

THE SHADOW OF A
SMILE

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The Shadow of a Smile

Beside me, in the queue, there was a woman with blue lips. She had, of course, never heard of me; but she suddenly came out of that trance so common to us all and whispered in my ear (everybody spoke in whispers there): “Can you describe this?” And I said: “Yes, I can.” And then something like the shadow of a smile crossed what had once been her face.

Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*

The Middle World

New Man

The policeman motioned with the rifle hanging from his shoulder. "This way mister man."

Zuba stepped into the dim corridor. His steps echoed on the pockmarked concrete floor strewn with pieces of broomstick. The yellow walls had a thousand blotches like the albino skin of the policeman. A smoky amalgam of stale sweat, urine, fermenting faeces and desolation hung over the passage.

"You think rich man son no go cell?" the policeman called after him.

The words did not sting this time. Zuba had been lashed with dozens of them during interrogation and had grown calluses against them. He walked down the corridor, staring blankly. Ike followed behind him, his face tight with rage. The imprint of the interrogator's palm was still visible on his cheek.

The smell intensified as they passed the rust-and-dirt-coloured bars of a cell door. Bare-chested men squatted on the floor in the dimness beyond. The words, "New man", floated out; whispered, repeated, passed from mouth to mouth. Bodies began to stir within the cell.

"Idem, they say you suppose get space for your cell for this two," said the albino when they got to the office at

the end of the corridor. He placed a white sheet on the counter before a chubby-faced man in police uniform. Then he studied an almanac on the wall with its photos of gaily-dressed women: NIGERIAN POLICE WIVES ASSOCIATION 2000. The nose-crinkling scent of mosquito coil struggled against the odour oozing from the corridor.

Idem looked down at the sheet. “Hmmmnh, Threatening Violence and Stealing.” He looked up and glanced at Ike’s glowering eyes. Then his gaze settled on the softness of Zuba’s face, at the eyes that seemed to stare back at him from a dizzying distance, and down at the gold cufflink that winked at him from the manicured hand Zuba had placed on the counter. “Undress, undress,” he barked. “Or you want enter cell with your fine-fine dress? Bring your money and valuables too.”

His words must have carried down the corridor. Shouts erupted from the cell:

“If you people dare to come in here without your *cell-sho* we’ll pummel you till you forget your mothers’ names.”

“Make sure you bring your cell-sho or we’ll dip your head into our shit bucket.”

“...We’ll kill you here today...”

Zuba and Ike exchanged glances. The dread they had nursed beneath their calmness, hidden like some venereal disease, broke out in a rash of symptoms. They forgot to feel embarrassed as they stared at each other with gaping eyes and palpitating hearts.

“D-Do you understand what th-they’re saying, Zuba?” Ike’s usually robust voice was whispery.

Zuba smelled the fear in Ike’s breath. He did not trust his own voice. He shook his head. His rigid fingers unbuttoned the striped white shirt he had on over black trousers. None of the detention stories he had read, none of the tales he had heard, had ever spoken of “cell-sho”. He leant towards Idem. “Please, what... what are they saying? What is ‘cell-sho’?”

“Cell-show. You’ll find out soon enough what it is,” Idem replied in perfect English.

“Please, have you any advice for us? We’ve never been in this kind of a situation before.”

Idem’s lips stretched in a sad smile. He shook his head slightly, to himself. “What’s your name?” he asked.

“Zuba.”

“OK, Zuba, give me one thousand naira from there to give them,” he motioned with his chin at the wad of money lying on the counter. “That should help take care of things.”

Zuba counted out twenty fifty-naira notes from the wad. The money quivered as he handed it to Idem.

Idem collected the money. “You no remove your trouser?”

Zuba shook his head. “I’m OK.” He ran his hand over his white vest and black trousers. Beside him, Ike had stripped to the black shorts underneath his trousers.

“OK, remove your belt. Belt is not allowed in cell. Some-one fit use it hang himself.”

Zuba unbuckled his belt and pulled it free. He unbuckled his watch; the automatic Seiko stainless steel watch his father had given him four years ago, a month after his eighteenth birthday.

“You people sure you bring all your money?” Idem asked. “They go take everything from you once you enter cell o.”

Ike nodded. Zuba nodded too. He exchanged a glance with Ike as he felt the warmth of the money spread out evenly in the two back pockets of the denim shorts under his trousers. He rubbed the keloid on his face. A spindly wasp hummed before its mud nest behind Idem, at the point where the yellowing ceiling met the yellow walls, the sound in the confined space.

The shouts coming down the corridor had petered out to intermittent calls.

“Zuba, please allow me to manage the situation when we get in there,” Ike said.

“No, Ike. No. Don’t worry. I can manage the situation.”

“I understand this people better than you do. Let me. Trust me.” There was a stubborn streak in Ike’s eye which Zuba knew too well. This was survival, not some official matter.

“OK,” he said.

They signed beneath the list of their belongings then followed Idem as he led the way to the corridor. The jangle of keys, the squeal of rusty hinges, the clang of metal against metal as the iron door swung shut. Zuba and

Ike were in the dark stench of the cell. Four men stared at them. Two of them were seated, their bare backs resting against the wall. The third man was stretched out on the concrete floor. His six-foot body bisected the cell, with his head propped up against one wall and his toes brushing the one opposite. While the fourth man, who had risen from his post before the doorway to allow them to enter, was standing by the door. He was burly and light-skinned, and had jutting cheekbones, bushy hair and beard.

Zuba felt for the secure coolness of the cell wall behind him. His gaze roved from one face to the other. Beside him, Ike stood ramrod still.

The burly light-skinned man took his place again before the entrance, resting his left elbow on the bars of the door.

“You, take—” Idem handed some money to him through the bars. “Make you treat them well.”

Idem walked off.

“What’s this? Two hundred naira?” the prefect barked, after the echo of Idem’s boots had died out in the corridor. He waved the money disdainfully at Zuba and Ike.

Zuba’s heart thumped in his chest as he stared back at the prefect with a blank face.

Ike stepped away from the security of the wall. He stood in the centre of the cell, between the outstretched legs of the other inmates, and looked around like an architect on his building site.

Zuba could hear Ike’s brain cranking behind a fake smile. Say something quick, he commanded Ike in his mind.

“I said, what is this?” the prefect repeated, his voice rising. “Mike,” he called.

The man beside him got up. He was tall and dark, and the contours of his large bones showed clearly through flesh that was stretched too tightly over them. His only clothing was trousers, worn inside out and folded at the hip to keep them from sliding down. The cream pouches of the pockets looked comical against the black fabric. “You see this?” Mike said, pointing at an inscription in chalk on the wall. “CELL-SHOW = N500,” he read out.

“Oh. So this thing is still here,” Ike said. The smile on his face was growing. “I wrote it.”

Zuba’s heart skipped. The buzzing of flies became the only sound in the cell. Ike remained where he was, rocking on his feet while returning the stares of the other inmates. One of them laughed ; Zuba was not sure who. He had just begun to relax, hoping Ike had called the bluff of the inmates, when Mike’s hand rose in a swing while the inmate lying on the floor lunged for Ike’s crotch.

“Ike!” Zuba screamed, and began bawling: “Police! Police! Idem!”

Ike leapt. Mike’s punch missed his face and landed on his shoulder. The hand from below grabbed at his crotch and yanked, transforming his shorts into a skirt.

“What’s happening there?” Idem called as his steps thudded down the corridor. “I say, what’s happening? Where you? Zuba?” He stood before the iron bars.

Ike’s assailants had sat back down on the floor, staring straight ahead. Ike returned to the security of the wall beside Zuba, panting.

“Em... It’s OK now,” Zuba said. He leant to the right and poked his head before the bars to reassure Idem.

“I say I no want any trouble in there. I no want hear any noise again. Otherwise I go throw tear gas in there.” Idem turned and left. His footsteps had barely faded when Mike and his co-assailant came at them again.

Zuba held out his left hand. “OK OK.” He slid his other hand under his trouser and retrieved the wad in one of the back pockets of his shorts.

Mike snapped the money out of Zuba’s hand and counted it. “Thank your Creator,” he said, and wagged a finger at Ike’s face. He took the money to the prefect. “One thousand one hundred naira.”

The prefect collected the money and recounted it. He nodded.

“Won’t you find me something?” a female voice called from outside the cell.

The prefect crumpled a note and flung it towards the cell opposite. A young lady seated behind the bars reached out and picked it. “Bless you,” her voice rang out again.

The prefect turned back to Mike. “Give them seat,” he said.

Mike went over to the old man seated last in the row. “Shift, shift, Papa,” he barked at the man, kicking him twice. “You will still be the last. And if by the end of the

week you're still here without completing your cell-sho we'll give you only standing space." He beckoned at Zuba and Ike. He placed Zuba fourth on the line, and Ike after him. Then he returned and took his place between his co-assailant and the prefect.

Zuba lowered himself to the ground. He could feel the warmth of the man that had just vacated the position. He stretched out his legs before him.

"This people wanted to turn me into a eunuch," Ike muttered beside Zuba, holding together the torn crotch of his shorts. "Thank Heavens I'm wearing a pant underneath. What would I have told my wife?"

Zuba forced a soft chuckle through his lips, thinking it would help Ike feel better. But the expression on Ike's face was still that of shock. It was not an attempt at humour, Ike was just mumbling to himself.

"New man, you in white vest, come here," the prefect said.

"Get up! Get up!" Mike waved at Zuba. "Obasanjo is calling you."

Zuba scrambled to his feet. He had heard that cell prefects were called presidents. But he never thought they actually took a sitting president's name. He stood straight before the prefect. "Mr President sir!"

A smile softened the prefect's features. "What's your name?"

"Zuba."

"What kind of a name is that? Is it Igbo?"

"Yes. Short for Chikezuba."

"What does it mean?"

"The Lord created enough wealth."

"Did He?"

Zuba rubbed his keloid.

"What kind of a lump is that on your forehead? Or is it a scar?"

Zuba snatched his hand off his face. He shook his head and said nothing.

"What happened to your forehead?" the prefect persisted.

"It's from an accident, when I was a child."

"What brought you people here?"

Zuba hesitated. Wasn't it the case that people were sometimes beaten up if they claimed innocence? "A case of stealing."

"What did you steal?"

"They said we stole money, and personal goods, from a family."

"Did you?"

Zuba hesitated again. He shook his head.

The prefect stared long and hard at him. "Well, it happens," he said finally. "Do your people know you're here?"

"No. But I'm sure they'll find us soon."

"What do you do for a living?"

"I just finished from school, still studying."

"So you're one of those who never get tired of school, eh?"

“Why not wear your trouser inside out to save it from dirt, so it will still look clean when you leave?” Mike said.

“It’s OK,” Zuba answered. “I don’t mind looking dirty when leaving.” He paused, then made an attempt at a joke: “Even Obasanjo himself was once in cell.”

The prefect smiled. The inmate beside Mike smiled too, looking so unlike the person that had made for the balls of his fellow man minutes earlier.

The prefect threw his head back and yawned. “You can return to your place,” he said.

Zuba sat back in his position. The floor felt grainy against his palm. He looked around the cell, beginning from the extreme right corner of the opposite wall which he had avoided focusing on since they came in. A dirty metal bucket stood where the two walls met, spewing its foulness into the air like a noxious fountain. The square piece of plank that served as its lid failed to sit well on its bent rim. Flies buzzed around it and in it. The outstretched legs of the elderly man last in the line were just inches from touching it.

The walls were dank and dotted with dried blood. Chalk and charcoal graffiti stood out in white and black on their dull dirty yellowness: BADBOY BAHODA LIVED HERE, DERICO NWAMAMA WUZ HERE, and the like. They reminded Zuba of his last days in secondary school when some of the students had gone round scribbling such graffiti on walls. The students were mainly the dull ones. He could still recall one of them murmuring to himself as he scratched his name on the hostel wall: “The principal

said I cannot leave an impression on the school, so I will leave one on its walls.”

The graffiti that held prime place on the cell wall was a life-size charcoal portrait of a man’s head and shoulders. The face was angular, with jutting cheekbones and chin. The width of the nose nearly matched the width of the frowning-but-grinning lips; the narrowed eyes gave a thoughtful expression. BUGA IN CELL, said the words beside the drawing. THE GODIAN PROPHET FROM THE HOLYLAND. NO PLACE LIKE HOME.

Zuba rested his chin on his knees. He wondered if his sister, Nonye, and the handyman who sometimes doubled as driver for Ike, were close to locating him. A policeman had waved a gun at them, warned them against following, as he and Ike were being driven away. “Inform Barrister Chigbo,” he had managed to call out to her.

Footsteps thudding down the corridor. Idem appeared at the door and slid three metal plates under the bars. The plates grated against the concrete floor, jarring on Zuba’s nerves.

The prefect picked up a sachet of water from one of the plates and bit it open at one end. His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down as he drank. Mike picked up another one and drank too. The other inmates watched. When the prefect removed the sachet from his lips, only half of the contents remained. He squeezed some water onto his right hand and washed it into the plate. He turned towards the two inmates between Mike and Zuba.

“Okpu-uzu, Chemist, now we have money. I’m sure you people will prefer to wait for Madam Food,” he said.

“Sure,” the ball-grabber answered.

Okpu-uzu... Zuba and Ike exchanged glances. So the ball-grabber was a blacksmith, with hands hardened by handling iron.

The prefect pushed the plates towards Zuba. “Pass them on to that papa. You people will get something better to eat when Madam Food comes.”

Zuba stared into the plates. One was filled with *garri*. The *garri* had not been stirred as was customary; it stood hard and flat in the bowl. There had been an attempt to eke out the okra soup in the second plate. A clear layer of water lay over it. Two half-sachets of water lay on the last plate. Zuba passed the plates on.

The papa took the plates. He was a short, slight man with a sprinkle of grey in his hair. His arms and legs were stocky, and seemed to belong to another body; his movement was lethargic, and the sadness didn’t leave his face even as he swallowed outsized dollops of the *garri* in noisy gulps.

Idem’s voice echoed down the corridor: “Madam, wetin you cook today?”

“Na *ogbono* soup o.”

“Oya, put for me, with two extra meat.”

When footsteps headed down the corridor, people began to stir.

“Madam Food, you have come,” the prefect greeted.

A middle-aged woman stood outside the bars. Her face shone with the warmth of hearths and kitchens. The smell of firewood smoke and condiments trickled into the cell from the wrapper around her waist. The cloth was so faded that the jumping horses on the fabric looked spectral. A heavily laden metal tray with a broad turned-up rim rested on her head like a sombrero.

“Yes o. How are you? How are you all? Are you buying any food today?” She lifted the tray off her head and lowered it to the ground. Smoke-blackened pots, plastic plates, cutlery, a tiny blue bucket and a jerry-can filled its circumference.

“Nwamaka, I hope all is well. You’re quiet today,” she said, casting a glance into the opposite cell.

“I told you I won’t talk to you again.” The clear soprano of the speaker came as a mumble.

Nwamaka. A child is good. The stresses in the name could be placed differently to make it mean: This child is so beautiful. Zuba leant forwards to get a better look at her. She was young; her skin glowed. The floral dress that hugged her, outlining her ample bust, was faded but clean. She looked like she was new. But Zuba knew she wouldn’t be occupying the prime position in her cell if that was the case. Only the cornrows on her head were unkempt. He estimated she was between eighteen and twenty-two. But the way she stared up at Madam Food with Betty Boop eyes, while holding her lips together in a sulk, made her seem no more than twelve.

Madam Food laughed. “Nwamaka my child, please forgive me. I came with something special for you today. Let me quickly serve Peter and his mates then I’ll take my time to serve you specially.”

The pout on Nwamaka’s lips dissolved into a smile. Three older-looking women seated after her leant forwards to stare at Madam Food.

“What’s in your soup today?” the prefect asked.

“It’s dried fish and pork meat. Very sweet.”

“Give us...” he looked back into the cell, “...six plates of food.”

“I don’t—” began Ike.

Zuba nudged him. “My partner and I had lunch a short while ago, we can share a plate.” He was surprised that the prefect included them on his feeding list and did not want to rebuff the gesture. He and Ike had prepared to go without food for the rest of the day. They had taken Coca-Cola and bread, bought from a shop in the police station, after their interrogation, and then swallowed tetracycline capsules obtained from the same shop, to seal off bowel movement – something that had always worked for Zuba whenever he had a runny tummy.

“OK. Bring five plates,” the prefect said.

Madam Food slid the plates of food under the bar along with a bowl of water for washing hands.

“It will be nice if you can come earlier tomorrow,” the prefect said while handing her some money. “I’ve added some extra. And Mother Food, please give your boy tissue

paper, candle and matches to bring for us when he comes to collect the plates.”

“I have heard,” the woman said. She squeezed the notes into a ball and tucked it into her bra.

Slurps and lip-smacking arose around Zuba and Ike. Zuba swallowed the saliva that the stench in the cell had caused to pool in his mouth, and examined the food: a steaming mound of yellow garri and a gelatinous soup with two Maggi-cube sized pieces of meat. He wanted to ask the woman for a fork. But after a glance around, he thought it unwise. He set to work. “Ike don’t leave it all for me o,” he said.

They ate slowly, blowing at hot, soup-moistened balls of garri. Mama-puts, as food hawkers such as Madam Food were called, were reputed to possess certain native skills lost to chefs of expensive restaurants, and the food would have tasted good under different circumstances. But Zuba was discovering the dynamic of taste and cell-smell. With the food’s aroma smothered by the general stench, the garri tasted revolting and the soup’s gooey texture reminded him of mucus.

Mike pushed his clean-licked plates towards the door. His body was covered with sweat. He licked his fingers and rested against the wall.

The other inmates followed suit. Zuba and Ike rushed what was left of their food. “Thank you,” they said to the prefect. Mike took their plate and slid it under the door.

Zuba’s buttocks throbbed against the hard floor. He shifted and tried to adjust his legs. A hand clamped down on his thigh.

“Careful! Watch my foot. Don’t upset my wound,” Chemist said.

Zuba stared down at the foot. Chemist’s ankle was twice its normal size. A wound, the size of a fifty kobo coin, festered upon it. Black and glassy-yellow scabs of dried blood and plasma were crusted around the opening.

Zuba’s face convulsed. “What happened?”

“They shot me. During interrogation. And said I was trying to run away. The bullet is still in there. They had arrested me from my chemist shop saying I had been treating armed robbers. I know it is the work of my enemies. They have been envious that my shop was making great progress just two years after I completed my apprenticeship.”

Zuba examined the swollen ankle. There was no exit wound. If Chemist had been shot during interrogation then he was probably shot at close range – so wouldn’t there be an exit wound? Or did it depend on the kind of gun used?

The boy came to collect the used plates, bringing the matches, candle and tissue paper. The prefect tore off a long sheet of tissue and began to twist it with his fingers. When the tissue became a long white cord, he put it aside, tore off another long sheet and began twisting again. He hummed under his breath, and worked with a deliberate slowness as if he wanted the task to last for ever.

Zuba and the other inmates watched each twist of the prefect’s fingers.

The prefect pushed himself to his feet. Seven cords of tissue, as well as matches and a candle were clutched in his hands. He took a step forwards and placed the objects at the foot of the opposite wall. He lit the candle, waited for some wax to gather at the base of the flame, then poured the melted wax onto one end of a tissue cord and stuck the cord to the wall. He repeated the process until the seven cords were trailing, bright white, against the dull yellow of the wall. They made the Buga graffiti, inches above, look like a totem in a shrine.

“It’s for the smells. Wait till the morning and you’ll see,” Chemist muttered when he saw the question in Zuba’s eyes.

The prefect returned to his post. He sat down and gazed at his handiwork. He gave voice to the song he had been humming, singing in a low husky tone:

Jesus, my rock of ages
The pillar of my life
I run to thee, I shelter in thee
There’s nothing the world can do...

The sound of a car halting outside floated into the cell. Doors slammed shut. Zuba sat up. Muffled voices. He strained his ears. Footsteps in the front office.

“Good evening, Sergeant. I’m Barrister Chigbo...”

Zuba exhaled. Warmth spread through his chest.

“...I’m here to see my clients. Two men: Zuba Maduekwe and Ike Okoye, just taken into your custody.”

“Your people have come,” the prefect said, turning to Zuba and Ike.

Zuba nodded. He held his lips between his teeth. Beside him, Ike stared towards the door, a new light in his eyes.

“Only their IPO can allow you to see them,” Idem said.

“Good. There’re here then. We’ll go and get their investigating police officer’s consent.”

“Can you please pass this food on to them?”

Zuba closed his eyes – Nonye!

“No. I have told you, nothing – nothing without their IPO.”

“We’ll be back,” the barrister said.

“It’s almost closing time at the office. You may not get him today.”

“We’ll still try.”

The footsteps started receding.

Zuba jumped to his feet. “Barrister!”

“Zuba, are you OK?”

“Zuba!” Nonye’s voice rang out, thick, sagging under the weight of her anguish.

“Nonye—” Zuba began.

“One more word and I’ll throw tear gas into that cell,” Idem shouted.

Zuba’s lips found each other again.

“Just hold on, Zuba. We’ll get you people out soon. We’ll be back,” Barrister Chigbo shouted.

Car doors slammed shut and the engine coughed to life. The car drove off.

Zuba clung to the sound of the receding car, following it far into the distance until not even the faintest hum could be heard. He sat down, pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He stared at the wall in front of him. The Buga graffiti stared back, thoughtful, wondering with him when his people would be back. Zuba rubbed his keloid. He looked up at the darkening patch of sky visible through the tiny window.

“They’ll be back tomorrow morning.” Ike said.

“I guess so.” Zuba bowed his head till it rested on his knees. He rubbed his keloid against the callused skin. When he lifted his head few minutes later, Buga had faded into the darkness.

The sixty-watt bulb hanging from the ceiling came on, casting an oily light.

Mike yawned loudly. He stood up and headed for the slop bucket. His pee hummed against the metal. He returned to his position and stretched out on the floor. Other inmates followed. Chemist pushed himself up with difficulty and hopped to the bucket. He stood on one leg as he peed, breathing heavily. Zuba was the last to head for the bucket after Ike. He expected to be hit by a pungent stench, but the smell that rose to his nostrils was weak – wasn’t too bad. Was there a relationship between light and smell? Do smells go to sleep at night?

He returned to his position and lay on his back. He had

never been able to sleep on his back. As kids, he and his brother, Chuu, had tried sleeping on their backs with their legs together and their arms by their sides, after they had seen Yul Brynner lying that way in *The King and I*. They had called it the Royal Sleeping Posture. They had not succeeded, but now he had to succeed. He wouldn't rest his belly, his cheek on the dirty floor.

The bulb went off. In the blackness, Zuba realized that a radio had been blaring at the front office somewhere. And there were voices. He heard a man curse at the radio's poor reception. A beam of flashlight cleaved the darkness. Then the crackle of a match being struck. The voices at the office resumed their conversation. From the tiny window up on the cell wall, cool, rain-washed breeze drifted in bearing the sounds of rustling leaves, shrilling crickets and the piercing squeaks of bats.

Zuba shut his eyes. He wondered how Nonye was faring. She would be too scared to sleep in the house all by herself, and the housemaid had travelled home for a sister's marriage ceremony. He should not have done this to her. He should have listened to her.

Tears stung his eyes as he thought of their father on his hospital bed. How much different, how much better their lives would have been had his father's oversized ego not driven him to quit his university job and start a secondary school. He felt the hot rush of bile at the thought of the school principal, Mrs Egbetuyi, and her husband sleeping comfortably on some downy bed somewhere. Perhaps he

should have followed his police friend's advice, and gone along with the selling-marijuana-to-the-students scheme, since he could not stomach the poisoning-of-students'-food scheme. Then Mr and Mrs Egbetuyi would have been the ones lying on a cold concrete floor.

Zuba rubbed his keloid. To his left, two of the inmates snored a duet. To his right, Ike kept twisting and turning. He wondered what Ike was thinking about. The Egbetuyis? Or his pregnant wife and child?

Mosquitoes swarmed upon the cell like the fourth biblical plague. Huge mosquitoes with needles for proboscises, and sirens for whines. Their whine was infuriating. Why couldn't they go straight to business without announcing themselves?

"When they cry in your ears, they are asking: 'Are you *asleeeeeeeeeeeep* yet?' his mother used to say. "So if you don't swat and let them know you're awake they'll get to biting you."

"But Mummy, all I hear is a long whine, I can't make out any words," he had said.

"That's because they speak *mosquitolese*, not Igbo or English. So swat and keep swatting at them to make them know you are awake. Otherwise they will give you malaria and I will give you injections with big needles," their mum had answered.

In the cell, Zuba kept swatting and swatting.

"These things won't allow somebody to rest," Ike muttered as he slapped at the mosquitoes.

Zuba's right arm started aching and he switched to swatting and slapping with his left. Hours later, however, he and Ike became still like the other inmates of the cell, too tired to react to the needles drilling and re-drilling into their bodies in search of succulent veins.

The Outside World

Keloid

An oil tanker hurtled towards them. Zuba was just able to glimpse the NIGERIA GO SURVIVE splashed on its bumper before the impact.

The acrid fumes of petrol mixed with the smell of mangled metal, stinging the insides of his nostrils as he whimpered, dazed, in the back seat with Nonye. A stranger was trying to force the door open. They had barely been pulled from the wreckage when it burst into flames. The air filled with the scent of burning flesh.

“My mummy and brother are in there!” he cried. He struggled to return to the flames, clawing and biting at the hands that held him until the blood oozing from his head blinded him.

He was pulled away to a car. Nonye was already there, trembling in the arms of a large woman. A crowd of onlookers curtained off the accident site, but not the dark smoke billowing into the sky. His mother’s scream before the impact continued to play in his head.

“*Gini?*” their mother had screamed at the tanker. It was what she always said when startled. *Gini?* What? Presenting a fearless front. Querying the unknown that suddenly confronted her. “Don’t you know that it pays to present a

bold front even when one is all jelly inside?” she had once said to Zuba. “It can stave off dangers.” But there was no staving off that hurtling tanker, and the last syllable of her exclamation, the *gini*, had gone shrill and off-key. Unlike his kid brother Chuu’s elemental “*Mummee!*”, beseeching Mummy’s magical ability to protect.

The wound which Zuba sustained when his forehead rammed into the car door window refused to heal for a long long time. It was stitched up, cut open and stitched up again. When it finally healed, the scar, rather than fading into the skin, grew bigger and bigger, into an itchy mound that looked like a leech fastened to his head.

“Keloid,” the doctor said. “Such scars are called *keloids*,” he repeated, staring at Zuba and his dad as if they were interns. “They’re notoriously difficult to heal. Even when they are surgically removed, oftentimes they grow back. He just has to learn to live with it.”

Zuba got home from the hospital and withdrew to the darkest corner of his room. He yanked off his shirt and slumped on the floor, resting his back against the blue wall where a dark smudge, the size and shape of his bare back, was visible.

When Nonye came into the room and saw her brother’s glistening face, she joined him on the floor. He threw his arm around the padded hardness of the cervical collar on her neck, and they cried.

It was not the attention-seeking crying of children. It was silent like the bleeding of wounds.

When their housemaid came into the room and saw them, she gathered them into her arms and carried them to her bed. She sang them to sleep with ancient lullabies, her sweet voice keeping out the mutterings and curses that wafted down the corridor as their father began his nightly pacing of the house.

One day in the month of March just before the rains, when the heat and dryness were at their peak, and the grass on the lawns and bushes had become brown and brittle, Zuba and Nonye returned from school. Zuba sat on the floor of his mother’s study and selected one of the biology textbooks scattered before him. He opened the book at a folded page and leafed through the colourful pictures, mouthing certain words. After a while, he reached for a hand mirror on the floor and held it to his face while he fingered the growth on his forehead.

“I am now ugly,” he cried as the housemaid entered the study. “And the doctor said that it cannot be cured. But there has to be a cure. There has to be.”

“Don’t mind the doctor.” She planted a kiss on his head and removed the mirror from his hand. “If we keep rubbing and massaging it like this,” she used her forefinger to rub the keloid in a circular motion, “it will eventually go down.”

Zuba purred while her finger worked on his face. His eyelids became heavy and he rested his head against her breasts.

“Now, come and have your lunch,” she said finally.

“I am not hungry.”

“Come and try, my dear. You have not been eating well. I promised to tell Nonye a folk tale if she eats. You have to join her if you want to listen.”

Zuba shook his head.

“OK. Come and eat only the chicken and leave the rice.”
Zuba lifted his head from her bosom.

At school the next morning, during break, Zuba withdrew to the shade of a mango tree. He sat on one of its gnarled roots, away from the tailor ants commuting on the fat furrowed stem. The thick leaves of the lower hanging branches reached down around him, shielding him from the bustle of his mates playing in the distance. He retrieved a mirror from his pocket and held it before his face. Had the time he spent rubbing his keloid the previous night yielded any result?

“Hey, look who’s here. It is scarface.” A stocky boy waddled towards Zuba, swinging arms that seemed to reach down to his knees.

Zuba looked up at him, at the thick drooping lower lip that made it look as if he was sneering at everything, and at the two boys grinning behind him in their grubby blue-and-white uniforms. He slid the mirror back into his pocket.

“So, you love your scar so much that you sneak off to a cosy place and admire it, eh?”

“It is not a scar. It’s a kee loid.”

“It’s a scar!”

“A scar, a scar, a scar. You’re scarface, scarface, scarface,” they chanted.

Zuba ran towards his classroom, trying not to cry. He sat brooding in class for the rest of the day, watching a lizard that had crawled up the wall to shelter from the blazing heat outside. When his teacher used the word “oftentimes” he sat up and rifled through his memories.

“Yes, oftentimes,” he whispered to himself. “The doctor said: oftentimes they grow back.”

He dreaded raising his hand; everyone would stare at him. He scribbled his question on a sheet and passed it to his neighbour.

His neighbour’s hand went up.

“Yes?” the teacher said.

“Aunty, what is the meaning of ‘oftentimes?’”

Zuba went home and paced about, waiting for his father to return from work. But when he saw his father stepping out of the car, his tongue failed him. He decided to wait for another day. Three days later, his father returned with a less forbidding expression on his face. Zuba followed him around the house.

“You have something to say?” his father finally asked.

“Yes, Daddy. I want this kee loid removed. It has made me ugly.”

He was startled by the roar of his father’s laughter.

“You mean you’ve started thinking about girls? At this age? What are you, ten or eleven?” He laughed some more.

“Zuba, just study hard, work hard and become successful, then you will be a handsome man to any girl you meet. A man’s beauty lies in his pockets, not in his face.”

“But I still want it removed. They call me...” his voice fell to an inaudible whimper.

“Have you forgotten that the doctor said it will grow back if removed?”

“The doctor said ‘oftentimes’, which means...” he paused to remember the definition he had memorized, “many times, again and again – but not every time.”

“You’re not a girl. You’re a man, and men don’t do plastic surgery. So, my son, just study hard and become successful.”

The result of the entrance exams came out and Zuba passed. He nodded to himself. Secondary school would be a new beginning.

“It will do you much good, Zuba,” his father said of his decision to send him to a boarding school for boys. “You need the fresh air of a new environment, to meet new people and make new friends, to become a man.”

Zuba rubbed his hands together as he surveyed his new shoes, crisp uniforms and cartons of goodies: cornflakes, milk, chocolates, biscuits and fruit juices. His eyes glowed as he felt the weight of his new leather wallet and filled his nostrils with the fresh mint of his pocket money. The thought of leaving home to become his own master, master over his money and goodies, got him cackling with excitement. Nonye’s sulking about being stuck all alone

with the housemaid at home, with her goodies rationed, increased his excitement.

“Grow up quickly then. But, waow! You still have four years, four whole years before you get to my position,” he said.

Zuba arrived at the Immaculate Conception College, Enugu, in the southeast of Nigeria, on a day when the sun seemed at its most radiant. He felt his keloid itch as he was introduced to his house prefect. But he held his hands firmly together. This was supposed to be a new beginning; he was not going to draw attention to it.

Yet the first question the prefect asked after introductions was:

“What kind of a scar is that on your face?”

“It’s not a scar, it’s a kee loid.”

The prefect looked at him strangely. “Well, whatever. This is your bed and that is your locker.” He tapped on the top of a double bunk, the last in a row of five, and pointed at a white wooden locker that stood out against the green walls. Then he left the cubicle.

He reappeared seconds later. “Hey... you... you... what’s-your-name-again... Scarface!”

The students in the cubicle squealed with laughter. Zuba knew from experience that such laughter would confer longevity on the name. He looked at the prefect waving at him from the door.

“Don’t forget to see me in the morning for your ceat card,” the prefect said.

Zuba nodded.

“Let me take my arrival refreshment,” he said. The giggles ended and his neighbours sat up on the beds beside him. He reached for his beverages, his biscuits and pastries, and gave himself and his neighbours an extravagant treat. He was later to recount to his sister, Nonye, that the beverage he took that night was so thick with powdered milk and cocoa that he had to drink it with a spoon, like custard.

Afterwards he changed into his pyjamas. He stared at his fat wallet for a minute or two, stroking it, noting the tiny lines that crisscrossed the shiny black leather. He put it away and climbed up to his bed to lie down, heavy and happy like a python that had swallowed a calf. He waited for sleep to overtake him, staring at the fluorescent tube at the centre of the ceiling, and at the brown moth that danced around it oblivious of the gecko inching closer.

The wind howled outside, heralding a September rain-storm. The glass louvres chattered; the air became chilly. Zuba reached under his pillow and retrieved a wrapper. It was one of his mother’s old *ogodo*: the long, ankle-length cloth wound around the waist beneath a matching blouse. He threw the cloth over his body and her scent wafted into his nostrils. An emotion he had never experienced before rose from the pit of his stomach with the speed of vomit. He pressed his head into his pillow.

“Home. Home. I want to go home. Daddy, Nonye...” Minutes later, the emotion was joined by a more familiar grief and he began to mouth into his tear-soaked pillow: “Mummy, oh Mummy.”

When he woke in the morning, the fresh smell of the newly washed air and wet earth rushed into his nostrils. But he did not feel refreshed by it, then or on other days. He took to shuffling to the shower, and on to breakfast and classes, like an apparition in the middle of a bustling market. Week after week, month after month, his sandals scraped along on the dusty school grounds.

“Look, if you’re homesick, it is normal,” his older neighbour advised him one morning while they made their beds. “But try and get over it. You don’t have to carry your grief on your face all the time.”

Zuba thanked him for his advice. He picked up his mirror and studied his face. His eyes were puffy and his keloid had increased in size. It now looked like a leech that had gorged itself to bursting point. He lifted his eyelids a bit, showing more of his sunken eyeballs. Then he parted his lips slightly, enough for the whiteness of his teeth to show through and brighten his face. He nodded and put the mirror away, squared his shoulders and strode out of the room, his new look plastered on his face. But his stride kept relapsing into a shuffle, and his shoulders into a droop, even after his pillow had forgotten the salty taste of his tears.

One afternoon during his second year, his house prefect came into his cubicle.

“Scarface! Get up.” He kicked the stand-alone bed on which Zuba was stretched out. “Scarface!”

Zuba squinted at the prefect with drowsy eyes. “My... My name is Zuba.”

“OK. Zuba or Zoo-bat or whatever you say your name is, I need your bed. You have to move to the lower bed of a double bunk.”

Zuba recoiled at the thought. He had woken up one morning in the previous term to find himself drenched with urine from the bed above. No doubt the prefect wanted to give the bed to his second-year student pet. He looked around the cubicle at the other second-year students sprawled out on their stand-alone beds observing their siesta. There would be fiery protests if they were to find themselves in his shoes. He breathed deeply and tried to kindle such a fire in himself. Instead, his hand flew up to rub his keloid as he said, “Senior, I’m sorry. I can no longer sleep on lower bunks. I have lung convulsion.”

“What about short convulsion?” the prefect sneered.

“I mean lung, l-u-n-g not l-o-n-g, convulsion. If I sleep on the lower bed of a double bunk and breathe in the dust from the mattress above, my lungs will start convulsing.”

The prefect stared at Zuba for a while. He scratched his head and walked away.

A long-forgotten feeling of triumph awakened in Zuba. The feeling grew with each successful encounter with the school prefects, building in him the confidence of Houdini. But the senior prefect’s knots were usually harder to slip out of.

“Oh, sorry, where do you have the abscess?” the senior prefect had asked in a sympathetic tone during one of their encounters, when Zuba claimed to have an abscess in order to avoid being flogged on the buttocks.

“Here,” Zuba had answered, placing his hand gently over a spot on his right buttock.

“Don’t worry then, I’ll flog you only on your left buttock.” He squatted before Zuba’s buttocks and dealt him the strokes, holding the cane vertically. “Steady now,” he had said, like a nurse administering an injection.

One evening during housework the house prefect was bent over a large map of the school farm, calling out the students one by one and allocating them plots of land to cultivate. The junior students stood in a mass, holding grass-cutting knives bent at the tips like scorpions’ tails, and chattering with fresh tales from their mid-term break. The senior students strutted around with canes which they wielded with the excitement of four-year-olds holding new water pistols.

“Scarface, this is your plot,” the prefect said, chuckling while he mapped out a large trapezium on the farm.

Zuba felt his keloid itch. His plot was the only part of the farm overgrown with wire grass.

“Why are you still standing there? Get to work!” he barked.

Zuba rubbed his keloid. “Senior, you have forgotten my boil.” A large boil had grown on his right arm, close to his elbow, before the mid-term break.

“What boil?” The prefect walked up to him. He grabbed Zuba’s arm and twisted it to get a better look.

“Ouch,” Zuba said.

“What is ouch? The boil is no longer there. It has healed.”

“Yes.” Zuba touched his elbow gingerly. “But the doctor said the root of the boil went so-ooo deep that it weakened my elbow joint. He said I should do nothing strenuous with the arm.”

“What is wrong with this boy?” the prefect screamed, turning to the crowd of students. “He’s always dodging from everything, takes part in nothing. Always at the fringe of every activity. He has asthma and cannot sweep dusty floors. He has an abscess when all others are being flogged on their buttocks. And now he has a weak elbow and cannot cut grass.” He turned back to face Zuba. “You know what you are? You’re a fringe man!”

The students doubled up with laughter. “Fringe man,” they repeated, pointing at Zuba with one hand and holding their bellies with the other.

Zuba too was doubled up, laughing. He knew that the students’ laughter would confer longevity on the name.

In his final year, when his mates’ shoulders began broadening, when their voices deepened and their heights increased and their chins sprouted hair, Zuba realized that the name, Fringe man, was loaded. It not only referred to his disposition to keep to the fringe of events but to his

size as well. He was passing out of the school and entering university, but he was just five-feet-four-inches tall. And, unlike other short people who made up in girth what they lacked in height, he was fish-bone thin.

Yet any name was better than one that referred to his keloid.

What the Doctors Ordered

A high fence enclosed the eight-hectare estate. Coral vines, nourished by the abundance of the rainy season, ran wildly, intertwined along the fence. Fat carpenter bees buzzed and perched on the vine's flowers, their black and yellow contrasting with the lush pink blossoms.

Zuba's father, Professor Chukwueloka Maduekwe, strutted around the fifteen buildings that comprised his own school – offices, classrooms, dormitories and staff quarters. He no longer regretted giving up his academic career at the University. He kept grinning and rubbing his palms together. In a few years, no doubt, he would repay the loan that had enabled him renovate and expand his late senator father's estate. He stopped at the centre of the compound and inhaled deeply. The air was heavy with the sharp scent of paint and with the fumes heated up from the fresh tar on the roads. It gave the compound the smell of a newly unwrapped gift pack. He nodded. An orange-headed lizard nodded back at him from its perch on the office wall.

The professor resumed his walk, occasionally patting the trunks of the neem trees that framed the driveway. He stopped again when he got to the gleaming black front gate. A wide signboard, spilling over with the smiling,

happy faces of well-fed children, proclaimed in bold blue letters: COROLLA SECONDARY SCHOOL FOR BOYS AND GIRLS: *where your child wants to be!*

When Zuba came home from university he saw from the bounce in his father's step that the school had taken off well. It was similar to the way his father used to walk beside their mum during family outings, especially when other men were looking.

Nonye teased their father about his new gait. "*Daddy, I buzikwa bobo,*" she said, calling him a cool dude.

Their father threw back his head and laughed so hard that Zuba saw his tonsils, the way he used to laugh when their mother was around. It made Zuba recall what his kid brother Chuu had told him about being woken up in the night by Daddy's laughter and going to his room to find Daddy wrestling with Mummy under the bed sheets.

"Mummy is stronger than Daddy," Chuu had concluded. "She was winning, she was on top."

Zuba too had a lightness in his walk. He had had an essay published in his university's biochemistry journal – a rare feat for an undergraduate – and his Head of Department was encouraging him to take up a career in science, and offering his services as mentor. Zuba had spent a great deal of the last semester with the man he had come to call his school father. He showed his father the journal during a rare father-son outing to a pub.

"Hmmm. *Exploring the Biochemistry of Keloid and Scar Formation.* Excellent!" The professor closed the journal

and placed it beside his glass of beer. He extended his hand for a presidential handshake. "Congratulations. Making good in your course, are you?"

"Yes, Dad. But it's more than just a course to me. It's what I want to do with my life."

"Writing scientific essays?"

"Researching and writing. I want to be a researcher."

Professor Maduekwe laughed. "So you will like to spend the rest of your life as a lab rat, locked away from people, with microscopes, test tubes, slides and pipettes for company?"

"No, Dad. I will not only research. I will lecture too, like... like..." He rubbed his keloid. "I'll just lecture too," he said, stopping himself from mentioning the name of his school father. His father might put the man down as "a colourless fellow" – a tag the professor used for many of his erstwhile colleagues, some of whom now laughed at him behind his back. (News had got to the professor that his former rival for the Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Nigeria, Professor Umeadi, had said, "The former Dean of Education wanted to become Vice Chancellor so badly that when he lost to me, he left to become Vice Chancellor of a secondary school".)

"Lecture? Well, that's good. But you'll be frustrated. Like I was. Universities are no longer what they used to be in the good old days. The President hit the nail on the head when he said lecturers today do nothing but sell handouts, drink beer in the staff club, harass female students and go

on strike. And the lecturers proved him right by going on strike to protest his utterance.”

A man in a green apron glided past the tables and placed two wooden bowls before them.

Zuba took a deep breath. The meaty aroma got his stomach yearning. He washed his hands and started on the dish.

The professor watched with a smile as his son chewed on a succulent piece of tongue. He picked up the tongue in his own bowl and transferred it, dripping with spicy emulsified palm oil gravy, into Zuba’s bowl, soiling the white plastic table top in the process.

Zuba avoided his father’s stare. A young couple was seated at the other end of the pub, beneath a banner that said: CENTRAL INN, OJOTO, ANAMBRA STATE. BEST IN TOWN FOR GOATHEAD PEPPER SOUP. They were singing along and giggling over some memory called up by the highlife music playing in the background. He focused on them.

“How old are you now, son?” the professor began again.

Zuba stiffened. His father used the expression “son” the way a farmer uses water on sun-baked soil: to soften it before tilling and sowing. “Twenty-one,” he said, still averting his gaze.

“And you’ll be graduating later this year?”

Zuba nodded.

“You know, son, I was thinking the other day how nice it would be if you got more involved in the school now. I will make a call to my old friend at the National Service

Directorate and have you posted to our school here for your service. What do you say to that, son?”

Zuba took a deep breath. He had been dreaming of his national service, and could still hear his school father talking about his own service: “It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, Zuba, living unfettered for a year as an unknown in an unknown place.” He rubbed his keloid as he said, “Yes, Dad, let me work and help out now during my holidays. But when I’m due for national service, I’ll like to be my age and take a break for a little adventure, to go to whatever nice new place I’ll be posted.”

Professor Maduekwe’s eyes narrowed and his lips stretched in a slanted smile. He lowered his voice as he said: “I know, son. You want a little wild time of your own, away from the reach of Daddy’s prying eyes. I understand.” But something in Zuba’s expression made him ask, “Or did I get it wrong, son?”

“Dad, it will just be a little break to help me refocus.”

The smile faded from the professor’s face. He would have gladly let his son go elsewhere for national service if, at last, Zuba wanted to do what other young men did: play and sow their wild oats before settling down. All he knew about his son’s sex life came from Nonye teasing Zuba with imitations of the housemaid: “Zuba, I have an itch in a place my hand can’t reach, come now and help me scratch it?”

The professor studied his son’s face while sipping his beer.

“And after service? You have any plans?”

Zuba wanted to travel far from home, to see more of life, to spread his wings without fearing they would get in his father's way. "Like I said earlier, Dad, I will want to research and lecture in a university."

"That's good. Your interest is in education, like mine. But you know, son, the school I've started is just the lowest rung in a ladder. Once it takes off fully and stabilizes, we could move another rung up, into higher education. And then, you can lecture in your own school. In your own university. How about that?" Professor Maduekwe's eyes were now animated. He gesticulated wildly, inflicting chops on the air as he spoke. "Welcome to the ship, son."

On the day that Zuba came home after graduation, his father did not seem himself. Professor Maduekwe was shuffling about, seething and mumbling to himself. Anything in his path received the caustic blast of his bitterness. Zuba, Nonye and the housemaid moved about the house on tiptoes. Even their clothes seemed to match the colour of the walls, as if they were trying to blend in and vanish once they heard his footsteps. Unfortunately, it was at this time that a classmate of Nonye's came to visit.

"So you did not see her enough while in school, eh?" Professor Maduekwe barked at the boy. "You have to chase her all the way to my house. You don't want her to study in peace for her matriculation exams." The professor looked Nonye's friend over again, from his glistening jerry curls to his shiny patent-leather shoes. "Yes, I know your kind.

You're looking for a girl you will send to an early maternity. Well, not my daughter." He stormed forwards, mistaking the boy's dumbstruck stare for defiance.

"Daddy, no!" Nonye screamed.

The boy started and ran off.

The professor chased him out of the compound then walked back to the house. "Yes, I knew it, I knew it," he muttered. "That's the problem with mixed schools. I should have sent her to a girls' school. She would then not have boys sniffing after her like he-goats, following her scent to this house." He stepped into the parlour.

Nonye was on the sofa holding her head while her body shook with her quiet weeping. Zuba's arm was around her shoulders. He was wiping the tears off her face and murmuring consolations.

Professor Maduekwe shifted on his feet. He fought off the urge to rush over and wrap his arms around them. Such displays of softness were unmanly. He swallowed saliva to dissolve the lump forming in his throat. But when Nonye raised her teary face and stared into his eyes, he rushed over anyway and swept them up in his arms. "It's for your own good. Believe me, all I do is for your own good," he moaned into their hair.

Professor Maduekwe rested his head against his children. His breathing was laboured. The sixteen-hour days, the problem at the school, the skipped meals and the mislaid blood-pressure tablets... the whole burden of his rage descended upon him in a splitting migraine.

“Zuba... please... the car keys,” he whispered. “Let’s go to the hospital.”

Zuba hesitated. There was something strange in the wording of the request. His father had not said please since their mother died.

They spent the night in the hospital, the professor on a drip in the hospital bed while Zuba and Nonye slept in fits, huddled on a couch. By morning, the professor had bounced back and insisted on being discharged.

He took the car keys for the drive back to the house, avoiding Zuba’s eye. He stared ahead as he drove and said nothing. Zuba glanced at him. Was he embarrassed by that intimate hug with his children, as if it was a one-night stand?

After a hurried breakfast at home he rushed off to his office, summoning some of his staff along the way for a brainstorming of the current problem facing the school, even though it was a Sunday morning. For the school had been brought to its knees by the antics of its first principal, Mr Iweobi.

He had come highly recommended from the state ministry of education. At the age of fifty-six, he had over twenty-five years’ experience in the education sector, twelve of them as principal at various schools.

After working with him for two terms, a disappointed Professor Maduekwe had called him to his face, “a dyed-in-the-wool *state* school principal with a lazy public-service mentality that does not fit in with the challenge and dynamism of the private sector”. The professor had

decided to lay him off by the end of the session. Mr Iweobi – then barely on speaking terms with his employer – had left quietly.

The next term only twenty-six of the fifty-six pioneer students returned. The former principal had fed their parents lies about the school, advising them to transfer their children to other schools. It was this news that had driven the professor into his latest rage.

Now alone in his office after a protracted meeting with his staff, the professor felt the beginnings of a headache. He retrieved a blood pressure cuff from his desk drawer. The school nurse was away so he fiddled with the contraption himself. His wife had always checked his blood pressure for him and, many years after her death, he was yet to master the contraption. He used to enjoy the way she would insist on his cooperation, even when he was dog-tired. Sometimes, he would put up a show of resistance just to get her going. Then she would pout her lips and use every arm-twisting technique in a woman’s book to get him to budge. He would budge with a frown on his face and a smile in his heart, and occasionally on one unreasonable condition: that she dressed in some of the lingerie he had bought her, or in nothing at all. He would admire her curves and contours as she wrapped the bandage around his arm.

The professor wiped tears from his eyes. He focused on a photo on the wall. It showed a younger-looking him in a Savile row suit, being sworn in as Commissioner for

Education before the Executive Governor of the state. His life had been one long tale of joys nipped in the bud. But he would not allow his joy to be extinguished so soon this time around.

With a few trusted staff, he set about contacting the affected parents to enlighten them as to the true state of affairs in the school. Eleven of the withdrawn students returned.

“The next principal should be a woman,” the professor mumbled to himself after the episode. “Yes, a woman. They’re more honest, straightforward, and less likely to cause problems. Easier to handle, too.”

He got home one evening, weeks later, and, in a joyous mood, announced to Zuba that he had interviewed a new principal for the school.

“In fact, I believe she is, like they say, what the doctors ordered for the school.”

The new principal, Mrs Egbetuyi, came on a visit to the professor’s house with her husband.

“Good evening. You must be Zuba,” she said, looking Zuba straight in the eye and smiling as he let her into the house. “Your father has told me much about you.”

“I hope he didn’t tell you the bad things,” he said, returning her smile and the firm grip of her soft hand.

“Oh yes, he did. That was the part I enjoyed most.”

Her husband followed her. He walked with his hands intertwined before him like a child that has promised to be

on his best behaviour. He was just a bit taller than Zuba’s father, but some kind of medical condition – acromegaly? – had enlarged all his extremities and made him look like a hulk. He squeezed Zuba’s hand. His palm was callused and Zuba almost winced. The man grinned.

They sat on a sofa beside the bubbling aquarium, smiling as they took in the angelfishes that swam backwards, and the guppies with red, blue and orange markings and spade-shaped mouths.

They seemed an incongruous pair. The principal, short and slim, radiated an air of intelligence. She paid little attention to her appearance; with a little care, she could have appeared pretty. Her hair was bobbed and combed forwards. Perched on her nose was a pair of thick-lensed glasses whose arms strained towards her ears at an obtuse angle.

Her husband sought his wife’s gaze every now and then, and a small smile would move his lips each time. His left hand rested on her knee. He looked fortyish. His hair was smoothed backwards above a granite face with its king-size nose.

“I just left the army last year, Professor, after sixteen years of the most exciting service,” he said, and went on to regale them with tales of his travels on hazardous peacekeeping missions. His wife kept nodding beside him, her eyes shining with pride.

Zuba shifted in his seat; there was a flicker of bitterness in his father’s eyes. It was obvious that Mr Egbetuyi reminded his father of that terrible time years ago, soon after he was

sworn in as Commissioner, when the military, having sacked the government, had clamped him in jail along with other corrupt politicians.

“Your daddy has gone abroad,” Zuba’s mother had explained, but later Zuba heard his dad’s name on the network news.

“Mr Egbetuyi,” Professor Maduekwe said, “you’re still young, how come you left the military then?”

“It’s a long story, Professor. It was in Liberia.” He grimaced. “During Operation Thunderbolt. I was asked to waste a woman caught spying for the rebels. Yeah, she was a prostitute. But her country was a war zone, and it was through such liaisons that she managed to feed and preserve her children and husband. I kept thinking: this is somebody’s wife, just like my wife. Heaven knows I cannot bear the thought of anyone hurting my wife in any way; how then could I harm another man’s wife? I refused, Professor. And, in the end, I suffered dearly for it. Became jobless.”

Mrs Egbetuyi laid a hand on her husband’s knee. Her husband’s hand was still on her knee, so her arm crossed his, forming an X. Zuba had heard that lovers who took a blood oath of loyalty would hold their arms in that manner, their blood mingling at the point of intersection from earlier incisions.

As always happened when confronted with such displays of emotion, Professor Maduekwe felt uneasy. He shifted his buttocks, and exchanged a glance with Zuba; didn’t it all sound too Hollywood to be true?

“Well, Mr Egbetuyi, I have some contacts and will let you know of job opportunities that might interest you and... Aha! I wanted to ask about your children.”

Mrs Egbetuyi stiffened. Her husband began to rub her knee. “Children? We’ll have children when we’re ready for them, Professor,” he said in Igbo.

The professor’s eyes widened. So did Zuba’s.

“You speak Igbo?” the professor asked.

“Yes, Professor. And Hausa too. I picked them up in the course of my military postings.”

After some more chit-chat, Mr Egbetuyi declared, “Permission to fall out, Professor.” And they took their leave.

A few weeks after their visit, Zuba understood a little more about their curious reaction to the question of children.

Anxious for his national service call-up letter, Zuba collected the keys to the school’s post office box one evening and drove to the post office. He found his call-up letter in the box and restrained himself from tearing it open. He had promised Nonye that they would open it together. He collected two other letters for Mrs Egbetuyi, and headed back to the school.

The principal’s apartment was a concrete version of the traditional Igbo hut. Its roof, made of asbestos, was peaked at the top, and stretched down and wide around the house. It kept the rays of the sun off the walls of the building, ensuring coolness even in the hottest weather.

As Zuba approached the steps leading up to the veranda, he heard a woman’s voice raised in argument:

“...we are no longer asking you to end your marriage to her. All we are saying is that you agree to our marrying another wife for you in the village. She will live with me and bear your children. You must not shirk your duties...”

“Mama, I can’t take any more of this. You’ll have to leave tomorrow morning. I did not invite you down to our new base to start talking to me about this again. Well, soon, my wife and I shall be out of your reach, and you’ll never see us again.”

“Son, if your father had not got me to give birth to you, you wouldn’t be here today. You too have to...”

Zuba rapped on the door.

Mr Egbetuyi yanked it open. He regarded Zuba with bloodshot eyes.

“Sorry to disturb you. But these letters are for your wife.”

Zuba held out the letters.

The man took the letters and turned back inside.

“And... er... Your voices can be heard from the road. I’m sure you would want to lower your voices.”

Zuba left the veranda and hurried home.

“Nonye! Nonye!” he screamed.

Nonye ran out from her room. “What is it?”

“My call-up, my call-up.”

They sat together on the sofa and Zuba tore open the letter.

He had been posted to serve as a teacher in Lokomo, a village in the southwest of the country. The village had been in the news a few months back when the inhabitants

demonstrated over their lack of amenities. It had no electricity or pipe-borne water. It was flanked by a river that served for drinking water, laundry, bath and latrine. The people still lived in mud huts.

Professor Maduekwe celebrated when he learnt of his son’s terrible posting. He waited silently, expecting his son to come whining to him; then he would call his friend at the National Service Directorate to effect a change in the posting and have Zuba sent to his school. But Zuba did not whine. He started packing his bag, and the look in his eyes awakened a sense of *déjà vu* in the professor, who had seen that look before, in a shaving-mirror, the morning he had decided to quit his job at the university after losing his bid to be Vice Chancellor.

