doing” Demola reasoned.

“I am sorry, I don’t mean to be rude” the man cleaned himself, zipped up and walked off mumbling something inaudible to himself. Slighted, Demola spat and moved quickly away to a safe distance. This insult infuriated the man.

“Its your father that you spat at. Lack of home training. Idiot.” Demola stood his ground. With the distance between them he felt safe. He spat again. The man paused, shook his head and walked away, still cursing.

“Imagine, if not for this nonsense ‘stomach snake’. A rat like that talking to me.”

“How far is it to your house, Madam.” Demola groaned, his neck half sunk into his shoulder under the weight of the load on his

head. The woman turned round and faced Demola.

“why are you such a nuisance? Are you new in this trade? Well, if you can’t go any further with this little thing on your head, then I would relieve you of it and get a capable hand.” She secured her handbag under her armpit and relieve Demola of the sack of gari. She gave Demola half the agreed price. Demola moved shyly away, massaging his strained neck. He had not eaten anything that morning, so he entered a ‘bukataria’ by the roadside. Here Demola ordered for food. As he ate, he used his left hand to ward off invading flies. After a while, he noticed for the first time a man eating some distance away. This man was shouting at the zenith of his voice. He needed more salt. His voice sounded familiar to Demola. Demola looked him all over for a clue: he was dirty, his hairs covered in dust, and bits of mud could be seen turked into his nails. The man washed his hands, got up and walked to the counter to pay his bill when the mark of recognition struck Demola. This man was the man he encountered on a heap of rubbish a few months ago.

“Good evening sir.” Greeted the man as he paid his bill. The man only murmured his answer without even looking at Demola. A little disappointed Demola followed him outside and walked behind him until the man stopped by some road construction workers. He exchanged greetings with the workers, lit a cigarette, and sat down to smoke. Demola watched at a distance how the labourers dug out a trench. He guessed that the man was employed here too. As the man looked towards Demola’s direction, Demola smiled his greetings and moved closer.

“I was the person who greeted you a while ago in the bukateria.”

“Is that so? I did not take notice of you.”

“I want to apologize for what I did the other day.”

“Oh! You were the boy who ... well, you don’t need to worry about that.”

He stopped talking on seeing his boss coming. He rose to his feet, picked up his digger and joined others in the gutter. Demola, now a little more confident, sat close by and watched the men work.

“Couldn’t your young friend join us instead of just watching?” A skinny man asked.

“I would have loved to, if your Oga would let me. Will he?” Demola intoned. They all laughed, for they knew Demola can hardly lift up a shovel not to talk of working with it. That afternoon, Demola implored his new friend to talk to his immediate boss on his behalf.

“I can’t talk to him myself but I know who to see who will talk to my boss for you.”

The following day, Demola returned to the site and met his friend who took him to the man who would help him secure the job. As they closed for the day, Demola thanked Saliu his new friend.

“I don’t know what I could have done without you.”

“Let’s forget about that. Here, have a stick of cigarette.”

“No, I don’t smoke, thank you.” Demola said brushing off dust from his head.

“I started smoking not quite long ago. In this type of job, one has to be down-to-earth.

Working and sniffing in filth daily as we do here, only things like cigarette keeps off the stench from our nostrils. It keeps one also in tone with our boss. He smokes; we smoke, though he works on mud while we work in mud.”

Demola could not understand this but Saliu’s reasoning sounded convincing enough. Since Demola was not strong enough to work with Saliu, he was assigned to help carry away dug-out earth. Demola was hard working and his boss noticed it.

“You are still very young and boys of your age are still in school. How old are you

“Fifteen sir.”

“That’s a pretty young age. Have you got your elementary school leaving certificate?

“Yes, I left school two years ago. The very year I lost my father.”

“Okay, see me tomorrow and I will see what I can do for you.”

Demola ran off to break the news to his friend. Saliu straightened himself from his work, sweat dripped down his face. He wiped off the sweat with the back of his hand.

“Mr. Okon is very kind. Do you know that he has two of his children in college and about half a dozen children of your age, all children of people he hardly knew, in school as well?”

When Demola got to his master’s office the next day, he was asked if he would like to work in Zaria. Demola answered in the affirmative.

I have just talked to a friend who works in Zaria. He said his ministry needs some messagers.”

With a letter of recommendation from Mr. Okon in hand, Demola left for Zaria.

Two weeks after he was called for interview, along with other applicants, he was offered a job in the ministry of works.

Saliu and Demola remained good friends and they often exchanged visits. Whenever Demola gusted Saliu, they would sit in the ‘Zaure’ and talk. Asabe, Saliu’s wife would greet Demola through the raffia curtain and withdraw into the compound from where she returned later with food or kolanut.

At times, Demola would go with Ebum, his fiancée. Demola met Ebum in a 'bukataria' where Ebum helped her mother serve food. Ebum had to move to Kano with her mother after her father and only brother died in the Ogunpa flood disaster. Ebum and her mother were fortunate, because, on this ill-fated day, they were off to a neighbouring village, selling cocoa pods. They returned home immediately on hearing of the incident. Two days of intensive search later revealed that Ebum had lost her father and a brother. Ebum and her mother left Ibadan to live with a close relation until the shock of the disaster subsided enough for her to decide where next her fortune lay. She will go up north, Ebum's mother decided.

"I have to go. Ogunpa has taken all that Ibadan gave me." Ebum's mother insisted after being dissuaded unsuccessfully from going to a place she hardly knows. She left Ibadan anyway with her only daughter and settled down among the 'Kanawa' people of the north. A common misfortune that had greeted Ebum and Demola in their early lives tended to, strangely enough, weld both of them, emotionally together.

CHAPTER 4

Demola lived in Muchia, Zaria. He occupied a room with his wife Ebum. Ebum was a thumb shorter than her husband who was himself close on six feet. The contents of their only room were meager. The furniture comprised a small centre table, an old rickety wooden chair and a crudely made reading table that was leaning against the mud wall. From the brown filthy wall, smeared with blood of bed-bugs, a wooden cloth rack hung. And close to this was an enlarged picture of Demola, Ebum and their son Ade. Adjacent the wall that held this picture was an impressive current calendar with the heading 'WHO IS WHO IN NIGERIA POLITICS' The picture in it comprised the president, driven in an open Mercedes benz car. He was standing and waving and smiling in the midst of a weary-looking crowd. Littered about the presidents own picture were little pictures of law makers with their hollow but bright looking faces.

Ebum, already heavy with child, was sleeping on their only bed. Demola instinctly looked up at the rusty leaking roof. The state of the house had been giving him great concern. During the rains,

rain water find its way through rust and openings on the roof, and worst still, the roofing served as heat generator on hot afternoons. Now, the rain is here again on his annual call. The clouds have started to gather. The cotton clouds transformed into one black solid mass and hung heavy over the sky. Demola watched anxiously as they broke, jostled against one another and merged against into one rugged monster. He watched the sinking sun peep desperately between the darkening clouds in dismay. Smoke from Demola's cigarette escape in rings and in succession dissolved into the gentle incoming air. All of a sudden, the wind descended, strong and aggressive. It blew hard against all that stood on its part.

"This rain again!" Demola bit his lower lip and shifted uneasily on his chair. The wind whizzed violently through the eaves, heralding an approaching storm. The fragile roof shook and cracked. Pandemonium.

"Is that rain?" Eburn's voice seeped out.

"It is rain alright. Prepare a container to receive the rain that will start trickling in soon." Eburn rose with surprising agility to do his husband's biddings. By the window, where he sat, Demola saw a Mallam standing under the shadows of a mosque with its magnificent minarets piercing heaven in the face. He was calling the Azir prayers. A few distance away, a little boy led his blind beggar-father away from the storm. They made for the safety of the mosque but the rain overtook them before they could get there. So father and son took refuge under a mango tree, hugged together for warmth and waited patiently for the rain to set them free. From the safety of Mallam Musa's mansion, a dog barked fiercely at the begger and his son. A while later, a naked, middle aged man joined the two under the tree. He walked in leisurely and sat comfortably on the wet ground, talked with the rain and chewed from a green fleshy mango fruit he picked from a nearby puddle. He sought for no warmth, it seemed, as the other two. Demola continued to watch this with growing interest, for on this same tree, he saw a vulture,

drenched to its skin, clinched patiently onto a branch that swayed treacherously in the wind. "Feathers from the same bird." Demola concluded.

The wind blew in the rain water against Demola's face, but he did not notice or did not care.

"Shut that window please, we've got enough rain in here already." Ebum's voice, soft but firm woke him into reality.

"Come over here and see something, Ebum. I was just counting my blessings; with this shelter over our heads."

"Blessed indeed. You called this trench a blessing?" Ebum retorted as she came up to the window.

"Look out there and see what I mean," Ebum look towards the direction of Demol's fingers. She shook her head and turned to look straight into Demola's face.

"Look, its not that I have no feelings for those wretch wasting away out there, but we must learn to grow first, before we teach others how to grow. Let's save ourselves first from drowning in this flood before we save others from drowning. Now, I can't understand why our landlord remained unconcerned about the bad state of this house."

"Forget about him. I have told him times without number about the leaking roof and the cracked wall but all my begging only ended in promises. The putty he used the last time to plug the holes has all washed off."

"The entire thing has to be removed, the zinc roofing removed and replaced with new ones. But I will not blame him, our troubles touch him less."

“The last time I confronted him with the issue, he said he would do something about it when the tenants paid up their rent at month end.”

“Aha! That’s all he cares for, money! Before the close of every month, his boys will come shuffling their feet around our door steps. But tell him to repair or replace anything in this damn house., his own house, he will swear and curse us and the heavens that bring rain.” She spat and moved away from the window.

“Maybe he will do something.” Demola said meekly with little conviction in every word.

“How long must we wait. With all these tales of his crawling decisions written everywhere. Something must be done, now.”

“Don’t worry, whatever happens, we shall get to where we are destined to get to in life. Let us pray to God that I get that job I told you about and all this suffering will be a thing of the past.”

“Pray on, while we continue to live like this. All I know is that there will be no past if we fail to march out of the present.” She went silent for a while, then slowly and almost talking to her self, she said. “God, through our parents, bequeathed to us this destination, this state we find ourselves in today. But our final destination in life is a prize we must win. No use making peace with our present fate. To do that will be suicidal.”

Demola was silent. Whenever there was any argument of this nature, Demola was often on the defensive. He felt he had failed the family because he could not provide a better place for them. Ebun must have read his thought and she felt sorry for him.

"I am not complaining, but I guess there is a solution to this mess we are in, though, this is all we can afford for now."

"It's my fault," I brought you into this."

"Into what?"

"This was not what I promised you"

"Well, we are in it together. Was it not just a while ago you observed how blessed we were? Ours is fair."

"No! see how cursed we are." He shouted.

"I fear there might be a storm."

"What storm? Its raining already."

"Hear, hear voices of children singing in the rain." They listened to the songs of the children, playing outside, their voices rising and gradually over-powering the mourning drops of the rain:

"Allah ya kawo ruwa

Koyau, ko gobe

Allah ya kawo ruwa

In ba yao ba, sai nujira na gobe..."

"They all wished for rain that warms the heart." Ebun murmured as she listened to their piercing unbroken voices.

"Perhaps, even in the darkness of torment, there is some comfort." She observed.

As the evening crept into the cover of the cold night, and the new moon blushed uneasily amidst restless stars, Demola's family prepared for bed. The rain had subsided and the children have ceased to sing. Ebun turned up the wick of the lantern in order to illuminate the room a little more, before she retired to bed. The songs of the children came once, more, loud, in Ebun's head. She hummed in step with the unbroken voices. Demola sat, smoking, his mind building and dismantling his hope for the future. Ebun

was his constant source of inspiration, always by his side in times of trouble. Demola could not imagine what he could do without her. He had come to realize too, that he was only a part of himself—the passion. The otherness was Ebum – the reality.

“Ebum is the spring of my life,” he would say. “And to be at war with her is to be at war with myself. To take her from my life will equally mean to sever my head from its stool.” He pulled hard at this cigarette, puffed and coughed into the fresh incoming air.

He stood up, quenched the cigarette light, eased himself of a yawn, bolted the window, lowered the wick of the lantern and sank on the mat besides his son.

“Tomorrow is another working day and an errand boy like me cannot afford to be late for work. It’s how one takes his job that determine one’s seriousness. The way I take my job might, even, count when the post of a typist I put in for is considered.” It was all Ebum’s idea. She had advised him the previous year to learn the art of typing. At first Demola considered this a waste of scarce resources and a luxury for his station, but Ebum insisted.

“Why do you mix up suffering with sacrifice. This is sacrifice we must make. And I am ready to sacrifice this present comfort for the future” Thus, the following day, a Saturday, he went and enrolled with ‘Harmony Typing Institute.’ It was like teaching a dog how to climb a tree, initially. But as days stumbled into weeks and weeks rolled into months, Demola grew to love his new trade. He drove himself into learning the secrets of the machine. His fingers would move with excitement, as they tapped and punched the keys. Now a proud graduate of ‘Harmony Typing Institute,’ he applied for the post of a typist in the clerical section of his office and waited anxiously for the result of the interview, hopping that it would come out in his favour.

Demola tried to compose himself to sleep but his mind continued to wander from one trifle to another. A mosquito zoomed past his face, several times, until it finally settled on his ear. Demola rapidly out at his ears with the edge of his stiffened palm and he thought he had killed it, but the insect was far from death. It returned.

“God punish this damn...” Demola cursed as he cut at his ears again and again. This exercise continued for sometimes until the mosquito, maybe tired of the game, left for new exploits. Demola later woke up with a start as Ebum’s sharp gasp and heavy breathing invalidated his light sleep. He stood on his knees, his hands resting on the edge of the bed.

“Are you alright?”

“I think I will be alright.”

“I better go for...” The last words got hooked to the walls of his throat. He rose from his knees and cleared his throat.

“I will go for momo Danladi. You will need an experienced hand. It’s impossible to get a taxi by this hour of the night.” Momo Danladi was a middle-aged neighbour. She was like a mother to Demola’s family and Demola realized how invaluable her experience would be at this critical moment.

“Don’t worry about Momo Danladi. Rest or you will be too tired to go to work in the morning. I will let you know when I need any help.”

“I must go for her immediately.” Demola confirmed.

“Relax, it’s only...”

“I am not asking for your views.” Demola retorted as he rushed to the door. He shot back its bolt, flung the door wide open and dashed into the rain. The wooden door, with a murmuring protest, dragged

itself slowly back into position. Outside, Demola aimed one foot against a stone that lay in a muddy puddle. The stone with a malicious slip threw him off balance.

He tripped and landed in the mud with a painless thud. Cursing under his breath, his teeth grinding against one another, he got back to his feet. Gathering the falling white wrapper about himself and holding it with a strangling clinch about his waist, Demola ran on towards Momo Danladi's house.

The full moon was out, stirring brightly in the sky. The pine trees were whistling softly to the beat of the cool wind, but Demola glided swiftly on, like a ghost escaping the light of the approaching dawn. Demola took the last steps as swiftly as lightning and banged rapidly on the door of Momo Danladi.

"Who's that?" Came a roar from within.

"It's me... I mean... It's Ebum, Momo, you must come immediately, I think she..." His words were drowned by clanks from bolts and clinks of keys on the door. Momo Danladi threw the door open with the strength of a monster, pushed Demola aside with fingers that could be mistaken for bananas and bolted past him. She leaped lightly into the night like an antelope. Demola went after her and caught up with her as she ascended the steps of Demola's house. A sharp cry of pain came to them as Momo Danladi opened the door. She went in while Demola remained rooted to the spot.

He felt as if his heart was on fire. He paused for breath, his heaving coming in puffs through his mouth. Then he stepped quietly into the room, came out again, shut the door gently and leaned against it. He shut his eyes tightly as sweat dripped into them. With arms outstretched towards the sky, he moved two steps away from the door.

"Come on, take this little rascal." Momo Danladi's voice reeled Demola around. She thrust little Ade into Demola's hands

... "and be a man, mama Ade is wonderful, she has almost taken care of everything before we arrived here."

"Yes". Was all that came out of his mouth. Momo Danladi gave him a sympathetic smile and withdrew into the room. Demola carried Ade for a while in his arm, his eyes going over the lad, unsure of what to do.

"where, where is that baby from?" Ade inquired.

"It's your new friend." Demola replied. "Do you like it?"

"Yes... But it cried so loud and ..."

"Don't worry, it only woke you up to tell you of its arrival." Demola assured him. The door opened again.

"You can go in while I fetch something warm for her and the baby." Demola went in, and the room was comfortably warm. He walked to the bed, where Ebum and the baby lay and asked if she was alright.

"Of course, can't you see...?" Making a sign towards the baby. Demola bent over the bed, kissed her and the baby. Ebum looked up into his eyes and smiled. Her gaze shifted down to his wrapper and a painful giggle escaped her mouth.

"Where did this mud come from?"

"Yes, last night's rain was heavy."

The christening of their second child did not involve much expenses. Demola had invited his closest friends, co-workers and of course his special guest was Mr. Chiroman, his boss. Ebum had tried to

persuade Demola to call in their church to pray for the family which he vehemently objected to. He nevertheless consented after Momo Danladi intervened.

After prayer, Pastor Lulu made a lengthy sermon, punctuating it with allusions. Lulu was implying that Demola's present predicament was caused by Demola's estrangement from God and the church.

"You must not forget the words of the bible," Lulu enjoined everyone present, "Which says" what shall I render unto the Lord for all his benefits towards me...' God implores us to instill in ourselves the virtues of giving to the church, so that we may also receive from the Lord." He advised. This sermon punched Demola directly in the conscience. He knew the pastor was referring indirectly to him. Demola was once a devoted sheep of Lulu, and, in truth, every Sunday he gave to the church the little he could afford as offering and tithe. An incident occurred, however, in the church one day which was to be a turning point in his life as far as Demola was concerned with the church. There was a combined service at Wusaza Zaria chapter and Shepherd Lulu was presiding over it. As usual, Demola and his wife were in attendance. The tray for tithe and offering was passed around. Immediately Demola dropped his own contribution, (coins) into the tray, pastor Lulu flared up.

"Why have you all, brothers and sisters in Christ, turned my father's house into a house for merchandise. Why all this coin noise? Paper money makes less noise. Why all this noise in the house of the Lord?" he shouted to no one in particular.

"Remember that day when our Lord Jesus Christ threw out the noisy merchants out of the house of the Lord." Shepherd Lulu continued. "So fellow sheep of God, in order to avoid the wrath of God by these shameless noise of coins, it would be wise of us to drop paper money, putting in mind what our Lord said once, that,"..... as thou giveth, so shall thou receiveth."

Back home that night, Demola went through the verses which Pastor Lulu referred to and felt there was some deceit in the whole affair. He thus made a vow never to step into the church again. He did not, however, grudge Ebum's remaining a devoted member.

He waited patiently for the pastor to round up after the service, Demola half-heartedly invited the Pastor for the evening 'Get Together'. In answer, Lulu smiled and said: "We, that are not of the world will find ourselves out of place, if we participate in things of the world."

That evening there were more guests than the family anticipated. This was not unexpected. It was normal for the invited to invite his best friend and this best friend to invite his own best friend too. And there are the 'Mo-gbo-mo-ya' a group of the 'I-hear-I-come' fame who are sure to swim in.

"You need not worry," Ebum assured Demola.

"We shall serve what we can afford. We must play the humble host because everybody is aware that this is a time of austerity and only the affluent in 'gusterity' can afford to glut his guests." As drinks and food ran out, Momo Danladi came in with two gourds of 'Pito' and 'Burukutu.' These, she presented to Demola, who thankfully placed them before the audience. This was greeted with shouts of protests and approvals; while some people instantly rose and hurried out in disgust, a few remained seated, unsure, as if they sat on thorns. Others watched longingly for a taste of the native brew.

"The whole place started bustling again, with life. They danced and sang over their drinks. The gourd of 'Burukutu' sat heavily on the floor, flies played boisterously about its foaming mouth and some of the flies, drunk, boldly dived into the gourd. Others got

their wings stuck to the flowing froth and were dragged helplessly
down the face of the gourd.

CHAPTER 5

Demola moved into a new two-room apartment at Sabon Gari six months after Ebum put to bed. The house, unlike the previous one, had a well in the compound and a pipe borne water in front of the house. Demola moved into this two-room apartment after the long awaited result of the interview for the post of a typist came out in his favour. Though Demola's family can now afford a little luxury, they did not leave their past completely behind them. They visited Momo Danladi sometimes and Saliu in Kano. Ebum took to learning tailoring, graduated and awaited the day she could afford a sewing machine. Meanwhile she devoted her time to the up keep of her home. At her spare time, she did some knitting which she displayed outside for sale.

Once, Demola returned home after a hard day's work and found Ade playing in front of the house, his knee deep in mud. Demola walked into the compound with fury in his steps. He looked round the compound but Ebum was no where to be found. Almost boiling over with anger he rushed to the kitchen which was a separate block

from the main building, and there he found Ebum cooking, her back turn to the door.

“What the hell are you cooking, leaving Ade to bathe in dirty water?” Demola bawled. Visibly shaken, Ebum looked instinctively around for her son, then her eyes fell. She hurried outside where she found Ade still enjoying his game.

“I was busy in the kitchen as you can see, and did not notice when he left the compound unnoticed.”

“Unnoticed! No, no, no” he barked. “Is that all you can say? Answer me, or must I work all day long in the office and return home only to take care of my children as well. If that boy gets into any harm, you will have yourself to blame for it.” he prayed. Ebum got hold of Ade, smacked him behind and took him to the well side. Demola watched this for a moment, turned and walked into the house.

Baba oyoyo! Daddy welcome! Baba oyoyo! Ade sang, running out to welcome his father back home from work. after dinner, Demola sat, relaxed, in a chair with Yemi in his arms. In one corner of the room, Ade was busy tryig to free a fly entangled in a spider’s web. Demola watched Ade for some time then lost interest. His mind reverted to the letter he received, in the office in the early hours of that day, he was happy with the promotion, no doubt, but what bordered him was the clause attached to it. Demola was to proceed to Lagos as an accounts clerk. He wanted to share this new development with his wife. So, he sent for her. While Ebum sat beside him, he read the letter slowly.

“God almighty!” Ebum gasped. Demola saw a flash of fear in her eyes but he knew she would go to any length with him.

CHAPTER 6

The night refused to come to an end, and Ade, too impatient to wait for dawn to crawl to a break, got out of bed. He tip-toed noiselessly to his mother's bedroom, ran his hands down the wall in search of the light switch, switched on the light and went to the table where his new school uniform lay displayed. He was to start school that morning and he wanted to make sure everything was in order. He counted the items one by one: two brown shorts, two white shirts, a light blue cap and a pair of 'back to school bata sandals. Satisfied, he left the room as quietly as he had entered it, but his mother who had been watching him, called him back to put off the light.

"Put off that light, Ade, and what are you doing in the room by this time of the night?"

"It's already morning, Mama, and I want to put on my school uniform." Ebun picked her wrist watch from the top of the cupboard beside the bed and read it.

“Put off that light and get back to bed. It’s only four o’clock.” She said with finality. Ade switched off the light and locked the door gently after him. Seconds later, Ebun heard the shower whizzing in the bathroom. She smiled to herself and tried to go back to sleep but could not, so she allowed her though to roam as it wished. When she came into the sitting room a while later, Ade had dressed up with cap in hand, eyes glowing with pride. His sister Yemi, sat admiring the outfit.

Back in his office, after dropping his son at his new school, Demola opened his table drawer his eyes caught a small blue card which he fished out rapidly. He instinctively glanced at the calendar.

“Ha, how lucky, this Koteh. I have forgotten all about his son’s christening coming up this evening.” Demola smiled with realization.

“No wonder, Koteh has been parading the corridor on the smallest excuse and shouting greetings to every fellow workers. And all this done to remind me of his presence.” Samuel Koteh, a messenger attached to clerical office, was celebrating the eight day of his sixth baby by his third wife.

“Yes, I shall honour this invitation.

A change from this boring routine could be refreshing I will go for the sun and spite the lantern light. He said to himself. Demola dropped the card into his suitcase and looked at the pile of files on his table with a nauseating discomfort. He stretched, yawned and took a newspaper and began to read.

At home that evening, Demola told Ebun about the invitation but Ebun felt it was too sudden. Said she;

“I think it’s more decent to have been told earlier than now.”

“He gave the card to me this morning.” He lied. “You know our people, they have virtually no regard for time. I wouldn’t have bordered going myself, if by convention junior staff don’t, exceptionally, feel honoured to be a host when ‘bigmen’ come to grace their occasion. It is always a boost on their ego, before their friends and relatives.”

Apart from two car parked in front of Kotech’s house, everywhere around was packed full of motor cycles. Demola squeezed his car between two motor-bikes and waited to be conducted in. people were hanging about, talking in groups. A little disappointed, he sat in his car and waited. There was no doubt that he was late, but this was intentional. An important person like him need not show anxiety for little things like this. He reasoned. “After all, I have enough to eat and drink in my own house, and coming early would only mean missing the attention and praises of early comers. This is Africa and Africans must keep Africa time,” we must be patriotic to our God-given Africa,”

Never mind what some errant idiots say about ‘African time’ ‘IPT’ (Irresponsible Peoples Time)” Demola cautioned his invisible students.

“What do they know? Nothing. By the way who is more responsible? Those rag-wearing-book worms, who go about town shouting ‘IPT’ at us, or we, people of substance, who like mirage, gliter and brighten dull ceremonies in town with our mere presence. Shit men!

Why those jungle beasts are allowed to roam in the open and left, free, to trample on our conscience and spit into our honourable faces is a mystery to me. Demola, was so engrossed in this analysis, that he did not notice Joseph Kotech hurrying towards his car.

His heart was pounding with excitement and his eyes glittering like that of a rattle snake, getting ready to pounce on his invisible enemy.

“Thank be to God, you are here at last, Sir.” Koteh shouted. “Sir, I thought you would not come again, sir. Because work fit plenty for oga.” He smiled obsequiously, exposing a black set of teeth. Demola instinctively wiped his nose with a handkerchief.

“No, not at all, though a busy man, I thought it proper to see how things are done here today.”

“Thank you very much, sir. Come in, please.” Demola adjust his ‘Agbada’ several times as he followed Koteh into the crowd. They squeezed past the dancing indifferent lot. Disappointment that he was not given any attention, Demola dropped the hands of his flowing gown. He was led to a room reserved for ‘important guests’. This room had an air of apparent soberness, compared with what obtained outside. A little girl was waiting on the guests. She fumbled with a bottle of coke in an attempt to open it for a woman sitting opposite Demola.

“Come on, open that thing quick, and ask oga Demola wetin he go drink.” Koteh shouted at the little girl. The girl feverishly left the bottle unopened. She went to attend to Demola.

“Wetin you go drink sir,?” she asked languidly, scratching her head with the opener she was holding in her hand.

“Anything will do” Demola replied, absent-mindedly, “Anything, but liquor.” He added. Demola’s attention had been drawn to a tall, large lady, sitting in one corner of the room. He notice, with interest, that her face and fingers were conspicuously lighter than her neck and arms respectively. Her eyes darted in it’s socket like a cornered chameleon, Demola though she was pretty. This woman

held in her left hand, a glass of big bottle of Guinness stout. Like one in a trance, she stared at Demola with half closed eyes. Her parted lips, petals of rose. Surreptitiously, Demola studied her cosmetic charm: she wore a sea blue lace, 'Iro and buba.' Her declivitous undulating strands of hair fell on her shoulder like the mane of a lioness.

The little girl returned with a bottle of beer and two bottles of soft drinks. She placed them before Demola and withdraw. Music started to play and he could hear shuffling feet of dancers outside. The little girl reappeared again with a glass.

"You can take away the bottle of beer, I prefer the soft drink. Demola advised the girl. As the girl picked up the bottle and disappeared, Demola returned to his object of interest. But then, the seat was empty.

"Where is she now." He looked around casually, then checked himself.

"What's my business with her anyway." Demola later saw her on the dance floor outside, she was with a man. The man she was dancing with was shouting at the top of his voice, as he interpreted the secrets of the talking drum. Demola watched the woman dance, her buttocks wriggled and vibrated under the spell of the dulcet melody. Demola's lower lip dropped. He remained so, transfixed to his seat. Then, she caught Demola watching her. Their eyes met and to Demola's eternal joy, her face thawed into a smile. She winked. Demola picked up his glass and drink from it.

"Have you been served, sir?" Demola's host broke the thread of his attention.

"Yes, yes. Thanks a lot." He replied; Koteh hurried away. When the music expired and everyone returned to their seats, Demola

rose instinctively to his feet. He walked up to the lady and stooped slightly while he talked to her.

“Hello, will you dance the next number with me?” He accosted her, she raised up her head slowly, looked straight into Demola’s face, then, smiled.

“What if I don’t like your next number?”

“Why not let me take care of that, which one do you prefer high life: Juju, Fuji, Apala, Waka or Afro beat?”

“Any Juju number will do”

“Right.” Demola straightened himself and walked to the operator who rose from his seat to meet him. The music he requested for started to play as he moved off. The lady joined him on the dance floor. Others joined them too, and the floor was once again full. They danced in silence, Demola waited for an opportunity to start a conversation. He felt like moving closer to her in order to lessen the tension that had build up in him. Then she spoke.

“I can see you don’t like alcohol. Are you a Muslim or a member of the ‘Deeper Life?’

“No, I don’t take alcohol, but I wouldn’t mind having a taste. If only to please you.”

The lady fell silent and danced on. While the talking drum gurgled she clinched to the edge of her wrapper, wriggled her buttocks, bending almost double. Her legs moved effortlessly to the beat of the ‘Akuba’ and the ‘Agidigbo,’ Demola was having a nice time but was surprised at himself. There was something, no drawing, pushing or attracting him towards this strange woman and there tended to be no going back. It was as if a string of passion was binding them together. And this string stretched tight, one end attached to the most tender part of this strange woman and the other

end to himself. Demola moved closer to her in order to relax this tension.

“What can I call you? Mine is Demola”

“I am Lilikatu Kayode, popularly known as Lilian Key.”

“Lilian Key.” That is a fine name”

“I stay in Bakutu Street. I have a beer parlour there as well.”

“Is that so?” Demola wondered, unsure of what to say, Lilian Key had revealed so much about herself.

“Oh yes, that is where I make my daily bread.”

“I know that street very well. Bakutu Street isn’t it.” He lied.

“I will call there one of these days for a crate or two of minerals.

“Be my guest.” Lilian said as the music gradually ends. She excused herself and went to join some women who had gathered for a snapshot.

“Be my guest.” She had said.” Demola marveled. Women are such marvelous instances. That was the last he saw of Lilian key that evening. As he drove back home, he wondered, what had got into him. There was an attraction to or was it affection for that Lilian? He wondered.

“Affect... what.?” He checked his thought.

“Affection! For who? For that loose, party woman. I mean, imagine the rate at which she consumes alcohol. Who said he loved her anyway” He questioned his thought.

“Love” He chuckled at the growing conflict within himself. The thought of his family cornered this conflict as he negotiated a corner leading to his palmgroove residence.

“Leave Lilian Key alone for now” He said aloud to himself. “You are home now” He read his wrist watch. “Half past two.” He parked his car in the garage and made for the door, opened the door with the least noise and stepped into the warmth of his home.

“Who’s that?” Eburn’s voice wisped from her bedroom

“It’s me”

“Welcome. Did you enjoy yourself?”

“I sure did. In fact I regretted your not coming along with me.” Realizing that there was no response from Eburn, Demola went into his own bed-room, undressed and got into bed. While he tried to compose himself to sleep, the events of that evening, at the party, presented themselves before his mind. The picture of Lilikatu came before his eyes. He tried to shake these pictures off by thinking of something else, but images of Lilikatu only grew stronger and clearer in his mind’s eyes. Demola tried his old tricks of imposing other ideas on a stubborn thought:

“First thing tomorrow morning, I will visit my bank... then...

but this trick was too weak for the image of Lilikatu. Her image simply strangled the idea out of focus and reasserted herself again. So he found himself admiring Lilikatu’s long jet black hair and her bloodred lips. Annoyed, Demola grabbed the bed switch and put on the light. He picked up a magazine, opened a page and started to read. Whenever the sub-conscious desire is in conflict with the conscious desire, the subconscious tends to rule. After a while, Lilikatu appeared again on the page of magazine. Helplessly, Demola watched the picture for a while. Then with suddenness, closed the magazines with a loud clap. He flung it across the room and put out the light.

Eburn walked down the crowded Yaba bus stop, drenched in sweat. She had waited in vain for taxi for over an hour, but none came. So with dismay she asked a passer-by the cause.

“So, you haven’t heard, that, today is taxi driver’s day.” They are protesting against government’s decision to slash taxi flat fare of N1.00 to 50k. she had heard about this cut, but did not hear that the taxi drivers would react in this manner. She picked her bags in both hands and joined the throng of people. As she stopped to relax the strain on her hand, Mr. Joshua, a neighbour friend saw her. He stopped and beckoned to her. She thankfully accepted the lift and as the sweat cooled off, she reflected on the inconsiderate and unpatriotic attitude of the taxi drivers.

“Why should they take the law into their hands. I can’t see the rationale behind the taxi-drivers’ action. Opposing government’s effort to alleviate the sufferings of the common man. They should realize that, not everyone is rich enough to afford N1.00 per every drop.”

“I can’t blame those boys, said Joshua.”

It’s not easy to get spare parts in the market these days. The cost of tyre, for instance is rising. Can you believe it, Mama Ade, that the cost of tyre has risen by 300%”. Ebun was silent. Joshua continued, speaking through his teeth. “I believe every citizen has a part to play as much as any government.”

“I hope things will improve” she prayed.

“If only prayers alone could solve our problems.” Joshua dropped her in front of her house.

“Thank you sir.”

“It’s a pleasure. Greeting to Baba Ade. I might call on him, during the weekend.” As she walked in, she noticed that her husband’s car was not around. The fear of Demola’s recent strange behaviour has started to sprout all over in her mind.

“He must be on overtime at work”. Ebum consoled herself as she settled down to prepare the evening meal. Somewhere, behind her mind, she was sure, her husband was having an affair with some woman.

“Ebum slammed the door of impossibility, against the face of such thought.

CHAPTER 7

In the darkness, Demola pressed the light-button of his electric wrist watch in order to read the time. "5.30"am, he sat up in bed and reluctantly staggered towards the bathroom. He washed, dressed up and went out, shutting the door gently after him. Save for a dog that was barking, Mukatu Street was peaceful. He drove straight to the office. After about seven month's affair with Lilikatu, Demola came to realize that Lilikatu was the right woman for him.

"She is sociable and presentable in society" Demola reasoned. Unlike that primitive, local woman I keep at home. Wasn't it Lilian herself who said that Ebun was the only obstacle to our perfect happiness?

"That's a simple matter" Demola had assured Lilikatu. "You leave that to me. I will not have useless, bush woman in my house. She must take what is coming or leave".

That evening, Demola returned home in high spirit, Ade was there to open the door for him. Demola stepped into the room and paused with a broad grin on his face. He looked about the parlour.

“welcome daddy.” The children chorused.

“Hello...hic up...” Demola staggered to a seat. His buttocks narrowly missed its object. He quickly readjusted and started to whistle, convulsively. Ebum continued to concentrate her gaze on the television screen. Demola too was watching the programme but with suppressed difficulty. After a while, his head dropped on his chest. Snoring took over where whistling had stooped. He snored labourously and spittle exploded intermittently from his mouth. Suddenly, he rose onto his feet, scratched off the saliva that had started to drip down his shirt, and moved blindly into the bathroom. Ebum heard a strangled Demola. He was standing over the sink, stooped like a human fountain, under a fit of vomit. When he straightened himself at last, Ade was already by his mother’s side. He was watching too. Ebum noticed pain on her husband’s contorted brow. Mother and son stepped aside as father dragged himself past.

“Daddy is sick?” Ade asked, looking into his mother’s eyes.

“No, he is not sick. He is only having a nice time.” Expression of surprise registered on Ade’s face. One thing Ebum vowed never to do is tell her children lies.

One day, for certain, they will come to know you lied, and down you’ll fall before their eyes. This to Ebum is a thing of eternal shame.

“But why does he vomit so?” Ade persisted.

“Go and ask him. He will be in a better position to tell you if he is sick or not. Ebum gently shoved Ade away, but Ade remained rooted to the spot, unsure. Demola emerged again from the kitchen, his head dripping with water. He felt light in the head but hollow in the stomach, so he sat down and closed his eyes. Ebum noticed that he now looked faintly sobered.

“Why not go in. lie on your back and ponder over what damage you are doing to your family and self.” Then almost in a whisper. Ebun said

“Your children are watching, can’t you see? Your home is crumbling under you. The home you built with your sweat is crumbling” Without opening his eyes, Demola replied softly.

“I am glad you realized it’s my sweat, what stopped me then from enjoying the fruit of my labours”. Please leave me alone, your words give me headache” he opened his eyes and as one carrying salver, he held his head in both hands. “Now go, I have better things to occupy my mind with. He shut his eyes again but it was too late. For the light in her serene words had penetrated his closed mind. He regretted ever opening his eyes at all.

“Better thing indeed. Hasting out of your house at day-break and creeping in at night, drunk and messing up the whole place in front of your children. When adults are delinquent like this, what do we expect from children?” Demola stiffened, flames in his eyes.

“Are you drunk? How dare you talk to me like that? When did I become so vulgar for the common tongue? Now, get out of here. Come on, put off that thing and get going” Ebun did not move. Demola stamped past her, switched off the television set, then turned to Ebun.

“You have now become so stubborn and rebellious enough to reverse the order of things in this house. I see, I see.”

“When the hen flirts with the cockroach, the cockroach is happy. But the hen knows where the romance will end.” She intoned solemnly.

“What, speaking to me in proverbs? This is too much. I cannot take this insolence of yours any longer. You have climbed the tree beyond the leaves and you must taste the pain of a fall.” He went

for her but she had already taken flight for her room. She bolted the door.

“Yes, bad company, bad friends have turned you against your family.” Eburn’s voice rang loudly within.

“What friends are you referring to? Don’t you dare bring her into this. I warn you.” Demola cautioned, shaking a threatening forefinger at the closed door.

“Who is ‘Her’? so it is this her of yours, that haggard Lilikatu, that has set you against me?” Demola pounded at the door.

“Why not bring your Lilli home instead of playing this backyard game like a kid.” Eburn continued to fire at him, her voice clawing through him like someone possessed.

“Open that door, just open the door and I will teach you to...to...” Choked by anger, he attacked the door with his fist.

“Go on, break the door if you can. I will not open it.” The barking door must have woken Ade, for he came to the scene, confused and alarmed. He had never seen his father in such a violent state before. Ade just stood there watching his father dealing blows at the door. Behind the door, he heard the voice of his mother, ringing out slightly above the croaking door. Moved by an impulse, Ade ran to his sweat-drenched father.

“Daddy, stop it. leave her alone.” He held his father by the hand. “Come on off with you” he shoved Ade away. “Daddy, please, please, what has she done?” he held his father again and in anger, he pushed Ade away with a force that sent Ade crashing against a stool. He landed with his side. Pain exploded in his ribs. He gathered himself up instantly.

“It’s me Daddy, me!” Ade cried, his voice shooting above the gurgling door. The door suddenly opened. Eburn dashed past Demola, who taken unawareness stood facing the open door. Eburn

knelt down beside Ade, took him in her arms and massaged Ade all over with a practiced gently haste.

“You can kill us”, if you don’t care.” Ebum implored between sobs. But Demola made no further move.

“I have nothing more to tell you but this, that I need some peace in my life. When two game cocks meet in a common cage, the cage is barren of peace.” Demola said as he went into Ebum’s bedroom and emerged with some of her belongings which he littered about the veranda.

“No use destroying my property” Ebum told him. “We shall leave your cage for you.” Ebum lifted Ade up to her bosom and took him into her room. She packed her belongings and stepped out into the cold night. Demola banged the door after them.

The cold, damp, dew of dawn still hanged heavily in the air. The children shivered in their scanty wears. Ade held his sister by the hands as they waited patiently at palmgroove bus-stop for a taxi.

“Where are we going mummy? Ade queried.

“To your grandmother’s place. By noon, tomorrow we should be with her.”

Ebum answered.

“I am very cold, mother” Yemi intoned

“We shall have warmth there as well.” Ebum answered.

CHAPTER 8

Two months after Ebum packed out of Demola's house, Demola helped Lilian pack her few properties into what was Ebum's former bedroom. Readjustment tends to be the first challenge.

"I reckon you spend virtually the better part of the day in your beer parlour. How do you intend to cope with the domestic affairs?"

"Never mind," Lilian assured him, "I will make this house stand as a monument of our romance. My shop would be our second home because this house, as I see it, cannot stand for long before it falls. It's too weak to stand the gluttonous treachery of our time." This answer shocked Demola.

"What do you mean 'this house is not strong enough to stand the gluttonous treachery of our time'?"

"Not with these 'Emergency contractors' we have these days. All they care for is what they can get out of you. They line their pockets and handbags with your money and leave you dry and naked, and the houses they build are weak because they are constructed with inferior building materials. But you have nothing to worry about,

the house in which I transact my business is modern and its currency can stand the test of many experiences.”

“You mean this building, as solid as this,” testing the wall with his fist. “This house cannot stand for long? You must be joking, Lilian? “I mean it, it is built on inexperience and lust. For security reasons, we must retain my shop. I insist.”

“You are not serious. Was it not you who complimented me on the charm and warmth of my home and the beauty of the house?”

“It was a judgment based on ignorance. I did not realize then, when I saw it from a distance, that I was only beholding disaster.”

“Well, in case your prediction come true, your beer-parlour is there.” Demola said, moving away from Lilian. He picked his car’s key and fondled it with impatience, thoughtful.” I never knew you to be a prophet of doom but I should have known better. Lilian Kayode. Allah hu Akbar” He grinned sarcastically.

“Now, who said Mohammed was the last of the prophets. Let that man come and see a lady prophet.”

“Say what you will, Ajia Lilikatu must retain her beer parlour.”

“Right, prophetess Lilikatu Kayode, tell us, when do we expect the great fall”

“That is your business. You may laugh as much as you like. You will also have the last cry.”

“Now, on a serious note,” moving towards her and holding her hand firmly in his. “There is no reason why you cannot retain your beer parlour, if you so desired. What I am saying after all, is for your own convenience.”

“Leave all the domestic worries to me and watch how I manage. You will take me back to the shop before you return to your office, wouldn’t you?”

“But, you must get me something to eat immediately we get there. I am dead hungry”

“Your stomach tends to be of paramount importance to you, what about mine? Can you fast at all?” She said, breaking off from his hold.”

“Fast? What do you call me? A spiritual beggar or a materialistic hypocrite? I am none of these and so have no cause to starve myself.” After taking his breakfast in his wife’s shop for almost three months, Lilikatu suggested that Demola should stop coming all together. His routine coming and going was disturbing her business. Said Lilikatu. “Since I am always off and on in search of better business strategy, it will be better if you find something to eat in the office.” Demola, out of sheer compulsive sympathy, acknowledge the difficulties she was going through, though he loathed his wife’s recent tendency towards dominance of all that concerned their domestic affairs. She had managed to convinced Demola to allow her leave home as early as six a.m. for her shop, and also to remain there until Demola came in the late evening to pick her home. He had also of late accepted Lilikatu’s suggestion that she needed another refrigerator to cope with the ‘high demand for chilled drinks’ at the shop.

“I will need another refrigerator for the inner room where the VIC, (very important customer) who prefer to relax free from the noise of the general section” Demola, out of love for his wife, advised that she remove the only refrigerator in their house, pending the time he buys a new one. Finding his house empty of warmth, he sought for all that his new home lacked in Lilikatu’s beer parlour.

"After all, the shop, notwithstanding its rowdiness, is cosy and comfortable." He reasoned. So he considered it only wise to stay long hours in Lilikatu's business premises and entertain his friends there as well.

"Give me a bottle of beer, dear," Demola said.

"You have not eaten anything and you ask for drink." Lilian replied, then called Ledisi, one of her stewards.

"Give him his food when it is ready. I get customer to attend to." She ordered and went off.

"Yes Ma'am" Ledisi replied and withdrew as fast as he had appeared.

"Get me a bottle of beer first, Ledisi." Demola called after him. Ledisi, as if he had not heard Demola's request, sat behind the counter counting some money and taking down notes, his forehead bearing ridges of concentration.

"Ladisi; are you deaf. I said give me something to drink, fool." Ledisi's head rose with the dignity of labour.

"Oga, beer no cold yet, sir."

"Bring am so, idiot." Demola shouted with diminishing patience. Ledisi served him a bottle of Guilder. He drank this with a lustfull guggle. He was later served his food. After the meal, he asked for one more bottle, but Ledisi protested at once with a polite bow, but a rude tone.

"sir, I tell you say them drink no cold yet."

"Put am for freezer. I go take am later. Abi no bi for sale?"

"Nda bari, my God! Sir, the freezer don full sir" Ledisi said, alarmed. He knew that Demola, being the husband of his mistress, would not pay for the drinks he consumed and he will have to account for every bottle of beer sold.

"But you said no cold drink, a while ago. How come...."

"Oh, these ones" pointing towards the open freezer. "Ha! someone get them o. He go soon come collect them." Lilikatu, just coming in, over heard them.

"Don't touch that drink them o. you hear me, Ledisi" Lilikatu warned.

"Chow, Ma'am, I no touch am at all. I just dey tell Oga Demola say..."

"Say wetin." Lilikatu cut him shut and waved him away. Ledisi gave her a seruptitious wink and walked quickly off to attend to a man who had just entered with some woman. The man sat down and waved the woman to a seat. Ledisi noticed that the person sitting with this man was a mere girl.

"Gbere bari, Almighty God; This girl no go pass fourteen years old sef. Me feel say the pocket money, wey she go carry go school she dey look for so." Ledisi speculated, shaking his head slowly as he went for what the man ordered. The girl sat passively and meekly clinched her handbag firmly to her breast. Lilikatu served Demola one more bottle of Guilder and then settled herself down as well on a big bottle of stout.

"You have eaten?" lilikatu asked, absent mindedly.

"Ask me that question again" Demola replied. Lilikatu did not hear him.

"Drink, darling, drink, drink." She sang softly to her self.

A man had just come in. he was talking to Ledisi.

"Is your mistress in?"

"Welcome sir" Ledisi smiled broadly with recognition.

"She dey inside. Your drink them don dey for maximum prison since morning. Na execute them dey wait for." Ledisi laughed but the man did not seem to hear him. He glided towards where Demola and Lilikatu sat.

"Welcome sir" Lilikatu greeted

“Thank you, thank you very much” The new comer replied. He shoke hands with Demola and sat down with them.

“Come here, Ledisi. Serve Mr. Demola a bottle of beer” The man ordered.

“One for Lili, and one for me” He added, Ledisi served them and disappeared.

“How is the evening going to be” Lilikatu asked the man.

“Its just starting” he answered curtly and was silent again. The trio drank on in silence. Gradually, the ageing evening drew in more people. In groups, pairs and individually, every seat was soon occupied. Suppressed murmur grew by degrees as soft juju music filtered out through hidden loud speakers.

“Bottle bottle. Where is Oke? Lilikatu asked the man.

“I don’t know. He will be here soon, I guess,

And thank you, thank you very much. Ludo Akaba, alias “Bottle bottle” was fond of saying; “thank you, thank you very much”, before or after a sentence. He was a man of society, well know in Lagos night clubs simply as ‘impossible’ Ludo is a land owner, a business magnate whom no one dare challenge. It was common belief that he could kill to get what he wanted. He bought his desires with money or with blood.

So, Akaba was worshipped, even revered as a saviour; for no social gathering worth its material honey would be deprived of the grace of ‘Bottle bottle’. Top police officers and customs chiefs were his close servile confidants. Ludo Akaba was a small man of about four feet, nine inches tall. He has a fearfully bulging eyeballs and a small mouth. He was smart and immaculate in his big flowing gown. Women within the ‘inner circle’ called him ‘honourable Bottle bottle’ on account of his smallness. But he could only be so called, exclusively by those in the “inner’ circle” Outsiders or those he often refered to as “evil tongues” dare not call him by that sacred

name. If anyone did, he spat fire and threatened to bring 'the wrath of lightning' on such a person.

"Thank you, thank you very much, my dear" He would respond when called Bottle bottle.' "But let any idiot, born with leftovers in his or her mouth dare soil my honourable name with foul breath, and the cursed mouth will be shut for ever"

Often he would follow this threat with several steps, moving forward and backward as he sang along with his fans:

Ludo: "What is the tongue of a destitute?"

Chrous: "Cutlass, 'And we shall, sure, use it to mawn (mow) down grasses"

Ludo: "And the mouth of a destitute?"

Chrous: "What else could it be used for, but for scrubbing hard earth."

"Here we are, there Oke comes." Lilikatu shouted. She was obviously excited like a person with head in the cloud. The darkness inside was overwhelming for Oke. He stood for a while by the door for his eyes to get used to missing the light it left behind outside. He stepped in, holding the woman he came with by the wrist. He practically dragged her towards where Ludo and others sat. Akaba who had by now beheaded and laid to rest half a dozen bottles of beer, sat staring at the new comers without saying a word.

"Evening," Oke greeted, as he took his seat.

"Thank you, thank you very much... you think...hiccup...you think you can keep us waiting...hiccup...for so long. No be so?"

"By lighting, I am terribly sorry, Bottle bottle. It's that woman again. She will not let me out of her sight."

"Aha, I guess as much. All right, go back home...hiccup...and suck more milk...hiccup..." Ludo's head dropped on his chest with exhaustion.

"That wife of yours with her short temper. She will be the end of you." Tutu, the woman who came in with Oke put in.

"Short what" Oke shrieked.

"Long temper you mean? The way she stretched small matter, you will think she is the head of the house."

"Oh! Tutu? Ludo interjected, apparently aware of Tutu's presence for the first time.

"So you are here as well."

"No, I am not here' Bottle bottle'. How are you doing anyway?"

"Thank you, thank you very much...hicc up...Lilian, get us more bottles. Abi them beer don finish?" Lilikatu neglected Ludo's orders. She turned to Tutu.

"Tutu, I love that your wrist watch o" Lilikatu said lustfully as she admired a gold plated wrist watch on Tutu's wrist.

"How much you buy am."

"It is imported" Tutu said proudly, stretching out her hand towards Lilikatu, as if to say "Here, kiss it. worship it" "N5,000 cash down, Original. It is specially made for those who are "down-to-earth on question of taste" Tutu quoted the advert jingo for the watch. "No sweat must touch it. if sweat touch am, the power go leave am and the gold go wash commot.

"Person like me no fit use am be that" Lilikatu regretted.

"How I no go sweat?" she wondered.

"The watch dey for special people wey them dey call 'AC3' Tutu said importantly. 'AC3' them live for air-conditioned everything; air conditioned house, air conditioned car, and air conditioned office..."

"By lighting, what have we got here, Lilian" Oke screamed. They all turned their attention to where Demola sat, slump on his chair, fast asleep. His breath was coming in smorts and foam of alcohol gathered about his open mouth.

"Lilian Key, for God's sake, give this husband of yours honourable sleep" Oke advised. They all burst into laughter. Ludo did not join

them. He was mumbling something inaudible to himself.

“Come, help me carry oga in, I beg.” Lilikatu and Ledisi virtually dragged Demola into the inner room. Lilikatu later joined the others and they drank almost in silence. The juju record that was playing was stopped and replaced with a congo music.

In protest, Tutu stood up, excused herself and walked towards exit. Oke saw her standing alone and went to join her.

“Let’s dance, Lilian. I just feel like it tonight” Ludo stammered.

“I am too tired for that now” Lilikatu protested. Ludo struggled to his feet and took lilikatu by the hand. He stired her unsteadily to one corner of the room. A couple of persons have also taken to the floor, dancing.

“I don’t like this number” Lilikatu protested again. She freed herself from Ludo’s grip and went to where the record player was and in a moment, the current juju number, “Kusimilaya” started to play. She joined Ludo and they danced. As the tempo rose, a couple of persons also took to the floor. Ludo and Lilikatu remained in the seclusion of the dark corner, mindless of the noise from dancing feet. As every available space was occupied and encroachment into their world became inevitable, Ludo and Lilikatu casually shifted ground. They moved into the inner room. Even here, Ludo and Lilikatu could still hear the melody filtering softly in through the closed door. From the bedroom, Demola’s hoarse snore whizzed out into Lilikatu’s ears. She smiled to herself and moved a step closer, into the comfort of Ludo’s arms. They danced on. She wriggled her waist and shook her buttocks, for, she would not allow Ludo to beat her to it. The privacy and warmth of the room helped to highten the tempo. Ludo moved a step forward and a step backward, followed by two steps forward and a step backward. Lilikatu, employing her latest style, rocked on the spot, with legs motionless. Her eyes were drowsy with rhythmic concentration. Then, suddenly,

the melody broke into a solemn crescendo but, as it were, only Ludo took the dictation

He stood rigid on one spot and with gradual diminuendo, the music expired and the explosion that followed, rank through Ludo's head. He slumped into a chair, perspiring and out of breath.

CHAPTER 9

“Children of today, I know not where I stand with you.” Eburn’s grandmother said, shrugging her shoulders.

“What else, if not sheer madness; A father throwing his own children out of his house” She rose to light the lantern and Eburn noticed that her hand shook a little.

“And you said this man of yours was not drunk when he did this monstrous thing? Well, if he was not drunk, then he needs a mental check up” The old woman concluded.

“He had a misunderstanding with his boss the day before the episode. This must have been the cause” Eburn lied.

“Rubbish, my dear child, rubbish. He needed a better excuse for his actions. Is he the only one with problems. We all have our problems as well. But we face them without unduly hurting others. He must, no doubt, be mad or you are hiding something from me”

“That is truth, mother” Eburn, in truth, did not tell her grandmother about the other woman, Lilikatu, and she did not intend to do so. “And these children,” referring to Ade and Yemi. “What do you intend to do about their future?”

"They will continue with their education here. I will get myself a job, so that I can keep them in school.

"What are you talking about? Talking like someone with a toothless gum. Are you both mad? Your husband and you? With all this fat salary he earns, he cannot send his own children to school?"

"They are my children as well. The fruit of our love. He and I must love and care for these fruits. No one knows what seeds these fruits carry in them and so they must not be allowed to rot away."

"Alright, Ade is almost through with his elementary school. How do you intend to send him to a secondary school? You know the money is not just there. I advise you give these children a decent trade. I suggest you send him to salami's workshop to learn carpentry. The trade is very lucrative. Look," the old woman pointed to a chair by the wall.

"Salami made that for me. I will talk to him tomorrow and you don't need to worry about Yemi, she can remain with me in my bean-cake shed"

"Ade has just secured admission into a government secondary school. The fee is reasonable fair for me to cope with. While he is away in school, I will get myself a job as a cleaner with the College of Education, here in Ibadan. With whatever I earn, I will keep my children in school"

"The way you talk, as if everybody must go to school. Let these children learn trade. Business is more lucrative than school. It's money we are all after, in this world, any way. Book or no book, there is more money in trade than all this book, book business"

"Money is not everything mother. If I must starve to death for these children's education, then so be it. These two are all I have as children."

"It is good" the old woman said. The futility of pressing the matter further is apparent, so she let the matter rest. The old one knew her

grand daughter well. From the very time Ebun could pronounce her first words, she had been a positively obstinate child. She seldom spoke but when she did, her words were heavy with ignosis. Ebun never compromised her belief or ideals and would stick to her conviction as a finger nail would stick to a finger.

“The ways of this girl of mine are definitely too large for me to master” thought the old woman. And I wonder what would have become of her, if the death of her father had not nipped her education in the bud.”

When Ebun laid down to rest that night, her mind went back to the discussion she had with her grandmother.

“She meant well.” Ebun thought. “My good, old woman. But she failed to realize one thing; that man’s mind is not static and the old ways must also give the new ones a chance. Every generation must have a free hand to decide their own destiny. But often, grandma’ will look at generations after her’s and say:

“The world is heading for disaster. The way you children of today live make me fear the worst. You are far too skeptical, inquisitive and often, you go in search of illusive freedom. You will not listen to those before you, live as we lived, learn our old wisdom and our age of order. You prefer, instead this age of disorder, this break-age.”

“I have always said it, that, what your ways will wrought on the world will be too heavy for you to bear alone” Like this, the old woman’s voice would drag painfully on. A mind shrouded in the glories of a past generation. There are moments too, Ebun recollected, when this same ancient voice of protest would ring out sweet, as it heralded moonlight stories. “One of Ebun’s favourite stories she loved to hear from this grandmother was titled ‘Man and gods at war’

“In the beginning,” the old woman would begin “Long before man acquired the art of disobedience. Long before the gods learnt the

“We must teach these short stunted fools a lesson they will never forget.” The head god rumbled.

“Pack, quick, pack. We are leaving. We shall make men come begging with their heads in dust and aches” The gods left men. When men returned from their journey, they found their homes empty, desolate and strange. The fertile part of Goma and its gold gone and the gods were nowhere to be found. But men had one consolation; the seed they had won from wonderland. Yet they feared that this seed might not thrive in the barren mass.

The gods created for themselves heaven, leaving men helpless but hopeful and determined.

“What are we waiting for? Let us pull down their heaven” shouted one of the men.

“Yes, let us destroy it. Pull it down”.

Pull heaven down. Down with the gods.” Men chorused in unison. They made for themselves bows and arrows from dry twigs and branches of trees. Men waged total war against the gods. It was a sunny day, the sun was breathing fire and the earth was baking and crumbling under the fierce heat. Men summoned all the strength they could muster. They drew their weapons and shot their arrows into the sky. Their arrows pierced the evenness of heaven and water gushed from its torn tenderness. The sky hissed and simmered and steam covered the face of the sun. darkness fell as the sun withdrew from the wrinkled face of heaven. The heaven’s surface funneled water down to the thirsty earth and as men’s wounds healed they rejoiced. This torrential rain continued for days and for months and for years. Then, water started to rise. It rose to the level of man’s knees, but men have nothing to fear. Their ‘wisemen’ have assured them that they have nothing to fear, no gods to stoop before. Years crawled into decades and decades into centuries, yet water continued to rise until it struck the level of men’s breast.

Then fear crept in and clinched the hearts of men. They cried out to their wise men.

“Save us, guardians of the seed of knowledge. This seed has only made us blind. We are lost.

Why do you cringe backwards from us so, wise ones? Mercy then, you gods; Take this affliction from us and teach us the true application of this seed, for all we sought for was to be like you gods, not dead giants” Meanwhile, the gods continued to boil with sterile anger. They knew men were a part of them, a diseased part of their soul.

“Despite men’s malignant rebellion, we must touch the hearts of these children with healing compassion” Suggested the head god. Thus, they set out to patch the damage done by the arrows of men. While they worked, steam hovered over the face of the sky and the sun peeped suspiciously out through the patched surface.

The mild morning sun, with renewed passion, was out again. He was out to mop up the surface of the earth. The gods, later that day, met to decide the place of men.

“Now that men have the seed of life but are yet to acquire the experience of ploughing and sowing, what shall we do? Asked the head god.

“I suggest we leave them to search for fertile lands themselves, learn the art of ploughing and sowing, so that through experience and knowledge of self healing, each of them, at his own pace, can grow to be like us and even greater” One of the gods said.

They all agreed to this and so the gods watched and guarded with keen interest how men laboured and toiled and how they failed and succeeded. “Silly, what a silly story. Who was the strange man from wonder land? Where was that wonder land situated? Where? Ebum queried as she turned restlessly on her bed. “And why must men suffer so much before they got mercy from the selfish gods? Ebum was still contemplating these questions when she fell asleep.

CHAPTER 10

Demola sat in his office and helplessly watched with alarming discomfort the pile of files on his desk, yet to be worked on. He felt a sharp pain at the back of his head and could not shake off the dizziness that overwhelmed his eyes. The result of too much drinking of the previous night.

“Good morning, Mr. Demola.” The voice of Mr. Razak, his immediate superior, shook him awake.

“Morning sir,” Demola replied automatically.

“Have you worked on and passed the discrepancy report document I asked you yesterday to pass to the accountant?”

“I am still working on them, sir” Demola stammered with a forced smile which vanished instantly on seeing anger flash past his boss’s eyes.

“That file has been lying idle in your office for the past one week and you stand there telling me you are still working on them.” Mr. Razak sneered.

"I am sorry.... I I will send it down without any further delay. "I guess you will" Razak replied. He leaned over Demola's table. "Is there anything the matter with you? You are not looking well" Before he could finish the sentence, he withdrew, wringing his nose as the odour of alcohol met his nose.

"No problems." Demola replied. Mr. Razak left immediately. Demola went to work, shuffling through the files. He heaved a sigh of relief as he fished out a file. After working on it, he rang for a messenger.

"Take this files to the account's office now and make sure you follow it up." With a slight bow, the messenger left, closing the door softly behind him. Demola went back to work.

"Razak" Demola thought. "How he drives me crazy." Despite his strictness there was something Demola cherished in Razak. He expected anything started finished, and well done too. Demola recollected the first day he resumed duty in Lagos; Razak asked Demola to take a seat, after Demola had tendered his letter of transfer. Although Demola was fifteen minutes behind schedule, Razak went straight to brief him for forty five minutes which was the time left of the one hour schedule.

"You will, no doubt meet with challenges and temptations on your new assignment" Mr. Razak concluded. "But you will enjoy working with us as long as you bear in mind that as we move forward in life, we must be prepared to leave some part of us behind. What you choose to leave behind is for you alone to decide.

"How true" Demola reflected. "Since Mr. Razak uttered these words to me, I have left a lot of things behind and picked a lot of things on the way as well" As the closing hour slide by, Demola crammed more work into the remaining hour and waited after office hour to work for another hour. By the time he stood up, the high threatening

pile of files had reduced considerably. He locked up and drove towards home. Then he rapidly looked at his watch "6.35pm." he said to himself and drove past his house, took the next street to the left and joined the next main stream of vehicle heading to Maryland. And came to a halt in front of Amadi's house and horned. The gateman appeared, beamed a smile of recognition.

"Welcome oga Demola. My oga no dey for house, but madam dey inside house." "Thank you" Demola drove in.

"Let me check, he might leave a message for me" he thought. Amadi's wife, who had heard the conversation outside, opened the door before Demola rang the door bell.

"Welcome, Baba Ade. Long time no see."

"Good evening, Mama Ikechukwu. It's work that prevented me from paying you visits."

"It's work that prevented you from paying us a visit. Even on weekends?" her every word smacking of irony. Demola was speechless. In truth, Amadi's family was a good family friend of Demola's while Ebum was still with him. Now, they stopped seeing Demola when Ebum left. "I can't stand the arrogance of his new wife." She once complained to Amadi. "How is Madam doing?" she asked Demola with one side of the mouth.

"She is doing fine. Did your husband leave any message for me?"

"Oh yes, he did. Come in, please. He said you should wait for him. He will not be long. What can I offer you" Demola entered and sat down without answering her question.

Ikechukwu and Caro were reading on the rug and little Chinyere was babbling away in her cot.

"Good evening, Daddy." The two children chorused.

"Evening, how are you?"

"Fine" they replied. Demola watched the children resume their lesson and it reminded him of his own children. "Ade should be in

his secondary two by now and Yemi, probably, in her final leg of elementary school.”

Since Ebun left Demola’s house, he had not bothered to know what had become of his children. As years rolled by, and no child came between Lilikatu and himself, to blunt the edges of the growing nostalgic feelings that, daily, pinch the most tender part of his heart, he often found himself dreaming of a lost past.

“Would you not have a cool drink? Get Daddy a bottle of beer, Ike.” Amadi’s wife ordered her son without waiting for Demola’s approval. Demola was thankful for this imposition, because he wanted something that would check the unpleasant feeling that had gripped him. He felt his stomach turn with pain of hunger as the smell of cooking in the kitchen met his nose.

“And food will soon be ready” Her voice breezed in from the kitchen as if she had read Demola’s thought. Demola drank his first two glasses in two noisy gulps and they tasted sweet in his mouth. He refilled the glass and sank back into his chair, taking a careful regard of the parlour. Its warmth filled him with envy. Was this pain he is now experiencing the result of the peace and order in this house? Or could it be the delicious aroma and the gentle but sweet voice from the kitchen or could it, even be borne from the children taking their lessons without any care in the world?

“It’s nothing. I have tasted better days myself” Demola was surprised at the sound of his own voice in his ears. Shocked, he lifted the tumbler to his lips. He sucked its contents through the spaces between his clenched teeth and it tasted bitter. He withdrew the glass from his lips and placed it back on the table. The taste of the first tumbler of any drink always has the finest taste. Demola consoled himself.

It was after mid night before Demola got home. Amadi had stayed out longer than expected. Demola drove into the garage and removed the bag of rice which was the main reason of his visit to the Amadi's. everything about the house was silent and lightless. The cold dry hamartan was draining the warmth of the alcohol, he took that evening from his veins. Demola stood, shivering with fury. He had knocked several times but no answer came and worse, he could not find the spare key that he always kept with him.

"This woman is not at home at 11.45 pm, what could be keeping her up till now? Leaving me outside on such a cold night." This was not the first time that Lilikatu would keep late hours. In fact, once or twice, he had to drink himself to sleep alone in the house. What made this night different was the sad feelings which started in Amadi's house and culminated in the painful fact that he had to stand helplessly in front of his own house and could not enter it to escape the onslaught of the cold night.

"My own house." Demola lamented, swallowed hard as he moved back into the warmth of the garage.

"What does she think of me? A stone without feelings? After every cursed moment like this, Lilian always had good reason for her actions" He glanced at his wrist watch.

"A minute to one o'clock. This woman is in trouble. Today, she will tell me who is the master of this house" Demola sat in the car and rested his head on the steering wheel. He soon dozed off. Minutes later, he was woken up by the scratching of tyres against the tarmac. He came out of the garage quick enough to see Lilikatu step unsteadily out of a taxi cab. The driver drove off as if he had just shed a ghost. Lilikatu searched her handbag and fished out a bunch of keys. Demola followed silently behind her. She wrestled with the lock and as she opened the door, Demola spoke.

"How dare you keep so late ..." His voice cut her like a slap. Lilikatu reeled around in fear but quickly recovered when she saw Demola.

“Oh! It’s only you. How you frightened me. You have been out long? Business was heavy today at my shop.” Demola moved closer to her but the heat of alcohol that met his nose stopped him.

“Business indeed. A respectable house wife still on business at one o’clock midnight. Business indeed” lilikatu did not reply. She just rested her bulk on the door, her eyes staring past him. Demola stood arms-length distance from her and battled hard, within himself, to suppress an impatient urge to move closer and end it all:

“Hold that cursed head of her’s and smash it hard against that iron door or against the cold concrete floor until I say ‘stop, stop’ Then she wouldn’t torment you any more” A voice advised him.

Yet deep down, he heard another voice saying: “Watch, watch her. This woman that stands before you is not the Lilian key you loved” And for the first time, since Demola met Lilikatu, he saw lust and hate in Lilikatu’s eyes. The hazy mist through which he used to see her cleared. Before him stood a strange woman.

“I am ruined” Demola said as he moved into the house. The woman followed him in and gently closed the door after her. Getting to the centre of the parlour, Demola stopped and turned around as if to make sure he had not entered the house with a stranger. He accosted Lilikatu.

“Where were you? Where, for heaven’s sake have you been. Leaving me outside in the cold?”

“Impossible. Haven’t you a spare key of your own?” She replied. “Look here, this attitude of yours has to stop. This nocturnal activities you engage yourself in must stop”, Demola shouted. He was like a general who cannot locate the point where bravery ends and folly began. “A house wife, getting drunk and walking in at the dead of night. This has to stop,” Demola shouted again. His voice confusing warning with pleading Lilikatu remained standing,

a little surprised but unmoved. "Dealing," Lilikatu began, smiling. "Why do you make big this small matter...?"

"You call negligence small" Demola tried a frown as he moved closer to her his fist hardened and dangled dangerously from his side, but Lilikatu continued to smile. This tend to soothe his anger. Resist the temptation to hit her. He loosened his hold on his fist and moved away from her.

"I have vowed never to beat a woman again, since Ebum. My day will know no violence again. I will not touch you" Demola mumbled almost to himself

"Women, woe of men. Women, hope of men" He mumbled to himself.

"You called the negligence of your matrimonial duties, small matter! And it was you who used to rant about your so-called women liberation. Is this all you meant when you argued 'Women Liberation?' You cast aside your responsibility to humanity. You, instead, compete with your men and your children on the quantity of alcohol your body can resist. You want to liberate fellow women and even the society while you have not started to liberate yourself. Sorry" Demola shook his head in pity; more for mankind than for Lilikatu or himself, for while he was talking, Lilikatu had dozed off on the chair. "She is far gone already" He went into his room, still talking to himself.

"Where are we heading to, my mothers? How will all these end, my fathers?" These lines reminded him of a poem he read sometimes ago in one of the Dailies. He tried, again, to recollect the lines as much as he could:

Father, the house you built
Is threatened
Its black minarets, with
Its fists in the cloud are threatened with decay and wear
So pure were your dreams when
You brought into this house a

Princess from the land that sway
To the 'Ogene' clank
So pure were your desires that
You wedded daughters from the land
That sway to the 'Kalangu' drum.
So pure were your dreams that
You wedded daughters from people that
Waft and walk on water; and
These daughters, in uneasy oneness,
Lived and hopefully cherished you
Dreams, Now, the
Storm of strife is tearing down
Our home and its flag tattered.

True, cracks appear on the
Walls and
Spiders mend the walls
With their strange thread
Our mothers dine with greed
And lust and accused one
Another of witch-craft
Our mothers meet with your lawyers and
Your will is altered for money
Our mothers are often away
From home, leaving us children cold.

My sisters and step sisters
No longer hold the sacred scepter
Of woman-hood. They even wish
They were men.

My brothers and step brothers
Cherished strange herbs of strangers
And lived in houses of aliens.
On their return, they flood our

Flowers for Ebum

72

House with liquor and idly blame
The spiders and the strangers for
The heaps of filth dumped
On our door steps.

Father, your picture still hangs
From the drunken walls.
Walls coated in dust. Once,
Your wives and children, in one of
Their brawls, smashed its glass and
Cursed you and your dream.
The day is spent, Father,
The room grows darker.
Darkness must take its turn
Once again.
The sun should be out tomorrow.

“Yes, our women have relinquished the sacred symbol of womanhood and they want to be men. But, if we are all men, who will nestle the seed of human procreation? How can we be at ease, when our nest hang from a tree with rotten roots? Where do we stand, where do we rest our spent bodies when the earth becomes the sun?” Demola sank into the past again: He saw Ebum, speaking with pain in her voice as she bears her mind on the place of women.

“What equality?” Ebum would query.

“Women are women and men are men. No one can claim superiority over the other since each has its own unique roles to perform. Both must work together, dedicating their lives to the upliftment of all that is true and to prepare younger generations for the supreme duty of service to the larger society. The failure of the home is the disaster of a society.”

“What is it worth, if you clothe your loved ones in all you can afford only to be soiled with filth of a decayed society.” Demola

would ask Ebum.

“How can you protect what you love from a sick society? You cannot force the society to protect those you love. Your efforts will be as the light from a star during a moon shine” Demola would press on.

“I will be contented, if only few could get comfort from what these only star radiate. Maybe some day, the reluctant majority could be guest to my belief”, Ebum would reply.

“Or on the other hand idiots like “Bottle bottle”, the idol of the society may come along to adorn their bodies with gold”. The pain of recollection of Ludo’s face flung Demola back to the present.

“I have no doubt that woman’s liberation is human liberation. He bit his lower lip, stretched and tried to get some sleep.

Demola raised up his head from the newspaper he was reading and looked out through the window as a taxi cab parked in front of Lilikatu’s shop. Lilikatu emerged from the taxi, pulled out two cartoon of beer from the back seat and shut the door with a deafening slam. This action infuriated the driver. He spat out his feelings with calm.

“Madam, why you no just kuku remove the door and take am with you” Lilikatu did not reply. She simply moved away.

“Omoale, bastard” Pressed on the taxi driver. Lilikatu stung by these abuses turned swiftly round and made for the taxi.

“Na you be omeale, omo garage.” Lilikatu lashed out. The taxi driver in his bid to escape Lilikatu’s on rush, pulled his cab into the street and narrowly escaped collision with an on coming Mercedes benz car.

“Moda “gbese”, look wetin this ‘Asawo harlot wan cause for me now” Realizing that she could not reach the taxi driver, Lilikatu stopped and started to curse his entire family.

“Why you no wait for me. ‘Were’, mad man” Demola watched this and shook his head. The cigarette he was smoking continued to burn itself away and he could not even lift it to his lips.

By degrees, Demola’s domestic problems started to have a marked effect on his work and it became impossible for it to escape the notice of his superiors. Most of the laxity and queries against junior workers came largely from his section. Workers under him resumed work late and left when they felt like.

“After all”, they would argue.

“Our lord, master, oga Demola’s ‘law of government work’ clearly stipulates that: “5 hours before end of government work, beginning of government work. 2 hours before the end of government work end of government work.” Workers under him would praise Demola and thank their stars that they work under such an understanding man. Working under him gave them ample time to concentrate on their major business transactions outside the civil service.

“Na only Oga Demola sabi government work, but that second Oga, no go allow cock wake up sef before he begin carry that him fat belle come office” one of the staff would comment.

“You know whether na him father get the work sef?” A cleaner said.

“How your contract work dey go sef, Sam?” He added.

“I thank God, I wan wait small time before I go my own business. Sifu-safis na small part of my business, my brother.”

These general laxity continued and Demola, in his goodness, argued that he would not be the one to ‘Mix sand with anybody’s gari’ Civil service, after all is the absorber of all the unemployment”

One day, the state military governor Gbadebo Alabi paid an unscheduled visit to the ministry where Demola worked. He was driven into the premises at approximately two minutes before the official opening hour and was disappointed with what he saw. The governor ordered the gateman to shut the gate and disallow anyone in.

“Yes sir,” the gateman stiffened to attention, his eyes closed, his head thrown backwards and his chest out.

“This na governor dey talk, no be oga” he thought.

“Today, oga pass oga.” At approximately 7.30 a.m., the gateman shut up the gate and returned to his standing position. He turned deaf ears to all pleas, curses and threats from co-workers, and superiors alike. He simply stared at them like a statue.

“Today fit to be my lucky day. The gateman thought. He heard, not long ago, of how, in one of the northern states, a night guard was promoted, “with immediate effect,” for refusing a governor entry. He had come in disguise at an odd hour. He could not be moved even in the face of bribery.

The gateman moved to the gate as if to open it but he was only making sure that it was securely locked. He turned his back again on the late comers.

The governor came at last to address the general staff. He expressed among other things, his disappointment in officers who failed to show good examples and were themselves involved in acts that betrayed the spirit of hard work and accountability. You are a disgrace to our people and the nation. You should be ashamed of yourselves...”

At the end of his speech, he brought out a sheet of paper from where he read out a list of names of those “sacked with immediate effect and ignominy” When Sawa, the gateman, heard the governor call the names of Okoro and Demola he stamped his feet in attention

and saluted in an attempt to draw the governor's attention to himself and as if to say "Gomina, your wish has been done. Forget not poor Sawa in your favour" But the governor did not notice Sawa. He moved rapidly off, followed by his-entourage.

Demola sat in his car and waited for the noise of the siren to die away and the dust to settle down before he drove in. he packed and walked confidently into his office. On entering the cold air-conditioned office, Demola suddenly started to sweat as one sized by fever. He quickly sat down and tried to shake off what he prayed was a bad dream. He looked around, stood up, paced up and down, his stockings growing damp in his shoes. He touched the table, the wall and then his head.

"They are real, solid" Demola said to himself. "So I was not dreaming after all." Moving towards the door, Demola stepped outside where he found people standing in groups, discussing. Demola, with head slightly bowed, walked past.

"What have they done?" Demola over heard Audu, his messenger asking. Audu watched Demola walk towards his car, opened the car and got in but he did not offer to open the car door for him as he used to do.

"Wetin them do? This gofment na wa. Them be fire."

"Na wetin Oga Demola do?"

"Only God know"

"Oga Demola na good man. Allah sarki" Audu lamented.

"God punish this gofnor" Someone said. He touched his tongue with his fore-finger and pointed it towards the sky.

Demola drove directly to Lilikatu's shop, parked his car and casually walked into the parlour. He asked for something cold to drink.

"Yes sir" Ledisi took the order, wondering aloud why Demola was not at work.

"Just do what you are told and shut up" Ledisi shrugged and moved off returning with a bottle of cold water.

"Where is Madam?" Demola inquired after Lilikatu.

"I no know where she dey. She go out since morning" Ledisi replied and left. Demola sat gazing blankly in front of him. Whenever the word 'office' or 'governor' slipped into his mind, he kicked them violently out. He seized the bottle of beer Ledisi had just brought him with a blind grab, opened it with a violent 'pop' and gulped down a mouthful. He sat the bottle on the table with a deafening bang. Ledisi watched at a distance and wondered what had gotten into his master's head. When Lilikatu sat down beside him that evening, he was already drunk. Seeing Lilikatu, Demola heaved a sigh, belched and smiled to her. Lilikatu smiled at him in reply.

"You have been drinking again" The comfort of Lilikatu's voice came to him from a distance.

"Lilian, my dear, governor don fire me" Demola said,

"I know" She replied. Lilikatu had heard the news where she went to.

"You know?" Demola said surprised. "Who told you" He asked. Lilikatu did not reply. She stood up and walked away.

"I told him he would have the last cry" Lilikatu said to herself.

"You have seen nothing yet"

"A bottle of beer, give me a bottle of beer and the bill" Demola shouted to nobody in particular. He started humming a song under his breath with hic-up punctuating every phrase.

Less than eight months after Demola found himself out of work and his account blinking red, he thought it wise to start a budget of reality and Lilikatu stood solidly behind him. She suggested a financial house-cleaning exercise.

"This will help check unreasonable spending" She reasoned.

"We need not keep two apartment any longer" Lilikatu suggested.

“We should move fully into my business apartment. I am suggesting also that you dispose of that car. We can’t afford to change that worn out rear tyre now” These suggestions sounded wise enough, if not inevitable. Demola and his wife moved into the two rooms and a beer parlour apartment at Makutu Street.

“This is only a temporary set-back”, Demola assured Lilikatu. “When I get a new and better job, we will find a more comfortable house. Lilikatu nodded and was silent.

The next two months saw Demola searching for a new job without success. He gave up altogether and spent most of his time in his wife’s shop. He would drink and smoke and sometimes help Lilikatu in the beer parlour with the service. Ledisi had left them after Demola moved into Lilikatu’s beer parlour.

“I tired for Lagos life. I dey go farm for we village” Ledisi had said before leaving. Demola gradually took over where Ledisi left and Lilikatu was seldom seen around during the day time.

CHAPTER 11

It was a cold harmantan night. Demola woke up shivering with cold. The bedroom he slept in was in darkness and he wondered why Lilikatu left the window open before retiring to bed the previous night. He gently slipped his hands towards where Lilikatu should be sleeping but his hands only touched the bare mattress.

“Not yet in bed” Demola thought. He had drank so much the previous night that he could not remember clearly how he got into bed. He paused in thought in order to pick the faintest noise of late drinkers from the parlour, but heard nothing. Everywhere was as still and cold as death. Alarmed, he felt everywhere for any familiar object which would convince him that he was in his bedroom. Everything felt strange.

“Where am I? where?” He rose carefully out of bed but the cold floor that greeted the soles of his feet made him shrink.

“No, this can’t be my room. Bare floor? No carpet?” He lunged for the bed switch with both hands and the light that engulfed the room revealed his nakedness. The strange room was empty save for the bed and bare mattress he was lying on. Shock and confusion wry his mind into two, sharing the bits between nightmare and

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reality. Demola dashed for the naked window and the cold teeth of the in-rushing harmattan wind cut deep into his flesh. He lunged for the door, flung it open and before him was the empty parlour that had served as Llikatu's business spot.

"Lilian Key! Robbers! Where is Lilian, my things, her things, everything gone, Lilian gone" Demola shrieked loudly into the raw cold, delicate night. He took a suicidal leap back into the bedroom, stumbled over the only table left in the room, reeled over it and landed on his forehead. Darkness flooded his dazed consciousness.

Dr. Osamoh read Demola's pulse. "Has anyone come to ask after this patient?" He asked an attending nursing sister.

"No one, sir," Said the nurse. "But from what I gathered about this man, he has a wife but she refused to show up".

"This is serious. From all indications, this man will need some financial backing to help him go through the necessary therapy. He will surely need X-ray photograph taken of his skull in order to help us ascertain the degree of injury.

"I doubt if the 'whore pet' has anybody to take care of the bill" The nurse gave him a malicious grin.

"I will not take kindly to such use of language on a patient" Dr. Osamoh said.

"I am sorry about that, but I heard from a reliable source that his only close relation, his wife, left town to an unknown destination. She left in the company of one Ludo on the day following the incident."

"Why not leave that to the police to decide-which information is reliable and which is not?" There was a knock on the door as the doctor turned to leave. A nurse came in to announce that someone would like to see the Doctor.

"A woman would like to see you, doc."

“A woman” a patient?”

“She claimed to know the patient in ward three. Shall I conduct her in?” The nurse asked. “Bring her into my office immediately. She might be able to give us important information regarding this man. The door of Doctor Saidu Osamoh opened and a woman entered. She stood before him. Osamoh studied her surreptitiously. He noticed that beneath the veil of weariness she was wore sat beauty.

“She may be a sister to the man in ward three” He wondered. “Sit down” The doctor said, unconsciously” The woman sat down, gazing steadily into the doctor’s eyes and tapping her dusty slippers on the floor.

“Yes, can I help you? I was made to understand that you know a man brought into this clinic in the early hours of yesterday”

“He is my husband” she said almost in a whisper.

“Can I see him now?”

“Your husband? You are Lilian Key then”

“No, I am Ebum. How is he doing? I heard of the incident in a police bulletin seeking information that could help lead to anyone close or dear to him. Can I see him, please?”

“You will see him” Osamoh rang the bell and a nurse appeared.

“Take this woman to ward three. I will join you there in a moment” The nurse opened the door for Ebum and then led the way.

“Will he be okay? How is he?” Ebum asked, looking into the nurse’s eyes.

“He will be fine. All he needed now is a little care from someone like you” The nurse quickened her steps and Ebum followed, her feet hardly touching the ground.

Like a status of patience, Ebum sat and watched Demola flow in and out of consciousness. Though advised against bringing any meal for Demola, she continued to do so. She paid the hospital bill too. On the fifth day in hospital, Demola opened his eyes and looked around before he finally settled his gaze on the ceiling. The nurse moved up to him and spoke softly to him.

“Your wife is here” Demola did not move his gaze. The nurse repeated herself. He shifted his gaze to the nurse, shook his head and replaced his gaze.

“You will not see her then?”

“No, I don’t want to see her again. Tell her to go away” Demola said in a whisper. Ebum stood up immediately, moved up to the sick bed and placed her hands on Demola’s. Her tears fell on his breast. Ebum moved her face closer to his, but Demola gently closed his eyes. Ebum saw pain in his eyes.

“It’s me, it’s Ebum” Ebum said. Demola’s head switched faintly. His eyes began to open slowly, then they stopped half-way as if his ears have not heard right.

“It’s me, Ebum, “She repeated quickly.

“I am here, I have been here with you for the past four days and now that you are getting better, I am happy” Demola’s eyes shut altogether. Ebum saw tears well up in his eyes and rolled down his cheek. After a moment’s silence, Demola’s mouth slowly opened.

“I can’t talk to you”

“But I want to talk to you”

“I know you will never forgive me, why have you come to mock me?”

“Who am I not to forgive?” She went silent for a while.

“Ade and Yemi often ask of you. They will be home for holidays soon” Anurse entered and signaled Ebum out of the room. The doctor on duty entered. Ebum left the room and sat on a bench. She

allowed tears to flow freely down her cheek. The tears of painful joy of a wife, the tears of caring and hoping of a mother.

CHAPTER 12

The bus crawled into the street, as the last man, an old man, got in. "Move in, old man. I haven't the whole day" The bus driver barked above the horn he was blaring. The old man held firmly to the iron pole that ran down the entire length of the bus' roof. The harsh smell of sweat and the tired looking faces of passengers made him feel faint. Opposite where he stood, about half a dozen school children sat, giggling at something that held their fancy. As the bus gathered speed, the children burst into a song.

"Even a song in this death drap" The old man said to himself. He looked away, shook his head and tightened his fist on the iron rail as the bus negotiated a bend.

"Come and sit down here, father" Ebon, drenched in sweat, stood up from her seat. "Come and take my place. I have come to the end of my journey, I will be down at the next bus stop" The old man thankfully sat down with much blessings from this strange woman. Ebon moved close to exit. Her right hand clutched a plate of Demola's lunch to her breast while the other hand held the iron rail for support. Comfortably seated, the old man took a deep lung

full of the in-coming air and watched the throng of people outside, human beings moving about their individual businesses.

As he watched, his attention was drawn to the carefree song from the school children. Their carefreeness reminded him of his own secondary school days. He had thought, then, that life was all songs and laughter. One specific incident stood clearly in his memory and it often amused him whenever it wondered through his mind as it often does. It was the case of 'The flying Umbrella' 'Current Affairs Society of his school had presented an American war film called "Arm for Arm" This film was based on an American rescue team sent to Vietnam. In the movie, American soldiers were exceptionally brave. They were kind to their captives, while on the other hand, the north Vietnamese were represented as cowards, callous and cruel to their victims. What thrilled his young mind most was the flying umbrella which the American forces used to land on enemy territory. The fighter planes just opened their bellies in mid-air and ejected umbrellas with little men hanging by their stems.

"God, I must make my own 'Flying Umbrella'. He thought as he got into bed that night. I will get an umbrella, climb up a very high place, say a story building. No, that could be dangerous for a start. I might break my neck in such daring venture" he shuddered at the thought.

"I will start from somewhere lower, then advance by degrees to higher levels." The very thought of flying sent him springing out of bed. His pounding heart racing him towards his friend's bedside. On getting there, he found Bello fast asleep, so he staggered back to his bed.

"What a splendid idea. But rather than jumping out of the earth, I will suggest you trek to the moon and thus be the first Nigerian to walk out of the earth" Bello, his close friend sneered, annoyed that

Bayo had woken him up so early in the morning to tell him of his plans.

Unmoved by Bello's discouragement, he went ahead with his plans. He bought rope from a store and settled down to work. Bello watched as he worked on the flying umbrella.

"You should try it first on mount Everest" Bello teased Bayo.

"Shut up" Bayo barked as he cut an old blanket into a round shape. He perforated six holes of equal distance about its edge.

"Indeed, such a feat would be breaking -the neck for-world record" Bello pressed on with mock seriousness.

Bayo cut the rope into six equal lengths and tied the end of each rope firmly to the blanket through the six holes. He united the other six ends of the rope into a knot and rose to his feet.

"Lets go, Bello," Bayo commanded. He gathered the gadget, flung it across his shoulder and without saying a word further, strode proudly towards the school's second gate. Bello followed closely at his heels. They both left the school compound and walked into the open field. They stopped by a tree.

"Sure, this tree is the right one in which to take a historic plunge from"

There was no doubt as to who would take the maiden drop.

"Hold the gadget while I climb the tree" Bayo climbed up the huge tree with surprising ease and perched on a branch. Bello tossed the 'flying umbrella' to Bayo. Bayo carefully kept it on a branch close by.

A bird, whose territory had been invaded, chirped a helpless cry of protest and flew into another tree. Bayo balanced his flying umbrella delicately on his head and held firmly to the knotted end of the rope.

"Don't forget to say the lord's prayer..." Bello advised as he moved some distance away from the tree.

"Do you need anything else, dear Bayo?"

"Shut up and stay clear"

"I don't need to be told that. I have cleared away all obstacle that might stand against your soft landing, save the solid earth.

"All clear?"

"Save the solid earth," Bello replied.

"Here goes." Bayo lunged forward into the air. Bello watched as his friend and the flying umbrella rolled down in one heap. The umbrella had refused to open as anticipated. It, instead wrapped Bayo up in itself and rolled down like a boulder from a mountain top. He landed on the ground, rolled some distance then stopped. Pain shot through Bayo's right hand.

"Disaster! What a wreckage" Bello shouted and then burst into a crocking laughter but suddenly checked himself. He rushed to the groaning Bayo's side. He disentangled the rope and blanket from the victim.

"Are you alright?"

"Leave me alone. It's all well for you to laugh.

"There must have been a technical fault somewhere," Bello observed, his check bloated with air of suppressed laughter. Bello helped Bayo to his feet and dusted his clothes. Bayo noticed the moistened eyes of Bello getting ready to burst into another volley of laughter. Bayo beside himself also started to laugh. He ran after his friend who had already taken flight...

"Onipanu bus stop, anybody?"

The young bus conductor shouted to the passengers. The shout busted into the old man's dream.

"O wa!" The school children chorused as they stood up, enmass, from their seats. They squeezed their way towards the exit. As the bus driver closed on the bus stop, he slowed down and without waiting for the vehicle to stop, the pupil in front of his colleagues

looked left and right, then jumped down. Others later followed suit. More people struggled out just on time for others to take their places.

“Oya! go on, te e mole! Fire on.” The conductor gave the driver the green light to move on. “Yaba, Yaba, Yaba...” The conductor called the next bus stop. The driver moved into the road and nearly crushed an on coming Peugeot 504 saloon car on the left lane.

“Were ni Baba e o, your father dey craze for head” The bus driver cried.

The conductor took over the abuse of the Peugeot driver from where his master stopped. He occupied himself with this new found fun that he virtually forgot to announce the next bus stop.

“It’s okay here driver” Ebun cried out.

“What do you mean it is okay here? Do you know where you are going at all?”

“I don’t know where I am going? After all my shouting. But how would you hear me when you were busy attacking anyone that cross your path with abuses.

“That is quite true,” put in a woman.

“This woman has been drawing your attention to where she intended to get off, but you turned deaf ears to her call”

“Shut up your old latrine mouth, you hear?” The conductor shouted at the intruder.

“For God sake would you stop” Ebun shouted in alarm. The bus did not stop.

“Now I have to walk all the way back”

“Whooz fot. Who you wan blame. Me?” Retorted the driver as he slowed down the bus. “No mind am” Encourage the conductor.

“These woman sef, them no go stay for their husband house. Na soso waka waka go boy friend them sabi” He observed.

The driver took a dangerous swerve to the right lane and slowed down but remained at an uncomfortable speed for Ebun to get off. Ebun moved towards the door step. She did not expect the driver to stop for her.

“He will not stop for me. This I know for sure. This is Lagos. A city too much in a hurry to care for individual’s plight”

Ebun descended the first step and the conductor stepped aside to let her pass. She waited for the bus to slow down enough for her to step off. The moment came when the driver negotiated a corner. Ebun quickly alighted but lost balance as her feet touch ground. She fell forward and the plate of food she was carrying with her flew out of her hands and its contents littered the road. There was a spontaneous shout from the crowd. Ebun picked herself up immediately but an oncoming Volkswagen beetle car knocked her off her feet again. She fell face down, rolled towards the edge of the tarred road, then stopped. Defiantly, Ebun picked her self up again. She staggered drunkenly around as if to confront an attacker, but there was none for the beetle had taken flight. She remained on her feet for a while, dazed. Blood ran down one corner of her mouth and patches of wet red dust covered her dress. Slowly, Ebun slumped to the ground and remained still.

CHAPTER 13

Exhausted and tired after a heavy meal, Ade, Demola's son made himself a cup of tea and returned to bed. After tea, he switched off the light and laid on his bed with his eyes closed. The jazz music 'autumn leaves' he had on the record player had started to play. The sound that filtered in from the loud speaker filled the room like an early morning sun. It spread over him like a gentle flowing stream. Caught in this delight, his tired body gradually committed itself into the arm of the melody; the treble chirruping like a baby bird. The bass guitar stamping and the talking drum cooing like a pigeon. Then a sudden pause in the music. Somewhere, beneath, soft whistle of a flute started to rise evenly like the evening breeze, blowing against a whistling pine tree. Tailing this whistling, came the soft slippery tongues of the piano, rising. The violin too was humming and yawning in ripples like drops of water gliding down a feather. Nestled in her melodious bosom, Ade felt the music's warm fingers stroking his itching eye. Lullabied thus, his eyes crawled to a close.

When Ade woke up early the next morning, he was refreshed and full of energy. After breakfast, Dada, Ade's house boy helped his master with his suitcase to the car. Ade drove out of the garage and glided swiftly through the open gate. He went towards orthopedic hospital, Igbobi where he worked after his national youth service. Despite the job satisfaction, sadness remained seated in his heart like a painful malignant mould. His mother, Egun, died when he was on his housemanship at the University of Benin and he could not trace his father's whereabouts after the horrible incident. Demola had left hospital before the completion of his treatment. Ade learnt that his father now reside somewhere in Lagos. What was more saddening was the fact that all his attempts to locates his father had come to nothing. The way in which Yemi, his sister, took the whole issue was more devastating. Their mother's death shook her violently. Whenever she wrote or phoned Ade, and Ade touched on the state of their father's health, Yemi would speak through the suggestion as if she had not heard. She even told him once, with finality in her voice, that she had no father.

"I don't want to hear anything regarding that man anymore," Yemi had said.

Ade felt sorry for her. She was so closely attached to their mother.

"A man cannot choose his own father" Ade had reasoned with his sister.

"The choice of one's parents is beyond a child"

Meanwhile, Ade was bent on finding his father, giving him a decent home and finding peace for his own soul.

"How can a man of my calling leave his father in a state of pillory while he the son continues to live in plenty?"

Returning home after the day's work, Ade stopped by a kiosk on the road side, to buy bread. A swarm of hawkers swooped on his car and virtually threw their assorted wares into his car.

"I need only a loaf of bread" Ade said.

"Oga, my own is the good one. Buy it"

"No, na my own good pass" Said another.

Ade calmly chose one of the loaves and threw the remaining loaves of bread into the hands of their owners. Disappointed, the hawkers ran towards other prospective buyers. A few of them still milled around in case Ade might changed his mind and asked for more. While he paid for the loaf of bread, beggars came up to his car, begging for alms. Lepers, cripples, the blind and the aged, all scrambled for Ade's attention. Displaying their various afflictions, the beggars cried with one voice:

"Bani don Annabi"

Chorus "Yaa dele kade, iya dele kade..."

"Bun mi nitori Olorun"

Chorus "Yaa dele kade, iya dele kade..."

"Yem na maka Chineke"

Chorus "Yaa dele kade, iya dele kade..."

"Dormem buba gbere Bari"

Chorus "Yaa dele kade, iya dele kade..."

In disgust, Ade implored the bread hawker to divide his remaining change amongst the beggars.

While the destitute went away with the little girl, Ade buried his face in his handkerchief as if to wipe off the whole nauseating embarrassment.

Taking off the handkerchief from his face, he noticed an elderly man standing beside his car. This man was old and worn out. His countenance melted into an exaggerated smile (as this strange man

had very little control over his facial expression) and Ade could see insanity lurking somewhere behind it. Yet, something told Ade he had met this man somewhere before.

"My son, I am hungry. Give me money" The old man said, grinding his teeth. Ade instantly took some coins from his pocket and without counting them, handed them over to the old man. The old man withdrew with thanks.

"Why you dey give 'Demo Demo' money?" A kolanut hawker asked Ade.

"Demo Demo? Ade repeated. Confused.

"Yes, Demo Demo. Na so we dey call that old man. His real name na Demola. Make you no sorry for the man at all, at all, because na him do himself"

"What did he do?" Ade asked with growing interest.

"Wetin he do? Alright, I go tell you, Demo Demo drive him wife away and come marry one 'asawo' prostitute. Na this asawo witch come eat all him money finish. Dat no do the witch sef; because of jealousy, this asawo witch come kill 'Demo Demo' him fest wife for motor accident"

The kolanut hawker stopped talking abruptly on realizing that the young man she was talking to was not responding to her. She was shocked also, to see that the man just gazing straight ahead of him with eyes dripping with tears. Confused, the woman moved away. After a while, Ade noticed that a small crowd had gathered around his car, watching him. He fumbled for his ignition key and drove quietly off.

"Where did you pick him from." A nurse asked the two hefty looking men that accompanied Demo Demo into the hospital.

"Na Dokita Ade say make we bring am come ya" One of the men answered.

“Oh yes”, the nurse recollected and sprang to her feet. “Just a minute” The nurse ran into an inner room and returned later with the doctor and two other nurses.

“Bring him in” The doctor ordered. Demola went in quietly with them and the door was shut after them. The nurses exchanged glances, shook their heads and retired to their various assignments.

“What has got into that doctor’s head?”

“Only God can explain that”

“How, for sanity sake, can doctor Ade just go into the street and pick a mad man to bother us here”

“I think that dokita Ade dey suffer from ‘cancer’ of the mind” Interjected a cleaner who was just standing nearby, posing his intelligence before the few patients around.

“If no be so,” he pressed on. “How dockita Ade go dey carry doty for main road come doty here for me.”

After over four months of intensive care, Demola’s health started to improve impressively. He sat on his sick bed taking lunch. His doctor came in and asked him if he would like to meet the man who devoted much of his time to him.

“Yes, I will like to see him, please” Demola nodded his thanks. The doctor disappeared and reemerged with Ade behind him. While the doctor withdrew, Demola regarded the young man closely for some time but there was no sign of recognition.

“Good afternoon, sir,”

“Good afternoon my son,” Demola replied as he laid back gently on his bed.

“How do you feel today?”

“Fine, thank you. I was told by my good doctor that you brought me here and have since been taking care of me. I feel extremely moved by your kind gestures, but I still cannot understand why you are doing all this for me. I have no one left in this world to care for me. My wives have all died because of me. It was my fault.”

“Try and get some rest” Ade put in. “You need not despair any more because contrary to what you said, there are still people alive who care for you. You have a lot more to be proud of”

“Rubbish, nothing. I have nothing left, save my wretched life. Nothing ... my wife is dead and I dare not look into my children’s eyes any more.” Demola started to cry openly. After a while, Ade stood up.

“Rest for now and remember that your children still love you” Ade assured him.

“Rubbish, what do you know about these things? What do you know about the lives of my family and mine? I have destroyed all my joy” Ade could hold it no longer.

“Rejoice, father. For the man standing right here in front of you is your son, Ade” Demola turned slowly to face Ade. For a moment, he just stared, his mouth agape.

“No, it cannot be true”

“It is true. My sister, Yemi, will return home from London tomorrow. She writes often and asks after you”

Demola was overwhelmed. He covered his face in both palms and turned to face the wall.

“I will be back in the evening to take you home” As Ade closed the door after him, he heard the sobs of his father. He stopped, then beckoned to a nurse waiting by the door. “Take good care of him while I am away. I will be back in the evening” The nurse nodded with a smile and withdrew. Ade hesitated a little, then walked rapidly off towards his car.

Ade returned from work in the late hours of one evening and noticed that Demola’s room was in darkness. He asked Dala, his houseboy, why this was so.

“Oga, na him say make I kill the light.” Demola sat in the darkness and remained as still as furniture. Only the red glow of his cigarette end stood suspended in the dark. Ade entered the room.

“Who’s that?” Demola’s voice came to life

“It’s me father, why not come out of the dark and get some fresh air. Come out into the moon light and you will see that we all have shadows of our own. At least, put on the light inside your room”

“Yes, please, switch on the light for me, my son. I have been sleeping all day and never realized the night has come this far”

“You are closer to the light switch, father, it’s directly above your head and I might stumble over a lot of things if I try to do it for you.”

The light came on and Ade stepped in and both father and son sat and talked heart to heart. Ade could not understand why his father preferred the seclusion of his room to the illuminated hall. Demola would neither start a conversation nor engage in long discussion. Whenever Ade introduced his friend to him, Demola would only nod to them and return into himself.

“Father,” Ade would start when they were alone again. “You must let the past remain with the past”

“It’s the past that will not leave us alone. The dead will not forgive us” Demola replied with a piercing voice.

“The past and all that you cling to now are trifle to the dead. You must learn to live again, father. Loneliness could be very boring.

“Boring? Silence is never boring. In fact I hear clearer and louder in it. I prefer the voice of silence to man’s voice of arrogance, deceit and emptiness: A child came up to me one day, prostrated himself before me and said:

“I salute you, respected one. But I could hear his little heart saying:

“I despise you, old ass” See what I mean? The boy’s heart and his tongue are in conflict...” Like this, Demola would talk and talk while his son listened patiently. Ade had come to realize the wisdom in taking his father back to their home town.

“Maybe when he returns to our root, he would find some comfort in the memory of his youth and consolation in the hands of the elders.”

When Ade suggested the idea of returning home to his father, the old man surprisingly accepted. He seized the idea as if his while existence depends on it and Ade felt relieved and happy, seeing smiles flaming again across his father’s face.

Ade fixed the date of their journey for a time when he would be on annual leave. This would give him ample time to get his father comfortably settled before returning to Lagos.

CHAPTER 14

Ade opened his eyes, blinked and looked out through the window as the train hooted and glided madly along its path. Cattle scattered excitedly in all directions. The cattle boy with his over-sized hat, desperately rotating his stick in circles, ran lightly to rally his herds about himself again. The rap, tap sound of metal against metal and the rhythmic beat from the engine gave the passengers a unified sway. A harmony of souls. The sleeping soul, the awoken soul, the drunk soul, the sober soul, all moving in unison to the dictates of the train as it moved on its course. The train dictated the tone and the steps, and the passengers only existed in it. A machine conveying its contents to their individual destinations where each must get off at the termination of each person's journey.

Night was drawing near. The speed of the train flickered as it glided into the silent valley that nestled the sleeping city of Ibadan. Demola's eyes were closed but Ade was sure he was not asleep, for his eyes were moving behind their lids.

"Poor thing, he has not said a word to anyone since the start of this journey" Ade looked into the night. The air was cold and bitter on

his face. It blew into his eyes and drew tears and the tears felt warm as they ran down his cheeks. He continued to stare defiantly into the night. In the place of running trees and green hills was now solid darkness but he persisted and at long last his efforts yielded fruits, for far into the night, he could see flickers of light from houses of folks at rest.

“We are close to a station” Ade said to no one in particular
 “The next stop is Offa station.” Someone on the adjacent seat shouted.

“Yes, it’s Offa, the land of giant wrestlers. The land where sweet potatoes line the pavements of men and make women’s mortar eager” Someone sang in confirmation.

“Father, Ade tapped Demola gently. “We are about to enter a station. Wouldn’t you eat something before we get to Ilorin?”

Demola opened his eyes half way and shut them rapidly again, his face slowly manifesting a smile of thanks. But this smile slowly disappeared by degrees as his mind wondered again into privacy:

“What have I gained
 What have I lost
 On this round on earth
 Now that I am almost done.

When I was mothered from the womb
 Of heaven and the blinding light
 Engulf my new darkness: the gasp
 And then the cry: mother! Mother!
 Why! Why! My innocence.
 When the sun arose, suckling,
 Its tender little fingers
 Soft and mild, strike my face

With warmth. I toddled ahead
Without a care, not knowing
What life held in store

When the sun, older and higher
Caressed my teenage temple with darkling steps
Was I not hollow blind and full of amorous pursuit?

When the sun sat itself overhead
And made me walk the earth like a god.
What did I radiate for those close to me?
Did I not stamp my feet and ram my fist
Into the chest of my treasures?

Now is evening. The sun is matured
Sunken yellow and as large as sour,
This aged wretched shall, soon set,

Buried deep in a far western field
Forgotten. Forgotten? No! Tomorrow
At down, this aged sun shall rise
Once again, wiser, has an infant sun.

THE BOOK

Demola is an orphan and almost innocent about everything until he met Egun. Without a Father's house to leave behind, he clings to his wife for warmth and purpose. Together they build their home on a foundation of poverty and hope. With a promising job and two children, Ade and Yomi, the future looks bright. Then Lilikatu arrives to the scene, pulling down the delicate structures and flooding Demola's house with the raw part of Lagos life.

Demola throws Egun and the children out into the cold, but Egun, unshaken, stands against the wind, shielding her children from storms and breasting them on meager income. He loses his job, and the tide plunges him further into an alley which only Lilikatu knows very well.

Demola wakes up one day to find the house he shares with Lilikatu empty, she also disappears leaving him with a fractured mind, Egun hears and returns. Crushed under the weight of a stopping love. She dies without flower for her common grave. Demola returns to the street where his son Ade finds him and takes him in but Demola refuses to forgive himself and in this interior struggle, he retreated further into himself, shutting out any light that point the way towards tomorrow.

He said "the past will not leave us alone", so could not reconcile the past with the present, nor give the future a chance. In his shattered consciousness, Egun and Ade are one and the same person.

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