

# Florida State University Libraries

---

Electronic Theses, Treatises and Dissertations

The Graduate School

---

2018

## And the Hills Burned

Obiomachukwu Calvin Umeozor

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY  
COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

AND THE HILLS BURNED

By  
OBIOMACHUKWU CALVIN UMEOZOR

A Thesis submitted to the  
Department of English  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

2018

Obiomachukwu Calvin Umeozor defended this thesis on April 2, 2018.

The members on the supervisory committee were:

Mark Winegardner  
Professor Directing Thesis

Elizabeth Stuckey-French  
Committee Member

Ravi Howard  
Committee Member

The Graduate School has verified and approved the above-named committee members, and certifies that the thesis has been approved in accordance with university requirements.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	iv
AND THE HILLS BURNED.....	1
Biographical Sketch.....	165

## ABSTRACT

Set sometime in 2002, *And the Hills Burned* tells the story of Chidi, a boy whose father – former Minister of Petroleum in the Nigerian Military administration of the early 90s, and current environmental activist – runs afoul of the military regime that had taken control of the country by the end of the 20th century. The family has no choice but to seek asylum in the States, three years after Chidi’s mother had died in a freak accident. But after six years of a relatively peaceful life in North Florida – and this is where the narrative begins – things start to unravel when Chidi’s aunt comes to spend the summer with them on St George Island. Chidi finds a letter and some documents, all pointing to a jarring truth: that his mother didn’t die that night nine years before, and whatever had become of her has much to do with Marist Academy, a notorious Catholic Missionary boarding school in Eastern Nigeria. Chidi gets to work, setting into motion a series of events that would land him back in Nigeria as an enrolled Marist student spending the holidays with his aunt. It is in Marist that he meets Virginia, and Jonah the only son of the American Ambassador to Nigeria, and everything he thought he once knew about his family and about himself is soon turned on its head. On a thematic level, this narrative explores immigration, and race, and the tyranny of power.

It took nine summers after Mama died for my father to come undone. Nine cycles since that night in June when our lives went up in a fiery ball, and my father muffled my screams into his trembling palm. And I wouldn't be wrong if I said that summers – or the dry season, as we called it back in Nigeria – took on a different significance from then on; became, in mid-June, a new year of sorts; a time during which we would, with practiced effort, attempt to jumpstart our lives afresh. Nine summers. Perhaps. Because we snuck out of Nigeria, and we settled in Tallahassee six of those years, Papa and I, and whenever May rolled to an end, we would load almost everything we owned into the new trailer for the two-hour drive up to the cottage on the south end of St George Island, where I would spend countless dawns out on the fishing pier a few yards from the backyard, watching the beach rouse with heavy languor, there on the edge of the Gulf. And soon our years revolved around those trips, for it was important to Papa – “a matter of life or death,” if you asked him – that we blend right in with the locals, and I figured that was the reason it made any sense that we would seek out the sun – most afternoons when a typical Nigerian would run for cool shelter – decked in nothing but a trunk that barely shielded the business just below his sizeable belly; way below that chest that looked like someone had slapped some honey and a handful of yanked fur on it, because, what could be more American? But deep down I knew, as I'm sure he did, that those trips to the island weren't as much about blending in as they were about banishing the memory of nine years before.

He was quite the sight on those beach days, my father, with the folded lawn chair hoisted high above his right shoulder, and his left middle finger stuffed between the pages of *The Turtle Chronicles* by one David Peralta – where it would remain all summer – lumbering out the back door of the cottage, with that limp prominent as ever, and dragging his six-foot-five frame across the

pristine sand to his favorite spot, no more than a hundred yards from the pier. And he could all but pass for yet another American tourist. What with that skin the color of pawpaw – or papayas, as he now insisted on calling them – and that hair, curly and lush, he was often indistinguishable from the crowd of mostly white tourists who made that beach their home in the height of summer. That was until he opened his mouth, and the faux-American accent came spouting out without shame. Not that my father cared. Not that he flinched whenever Aunt Nkechi made fun of his burning desire to Americanize everything about himself. He took it in, much like he had taken Mama's death, as just another personal hurdle to overcome – something he had, at that point, fancied himself quite adept at. And it showed. For on mornings when I would watch, from my room window on the second floor of the cottage, my father trotting down to the beach, I couldn't help but imagine a soldier ant hard at work, shouldering a crumb up an anthill, like it was his burden alone to bear and no one else's. To Aunt Nkechi, of course, it was a different matter. She told me on one of those summers mornings we sat by my window and played ludo and spoke of Mama, that the beach ritual reminded her of Okonkwo, the mad man who lived in an abandoned stall at the edge of the village market back home; who would, at first light, trudge down to the market, along with the other traders to conduct his business, which may or may not have involved him dancing around the square with his rather hefty junk in glorious view.

And yes, that was the summer after Aunt Nkechi found the lump; the summer she left her teaching job in Lagos to come spend the June with us. The summer I turned 17, barely three months to the second anniversary of 9/11, and all that I had known about my family came crashing down in a cloud of raging debris. It was the summer I told Papa I didn't want to live in Florida anymore.

Papa had stormed out the back-screen door of the cottage that thankless morning, sans lawn chair, sans *The Turtle Chronicles*, and made a beeline for the pier where I was tossing pebbles as far out into the water as I could, bored silly with Aunt Nkechi up in her room, napping up as much

strength as she could after her chemo a couple of days before and Bayo pulling yet another incognito. I glanced at my cellphone on the railing, weighing the idea of calling him yet again, and I pretended not to hear the footfalls pounding across the yard towards me.

“You left it on again,” Papa called, as soon as he was within earshot.

“What now?” He didn’t hear me.

“How many times do I have to tell you to switch off the porch light before you go to bed?”

Right, the turtles.

My next toss wasn’t as good as the last, and the pebble dropped into the bed of green with a sad plunk.

“Am I talking to a ghost?”

“I forgot. Sorry.”

“What do you mean ‘I forgot?’” Papa asked between pants – the walk across the backyard had winded him. “Look at me when I’m talking to you.”

I turned to face him, staring up into his eyes, keeping my airs stoic, noncommittal. That always riled him some.

“What do you mean you forgot?”

I shrugged, letting my eyes roam across his face, beardless, even boyish, yet weathered in the only way a face who had lived through a civil war and political service in three military regimes can.

“I already have more than enough on my plate with Nkechi and the hospitals. I don’t need your nonsense, Chidi. Not today...”

“I said I forgot. What else do you want me to say?”

He glared down at me a good while, unblinking and I did everything I could to ignore the sudden itch in my left eyeball. I was determined to win this one.



“Leave that light on again,” he said after a while, the growl in his voice no doubt tempered by his defeat, “and we’ll see who owns this house.” In a flash, he was limping up the back steps. He punished the screen door with a rattling slam.

I turned and whipped the last pebble in my hand towards the water, and stared after it as it cut through the virgin morning air, and I tried, hard as I could, to ignore the thrill of my phone against the railing, the sudden heft of my chest, the dread now prancing across my mind that my father, maybe, cared more for baby turtles than he did his only child.

Of course he did – he’d missed my first recital, the summer after we moved to Florida, to take a stray turtle he had found that morning to the vet for a routine check-up. And this is not to mention the time he had forgotten to pick me up from Bayo’s house the summer before, because he had found a turtle with a crushed shell on the side of the road and “I just couldn’t leave it there,” he’d said the next morning when he finally showed up.

I had long taught myself not to be as bothered with my father’s often mis-prioritized caregiving, not to seethe as much when I watched him escort an old turtle across the road when we were late for the fair, or cuddle a baby squirrel with those annoying “coo-coo” sounds he made that often disrupted my nap on the front porch, holding more conversations with it than he would with me in a year. I had learned to overlook these, not only because it was less than flattering to think that I was competing with animals for Papa’s attention, but because I saw it as his own way of coping with everything that had happened in the wake of Mama’s death. It changed him, that vile night - even more than it did me, who still wore the one reminder that she had ever truly been ours around my neck. And in a way my existence, my very sanity depended on it. Just like Papa’s, I imagined, depended on a fascination with turtles which had brought Mama and him together in the first place, back when he was the Minister for Petroleum, and she a fresh graduate of Entomology

from the University of Lagos moonlighting as an environmental activist, constantly bombarding his office at the Federal Secretariat in Abuja with protest letters and posters.

I looked out across the water and I took it all in; the sky which was but a sea of crystal blue, with not a speck of cloud in sight to shield the sun even for a half second, and the Gulf – green and full of glint – sitting still, wave-less, as if itself exhausted from the ripe Floridian heat that was trying to roast us all crisp. It was all too much, the perfectness of that day. So I turned towards the cottage, with my back to the water, and I pulled myself to sit atop the railing. I reached inside my shirt, a Hawaiian affair, and felt for the rosary beads around my neck, and their familiar heft against my fingers sent a wave of ease coursing through me. The beads were my turtles, I knew that now.

I stared at that cottage sitting in the sun, with its walls a glowing brand of white that covered everything around – the rosebush by the stairs, the swing bench and the Rover beneath the pines – with an aura of pure summer splendor, the kind only St George could give. It was a thing of beauty, that cottage by the sea. And it that moment I was thankful for it.

Just then a man in his mid-50s walked up to the pier. He wore the same washed-out Bugs Bunny t-shirt and the frayed Yankees cap as he had done almost every afternoon that summer, and he held a bucket and a line in his other hand. I obliged him a nod, shrugged when he walked right past, towards the end of the pier, like I expected him to.

The phone buzzed again, this time inching its way towards the edge of the wooden railing overlooking the water. I waved off a bug dancing around my face, as I picked up Bayo's call.

“Dude, where yat?” the Louisiana twang was heavy that morning, the British accent was gone.

“Home. Been calling you all morning,” I said.

A figure passed by the room window beside mine on the second floor of the cottage. Aunty Nkechi was up.

“Oh, pardon me. Had some business to take care of,” Bayo said, his faux-British accent coming to the fore again. Half a decade I had know him, and I still couldn’t understand why he couldn’t just pick one accent and stick with it.

“Mhmm.”

“Don’t start, Chidi.”

The bug was back, bumping furiously against my lips, like a hummingbird on a shut window. And I swiped my palm hard at it, smacking myself in the mouth as I did so.

“Ow.”

“What? Is everything ok?”

“Yeah. Stupid bugs.”

Just then a figured appeared at Aunty Nkechi, a silhouette against her silk curtains. It reached down, and it pulled off its dress above her head. My throat clenched shut, held my breath to ransom. I looked towards the end of the pier to find the fisherman standing still as a rock, with his eyes fixed on the water that had swallowed his line.

“So, you’re still coming to the party, right?” The voice on the other end of the line sounded distant now.

I turned back to the window and the figure was staring hard at one of her breasts now, squeezing and un-squeezing, with one arm raised to the ceiling. Then the arm dropped back down. Then the figure began to palpate both breasts. And I just couldn’t for the life of me peel my eyes away, much as I tried to.

“Chidi!” I pulled the phone away from my ears.

“Yeah?”

“Did you hear me?”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll swing by.”

“I said Shawna will be there.”

The figure was jumping up and down now, jiggling her breasts as she did so, and I felt my jaws drop slack. The bug flitted back just then, no doubt trying to seize the opportunity. And I waved it off with a little more force than was necessary, wrapping my feet around one of the rail beams to keep from tipping over.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I turned my attention back to the window to find the figure facing me now. And the hairs on my neck stood straight. And a wave of panic coursed through me, shuddering my feet lose from the beam, and jerking me back towards the water. I reached for the railing too late. My fingers all but grazed the chaffed wood as I tipped backwards and smacked right into the water, floundering down into the warm darkness when I could kick myself afloat no longer.

I held my breath long as I could, I did. And I heard Ejike’s voice teaching me to swim all over again, telling me to keep calm. But I didn’t listen. For I knew that my survival depended on how hard I kicked. So, I kicked. Again and harder again. Till I began to feel the pinch in my lungs, and the water’s pull against my legs. Till the sun rays fluttering down into that darkness began to ebb away as I dropped deeper, and the screams of my aunt and the crash of one body, and then another into the water sounded like muffled echoes from another plane.

And I saw Mama for the first time in years, and she screamed at me to drop Pogo, our neighbor’s cat who was run over by a taxi when I was eight. Mama hated it when I touched other peoples’ pets and came home coughing and wheezing through the night. There in the water, she was just as furious as she had been all those years before, her pout and her frown every bit as stern, as immovable. And I reached out to her, to tell her that I wasn’t petting Pogo anymore, but strong arms gripped my shoulders and began to pull me up and away from her. And she didn’t even reach

out to stop them. She just stood there, with her hands on her hips, shaking her head in profound disappointment.

“What’s wrong with you?” Auntie Nkechi screamed as I coughed my lung out on the sandy lawn beneath the pine tree under which the Rover was parked, the salty water spewing out my mouth in spurts. The fisherman was on one knee beside me, patting my back with a cupped palm. He was drenched now, and his Yankee cap was gone, revealing his salt and pepper hair turned slick by the water.

“You ok, buddy?” His southern drawl eased some calm onto my frayed nerves.

I nodded and looked around for Papa. He wasn’t there.

“Nna, are you ok?” Auntie Nkechi had taken over the back palming from the fisherman who had slunk off to the side and was now wriggling water off the edge of his shirt.

“Chidi, can you hear me? Are you ok?” Auntie Nkechi asked again.

I looked at her, clad as she was in a t-shirt and towels wrapped around her waist and head, and I wondered if she had caught me peeping.

“Yes.” I wiped the water dripping down my face with the back of my hand.

“Jesus Christ.” Auntie Nkechi got up and began pacing around in front of me, hands on her hips, not unlike Mama in the water. I stared at her, ignoring the twinge of guilt from my peeping-fest earlier, and I marveled, all over again, just how much she was a spitting image of Mama – the six-foot frame that ensured she towered over almost everyone she came across, so much more slender now than it had been in the days before the chemo, before the light in her hazel eyes dimmed to a flicker. But she held it all – the cancer, Mama, the miscarriage – with a grace that was both regal and genuine, and youthful, all at once. So that she looked nothing like her 38 years.

Papa came running out the house, slamming the screen door behind him as he always did. He was shirtless and semi-dry, and he tossed the blanket he held in his hands over to me without a word, and then made his way over to the fisherman. He offered the man a handshake with what looked like a couple of crumpled one-dollar notes clenched in his right palm. It had been his signature move with the policemen back home, and I was surprised to see him pull it off on foreign soil. He had perfected the art so that it now was most subtle, most suave in its delivery – the loaded handshake as I liked to call it. The fisherman looked at his hand after the shake and his jaw dropped slack, and he was about to say something before Papa brandished one of those dismissive waves he saved for whenever he wanted to pretend that effusive gratitude irritated him. I wasn't going to be the one to tell Papa that perhaps the fisherman wasn't looking to thank him; that perhaps my life was worth more than one-dollar notes that looked like they'd been pulled out of a sweaty armpit.

“Nna, what did you do that for? You know you can't swim.” Aunty Nkechi had knelt beside me again, raising my chin with her fingers and staring straight into my eyes, her warm breath easing over me.

I tilted my head back, out of the reach of her fingers and made to get up – I had to find my phone. But she held my shoulder in place.

“Sit down and catch your breath biko.”

Behind her, Papa and the fisherman were conversing among themselves, the new best friends, and every now and again they would cast a weary glance in my direction. Papa hadn't been over to see if I was all right. He was mad at me; I could tell from the pursed lips to how much effort he put into ignoring me. He always did that; found non-verbal ways to register his displeasure while gnashing you with soul-churning guilt. It was a game I had gotten used to over the years, though his choosing to play it at such an inopportune time struck me as ridiculous.

“Did you hear me, Nna?”

“Huh?”

“I asked if you wanted to come into the house now.” Aunty Nkechi was seated on the ground beside me, rubbing her hands together repeatedly as if trying to get every grain of sand off them – she wasn’t used to beaches.

“Did you see my phone?”

She glanced at the pier I had fallen off of, and she let her eyes roam over it, over the yard that stretched between the pier and the backyard where we now sat. She shrugged. “You must have dropped it in.”

“Shit.”

“Nna.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ll get you another one,” she said, turning to offer me a smile that only seemed to accentuate her now sunken cheeks.

It took a whole afternoon to convince Aunty Nkechi and Papa that I would be fine by myself; that is was alright for them to leave me alone overnight while they made the two-hour drive up to Tallahassee Memorial for the follow-up appointment, which Aunty Nkechi had had to reschedule to a later time because of the incident. It was even more difficult for Papa who was always particular about security around the house at night. Papa who would, with the slightest of disturbances when daylight had fled, patrol the house until dusk with his twelve-gauge shotgun rested in the nook of his arm; who, in the wake of political kidnappings on foreign soil by Nigerian operatives, added severe paranoia to his sprawling list of ailments. It was only when I promised to call the second anything went wrong that Papa and Aunty Nkechi tossed their overnight bags into the trunk of the Rover and vanished with the fading light.

It was a Friday, and Papa had grumbled about not wanting to deal with the weekend crowd at the hospital the next day – to which Aunty Nkechi had let out a deafening hiss. That was her only response, of course; the hiss. Whatever else was to follow was going to do down when I wasn't around – probably during the drive to the hospital. Because, you see, Aunty Nkechi and Papa were always particular about presenting a united front around me, even though I wasn't a toddler anymore, even though the cottage had thin walls that let me hear, over the crashing waves a few hundred feet from our back porch, their constant squabble over Papa buying the Rover, and the property in Miami, over Papa not paying back some of the money he had embezzled during his stint as Minister of Petroleum.

I pondered on this, on the often-fraught relationship between Papa and Aunty Nkechi since Mama's death, so much that it kept me up from my siesta that afternoon. Before long, I abandoned hope of catching any sleep and went down to the kitchen to warm up some leftover beans for lunch. And it was while I was waiting by the microwave, wondering what to do with my Friday night freedom, that I remembered I hadn't called Bayo back. His big party was that night – and the boy wouldn't shut up about it. He was hosting it at his house there on the island, because his folks were in Belize for the weekend. And, as he had told me repeatedly, he would skin me alive if I missed it. I had to turn down his other parties that summer mostly because Aunty Nkechi was around, and I didn't want her worried sick, or giving Papa more grief about being a borderline-negligent father, which she always did whenever I stayed out past ten.

But beyond this, I was always wary of engaging in non-adult supervised activities with Bayo, not because I was a prude of any sort, but because it was the consensus at our high-school then that my closest friend – who was from Lagos, London and Baton Rouge, in that order – was a nutcase. And that's putting it mildly. I mean, how else would you describe someone that walked into a staffroom during lunch and punched Mr. Elder, the Biology teacher, off his chair because the man



had the temerity to give him an F, with a smiley face? Plus, he had, over time, perfected the art of slipping tangerines into the exhaust pipes of the cars belonging to teachers he didn't like. And he always hung around to watch their cars stutter and stall. But the school wouldn't touch him, not beyond the occasional detention or two-day suspension, not with his father being golf buddies with the Superintendent, and the school's biggest benefactor.

My lingering reservations about Bayo aside, he was the distraction I needed most that summer that found me broke, without a job, and dealing with the news of Aunty Nkechi's cancer. If I was to make good use of the little break my misadventure had bought me, I had to stop by Bayo's party, I knew this. Plus, hadn't he mentioned that Shawna was going to be there?

It was only a half past seven when I called from the kitchen phone, but Bayo was already slurring his words – his British accent gone with the wind – and screaming his “hello” over the music blaring from a speaker that sounded like it was right next to his head.

“The Cranberries, really?” I asked.

“Do you have a problem...?”

“Nah. ‘Zombie’ is a great son—”

“Wait. Hold on.” The line went dead. I plucked at the cord, counting the lines of the moonlight fractured on the marble countertop, till the line came alive again.

“How far? Wetin happen this afternoon?”

It was the first time I had ever heard Bayo speak pidgin, and I was stunned into silence. I stood there, marveling at the power of alcohol in liberating tied tongues.

“Nothing much. I fell into the water.”

I took the phone off my ear just as the shriek came spouting out the receiver. It turned into a howl, and then a raggedy cough that sounded like he was losing a lung. And then it was back to the

shriek. Hi, I'm Richard Pryor. I traced my fingers above the countertop and watched as the moonlight eased over my fingers with a gentle brush.

"That's so funny," Bayo said after a while, between sighs of contentment.

"I'm OK, by the way."

"Meh. You still dey come this side?"

"But it isn't time yet. You said eight, ba? I leaned out the kitchen doorway to double-check the wall clock over the mantelpiece in the living room just to make sure.

"Yo! Quit arguing and get your ass over here. Damn." And Mr. Louisiana was back.

"I'll be there in a jiffy."

"In a jiffy? You British-sounding mother—"

"Bayo!" A vaguely familiar female voice shot through the line. There was a chuckle, and then a wave of sloppy laughter.

"Ok. I'll talk to you later bro," I said, without moving to drop the receiver. I was starting to feel left out.

"Wait, wait. Luciana wants to say hi."

I had thought as much. And I had absolutely no interest in speaking to her. The phone was halfway to its cradle on the wall, when the voice low-pitched and clear, reached me.

"Hey Chidi!"

I put the phone back up to my ear. "Hey Luciana."

"Cómo Estás?"

"Muy bien. Y tú?"

"Excelente. You coming to the party, right?"

I was glad she had chosen not to test my Spanish any further. "I'm not sure yet," I said.

"Bayo said you're still angry with me about my quinceañera."

I still was. Of course I still was. “Nah, it’s cool.”

“Liar.”

“For real though.”

“Mhmm. Don’t worry, get over here, and we’ll dance some bachata, and I’ll make it up to you.”

“I’ll think about it,” I said, swallowing the lump in my throat.

“Also, Shawna is here!”

Great, now everyone was in on it. A harsh “shh” sounded somewhere in the background, and I made the mental note to deal with Bayo later.

“Great,” I said.

The line clicked shut.

If I was unsure about going to Bayo’s party, that uncertainty had long flown out the window. There was no way I could back out now, not with Miss “Out-of-my-League” Shawna there at the party, not with me having committed to bachata with Luciana. Problem was Aunty Nkechi and Papa’s late trip to Tallahassee Memorial meant that the Rover wasn’t available for me to steal. And no, I wasn’t going to show up at a party on a bicycle, not if I didn’t want to kiss my chance with Shawna goodbye.

Papa’s door was unlocked, and his clothes were strewn all over the bed – slacks, shirts, socks. A worn copy of *The 48 Laws of Power* lay open on the floor, beside a pair of Nike running shoes – not that I had ever seen Papa run – and a Ferragamo belt, and a spherical blotch of what looked like coffee on the rug. I had been in his room a few times since Granny’s family relinquished the cottage to us a couple of years before, but I couldn’t remember it ever being so messy.

I scanned the room trying to figure out where the man who had a history of being careless with money was likely to stash it. The mahogany desk by the shuttered window overlooking the beach carried a simple desktop lamp and a wire file sorter; nothing more. The drawers were crammed with documents and old scripts from his teaching job at the community college. There was no wad of ten-dollar notes hidden beneath the documents.

The sole shelf in the room, hidden behind the door, bore books thick as thighs, and beside it, tacked onto the wall with what looked like a cheap picture hanger ready to give way any second was the same picture with Mandela from back home. Same frame; same crack in the corner. I froze on it a moment, wondering how Papa had gotten it shipped over from Nigeria. Then I remembered Aunt Nkechi was in town and could possibly have brought it with her. I stared at the picture, at the wild smile smeared across Papa's face as he held onto the Stateman's hand, white knuckle and all, as if his entire life had built up to that moment, as if nothing else would ever measure up. I imagined Mama and me in Mandela's place, holding onto Papa's hand and shoulders in some awkward half-embrace, the kind family members usually subject their kids to at graduation. I don't know why I did that, to be honest. Perhaps it was because I had never seen my father beam as much as he did in that picture; perhaps some part of me wished that Mama and I had been the cause of that proud smile. As always there was no picture of Mama in sight – not like I expected to find one anyway. I had always thought it curious, the way Papa had taken Mama's pictures down soon after she died. It seemed to me that he was trying hard as he could to banish any memory of her. And this was indeed one of the reasons Papa and I got into it after Mama died, after her pictures disappeared off the mantelpiece and the walls of our home in Port Harcourt barely a week after the ceremony. For, up until that point, I had always assumed that no matter how hard I loved Mama, Papa loved her more. But something about the way he had chosen to mourn her sowed that seed of resentment in me that never quite withered away in the years since.

I looked to the floor beneath the picture to find Papa's shotgun rested against the shelf. It was about the only possession Grandpa had left Papa when he died, and not a soul but him was allowed to touch it – everyone knew that. I paused and stared at it, and the memories of the tumultuous nights Papa had wielded it back home came flooding back. We had left the shotgun back home when we left Nigeria, and for many months that seemed like the right thing to do. But then Papa's former colleague during his days in the regime was kidnapped from his home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, went missing for a week, and then turned up in a courtroom in Abuja. Then the details started flooding in. The Service had tracked him to Michigan via a mouthy relative back home, showed up at his door, tossed him into the back of a van and gave him a near-lethal dose of horse tranquilizer – just enough to knock him out for the twelve-hour flight across the Atlantic in a cargo box aboard a British Airway flight. You cannot make this up. Papa went mental. Put us both on a daylight-only schedule, and phoned Aunty Nkechi and told her to find every means of shipping his gun out to him.

I shrugged and continued my search.

There really wasn't much else to look through seeing as we had only used the cottage the last two summers. All that was left was the dresser – the pearl white monument with gold handles and a velvety finish – standing on the other side of the door opposite the shelf, beneath a white framed mirror sitting on the wall. Papa had bought it at a garage sale on the island our first summer there, and I remember how he gasped when the seller, a woman in her mid-sixties who had lived on the island most her life, had told him that the dresser was his for \$200. I didn't have to know anything about antique furniture to tell that the dresser was easily worth three times as much. I also remember her mentioning something about a secret compartment – or something of the sort – in one of the drawers because Papa's eyes had glowed like he had just found a pot of gold.

I knelt and pulled open the bottom drawer, and the stench of moth balls, musky clothes and since-decayed roaches rocked me back. I turned my face away and took a breath of fresher air. I was sure I was the first to open that thing in ages. I took the clothes out the drawer and set them on the floor beside me, holding my breath as I did so. At the bottom of the drawer, right in the middle, was a little impression in the woodwork, faint and almost indistinguishable. I pressed down on it, and whole bottom popped open in a spray of silvery dust, revealing a shallow nook with a light coffee finish. I reached into it and retrieved the only thing it held, a brown leather portfolio – with a busted zipper – tied shut with a yellow rubber band. On the cover of the portfolio, etched deep into the leather was the Nigerian Coat of Arms, or at least some artist’s reimagining of it.

I slid the rubber bands off the portfolio, making a mental note to tie it back just the way I had found it. I flipped through the letters and folded yellow papers crammed into the portfolio and much of it seemed to be documents from Papa’s tenure as a minister. There were drilling permits and invoices for pipes, steel columns and the like; most of them dated June 1992. I found it quite curious that someone would go through such pains of hiding what appeared to be routine documents – unless they weren’t so routine after all. I took a closer look at them, but I couldn’t exactly tell what was off about the figures and dates, if indeed anything was. At this point I had all but given up on my search yielding anything monetarily beneficial – Papa wasn’t exactly the bury-your-money-in-a-pit kind of man – but something about those crusty, mold-laden papers kept me flipping through.

Close to the bottom of the bundle was a white envelope addressed to “Chief Ikenna Okafor.” And I began to ransack my memory, trying to recall when Papa had ever been granted a chieftaincy title. On the top corner of the envelope was a stamp; and then “From Martha” scribbled in a painstakingly crisp penmanship. There was no surname, and the return address simply read

“Marist Comprehensive Academy” – if I remembered correctly, Ejike, and Marvin my next-door playmate back in Nigeria had been sent to that school.

The date – June 10, 1998 – beneath the name explained why the envelope wasn’t as dusty as the other papers in the portfolio. The seal was somewhat weak, and it seemed as though Papa had opened it many times and had tried, without much success, to reseal it.

I looked again at the name of the sender, at Papa’s full name and our Tallahassee address. I gave up after a couple of minutes and peeled open the flap gently as I could.

My eyes flew across the page in seconds, and soon the words hit me. Like a freight train at full pelt. I went back to the beginning and read again. I flipped the back of the envelope and looked at the date again, just to be sure. It hadn’t changed. And my chest began pounding like a jackhammer. So I sat on the floor with my back against the bed, and took the breaths in through my mouth, just like Auntie Nkechi had taught me to.

But the date. The date made no sense. I checked again. June 10, 1998. Five years ago. It made no sense.

She missed Chidi the most. He was her biggest regret.

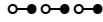
What on earth did that even mean? Why hadn’t Papa mentioned this to me?

And if the letter was dated “1998” that means Mama hadn’t died in ’95.

I opened my mouth wider, and I took deeper breaths. But my chest only pounded faster, like it was a woodpecker on steroids.

I looked at the return address again. Marist Comprehensive Academy. And soon the horror stories Marvin had told me about the place all those years ago came flooding back, in furious waves.

I took another breath and I let them wash over me.



It was past ten when I turned onto the street leading down to Bayo's beach house – a two-story stilt structure, with a rooftop deck – where the muffled thumping of a Nelly song was reverberating to the skies and back. The house was pitch-dark for the most part – save for the faint flickers of disco lights dancing in its windows. And its silhouette stood dark and brooding against the blue of that moonlit night. I figured the deck lights were off because, of course, Papa had initiated Bayo into the Sea Turtles' Club when I wouldn't take.

The Grand Cherokee and the Honda Civic parked in the graveled driveway gave me the sense that the party wasn't as big as it had sounded over the phone, or perhaps it had already thinned out – although there still were a bunch of bicycles and skateboards in various poses of abandonment. I hopped off my bicycle and chained it to one of the stilts.

“¡Oye! Chidi.”

A ripple of laughter came pouring down from the rooftop deck.

I took a couple of steps away from the house and craned my neck hard as I could to catch a glimpse of the deck. I saw Luciana waving hard at me. I waved back. And then I made my way up the front stairs, towards the music, straining to block out the rambling thoughts bouncing around in my head.

A white, dreadlocked kid answered the door, bong in hand.

“Yo mon!” he yelled, above the music. And I just couldn't.

“Where's Bayo?”

“On the deck! With some cheerleader.” A heavy wink.

“Thanks,” I said, and made to move past him. He pushed the bong towards me, shrugged when I shook my head and pushed past him into the dark, steamy void, brimming with figures



dancing to “Hot in Herre.” I was stunned at the crowd that had, by all indication, gotten there on foot. It was true dedication, that. Considering that the Bayo’s beach house was on the Eastern edge of the island, far from most other houses. I stood for a moment, and took it all in, and tried to calculate the amount of ass-tanning Bayo would get when his parents got back to find their house a hot mess.

I pushed, wiggled, slinked my way through till I got to the back balcony, and then I climbed the steps up to the deck perched on the roof. Bayo was seated on a recliner, in a vest and beach shorts, taking a sip out of a red party cup as he watched the waves thunder and thrash only a few yards beyond the deck. Shawna, spotting her cheerleader uniform – apparently it was a costume party of sorts – was slumped and half-snoring on the recliner next to him. The rest of the deck was empty.

“Hey man,” Bayo said, barely sitting up when he saw me. “You took your time.”

“Sorry I’m late. Something came up.”

“That kinda day, huh?”

I shrugged.

“She got tired of waiting for you,” Bayo nodded in the direction of Shawna whose blonde mane glistened in the moonlight.

I settled into the other recliner by his side and shook my head when he offered me a drink. My stomach wasn’t up for it, you see. Not after my discovery in Papa’s room.

“You okay, bro?” His voice barely above a whisper now.

“Yeah.”

I stole a glance at Bayo beside me, tranquil as I had ever seen him, and it struck me just how different he was now from the unhinged boy I had met four years before, the day I had clashed with Mr. Parker, the English teacher.

It was a year after we had moved to the States, and Papa had begun teaching Organic Chemistry at Tallahassee Community College – which I found odd, because I had always assumed that the money he had made from his stint as a minister in a regime so corrupt it plunged the value of the naira to that of soiled toilet paper had eliminated the need for him to ever hold a day job. But Papa began working in earnest, and our late nights became TV and Mexican food nights, became one of those rare moments Papa and I ever existed in the same orbit, with no long, heavy silences and bickering over one thing or the other. But while things were mostly fine at home, I struggled at school, kept mostly to myself, with the hope that I could ghost through the entire ordeal. And for the most part, I succeeded in doing so.

That was until the day – it was in the Fall, I think – when a bow-tied Mr. Parker asked the class to share thoughts on Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*. Just then Achebe’s famous response, which I had read about a few weeks before, jumped into my head, and my hand shot up on its own accord – I promise. Soon I was in the middle of a rant about how the book was one of the more ridiculously racist works in the English Literary canon, and how the savages, the ones with bones through their noses, with the skins darker than night, were humans too, were the owners of that land before the Belgians, and the British, and the French came trotting along to rape their women and pillage their land, and drop white gods on the ashes of their ravaged shrines, and heavy bibles in their calloused palms. The silence was impenetrable by the time I was done, and I swear I could hear the creaking of my classmates’ jaws as they dropped slack. It took Mr. Parker a few moments to collect himself; to give a flat “thank you, Mr. Chidi” with whiskers trembling with what I wanted to believe was wonder.

During recess that day, I sat at the high end of the bleachers as I always did, watching the cheer leaders practice; waving back when one of them, Shawna, would steal a wave at me when none

of her mates were looking, sending a hot flush coursing through my cheeks. Shawna. full-lipped and gracefully formed Shawna, with the voice that could charm the bible off a preacher's hand – not that that makes any sense, bear with me.

But guess who came trudging up the steps towards me that day, sporting a grey Henley shirt, stuffing handfuls of popcorn into his mouth from the open packet in his left hand and planting himself beside me, without a word. Bayo did that for two weeks, before I decided to stop ignoring him.

“Chidi!”

I looked behind me to find Luciana climbing onto the deck. She was buzzed, I could tell. But that didn't stop her from darting to the foot of my recliner and pulling me to my feet. She planted kisses on both my cheeks and held me back to take me in, with those eyes warm and blue, and that smile full and glorious, sending a buckle to my knees.

“Chidi,” she said softly this time, and set her head into the cradle of my chest. I held her frame, petit yet full, in my arms. And I noticed for the first time that the DJ, most likely under Luciana's behest, had put on some Carlos Santana. Without a word I began to sway with the fireball in my arms, reminding myself, again and again whenever I caught my guard slipping, that she wasn't mine.

Behind me I heard Bayo chuckle.

“Are you still mad at me?” Luciana asked my chest.

I mean, I wasn't entirely over it. How could I be? Bayo and I had showed up at her quinceañera two winters before, and all I had asked was that she teach me to respond to “cómo estás?” That was all. “Estoy caliente,” she'd said. “Just say ‘estoy caliente’ like this.” She pinched her fingers together, thrusting them back and forth for emphasis, not unlike the characters in those

Italian mafia movies Bayo and I saw on Saturday nights. And I did just that; all party long. I took the giggles, and the grins, and the smothered snickers to mean that Luciana's family, many of whom had flown in from Bogotá, were, at the very least, amused at my elementary Spanish. That was until one of her cousins pulled me aside just as the party was winding down and told me the truth. "It means 'me so horny,'" were his words.

"Nah. I'm over it," I said into her hair.

I felt a tap on my shoulder, half-turned to a party cup thrust in my face. I took a swig, and then another, and I returned the cup to Bayo, never breaking my hold on Luciana. I winced as the whiskey tore a path down my throat, and I wrapped her closer to me, till her weight against Mama's rosary beads burned into my chest, till the scent of her hair set my nostrils ablaze. For a second, I wondered how different that moment would have been had I not gone into Papa's room. But I let the whiskey ease over me; I let it numb the chaos that had taken hold the past couple of hours; I let it consume my dread of the task to come. And with Carlos Santana's silvery croon floating through the air, I looked up and I watched the moon shimmer in the heart of that heavy darkness.

I had danced once, so many moons before.

It'd been two years since Mama, a year since the hangings, and we were back home for the Christmas holidays. Ejike and I had just watched "Rocky" on the local variety channel.

"I'll be the coach, and you be Rocky," Ejike said, that morning on the banks of Obizi river. And he tossed our jerry cans onto the grass. He pulled the string off his hoodie, and he tied them around my feet.

"Now, punch. And move. But don't break the string, inugo? Aunty will kill me," he'd said.

I did. I punched hard at the air, at the world, there on the bank of that river. Until an anger that I had spent two years killing welled back up in me, clutching the back of my throat in a grip of steel. I thought of Mama, and the emptiness that had consumed us in the time she'd been gone – the kind that dropped a mallet on your chest in the dead of night so that you woke up to find the world a dark and cold void closing in on you, and you screamed till your widower of a father came crashing into your bedroom, bringing with him a flood of light and a shotgun.

I thrust my fists harder, with a grunt to my rhythm.

And I danced as I did, keeping my feet together, lest I snap Ejike's hoodie string and bring him a world of trouble.

We shadow boxed, and we wrestled – with Ejike pinning me to the sand every round; taunting me as he did so, yelling at me to keep my back off the ground at all times, like I was a wild cat.

We were ten.

And our lives still held up.

But if you ask anyone who knows, they will tell you that our troubles truly began the spring after, the day Papa flashed his rump at an auditorium full of students chanting Abacha's name. They might describe the collective gasp that ripped through the room; the sharp jeers that followed; the missiles of Ragolis plastic bottles and half-finished bananas that began flying towards the stage, towards the stretch-marked buttocks swiveling as if in celebration of its newfound freedom. And they might even mention the University of Port Harcourt officials – old friends of Papa, both of them – that rushed to shield the butt – like it was some prized relic – from the onslaught. They would later testify, at a tribunal set up by the military governor to investigate that incident of “treasonable disregard for constituted authority,” that they were merely protecting Papa's right to peaceful protest, much to the amusement of the courtroom.

I might not have heard about the debate fiasco had Nneoma – the house-girl Aunty Nkechi had convinced Papa to bring in to look after me and run the house – not left the Trinitron TV in the parlor tuned to the local NTA news channel after dinner one night and gone up to her room to powder her face ghost-white and change into that oversized t-shirt she used as a pajama. I had a spoonful of hot custard in my mouth when the story came on. A shaky video report on the former-Honorable-Minister-for-Petroleum-turned-activist shaking his behind at a group of university students showing allegiance to the sitting Commander-in-Chief. And just in case I had any doubt as to the identity of the butt owner, a picture of a younger, doe-eyed Papa shaking Nelson Mandela's hand in '92 – the same one hanging right over the TV panel, the one Papa never failed to boast about to visiting friends – was plastered all over the screen, causing me to send the custard in my mouth down the wrong channel in a coughing fit. It was the first time I had ever seen Papa on TV – I was much too young to recall his days as a minister under the former president – and, my, what a debut it was.

At the time, the real implication of Papa's dance-fest might have been lost on me; although I do remember that Okiche, my next door playmate and his brother, Marvin – who was later shipped off to a Catholic boarding school by their father – had told me during a game of catcher that their uncle had disappeared from his apartment in Lagos for three whole months, because a neighbor heard him call Abacha an illiterate dung-sniffer during a night of drunken reverie. Their uncle returned, I heard, with nothing but the skin hanging loosely on his bones and a lump the size of a tennis ball above his left eye. I remember how the mere mention of Abacha's name from that moment on would cause a ripple of terror to wash over us – how we would freeze for the most minuscule of seconds, before changing the subject.

Papa didn't come home the night of his performance, or the night after. And on the third day, a bearded man in an ill-fitting safari suit and dark aviators showed up at my school and pulled me out of class to ask how Papa was doing, and when he was coming back home. Nneoma shook me awake at 3.A.M. two mornings after that, with Papa's Samsonite duffle bag in her hand, and snuck me out the back gate of our compound where Adamu, our chauffeur, waited in a lilac Peugeot sedan that smelt of roasted peanuts and ogidi, that groaned awake when he touched the blue and red wires beneath the steering wheel. Soon we were bouncing over dirt roads and swerving past potholes the size of lakes, on our way to Grandpa's bungalow where Papa and Aunt Nkechi were waiting for me.

For three weeks we waited for the heat to cool, Papa and I, cooped up in that quaint, British-styled bungalow Grandpa had left Aunt Nkechi; the one he had built on the edge of town in the 70s, right after the Biafran War; the one he had warned Papa not to touch – if he liked his skull intact – when he offered to bring in contractors to expand and “modernize” the house; the one with the whistling pines in the backyard, and the thatch-roofed hut that sat derelict at the corner of the compound, testament to a time, years before the missionaries rode in on their Long John bicycles,

when Grandpa's grandfather had eight wives and the hut still stood as the Obi, the seat of power over his vast household. The one where I had met Ejike for the first time three years before, where Mama had spent a few of her last days. On cool evenings, I would sit out on the front verandah and stare at what was left of the Obi and imagine what the builder would think if he woke up from his slumber to find out that his grandson had knocked down all eight huts, built in its stead a sprawling bungalow, left his Obi to its ruin, and married an Irish nurse he had met while flying relief planes in the war. I was sure he would pull a fit for the ages, the kind that sent thunderclaps ripping through the skies, and hailstones the size of apples raining down in fury – such fanciful imaginations of ancestral wrath was one way I dealt with the boredom of those weeks we spent waiting for Papa's asylum application to scale through. Of course when it finally did, Aunty Nkechi saw to Papa's disguise – white moustache, a Zimmer frame and a gait magnificent in its exaggeration – lest the airport officials recognize him as the wanted minister and pull him off our flight to Florida.



Papa offered to say the grace at dinner the following night, which baffled me because he almost never did. He sat at the end of the table opposite me, yet he didn't look my way, much like he hadn't since that morning when they got back from the hospital. I couldn't tell if he was still pissed off about the porchlight, or this was about my misadventures at pier. Frankly, I didn't care – I was still steaming from what I had found in his room, and I wasn't about to be caught up in his petty squabbling. In fact, if Aunty Nkechi hadn't insisted on a table dinner, I would have been up in my room, plotting what to do about the letter I had found the day before; the letter I had told no one about. She was seated between us, Aunty Nkechi, looking more frail than she had the day before – chapped lips, droopy eyes, tremulous, like she would keel over with the slightest gust of wind. She said the oncologist had given her a positive prognosis, so she wasn't as worried. I believed her. And I stopped asking if she wanted to go upstairs and take a nap after she promised to knock me out if I kept bugging her about that. She was making all the fuss about dinner – the cooking, the table-laying, the Moscato in the decanter – to get her mind off her health, I understood that, as I'm sure Papa did. So, we played right along.

The air was hot and heavy with the scent of vanilla and nutmeg wafting in from the oven in the kitchen, when Papa squeezed his eyes shut and launched into a sermon about the devil using some people as instruments, causing them to smoke marijuana and “jump into oceans.” I pursed my lips at the jab, as Papa then asked Angel Gabriel to fly down and cover the food – fried rice with turkey and coleslaw – with some “heavenly sauce;” whatever that was. And despite how ticked off I was by the whole charade, I couldn't help but imagine Gabriel, in glowing white robes and an apron, perched on the table with a saucepan and ladle and pouring some thick red sauce over the

casseroles, even splashing some on his wings. I cracked open an eye to find Aunty Nkechi watching me, and I shut it tight again, and counted down until the grace was done.

As I watched my father shove the spoons into his mouth, I wondered if he knew by now that someone had taken that letter from his secret stash. I wondered how often he checked it. I wondered how much he knew of what had happened to Mama.

“Nna, how are you feeling now?” Aunty Nkechi’s eyebrows were furrowed with worry, as they had been all day.

“Much better, Aunty.”

“Oh, really?” Papa quipped, with a mouthful of rice and a stare made of stone.

“IK, don’t start.” Aunty Nkechi’s voice, though calm, carried with it an edge of steel. Papa stared at her, then at me, and looked about to protest. But he bit his tongue at the last moment and buried his attention again in the plate of rice in front of him.

Just then the oven alarm went off in a series of shrill beeps, and Aunty Nkechi sprang off, with surprising zest, and rushed into the kitchen to check on her cake.

Papa and I sat there at the table in a silence that was pierced only by the clang of our cutleries against ceramic, the ticks of the grandfather clock in the sitting room and the banging of the oven door and baking pans flittering in from the kitchen – which was one of Aunty Nkechi’s tells when she had been ticked off by someone.

I sat there, and I watched my father gobble his food down, oblivious of me, and of the hell I had found stashed in his room, and a new strain of resentment crept under my skin and gnawed at it. And in that moment, I understood why Grandpa didn’t said a word to my father in the last decade of his life. He had arrogance back in his airs, in a way I hadn’t seen since Mama died; before he rose to cult-hero status because of his defiance of Abacha at the height of his powers; before all that talk of him running for presidency in 2007 against the incumbent’s choice began to surface.

And it was most irksome, my father's new-found arrogance. And in that moment, there on the dinner table, it gnawed at me, until my restraint fell apart.

“What happened to Mama?”

Papa froze, with his fork poised mid-air, as if ready to stab away at the pall of silence that had just fallen over the room. And I can swear I saw Papa's jaw fall slack for a quick second, but he was quick to pick it back up.

“What do you mean?” He dropped his fork onto his plate. His stare was as cold as ice – not like that bothered me in the slightest.

“Where's Mama?”

I clenched my fist into a ball to stem the trembling that had begun to rattle my fingers.

“Nna, your mother died when yo—”

“No she didn't.”

“Excuse me?”

“Mama didn't die in '94. So you can stop lying now.”

“Isi odigwa gi mma?!” Papa boomed, half rising, his voice bass-deep and something terrible.

“Have you gone mad?”

In all the years I had known my father, I had never seen him as he was that night, like a leopard poised for the kill. But he was sorely mistaken if he thought that would deter me.

“What happened to her, Papa?”

Even before the words were out, I knew I had pushed too far. I saw the plate hurtling towards my face from the other end of the table. I ducked just in time for it to sail over my head and crash into the wall behind me in a deafening bang that sent tiny ceramic missiles flying across the dining room and clattering onto the panel wood floor.

“Ogini?” yelled Auntie Nkechi from the kitchen.

Papa glared at me for a few moments longer. But the red in his eyes had dissipated now, replaced by contrite kind of uncertainty. I couldn't be bothered any less. I had gotten the answer I sort in the broken ceramic pieces littered on that dining floor. Papa sat back down and resumed his dinner, without a word, as Aunt Nkechi came running out the kitchen.

“Ogini?” she asked again. “What happened?”

I walked past her into the kitchen, picked up the broom and dustpan nestled behind the storage door, and I walked back into the dining room, sweeping up every plate fragment I could find that floor.

I sat back down to my dinner, and I kept my mind off Papa now grumbling to himself as he gobbled down his food, off Aunt Nkechi watching our every move with furrowed brows. Off trying to figure out what it was my father was hiding. I was done with him, far as I was concerned. And all that mattered, all I could think of, was the name “Martha,” and why people with names like those – with names like “Marvin” – ended up at Marist Academy.

I was out on the backyard after dinner, on the swing-bench that hung from the pine tree, watching the waves slam themselves against the beach about a hundred meters into the night, where three toddlers and a Golden Retriever squealed and barked in delight whenever the wall of water swelled too high and the couple in parkas yelled at them to stay out of the water. I took the chaplet off my neck and stared at it, at the black emerald beads cut into cylindrical shapes, at the cross at its end carrying the crucified figure of an ebony Jesus. It was unlike any rosary I had ever seen, and I remembered been enamored by them whenever Mama took them off to pray. I fingered the chaplet beads in my hand, refamiliarizing myself with its weight and its shape, remembering all over again that in the nine years since the night I had woken up to find it on my nightstand, the night Mama died, I hadn't said the rosary. And even when Papa would drag me to the parish for yet another

novena, I would tune off, and dream of anything but being there in the midst of those dour voices droning Hail Marys like it was a song for the dead.

Died.

I wasn't even sure what to think anymore.

I heard the screen door creak open and then snap shut behind me. After a moment, Auntie Nkechi appeared beside me wrapped in at least three layers of sweaters – even though it wasn't so cold out – handed me one of the two china bowls of ice cream she had in her hands, and then she sat down beside me on the swing bench. I dug my feet deeper into the carpet of dead leaves and sand, and I pushed the swing back, so that soon we were both swaying back and forth in the calm night air beneath the pine.

It was about nine, and the moon was out again, and because I had remembered to turn off the porch light this time we could see all the way down the beach peopled with dark figures darting and lounging in the moonlight; all the way up the water to the tiny dinghies in the distance. And it was all awash with a shroud of gentle blue. Off to the right of us, no more than a couple hundred yards, a group of teenagers were seated around a fire, roasting what looked like marshmallows in its yellow flame. But there was a solemn air to their commune. And soon one of them stood up and began reading out of a black book. I slid the chaplet into the breast pocket of my shirt, and I took a spoonful of cream and stuck it into my mouth. A wave of ease washed over me as I munched on the cashew nuts buried in the cream – Auntie Nkechi had remembered how much I liked them.

“Nna, do you believe werewolves exist?” Auntie Nkechi asked after a while.

“Eh, nope. They're just fantasies,” I said.

“Hmmm.” She nodded, almost to herself as she scooped another spoonful into her mouth.

“Why?”

“Oh, nothing.”

I looked up at the moon, full and fierce. They’d better be fantasies, I thought.

“What was that about in there?”

“Where?”

“With the plate. What happened?” Auntie Nkechi had turned to look at me now, and her eyes were searching my face hard, looking for a tell, anything. I was careful to keep my poise.

“Nothing. It slipped from my hand.” I took another spoon, and I did all I could to ignore Auntie Nkechi’s eyes, till she gave up and turned her attention back to the bowl in her hand.

“Will you come with me to Island Outfitters tomorrow?” She asked between mouthfuls.

“You need a bikini?”

She half-choked on her ice cream. “No, silly. I want to get your father a beach shirt. We’ve seen enough of that chest.”

“Oh.” Just then the image of Auntie Nkechi at her window the day before popped into my head. I brushed it off.

“Beach shirt, isn’t that what they call it here?”

“I think so.”

“They sell bikinis there too? I didn’t know that?”

“Oh, I’m not sure. I was just messing with you.”

I didn’t duck the shoulder punch in time.

“We could get a Bahamas shirt. You know, the flowery one.”

“If we find one, sure.” I really didn’t care either way. And I wanted her to know it without my seeming disrespectful. She stared at me a few moments, before turning back to stare at the beach. In the distance, the group of teenagers had broken into an uneven rendition of “Amazing Grace.”

“What do you know about Marist, Aunty?”

“Marist? The boarding school in Abia State?”

“Yes, that one.”

“It’s a very good school. We sent Ejike there when his wahala became too much.”

“Wait, what? Ejike?”

“Yes, Ejike. The friend you don’t ask about anymore.”

“It’s not like that, aunty.”

“Mhmm. I hear you.”

Before the events of the day before, I hadn’t thought much about Ejike to be honest; and I felt a pang of guilt at this. He had been one of the reasons I missed home when Papa and I first moved. If he had ended up in Marist, it then meant something bad had happened. See, it isn’t like the only reason folks sent their kids to the school was to “straighten their path.” It’s just that a majority of Nigerian parents saw Catholic missionary schools like Marist as reform homes for their academically and behaviorally maladjusted children, regardless of their faith.

“How’s he?” I asked after a good while.

“Well, we sent him back to his uncle in Cameroon.”

“What? Why?”

Aunty Nkechi’s sigh bore the weight of the world. “Ejike’s started getting into too much trouble. He was picking fights, cursing, moving with bad people. He even started smoking marijuana.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, tried my best to feign a solid mixture of shock and disgust; dropping the corners of my mouth like two invisible ropes were tugging at them – the face Nigerians make when they get the judgmental itch. “Marijuana? My God.” That I had shared a blunt with Bayo at his beach house the week before is not pertinent information at this point.

“Yes o, Chidi. I sent him to Marist after that.”

“Did he like it there?”

“Like it? He ran away from the boarding house. Twice.”

The chuckle was out before I could stop it.

“This isn’t a funny matter jor.”

“Sorry.”

I mean, who could blame the boy? I still remembered when Okiche’s brother, Marvin – headstrong, rascally Marvin – was taken out of the private school their father had enrolled him in and then shipped off to Marist, after yet another knuckle-fest with a student. The week before Marvin was to leave, his father had stopped by the house to see Papa, and from the kitchen where I was having lunch, I could overhear the man gushing about how Marist would pound his boy into shape and wash the “rascality” off of him. And indeed, Marist did; and maybe washed off a little more too. For during the summer-long vacation and the Christmas break, Marvin would come back home to Port Harcourt looking taunt, skeletal almost; the beads of his rosary resting securely in his hollowed-out clavicle each time he took off his shirt to play football with us in the evenings. Of course, Marvin lost it when one of our mates, Tolu, said that his new shape meant that he was now built for speed, the poor thing – and it didn’t help Marvin’s case when he chased and caught up with Tolu in a flash, bundling him to the ground with an effortless leap. Marvin became a shadow of himself after his enrollment, grew so razor thin that his once proud father pulled him out of the school two years later. “But at least he is calm and well-behaved now,” Marvin’s father would say, whenever, after mass during the holidays, one of his friends would point out that they could count Marvin’s ribs through his shirt. I don’t think Okiche ever told his father, as he told me, that Marvin had been giving it to Mrs. Abazie, the Catechist’s wife, on Sunday evenings while her husband was



away at the parish teaching children the Ways of the Church. He didn't want to crush the old man's happiness, I suspected.

So yes, I knew a good lot about Marist, and I knew there was no way in hell Ejike would survive months there. And, for a second, I wondered what that meant for this Martha person, whoever she was.

"I just don't understand what's wrong with that boy," Aunty Nkechi was saying. "Marist would have been best for him."

I nodded. She hadn't met Marvin.

"Do you like it here?" Aunty Nkechi asked, her tone signaling she was done with the whole Ejike affair.

"Here, St. George's?"

"Here, America."

"Oh... I dunno, Aunty. It's ok, I suppose." I dealt another spoon of the rapidly-melting ice cream into my mouth.

"You're not homesick or anything?"

"Not particularly." I knew my aunt well; she was searching for yet another reason to worry.

"So, you don't miss me abi? Alright."

"Oh I do, Aunty!" I felt the flush in my cheeks. "That's not what I meant."

"Hmmm." I could see the shadow of the grin she was trying so hard to suppress creeping out the corner of her mouth.

"But I miss the food. I haven't eaten ofe onugbu since we left."

"You don't like American food?"

"I mean, it's ok. But it's not the same, you know? Not spicy enough."

Aunty Nkechi threw back her head and laughed so hard the campfire kids jerked their heads in our direction, frowning through the light of the flames as they did so.

We sat still a few moments, swinging back and forth on the bench, and I imagined she was thinking of a way to phrase what really was on her mind.

“Was that why you jumped in the water?”

“Because there are no spices in American food?”

“I’m serious.” She had cleared the ice cream in her bowl and she stooped to set the plate onto the sand beside the swing. “Did you jump in because you don’t want to stay here anymore? Because you miss home.”

“I fell in, Aunty.” I was sure she didn’t want to know the real reason I had fallen in.

“Why don’t I believe that?”

“I dunno.”

“I just don’t understand why you play around water so much, when you can’t even swim a lick.”

Swim a lick? I hadn’t heard that expression before. I thought about it as I twirled the last glob of ice cream in my plate with the spoon.

“Nna, look at me.”

I turned to my aunt, and her face, etched with worry, took me back across the years, to the months just after Mama died, when my night terrors were at their worst and she moved to Port Harcourt to stay with me; the months were her face, fair and kind, became the first thing I saw in the morning, and the last at night; the months were I grew to believe that she was the most beautiful, most remarkable woman I had ever seen; the months before Ifedi, before the miscarriage, before the cancer; the months before she let go of the world and held onto Papa and me like she was stranded at sea, and we were but the only raft in sight.

“It’s alright to be homesick, Nna. Ok? There’s nothing to be ashamed of. That’s why you’ve been acting strange since yesterday, isn’t it?”

I nodded, because it was a lot easier than explaining what I had found at the bottom of Papa’s dresser; because as much as I loved her, I couldn’t trust that she didn’t know about it too.

But she wasn’t far off it, my aunt. I did miss home. And it often felt like I had left little piece of myself behind when Papa and I left. A little chunk on the wooden bench on Grandpa’s front verandah where I would often sit with him, before his silence, listening as he told me stories of Biafra and the Annabelle airstrip where he landed planes in the dark of night, where he was once shot out of the sky, and nursed back to health by an Irish nurse named Fiona – a woman he would later marry; a tiny piece on the couch in the living room back at the house in Port Harcourt, where Mama and I would bury ourselves in old episodes of *The Rich Also Cry*, rooting for Mariana all the way; on the banks of the Obizi, about a mile from Grandpa’s house, where Ejike and I would, on sunny December mornings, wrestle egedege, and play Rocky and Coach, and fling worm-baited lines out into that water green with mold, and talk for hours as we waited for that one unlucky fish to take a bit off the line.

The next morning after breakfast, as I was on the desktop in my bedroom, browsing everything I could about the Marist Brothers and their schools back home, there was a knock on the door. Aunt Nkechi poked her head in.

“Nna, get dressed. We’re going to get your father that shirt.”

“Now?” I had forgotten I promised to go down there with her.

“Do you want to go in the afternoon when it’s hot outside?”

I couldn’t argue with that.

By the time I got out the front door, Aunt Nkechi was already seated behind the wheel of the Rover, adjusting the yellow head-tie she had on. Her Ankara blouse and wrist bangles added to the rush of vibrant colors swirling around her, and for a second, I thought we were headed to an African carnival, instead of the local surf and supply shop. It gave me pause, seeing her sitting behind the wheel – I hadn't seen her drive since Mama's accident. But then I had a lot more on my mind than my aunt's readiness to jump back behind the wheel.

Papa was out on the front porch; seated on his recliner with his head buried in a week-old issue of *The Apalachicola Times*. A week-old. I hadn't said a word to him since dinner the night before. I wasn't about to start then. I breezed past him, down the steps and across the white sand of the front yard, patched here and there with the occasional spurt of hopeful grass. The sun was out in full blaze, against a cloudless sky and it had already begun to warm the air. I slid into the passenger seat beside my aunt, and without a word she turned the engine over and we eased out the yard and onto the access road headed to the center of town.

Traffic was light that Sunday morning, and safe for the occasional runners and strollers, there were hardly any pedestrians in sight. Aunt Nkechi took a right onto another access road and kept on it for a couple more miles. Soon, she rolled down all four windows and the sunroof, and shared a smile as the crisp gulf breeze swam through the car, sending the top flaps of her headtie dancing in the wind.

"Your father likes good things," she said, patting the leather armrest between us.

I grunted my agreement and let my eyes ease over the cream-leathered interior and the wooden panels around the center console. It was a neat machine, that Rover. I would admit. But for someone who balked when Papa told her how much he had paid for it, Aunt Nkechi seemed to be enjoying it a little too much. I reclined the passenger seat halfway, so that I could gaze at all that blue out beyond the sunroof.

“When did you renew your license?” I asked Aunty Nkechi, after a few moments of sky-gazing.

“Last week. Didn’t I tell you?”

“Nope. Nobody tells me anything.”

“Oh, please don’t start with that.”

“But it’s true.”

Aunty Nkechi gave her eyes a good roll, dropped a wide yawn too. “You can be so dramatic, you know that?”

“What? Me?”

“Yes, you. Just like your father.”

I had nothing to say to that. Mostly because my similarity to Papa wasn’t exactly something I was in the mood for dwelling on.

I stared, for a moment, at Aunty Nkechi’s headtie flapping towards the open sunroof, and I wondered if she had begun to lose her hair.

“Are you ok, Nna?” she asked.

“Yes. Why?”

“You drifted away for a second.” Aunty Nkechi has a curious crease to her eyebrows, the kind she always had when something mystified her. “And you’ve been acting off for two days now.”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” I said.

“So, are you going to tell me about the other day now?”

“I thought we talked about that last night.”

“No, not really.”

“I wasn’t trying to kill myself, Aunty. You don’t have to worry about that.”

“Then what will you call jumping into ocean when you can’t even swim in a bathtub.”

“The Gulf of Mexico is a sea, not an ocean.”

“That’s debatable. And don’t get sassy with me. I’m dead serious.”

“I told you, Aunty. I fell in.”

“Jesus. Are you sure you didn’t do it on purpose? You know how many people over here can commit suicide if you don’t smile at them.”

A chuckle rushed up my throat, but I smothered it into a snort. And ducked out the way of my aunt’s hand flying towards my mouth. It smacked into the headrest instead.

“Everything is a joke to you, okwaya?” She was fighting between focusing on the road ahead and fixing one of her mean stares on me – so that soon her head flitting back and forth between the road and passenger seat.

“No,” I said, in as contrite and subdued a voice as I could manage.

She pulled into the front of the Island Outfitters store – a single red-brick structure with an all-glass front – parked beside the only handicap spot and killed the engine. I adjusted my seat back to the upright position.

“What happened to you? Eh, Chidi? Now you’re getting into fights...”

“Fights? I didn–”

“Yes, fights. Your father told me.”

Had to be the scuffle in the cafeteria after the head jock, Jeff, and his crew of simpletons began making monkey sounds behind me on the food line. Bayo jumped in and soon it was an all-out brawl. It was the first day I considered Bayo a little more than the annoying classmate who wouldn’t leave me be. Of course Jeff and his boys had cooked the story up, told the principal that the sound I had heard was just them clearing their throat, which was about the most ridiculous lie I had ever heard. Not as ridiculous, though, as the principal, a Hispanic man himself, gobbling that mess up and calling Papa to tell him that he had a son who punched people at recess for fun. Lord

knows how hard I tried to keep from laughing when Papa, who had left all the ass-tanning to Mama when she was alive, began his hour-long rant – punctuated by cracks of the leather belt against his open palm – with “So you’re Rocky Balboa now, abi?” By the middle of the rant, he had shortened it to “Mr. Rocky.”

“It was self-defense,” I muttered under my breath; it wasn’t my best work.

“Self-gini? You threw the first punch. You deviated someone’s septum.”

I shrugged. There really wasn’t much else to say on that. She wasn’t going to make me feel guilty about that one.

“And what about the last week of school before the summer break?” Aunty Nkechi went on.

I’m not even going to get into the “African booty-scratcher” incident with Kenny; don’t ask. And what was it with Papa chronicling my life to Aunty Nkechi.

I gave another shrug.

“Jesus Christ,” Aunty Nkechi grumbled under her breath as she slid off her seatbelt and opened the car door. “This boy won’t kill me.”

The Island Outfitters store was almost empty when Aunty Nkechi and I got in the front door. The walls were tinged brown with wooden panels that held tank tops and vests, shorts and trunks, flip flops too – and on the far end, towards the back of the shop, Hawaiian shirts. The cashier, a freckled white kid with braces in his teeth, no more than my age, gave us a corporate smile, his eyes lingering longer on Aunty Nkechi in her elaborate, one might say extravagant garb. I trailed Aunty Nkechi as we headed towards the back of the store where the shirts were.

I had entered into auto-pilot mode at this point. For some reason I hadn’t been able to get out of my mind all Aunty Nkechi had told me the night before about Ejike, about what she thought of Marist. Obviously, she saw it as a place meant to reform; to correct the crooked, if you will. Thing

is, I didn't know if she knew what Papa was hiding about Mama, if she was in on it. But I knew for certain that I had to find some way out of there, out of St. George and out of Florida.

“What size does Papa wear?” Aunty Nkechi's voice pierced through the fog of my thoughts.

“Large.”

“Large ke?”

“Large. He said it hides the belly.”

Aunty Nkechi shook her head and dropped the flowery blue shirt with flying dolphins she had picked up, and fingered another one instead, checking the label to make sure it was the right size. It looked about right, but it also looked like vintage material, and Aunty Nkechi's flinch-and-drop when she looked at the tag only confirmed this.

I thought of Marvin, him of the sunken clavicle, and I wondered what he was up to; if he had continued his affair with the catechist's wife, if he had gained back his weight and gotten a civil service job, where he hung crucifixes and pictures of Mary on the office wall beside the president's portrait. I wondered if the same fate would have awaited me if Papa hadn't flashed his butt at that auditorium all those years before, if we had stayed back in Nigeria and I had gotten into a fair share of fights at school. I wondered if I would have been sent to Marist to get fixed. I was almost in my final year of high school at this point, and I couldn't wait to be done. But then again, I knew – in fact, I was most certain – that the only shot I had at finding what had happened to Mama was to get into Marist and find Martha.

After about a half hour of browsing the shelves and trying on a couple of shirts, Aunty Nkechi and I headed to the counter to check out. As we waited for the elderly couple in front of us to pay for their beach chairs and visor hats, a couple of boys, pearly white, and in their late teens, it looked, got in line behind us, and began exchanging loud barbs and high-pitched giggles. At one point they began laughing so hard at some inside joke that the couple couldn't help but turn around



a couple of times to see what all the ruckus was about. Aunty Nkechi, beside me, gave a non-committal glance in their direction and said nothing. For a while, I resisted the urge to turn back for a good look but somewhere in the middle of their slurred frat-boy yarn, I heard “voodoo” and turned just in time to catch one of them making enchanting motions, with his fingers, at the yellow headscarf Aunty Nkechi had around her head.

The comedian froze, with his fingers mid-motion, and for a second my brain stopped in its tracks, trying to figure out if what I was looking at was in fact real. Soon it became the strangest Western face-off; the bozo with the fingers in the air behind my aunt, and I staring, trying to comprehend the idiocy. The friend beside him, snickering into the flip-phone he held up to take pictures of the show, wasn’t helping to deescalate the situation that my aunt was still oblivious of.

Yet, for some reason, I wasn’t immediately riled by the mess I was staring at. All I could think of was the date on the letter and the name Martha, of Ejike and Marvin’s misadventures, of whatever secrets Marist held about my mother.

Then the comedian’s insolence sent a familiar surge of fury up my spine and before I could blink, my right hand balled into a fist and I swung it hard at the funny guy, smashing it into his snout before he could drop his hands to shield himself.

“Chidi!”

Aunty Nkechi’s voice was a distant echo when I sent a left follow-up into the chin of the boy now stumbling backwards, clutching his nose. He fell onto a rack of discount items, and then, using it as a springboard, he charged back at me. Like an enraged bull. I barely braced myself before he slammed into me, sending a shard of pain ripping through my gut as my feet gave way beneath me. We hit the tiled floor with such force I was sure my bones had fallen off their joints.

I took his shots to my side. And I elbowed and punched back at the boy atop me, ignoring his grunts of pain, the taste of copper in my mouth, my aunt and the cashier tugging, pulling, trying everything they could to tear us apart.

I would think about that fight at the surf and supply shop all through the summer, and the fall out with Papa that followed. I would think about it the morning Aunty Nkechi and I landed in Lagos. The moment, a month after, when Aunty Nkechi swung Grandpa's old Peugeot wagon around that bend to reveal the five-storied behemoth sitting atop that hill far into the horizon. And the closer we pulled to it, the more it spread itself wide and proud for the world to see, never mind that the blend of its yellow, red, and grey paints was anything but harmonious; never mind that its entire structure sat at odds with the greenery of oaks and irokos and whistling pines embedded into the surrounding hills. It stood stubborn and sore, that house on the hill. And from the moment I first set my eyes on it, I feared the worst. For nothing about that building gave the sense that it was a place of joy and learning. The Peugeot seemed to agree with me, for it groaned and belched its way up that hill as if in protest.

The higher we climbed, the heavier my doubts grew. And they were merciless, those doubts; they taunted me, asked me, again and yet again, if I really wanted to know the secrets that place on the hill held about my mother.

I took my eyes off the hill and craned my neck to look up into that Sunday sun that was melting the asphalt up ahead, leaving mirages in our path as if to tease us onward. As if to remind me that the hardest part of being back home wasn't updating my pidgin or re-learning my Igbo or learning not to freak out when the power went out at dinner and screaming "Up NEPA" in praise of the power company when it came back on the next day. The hardest part was re-adjusting to the merciless heat, the kind that stewed your brain in a smoldering pot – damn near drove me mad when Aunty Nkechi and I had to stand out at the airport lobby to hail a taxi the afternoon our flight landed at the Murtala Muhammed Airport in Lagos. Aunty Nkechi broke into a fit of giggles when

she turned to see me wincing away the sun like I had just turned albino. Ridiculous, the heat that day. And here it was again, burning everything in its path on that road to Uturu, casting a shimmery glow onto that building on the hill, as if to tell every sojourner on that melting strip of asphalt that all was rosy and merry within its walls.

“Nna, are you ok?” Aunty Nkechi’s voice pierced the pall of silence that had hung over the car for much of the two-hour drive up from Grandpa’s bungalow.

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

I looked to my aunt, once again pleased that she was confident enough to leave her headtie behind that day. She was in remission, and she had gotten much of her hair back. And now she was proud enough to show it off. I smothered my smile, and I looked behind me, at the pillow, and the rolled-up mattress, and the desk and black trunk, all conspiring to keep me from looking back down the road that led home.

“You know, we could always turn back if you change your mind. But this is a great place – trust me.”

She would know, wouldn’t she?

I looked forward again, towards the hills in the distance, towards the concrete mammoth sitting atop it like it was a throne, and in that moment, I began to wonder if she had given Ejike the same spiel when she had taken him there. Maybe he had sat there in the same passenger seat, right beside the crisply dressed woman with the balm-smooth voice and the hazel eyes. Maybe he too had believed that Marist would change him, make him a more agreeable boy, the kind that lowered his eyes and his voice when an adult was speaking; who didn’t ride his bicycle off in the middle of the night to watch fireworks in the park but stayed home to break aki while the corn roasted in the old hearth in the backyard; the kind who didn’t build a canoe by himself and take anyone who asked with him on one of those fishing expeditions down Obizi, but instead wore a white shirt buttoned

all the way up to his throat for Sunday morning mass, and was the first to show up for catechism class at the parish the evening after. I wondered what thoughts must have been racing through his mind as they pulled closer to the school, as we now did; I wondered if Aunty Nkechi even noticed his apprehension. I loved her to death, my aunt, but she often possessed a remarkable gift of oblivion as I had found out that summer.

As the Peugeot rolled up to the gates the gates and pulled into a spot in the red-soiled lot, right under an overhead signpost that read “Marist Comprehensive Academy” in impeccable penmanship, Aunty Nkechi turned and smiled at me.

“You’ll thank me later, you’ll see.”

I couldn’t understand why the place made her so giddy. And the more I thought of it, the more it seems like she was a reaper of sorts transporting broken souls like Ejike’s and mine out here to be fixed.

“Sure,” was all I said.

Was all I said when she asked, in a whisper, as we sat beside each other at the desk in the admissions office, if everything was fine with me. I was staring at the oil painting on the wall. It was of a man with a yellow halo whipping and kicking at rapidly retreating men who were leaping over tables and each other – moneychangers, if indeed the painting was depicting the Cleansing of the Temple. In some ways, it was rather comforting to know that Big J got into a few scuffles of his own – and in that moment I dared to wonder if he would have survived Marist. The painting, encased within a cheap gold frame and glass, stood on the wall right behind the admissions officer, Brother Jude, who was still listing out the items I wasn’t allowed to take with me into the hostels, like they weren’t already written in the booklet he had given us the day Aunty Nkechi brought me to write the entrance exam; the same one I had in my hand. I wondered about the significance of that painting; was Brother Jude the man with the yellow halo? Were the students the retreating

moneychangers? That made no sense. Perhaps the moneychangers signified the demons he was appointed to chase out of ungodly kids placed in his care. Had Ejike and Marvin seen the same picture? Had they taken it as the first sign of what was to come, I pondered as I let my eyes sweep the rather cramped office, with the misaligned bookshelves leaning away from the wall, and jaded pictures of students stooping beside a trophy hoisted by a beaming, much younger Jude, and the endless piles of paper files that looked like they hadn't been touched since before I was born. And it made me wonder just how long the brother sitting opposite Aunty Nkechi and me had been in this institution.

“No magazines, and no romantic novels,” Brother Jude droned on. He was a small man, easily swallowed by the black swivel chair he was planted in. But, to his credit, he had a head that was proportionate to his body – the Fresh-Prince-of-Bel-Air haircut notwithstanding; a round, pitch dark face that carried creases, grave and somber, on his forehead, and a pair of glasses perched rather pretentiously atop his nose. Add the lily-white soutane he had on, and you had a picture of stark contrasts; of a heavily dark man, in a white soutane, sitting in a black swivel chair. He was interesting to stare at, I'll give him that much.

“No Walkmans, no radios, and no electronics of any sort,” Brother Jude said, in his rather overbearing Igbo accent.

I'd have liked to see him try to take the Nokia Aunty Nkechi had bought me to replace the phone I had lost in St. George. Even Aunty Nkechi hadn't been successful in getting me to leave it behind at home. I knew it was contraband, sure, and I knew the network up there was pretty sketchy. But having it with me was going to buy me peace of mind. Plus, I could always call her, or Bayo, or Luciana whenever things got tough, as I knew they would.

“Not even a pressing iron,” Brother Jude said, looking at me from above his ill-placed glasses for emphasis.

Wait, what now?

This didn't seem to faze Aunty Nkechi, and she was the one that had spent money on a new pressing iron the week before; she sat still in that chair and nodded a little too earnestly, much to my despair.

“No pressing iron? Really? Am I supposed to wear wrinkled clothes to classes?”

Brother Jude looked back up from his list and impaled on me a stare most grave, most rattling. And without another word I slumped back into my chair.

“Is that how you talked to your elders?” He asked, in a deep baritone.

“I just asked a ques—”

Aunty Nkechi shoe against my shin snapped the words out my mouth. I turned to her, and she had the if-you-don't-shut-up look she saved for special occasions. I bit my tongue.

The stare from Brother Jude intensified for a second and I slumped even further back into my chair while still keeping my eyes locked into his. And just as I was about to break the stare and give in, Brother Jude let out a light chuckle, turned his attention to Aunty Nkechi and smiled.

“This one na real Americana,” he said. And Aunty Nkechi shared a laugh with her new buddy.

“Don't worry,” he grinned as he turned his attention back to his list. “Rumpled shirts don't kill.”

It appeared, then, that the uniform I had on at that moment was the last article of ironed clothing I was going wear for a long while. I made a mental note to savor it long as I could.

“Nna, I'll send you a charcoal iron, you hear?” Aunty Nkechi said, as if reading my thoughts. I paid her no mind.

“No lipstick; no earrings,” Brother Jude went on, and then paused to look up from his list yet again. “I hope you don't wear earrings?”

He looked to Auntie Nkechi with a grin wider than his mouth and she obliged him another chuckle.

“No. I don’t,” I said.

“Good. You know how all these American boys behave.”

And he was back to his list before I could ponder on that.

“No condoms...”

I let his voice trail off the edge of my consciousness and floated my eyes over to Auntie Nkechi, in her plaid skirt that reached way below her knees, and her white long-sleeved blouse tucked into the skirt and sealed with a belt bearing an oversized buckle. She looked like she was ready for the most important job interview of her life, not like she had just driven two-hours over pot-holes and bumps to drop off her unruly nephew. She knew how much the reverend brothers insisted on conservative dressing on the part of women, whether student or parent, and even though I knew it irked her to conform to their ridiculous rules, she genuinely believed that it was more important that I get into the school that would save me. That was worth more to her than her pride.

I stared at her, and once again I was reminded of how much she resembled my mother, safe for the fact that she was shades lighter in complexion, thanks to Granny. From the nose, down to the chin, down to the thin, long neck. Mama was still young when I saw her last, but in that moment, I wondered if she would have aged as gracefully as Auntie Nkechi did.

Would have.

God, the not knowing was the craziest part. It was going to drive me mad soon enough, I was sure of it. But I had taught myself, the rest of the summer, to hope less. Because it was not so much the uncertainty, but the hope sprinkled in-between – that was where the danger lay. What if I hoped too much, and then that turned out to be misplaced, wouldn’t that feel like her death all over again? Besides, what about that letter made me so sure she was still alive. It was half-a-decade old; a



million things could have happened in that time. Sure, I had gone with my gut. And one might call that brave. But was it? It was one thing to go with my gut in choosing pizza over noodles for dinner. It was a whole other thing to put things in motion to land myself in a Catholic missionary school halfway across the world, in a place so alien, so out-of-this-world – a place that had driven two people I knew over the edge.

I bit my lip, to keep them from trembling, to tune my brain down and force it to focus on the pain. I slid my hands into the side pocket of the backpack at my feet to make sure the letter was still there.

Just then Aunty Nkechi turned to me, flashed a half-smile and a wink, and then turned her attention back to the little man playing God. It is true that our lives had drastically changed in the months since the incident at the surf shop. But here she was, Aunty Nkechi, bounding on like nothing had changed, like everything was still the way it was before Mama went off in flames. But I wish it didn't have to be so; I wish she didn't have to keep up such appearances on my behalf. For in as much as she did it out her instinct to protect me, it betrayed the fact that she didn't think of me as grown just yet. It showed that whenever she looked at me, she saw the little boy reading Enid Blyton by the kerosene lantern on the front verandah, paying half a mind to her gossips with my mother. It was why I had chosen not to tell her the reason I was there at Marist.

“So, you'll join the Senior Secondary 2 class on Monday. We call that SS2 here,” Brother Jude said. “Remember, you have to start preparing for the SS3 final exams next year. There's no time.”

I nodded. Like I had come all the way out here to bury myself in books.

“Here's your Hymn and Prayer Book.” He slid two booklets – one thin the other short and thick – across the desk towards me. “Mass every morning at 6 A.M.”

“Every morning?” I asked.

“Every morning.”

I was in it now.

“Any questions?” Brother Jude asked as he took the glasses off his nose and placed them on the desk in front of him.

Aunty Nkechi looked to me, and I shook my head, completely ignoring the reverend brother sitting opposite me.

“No questions, Brother. Thank you so much,” Aunty Nkechi said as she stood up and offered her hand across the desk. Brother Jude hesitated for a split second before he took it, casting furtive glances at his door as he did so. And just like that, my fate was sealed. The fact that it was a fate that I wanted for myself didn’t exactly make it any more digestible. For something about Brother Jude and the exchange over pressing iron gave me the impression that I might have underestimated what it would take for me to get through the school in one piece.

Brother Jude led us to the door of his office on the ground floor of the school building and then out towards the gate on the opposite end of the courtyard that he earlier called the assembly ground. It still was an intimidating sight, the floor brimming with red dust, closed in on two sides by the five-story building and the ten-foot fence capped at the top with shards of iron and barb wire cemented into place.

“I’ll call a student to help you with your boxes,” Brother Jude said, and with that he disappeared round the side of the school building.

“Nna, let’s get your things out of the car,” Aunty Nkechi said as she began strutting towards the gate. I followed a few paces behind, and I watched as her sandals etched their prints into the gleaming red soil.

“What do you think of the place so far?” Aunty Nkechi called behind her.

“I don’t like him,” I said.

“I don’t think you’re supposed to, Nna. I don’t think he cares either way.”

“Oh. Well...”

“Just...” She paused as we reached the gates and flashed a smile at the security man who pulled the gate open for us. “Just keep your head down, and don’t be so belligerent all the time.”

“Belligerent?”

“As in, combative. Don’t be so quick to get into a fight. You know that’s kind of what landed you here in the first place.”

I knew.

We got to the car, and Auntie Nkechi stopped and turned towards me.

“Do you want to speak to him before you go in?” she asked.

I stopped too. “No.”

“Are you sure?”

I reached out, popped the trunk and began heaving my Samsonite bag out of it.

“Yes, I’m sure.”

“I gave him your new cell number. Just so you know.”

“Ok,” was all I said.

Auntie Nkechi cast a concerned look my way, shook her head and walked over to the passenger side of the wagon to begin pulling my box of food provisions out of the backseat. I watched her through the side of my eye as I began to tussle with the trunk that held my books. We had been through this so many times since the incident, and I just couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t let it go.

The trunk, made entirely of metal, wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard I yanked. I cursed beneath my breath, irked all over again, by the fact that Auntie just wouldn’t give me the money to buy the books in the school bookstore. I braced myself, grit my teeth, and lifted the trunk with every

ounce of strength I had left, and immediately regretted in when a sharp pang shot down my spine and onto my lower back. I dropped the trunk on the ground and waved away the red dust twirling around its base.

Just then a little boy walked out the gate and began making a beeline toward us. He couldn't have been more than thirteen and was most likely in his first year. He had on the day uniform, a red-check shirt a few sizes too big, and what looked to be a short that reached way past his knees and was squeezed a little too tightly at the waist by a frayed belt. He walked with a swagger, dragging his sandaled feet through the dust like he owned the place; like he had to announce his presence lest he bundle someone over. I was genuinely worried about him though – with his bone-thin arms and his legs as spindly as a mop-stick, and his head bald and much too reflective. I had questions.

He walked up to the car.

“Afa gi o wu Chidi?” He asked, staring up at me, and then at Auntie Nkechi. I returned the stare and looked to Auntie Nkechi who appeared as confused as I was.

“E na asu Igbo?” He asked, focusing his rather intense gaze on me now.

“Yes, I speak Igbo.”

He seemed taken aback for a second.

“Are you from America?”

I really had to work on that hiding my accent.

“No, not really.”

“Hmmm...” the boy said, the glint in his eyes betraying the fact that he wasn't in the least disappointed with my answer. “Is your name Chidi?”

“Yes, afam wu Chidi.”

Even before he chuckled, I knew I had butchered that, screw up my first chance to impress with my Igbo.

“Americana. Welcome o.”

Now he was just toying with me, the brat.

“Thank you.”

“My name is Obi Okoye. Brother Jude said I should come and help you with your load.”

I turned to looked at Auntie Nkechi who had gone all red in the face, who looked like she was about to burst out laughing any second. She then turned away from me and stuck her head into the open car door. I ignored the muffled laughter and turned back to face the little man who looked like he could fit smugly into my metal pail now rested against the back tires of the car. And I gave him a good stare from head to toe – etiquette be damned – and for a few good seconds I tried to glean what statement Brother Jude was trying to make by pulling such a stunt.

“Brother Jude sent you?”

“Mhmm.”

I didn’t have the strength to argue.

“Ok. What can you carry?” I asked, waving my hand over my belongings now rested on the ground around the wagon.

He mulled this for a few seconds, the little guy, and then he made a beeline to the trunk of books by my feet. I stepped back, because I figured he would need all the space he could get.

Obi Okoye planted his feet wide apart from each other, stooped low and grabbed the handle on either side of the trunk – a feat I was already impressed with, given his somewhat limited reach – and he heaved. And soon the heave turned to grunts and before long they became groans, the kind that usually accompanied a bout of constipation. The trunk didn’t budge an inch. And I feared Auntie Nkechi would give in to her giggle fits there in the backseat of the Peugeot. I didn’t even know where to begin. I just stood and watched Obi Okoye pull, and grunt, and pull that trunk all three inches in the dust. I had to give it to him though, he had a lot of heart. And the fact that he

didn't seem fazed by the immovable force in front of him, and my aunt giggles that would have broken even the strongest of men, made me oblige him some level of respect. Too much respect to tell him that his plan of action probably wasn't going to get the job done, not that week in any case. So, I stood by and watched him work.

After a couple more heaves, Obi Okoye stood up, and, with the back of his hand, wiped off the ginormous beads of sweat now cascading down his face. "Dis thing heavy o," he said, giving the trunk a retributory kick. "Na dead body you carry inside so?"

"Nah, no corpse. Just books." I said.

He cast a look of mild surprise across the rest of my belongings – cupboard, cartons of provisions, metal pail, a chair and a desk, and the Samsonite bag – in vary stages of repose on the ground around the wagon, and I could swear I hear a whimper escape his lips.

"Na you get all these things so?" He asked.

"Yup."

Aunty Nkechi finally got out of the backseat from where she had been watching the whole show and stuffed the pillow she was now carrying into the empty bucket on the ground, making an extra effort to keep her face straight, like she hadn't just been laughing her wig off in the backseat of the car. I cast a look her way and I shook my head in exaggerated disappointment at her antics.

"What?" she mouthed.

Meanwhile, Mr. Macho still stood taking stock of my belongings, his arms at akimbo this time. He then shook his head, turned and began walking towards the gate.

"Make I go bring people come," he called back over his shoulder.

"Yeah, you do that," I said beneath my breath.

Obi Okoye stopped in his tracks, and turned and began swaggering back towards us, feet shuffling in the dust and everything, and for a second, I thought he had heard my quip. But he

walked straight to the bucket, squeezed the pillow deeper into it, picked the thing up and began walking back towards the gate without a word to either of us.

We stood there, Auntie Nkechi and I, watching him saunter towards the gate, swinging the bucket as he whistled a tune, like it was just another sunny, merry day in paradise.

“He’s something,” Auntie Nkechi said.

“Why does he shuffle his feet like that?” I asked.

Obi Okoye walked through the gate and was gone.

“You know you don’t have to wait until he gets back,” I said to Auntie Nkechi as we watched a group of junior secondary girls skip past us on their way to the school grounds. They couldn’t seem to take their eyes off of us, the strangers with the belongings splayed out on the ground with reckless abandon.

“Are you embarrassed of me?” Auntie Nkechi asked, as she reached her hand into my hair and ruffled it.

I chuckled as I felt the flush in my cheeks, and I suppressed the sudden impulse to pull my head out of her reach.

She placed her hands on my shoulders and turned me around to face her. “You’re going to be ok, you hear?”

I looked into her face, and it was fair, and it was kind. And imprinted on it were the creases that held the worries of a family fractured at the seams. And I marveled at it; at her strength that bore it all with quiet yet firm grace, with poise beyond human capabilities, with the unshakeable kindness beneath it all. And I loved her all the more. For she had up to that point been the one constant of my rather peripatetic life, and I was most grateful for that. I managed a smile, and a wink to let her know of this. Which I almost regretted the second she crushed me in a hug that threatened to collapse my bones and crush the life out of me. She held on, my aunt, there in front of those

gates that led to the unknown, oblivious to the trickle of students now fluttering out onto the lot, to the gazes and occasional chuckles and the sun beaming down in righteous anger. She held on, like letting go was losing me. And it gave me pause, this, made me ask myself, all over again, if I had the mettle to finish what I had begun that day at the surf shop. But I knew that getting back into that car and driving back with her to that bungalow so many miles away was no longer an option because that woman was more deserving of an answer about Mama than even I was; for she had loved her just as much, and she had fought for and with her when Papa was too weak to. And though it made no sense at that point, I felt, there in that parking lot, close, so close to the answer that I knew we both needed. And I hugged back. Hard as I could. And together we stood in the sun, basking in its warmth and ours. And suddenly the path ahead didn't seem so daunting anymore.

She pulled away, after a good while, and held me at arms-length, letting her gaze, now streaked with tears, wash slowly over me, like she was taking a mental photograph of me for posterity. And if Marvin's Marist transformation was any indication of what was to come, she might as well have.

"You remind me so much of your father," she said, her voice starting to crack.

It wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear in that moment, but I smiled nonetheless.

"I've got the phone, Aunty, and I'll call you, ok?"

She nodded, seeming to take some consolation from that, and then she smiled, and hug me again. She then began taking some of my belongings out of the path of the car and placing them to its side.

"Are you sure you don't want me to wait until your friend gets back?" She asked.

"Oh, he's my friend now?"

"He's so cute," she chuckled, and for a second, I was scared she was going to break out into yet another giggle fest.



“I’m not sure he’ll like being called ‘cute.’”

“Well, I think he is.”

“You want to tell him that yourself?”

“Nah, I’ll let you do that for me.”

I walked her to the driver’s door, and held it as she got in, and pulled the rest of her skirt in with her. She paused for a second, looked straight at me.

“Call him. Whenever you’re ready. But call. You hear me?”

“I hear you.”

She handed me the flask full of rice she had prepared that morning. “Keep that inside your backpack,” she said. “Now.”

I walked to the other side of the wagon, slid the flask into my backpack rested on the desk, and I walked back to the driver door.

Aunty Nkechi blew a kiss my way, took the door out of my hands and snapped it shut. She pulled a half-arch in reverse and waved at me as she pulled out of the lot. And I stood there, in the red haze her wagon left behind, and I waved back ignoring the sudden clutch in my chest.

The dust hadn’t yet settled when Obi Okoye and a posse of boys – tall and full-bodied – walked out the gate and began making their way towards the opposite end of the lot where Aunty Nkechi had left me; where I now stood, hand-on-hips, with my luggage in very various poses of repose at my feet there in the red dust. Obi Okoye’s swagger had an edge to it now, like he had not been out there embarrassing himself with the book trunk only a few moments before. But more surprisingly, I wanted to know how he had managed to convince the big guys to come and help him with his Jude-appointed load.

It was a remarkable feat, I'll give him that. And he seemed to realize as much, for he walked now with a swagger that hadn't been there before, and he was spotting a full-toothed grin, there at the head of the group, which allowed me to notice for the first time that he was missing an incisor. Before long, he was standing there in front of me with his boys.

"Oya," Obi Okoye said, with a wave of his hand across my belongings. "Sharp sharp."

Without a word the semi-giants began picking up my luggage like they were cases full of feathers. Two of them picked up the trunk with such ease it sent a fluster of embarrassment across my cheeks. Another picked up the cupboard, hoisted it high above his head and began lugging it towards the gate.

"No drop am o," Obi Okoye called out. "Or I'll break your head."

The boy continued his walk like he hadn't heard anything, and so did the rest of the group. To be honest, I was a little unsettled not only by the fact that Obi Okoye had such command over a group of giants; but also, by the fact that they were so wordless in their servitude.

"Nonso, you know the corner, abi?" Obi Okoye voice rang out towards the receding group.

"Yes Senior," one of the boys carrying the trunk called backed, and within seconds the group disappeared through the gate leaving me with only my backpack, and the food flask in my hand.

"Senior?" I asked of the boy beside me.

Obi Okoye flashed a grin my way. He then looked around, spun in a semi-circle, turned back to face me. "Your Mama don go?"

"She's my Aunt. But yes, she's left."

His grin still hadn't faded, and he looked way too amused for my comfort.

"What?"

“You be real Americana.” His let out a chuckle, and I felt the sudden urge to smack him across the mouth, but that word “senior” gave me pause. I bit my tongue and decided to save the smack for the next person to use the Americana tag on me. Also, I knew I had to work harder on masking my accent, for I was more than certain I would get into a lot more squabbles if I didn’t.

Obi Okoye began walking towards the gate without another word and I followed not that far behind, raising my eyes above the gate to take in the mammoth structure in front of me, that looked even more sinister up-close. And all over again I wonder what secrets the place held about my mother and about my family, and for the first time since I found those letters back in St. George Island, I began dreading what lay on the other side of those secrets. And as Obi Okoye walked through that dark red gate, I paused for a second, and looked back at the lot, and the fence, and the dusty road Aunt Nkechi had disappeared down, and somewhere deep in my being I accepted whatever was coming. I stood there, staring, until Obi Okoye grabbed a hold of my hand, pulled me in and told the security man to lock the gate after us.

We made our way up the stairs and on every flight, we were greeted with the view beyond the concrete railing, of the assembly grounds, and the fields on the other side of it, and of a tuck-shop, and the exam hall. With each flight, they all grew smaller and smaller, and sending a wave of uneasiness coursing through me. We passed by rows of empty classrooms, until we got to the fifth floor, where a stairgate, running from floor to ceiling stood in our path. A tag hung from the top of it that read “Campus One.”

Obi Okoye paused for a second and turned to look at me. “Welcome to the big boy’s campus,” he said, in a voice low and dramatic.

I nodded in response.

“Keep it quiet, you hear. They’re having siesta.”

I nodded again, not so much in acknowledgement, but in recognition of its essence, this siesta, and a mounting desire to get one of my own.

He pulled open the gate, and we continued our ascent, and at the top of the stairs, we turned onto the floor, and instead of a clear corridor of classes, with the occasional random desk, there was, instead, a cluttered corridor, with buckets, and pails, and shoes, and the occasional clothes hanging over the balcony, but not a soul in sight; not even the boys that had made off with my belongings. Obi Okoye had told me on the climb up that these was where the senior secondary 1 and 2 boys lived, along with a few SS3 prefects. But it didn't look much like it – if anything, it looked like the dwelling spot of a bunch of children whose parents hadn't had the time to teach them how to live on their own. And the stench of urine, eased over me in an almost overpowering surge, right there at the top of the stairs, and it seemed to be coming from a black bucket right by the concrete balcony, and directly opposite the first doorway that had "SS1" written in chalk with infantile penmanship over the doorway. As we walked past it the bucket on our way down the corridor, I craned my neck to see if I could get a peek into the bucket, but it seemed empty, and this immediately struck me as odd.

"That's the urine bucket," Obi Okoye said.

"The what now?"

"The urine bucket. We lock the gate at night. So, if you don't put that there, they'll just wee wee off the balcony in the middle of the night." He made dripping sounds and wiggled his fingers in the direction of the balcony.

"Jesus."

"Yes, yes" Obi Okoye chuckled – he was enjoying this orientation on the "wee wee" habits of the senior campus a little too much. "They will make it rain. Ha!"

Something told me the “they” actually meant “we” but I was a little too scandalized at that point to dwell on it.

“How many students are in this campus?” I asked, taking mental note that the said campus was in fact one long corridor.

“Let’s see. 150 in SS1; 120 in SS2; and then prefects. About 300.”

“300 students? In this place?”

“Yes, yes.”

Three hundred boys making it rain from the balcony if the buckets weren’t there. I suppressed the gag shooting up my throat with all the willpower I could muster.

“And who takes out the buckets?” I asked.

“Everyone takes turns.”

Like hell.

“Actually,” Obi Okoye continued, “we give the duty to new students on their first night. Welcome ritual.” The clown could barely suppress his grin.

“What?!”

He looked up at my face, and then he let out a peculiar shriek, and it took me a while to realize that he was laughing. There must have been something on my face.

“Obi Okoye!” A rumbling voice rang out one of the windows we had just walked past.

“Sorry, Chiefo,” Obi Okoye called back, and placed a hand over his mouth to kill his laughter. He then turned to me, “I was just putting your legs.”

I was this close to picking him up and tossing him over the balcony, the laughing chimp had no idea. “Pulling my legs, you mean?”

“Chai. Americana. Yes, I was pulling your legs.”

“So, I don’t actually have to carry the urine bucket?”

“Oh, you have to. But not today.”

That didn't give me the comfort it ought to have.

We walked past a door that led into what looked like the refectory, with its table and benches, some of it still spotting crumbs from the last meal, and then we got to the door at the opposite end of the corridor. This one was labeled “SS2.”

Obi Okoye walked right in without ceremony. I adjusted my backpack and, for a second, I glanced in the direction of the black urine bucket opposite the doorway. And with a prayer that my bucket-carrying day didn't come anytime soon, I walked into the hostel.

Imagine, if you will, a large rectangular hall run through with a condensed maze of wooden cupboards and metal double-bunk beds, strewn with well over a hundred sweaty bodies in various forms of recline, fanning themselves through the heat furiously with plastic fans and exercise books – while they stole envious glances at the lucky ones; the ones that had already dozed off – trying to generate whatever breeze the louvred windows had stifled in its crummy nets that looked like the hadn't been touched in years; that looked like their primary function was to block out the daylight and not ward off mosquitoes that roamed the hostels like they owned the place. No, there wasn't a fan in the ceiling – despite the place looking like it hadn't seen electricity in a generation and a half – only the empty hooks that stood there in their place, empty, waiting for what might never come, and mocking the poor, sweating creatures below while they did. The same creatures whose voices formed a blanket of drones that hovered over the hostel, and settled onto it, and was broken through only occasionally with a shout of excitement coming from the bunks in the furthest corners of the room.

The door I had walked in through – which, so far, appeared to be the only entrance – led into an aisle that was smack in the middle of the hostel. The aisle ran in-between a series of bunks all

the way to the bunk on the opposite end of the room, where it then split two ways; right and left. I caught Obi Okoye's shadow disappearing down the left aisle soon as I walked in, and I was making my way towards it when a housefly, straight out of nowhere, flew right at my face. I took a step sideways, and swatted hard at it, and in so doing I bumped into one of the side bunks, sending a rattle through its frame. I had barely readjusted myself when a hand shot out of the lower bunk and held onto my cashmere in a grip of steal.

“Who you be?” The voice sounded deep, way too deep to belong to someone still in a high school.

“Excuse me.”

“I say who you be? You no know say persin dey sleep?”

“Oh, my bad. It's just that there was a fly and it...”

“Wait, who you dey form Americana for?”

That was it.

I set my elbow up, and I let it drop straight into the forearm still hanging onto pants. And it may have been a combination of the force of my blow and its suddenness, but in that instant the deep baritone turned into a high-pitched shriek of pain and the arm retracted into the bunk from whence it came, like a prodded snail into its shell.

And fine; maybe I ought to have warned Barry White about “Americana” being my new trigger word, but you can't exactly blame me for that, not when he was making a mess of the pants I had spent hours ironing that morning.

Not that any of that mattered when homie came charging out his corner like a triggered bull, all 6-foot-2 of him, with the lumbering bulk, and the chiseled muscle gleaming with sweat, mosquito welts, and the fury of a prematurely-awakened – and assaulted – simpleton. He was nursing his arm, furiously, and he looked like he was just about ready to eat me for lunch.

I took a few steps back and cast a hopeful glance around for some underserved Deux-ex-Machina.

“You dey mad?!” He screamed, dropping his hurt arm which immediately balled into the biggest fist I’d ever seen up close.

“See, look. Chill,” I said, taking a couple more steps back, looking across the room to notice the grinning faces poking out their bunks to watch the spectacle.

“Me? Chill?” He asked, getting more riled up and taking a couple more steps towards me.

“Nnebe!”

I never knew the day would come when I would be so grateful to hear that little voice.

The man stopped and looked back towards Obi Okoye who was now making his way up the aisle towards us.

“Nnebe, how far?”

“Obi. Look at this guy o,” he said, pointing into my face, almost as if daring me to do something to justify him pounding me into the ground. I wasn’t going to oblige him.

Obi Okoye walked up to him, and taking his hand, like a toddler would a father, motioned for him to stoop low. Nnebe did, and Obi Okoye began whispering into his ear, pointing in my general direction as he did so. And soon they were both nodding, with Nnebe even managing to flash a grin. And on a normal day I would have given a tooth to find out what Obi Okoye was saying to him, but that day, there in the aisle, I really couldn’t care any less. All that mattered to me was that Nnebe had stopped advancing towards me.

Before long, Nnebe stood tall again, cast an inscrutable glance my way, and walked back into his corner to resume his siesta, I hoped. I looked around again to see the few faces that had bothered to observe the almost-fight withdraw back into their beds, with what I can swear were looks of utter disappointment.



“This way,” Obi Okoye said, as he began walking down the aisle again.

I caught up to him this time, casting a glance or two in Nnebe direction just to be sure this all wasn't a plot to jump me from behind. “Thank you,” I said to Obi Okoye.

“No problem. But, you don't want to pick a fight with Nnebe.”

He didn't have to tell me twice.

“Why?” I asked anyway.

“Just... trust me.”

We turned into the left aisle, one after each other of course, and continue down, squeezing and contorting, and turning our bodies in every direction to avoid running into the bunks or the cupboards, or the random metal buckets that were left lying around to meet wandering toes. And every bed was boasted body – in a few cases, two – that was either shirtless, or wearing the day uniform, a red checked shirt on blue trousers. Most of them looked like they had been long asleep and for the life of me I couldn't understand how it was that they could find the tranquility of soul to sleep in that heat. For a few moments, I envied them, for I knew that no matter how tired I was – and I could barely keep my feet below me after the trip and all that had happened that day – I wouldn't be able to pull a nap off.

We were almost at the end of the hostel, when I caught sight of my luggage atop my cupboard. Obi Okoye stopped at the cupboard and made a sweeping motion to indicate the space in the aisle between the two bunks. “This is your corner,” he whispered.

I took it in, the grimy floor that looked like anything that touched it would stick, the four beds that the bunks held, three of which were occupied with snoring figures. The fourth was the lower bunk to the right, which offered a view out the window, something I was immediately grateful for, even if the light coming in was heavily limited by the amount of dust being hogged by the net. Luckily, my mattress had already been set, and I could see the edge of my book trunk and the glitter

of my bucket peeking out from below my bed. The boys truly had offered some excellent service, which, of course, made me wonder even more what hold Obi Okoye had over them.

“Your friends are very kind,” I said to Obi Okoye, as I planted myself on the unmade bed, and fluffed my pillow some.

“They’re my boys, not my friend,” Okoye said, leaning against my cupboard which didn’t budge an inch.

“Your boys?”

“Yes,” he replied with a smile. And I left it at that.

“Thank you, all the same.”

He nodded, and then slid his forefinger into his nose to fish for something.

I suppressed my shudder and tried to think of less invasive things.

“Do you have a chain,” Obi Okoye asked, after flicking the boogie in the general direction of the next corner.

“A chain?”

“Yes, for your bucket.”

“I need a chain for that?”

He gave another one of those condescending chuckles I was getting far too used to and got off the cupboard and disappeared down the aisle, with a word.

I took my backpack off and placed it on the bed beside me, right behind the cupboard, and I began unstrapping my sandals. I was barely done when Obi Okoye reappeared, holding a chain in a blue encasement, with a padlock and its key hooked onto the end link.

“Thank you,” I said, reaching for it.

“Two hundred bucks.”

Of course. “Turn around,” I said to him. He did, with a grin. And I reached into my bag and pulled out my wallet and counted two crisp hundreds. Auntie Nkechi had insisted on insisted on giving me big bills. “It’ll make you less tempted to spend,” she’d said.

“Plus, something for the boys, you know?” Obi Okoye said, back still turned.

I supposed that made sense. So, I counted out two more hundreds. And I consoled myself with the fact that I was starting to understand how the place worked.

“Here.”

He turned back around and flashed a toothy smile when he saw me holding out the crisp bills at him. And just as he as he reached to take them, a hand swung out of the bunk above me, like a pendulum, and snatched the money out of my hand. I had never seen a smile dissolve so quickly, as Obi Okoye’s did. And I shot up to face the thief. But I ran my head straight into the metal beam above me. And the surge of pain ripped through my skull and sent me into a dizzy whirl that planted me back onto my bed.

And I nursed this through the bickering and the barbs between Obi Okoye and my bunkmate, barely making sense of their brand of concentrated Igbo interspersed with pidgin, not in my current state. Until the hand that took my money, handed out a single hundred-naira bill, much to Obi Okoye’s dismay. He took it, with a scornful “Mpa gi!” – which literally meant “your father,” but was, as I came to learn, the vilest form of insult to one’s parent because the abused was forced to fill in the blanks from their own imagination – and he sauntered off, tossing the chain and padlock onto my cupboard and stuffing the money into his back-pocket without so much as a glance in my general direction.

The hand reached down again, this time with the balance of the bills fluttering in my face. And for the first time I noticed how incredibly light-skinned the hand was. I reached out and took the money.

“Thank you,” I said, as I took the bills.

The hand formed a thumbs up, and retreated up into the bunk from whence it came, and I couldn't help but wonder how my first day in the hostel up until that moment had been full of hands reaching out from bunks and Deux-ex-Machina, and if my head wasn't throbbing so hard, I perhaps would have chuckled at myself; at the drama that always seemed to follow me wherever I went.

I raised my pillow and then I flattened my backpack underneath it. I took my shirt off, and rolled it into a ball beside me, and then I slid my undone sandals under the bed – which so happened to be bordered by two cupboards that forced me to pull his leg up and fold it before I could fit in. I placed my head face-up onto the pillow and I traced the spring patterns on the mattress above me until my head throbbed me into an uneasy sleep.

My eyes hadn't been shut more than a quarter of an hour before the bell began ringing and tossed the relative quiet in that hostel on its head. But my head was still throbbing from my misfortune, moments before. So, I tried as hard as I could to shut out the sounds of creaking bunks. But the chaos swelled to a rippling crescendo, and soon, the patter of shuffling feet grew even louder than the tolling bell. I pulled myself into a sitting position, and I took in the streaming crowd and for the life of me I couldn't understand what had them in such a hurry. I slid my hand below my bunk and felt for my book trunk and the bucket I had neglected to chain to my bed; they were still there, much to my relief.

There was the dark-skinned boy, about my size, seated on the top bunk opposite me, slapping Vaseline on his chest while casting furtive, almost frantic glances towards the corners at the edge of the hostel. I figured he was simply observing the chaos of a hundred and twenty bodies running around in immediate post-sleep mania; but something about his manners – how quickly he applied his precious Vaseline, and how restless his face looked gave me the sense that this was watching out for someone. Then there was the boy sitting on the lower bunk, fully dressed – check shirt tucked into his short, with his curly dark hair oiled neat and lined, looking like my Dad had in one of those his London pictures from the 70s. He looked Indian. And he was chewing hard on what looked like a biscuit, and although he did steal a couple of glances in the direction of the extreme corners, he was a lot more relaxed. The bunk above me was quiet and judging from how less depressed the mattress seemed now, I got the sense that my bunkmate had in fact already left. So much for being a guardian angel, that one.

The boy opposite me on the lower bunk stopped chewing when he noticed me for the first time. I turned my attention to him, and he extended the pack of biscuits towards me.

I shook my head. “No thanks.”

He nodded and continued chewing, never taking his eyes off me the whole time.

Now his mate above him, no doubt hearing my voice, turned his attention to me.

“You’re not going for mass?” He asked, almost incredulous.

“Huh?” I had been told that it was an early morning affair. And so, I couldn’t understand why there seemed to be another one fixed for the night.

“Mass? You know, church service?” His manner was like he was explaining it to someone who didn’t really speak the same language as he.

“I thought that was usually in the morning?”

The Vaseline boy paused for a few seconds, regarding me with a rather curious glare, at once sending a ripple of unease through my spine. The guy in the lower bunk stopped chewing for a few seconds, and fixed me with a slack-jawed gaze, like he was both in awe and amused by me at the same time.

“What?” I asked.

“Where are you from?” The boy in the top bunk asked.

“Nigeria.”

“As in, where did you come here from?”

“The US,” I said, doing my best to sound as unenthusiased as possible.

“Hmmm,” was his response to that, along with a deep nod of approval. The boy in the lower bunk began chewing again, with a subtle grin this time.

“What’s your name?” He asked, as he finally stopped applying the Vaseline, and snapped the container shut.

“Chidi.”

“Well, Chidi, I’m Abaz, and that’s Ranjit. He’s Indian,” he said, pointing to the guy in the lower bunk who stopped chewing and smacked the feet dangling above him. “Sorry, he’s from Kashmir.”

The boy looked to me, raised his biscuit in acknowledgement, and then went right back to chewing again.

“You should start getting ready for mass,” Abaz said.

I grabbed my shirt off the bed beside me, and I flapped it straight, and I got off my bunk, making sure to avoid the metal beam this time, and squeeze between the two cupboards on either ends of my bed. It was a stifling feeling, I can tell you that. And in those first days at the hostel, I was absolutely sure that the cluster and the chaos would get the better of me; I really believed they would. Because, for the life of me, I couldn’t fathom how I was going to survive weeks on end in that cramped space. For the very first time, I began to get an inkling on why this place had turned out Ejike and Marvin the way it did.

“Do you have your hymn and prayer book?” Abaz asked.

“Yeah.”

“You’re going to need them.”

I sat on the bed, pulled my backpack from beneath my pillow and got out the prayer and hymn books Aunty Nkechi had bought from Brother Jude earlier that day. I took out my wallet and slid it into my back pocket just to be safe. I was just about placing my backpack back underneath my pillow when the voice rang out from the front entrance.

“So, SS2 boys. You didn’t hear the bell, okwaya?! No problem.”

I stood up from my bunk to find the owner of the booming voice, and I caught a glimpse of an almost-albino – who I would later learn was the liturgy prefect – standing at the door, sporting a heavy crucifix around his neck, which, together with the heavily-powdered face, gave the eerie

impression of a ghost. He was diminutive – not that much taller than Obi Okoye; which is why I struggled to understand how he possessed a voice that boomed that loud, that travelled that far, that drove far more abled-bodied men scrambling past him out the door, even as he stood, still as a statue, with a stare that could the devil shiver.

“You have five seconds to get out of this hostel,” he said, turning around as he did so, and sliding the belt off his waist. “One!”

Chaos.

A rabid crowd of bodies streaming towards the front entrance, yelling as they did so. Running into cupboards and tipping them over, kicking buckets out the way, slamming against the bunk frames in a bid to avoid the cupboards.

“Two!”

Abaz was down from his bunk, and in a flash, he was sprinting down the aisle towards the door, with Ranjit – who had discarded his biscuit pack on his bed – hot on his heels.

“Three!”

I stooped to grab my prayer books off the bed, and just as I made to stand up straight, an onrushing student plowed right into me, knocking me against my cupboard and down onto the sticky floor, my hymnbook flew out my hand and sliding under Ranjit’s bunk.

“Four!”

I scrambled beneath the bed, grabbed my hymnbook, and shot back into the aisle, joining the swarm of bodies headed straight for the door.

“Five!”

By this time the train of bodies streaming in from the aisles had choked at the door, causing a blockage that stopped anyone from getting through. It appeared a couple of boys had tried to rush



out at the same time and had gotten themselves stuck in the doorway, and the bodies pushing against them did nothing to dislodge them from their predicament.

At least that was what I thought.

Until I heard the first swoosh of Linus' belt. And it was heavy and somber, like an ominous wind bringing ill-tidings to those unlucky souls that had missed his count. And then there was the second which ended with a sickening crack and a yelp so deep, so primal, it sounded like Linus had killed a soul.

"Jesus." Said the short guy stuck in front of me, buried, it seemed, amongst those bodies above whose shoulders he could barely see. He hadn't seen the belt connect with the back of the poor sod now writhing in pain as he stumbled down the corridor. He hadn't seen, but he'd heard. And he was a man of faith, that one.

"Jesus." He said again, this time not in horror but more in prayer, and I wondered just how effective that would be. And I took a cue from him and crossed myself, just as another crack rang out from the doorway, accompanied by a baritone-d shriek that sent a little shiver rattling down my spine.

But now Linus had begun to lose patience, and his swings had gotten faster, and he was now stepping closer, ever closer to the door, swinging again, and again, to dislodge the bodies from the doorway, like he was a herder and they were stubborn cattle.

"Senior Linus, please na!" Someone in the crowd pleaded. Not that that helped any.

I turned towards the corner at the right end of the hostel – the prefects' corner I would later come to learn – and I could make out a group of students calming laughing amongst themselves as they watched the spectacle, sipping some concoction from enamel cups as they did so. And they could have as well been vampires having a snack of blood, as we, the condemned, entertained them. And it sent a wave of nausea through my stomach, their delight at our horror. And I, from that

moment, nursed a deep resentment for them, the watchers in the corner, even more so that the brute now standing in the doorway, swinging his whip at the crowd of sorry bodies streaming out towards him, in perfect unison with the crucifix dancing on his neck. I was stuck in that moment by the sheer irony of it all, sickened by it even. And just as I reached close enough to the exit, to smell the beast's perfume, to see that his eyes were in fact green, to hear, right in my eardrums the shrieks and cries of pain, I held onto the shirt of the boy in front of me, and I pushed him straight into the path of Linus' downswing.

I was already halfway down the corridor, following in the path of my stumbling comrades when I heard the boy cry out in a voice strung with eternal pain. And for some reason, I couldn't quite fathom, his was more gut-wrenching than the others, more soul-breaking. And, believe it or not, I said a little prayer for the poor soul.

Our trek took us down the stairs from Campus One, all the way to the assembly ground in the courtyard, out the gate and through the parking lot where I had said my goodbyes to Auntie Nkechi barely two hours before. We crossed onto the dirt road she disappeared down, and we took a right through a gate that read Marist Rehabilitation Center, where we passed a clinic, and a hospital, and a craft center. Before long, we made it to the middle of the campus, onto a narrow gravel road that led down into a valley and then up another steep hill that had a warehouse-like structure atop it, boasting a cross on its roof and barn-wide doors that, from where I stood at the top of the first hill, looked like it was swallowing the body of students clambering up that hill.

As we approached the hill road, a stream of girls – decked in checked dresses ironed stiff and sporting well-oiled low cuts and no jewelry whatsoever – joined the fray from the right side of the hill. It was at this point that I gleaned that the girls hostel was on this part of the school campus; not on the school grounds like Campus One. And so, even though the Campus One boys had the

advantage when it came to proximity to classes, the girls had the edge when it came to the chapel, and they looked happier for it. For while they walked with a swagger in their heels, and cheerful chatter on their lips, as if they were strolling into Wonderland, the boys, especially the juniors – who were pouring out a slum-like compound that I would later learn was Campus Two – looked terribly emaciated. And there was nothing leisurely about their gait. And up ahead, I could make out a few of those junior boys darting up the hill, past the girls and the senior students, as a prefect chased them towards the chapel.

As I trotted down that hill, it occurred to me that somewhere in that throbbing crowd was someone that had the answer to the questions I had about Mama's death. Mama. I had been so caught up in my new reality I hadn't spared her a thought. I knew that was something I couldn't afford to do. I knew I had to keep thinking of her, of that letter now in my backpack, so as to keep my mind focused on my mission in that place.

As we got closer to the chapel, I followed the same group of seniors who had busted out of the hostel just before me and together we around to the back entrance of the chapel, which did in fact look like it was once a warehouse. It was painted a mixture of green on the roof and cream on the walls, and it had no windows to speak of, just the ginormous entrances by the sides, the ones that reached from the roof to the floor, and then the little doorway through which we now walked. One step through the doorway, and I paused to take in all in; the deafening chatter of nigh a thousand teenagers yapping away in a hall built to amplify sound; the central aisle at the beginning of which I stood, leading all the way up, about a hundred feet to the raised platform that held the altar; that split the chapel right down the middle, with the girls on the benches to the left and the boys on those to the right, lest they intermingle and set the world ablaze; the speakers tucked high into the rafters, dressed in cobwebs that looked at least a decade old. And I was stunned by it all; the energy floating through that space, the all-black crucifix dead-straight ahead of me, high on the wall behind

the altar, above a sealed doorway. And I could have stood there a while longer too; to take in the image of the brothers dressed in all-white, sitting to the right of the altar, somber, oblivious to the raucous shaking that building to its core, and the group to the left of the altar, who, judging from the piano and the drums and the stand before them, appeared to be the choir. I squinted my eyes at the group of brothers, searching hard to see if I could recognize who I was looking for. I didn't make him out at first. But after a second go around, I spotted him in the second row among the brothers. Brother Jude had his head buried in what looked like a missal, and for a split second I wondered if there was a passage in there that read: "send onto a new student a crook and a rascalion to provide aid in his time of need." The clown.

I began inching forward, taking it all in, until up ahead, a couple of rows from the altar platform, I made out a figure waving furiously at me.

"Chidi!"

I pulled closer, squinting my eyes as I did so, until I could make out Abaz's smiling face amongst the sea of red. A wave of relief coursed through me as I walked up to meet him. He nudged Ranjit, who was sitting next to him, and gestured for him to move a little further down the bench. He then adjusted himself and made a space for me at the edge of the bench, right by the aisle – a spot I was most grateful for. I sat down beside him and offered my gratitude with as warm a smile as I could manage under the circumstances.

"I see you survived that," I said.

"Linus?" Abaz squeezed his mouth and offered a hiss Auntie Nkechi would have been proud of. "He's a madman, that one."

I chuckled, more at his furtive glance around as he gave the jab. He seemed a wise kid, and I made the mental note to stick close to him.

"Did he get you?" He asked.

“Nah,” I said, with a dismissive shrug. And I took a look down the benches of other SS2 boys to see if I could recognize the sacrificial lamb from before. I didn’t.

“Who are those students up there? Behind the brothers.” I asked.

“Oh, those are the SS3 students. The VIPs.”

“No shit.”

He laughed at this.

“You Americans like that word ‘shit’ a lot,” Abaz said, and nudged Ranjit as he did so – his buddy didn’t pay him any mind; he had his eyes fixated on someone up there in the choir group.

“You know I’m Nigerian, right?”

He chuckled like that was joke and pointed in the direction of the VIPs. “That’s the SP. The tall guy in the specs.”

I sighted him out, and he was tall alright; fair and lean, with his cheeks sunken and spare, and his eyes impossibly large, even behind the glasses that looked way too plain to be medicated.

“SP?”

“Senior Prefect. The boss around here.”

Boss? Surely, my bunkmate was being dramatic. I looked more closely at the guy, and despite his height, and the cheeks models would kill for, there wasn’t anything altogether remarkable about the guy.

I looked across the aisle, to the girls on the other side of the divide. And they looked calm, serene, and way more cared for and fed, unlike my compadres on this side of the aisle. And for a second, I imagined that the aisle, wide as it was, was not to keep the boys from the girls, but to keep the prisoners away from the actual students. Two of the girls directly opposite me shared a giggle and a glance my way. I flashed my warmest smile, and they quickly turned from me. They didn’t want to be caught fraternizing with a prisoner.

Just then, the doorway that led into the church swung open and a giant of a man waltzed in and made his way to a table behind the altar that held vestment all laid out with perfect folds. He was trailed by a boy, around my age, who carried a metallic suitcase in his left hand and an official frown on his face. He walked past the priest, dropped the case beside the table that held the vestment, and began helping the father get dressed for the mass, right there in front of the congregation. I couldn't take my eyes off the kid, hard as tried. For he looked so out of place in that chapel, in that boarding school, there in Eastern Nigeria, with his nose pointed straight, and his blond hair glowing in the light above the altar, and his skin in sharp contrast to pretty much every student in that chapel. I couldn't quite grasp what a white boy was doing in this place, so, so far from his people.

"See, you're not the only Americana in here," Abaz said with a smirk, nudging Ranjit as he did so – not like that one had taken his eyes off the choir group.

"He's American?"

"Yes. I'm sure that's why they gave you guys the same bunk."

The hand. Of course the hand belonged to him. But the voice that had exchanged barbs with Obi Okoye while I nursed my head hadn't sounded American at all. In fact, its brand of Igbo was so concentrated I had struggled to keep up. Surely it wasn't the same person.

"He speaks Igbo?" I asked peeling my eyes away from the wonder for a second.

"Oh, you have heard him speak?" Abaz asked.

"Yeah, this afternoon."

"Well, we were just as surprised as you when we met him three years ago. We were excited about an oyigbo coming to join us. Then he opened his mouth."

Ranjit let out a chuckle that only triggered Abaz into joining him. I couldn't quite fathom what the deal was with those two.

Just then, the boy seated on the bench in front of me, turned around to face us.

“Who? Jonah?”

Abaz and Ranjit nodded in-between their chuckles.

“Pfft. That one even speaks better Igbo than my Grandma.”

The snicker was out of my mouth before I could hold it in.

And the ripple of laughter that ran through both benches in that instant gave away the fact that all the SS2 boys within hearing range had been listening to our exchange the entire time.

“Which kin oyigbo be that one?” Another voice shot from behind me. I didn’t bother to turn back, I kept my eyes trained on the white boy now handing a stole to the half-dressed priest, completely oblivious of the ribbing he was getting from his peers.

“I’m tired jor,” said the boy in front of me. “We can’t get proper food, or a proper toilet. Now not even a proper white boy.”

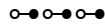
The laughter was louder now, and this time I couldn’t help joining in. The guy was killing his audience, and he knew it.

Just then one of the brothers seated close to the altar stood, revealing a frame that was well over 6 foot and a bulk that gave the sense that he might have lifted weights at some point in his life, and he walked slowly to the edge of the platform, hands behind his back. He stopped and fixed a cold stare in our general direction, and suddenly those eyes sunken deep in that dark, austere face took on a somewhat terrifying edge. And a calm descended immediately on the entire chapel, smothering the chatter to a deathly silence, disrupted only now and again, by a “shhh” or two, from the now patrolling prefects, who had all of a sudden found their sense of duty.

He stood there for more than a few minutes, the scowling brother, taking in the crowd, drinking in the silence he had ushered into that hall with only but a look. And then, ever so slowly, he picked his finger up and pointed it straight at the comedian seated right in front of me, and for a

split second my heart stopped, because he might as well have been pointing at me. And the boy seemed to shrink into himself for he arched his back some and forced himself to slink deeper into the bench. The brother held his stare and his finger for moments that felt like an eternity, and then he turned away and walked back to his seat.

And I felt a chill descend on my being in that moment, one that I have, since that day, being at pains to describe. And If I had been more perceptive of it that there in that chapel, I perhaps would have gained some understanding of what was to come.



It wasn't until midway through the mass that I saw her for the first time. The priest had just finished the call for "the sign of peace" and we had turned around to exchange handshakes and fist-bumps – no one made any attempt to reach across the aisle to share peace with the girls on the other side. At this point the church came to a standstill, and every pair of eyes in that chapel were now fixed on the choir stand. A girl, slender, and fair, with a gait that made it seem like she was gliding, walked down the central aisle of the choir section, and then up the steps of the conductor's podium. She gave the boy at the organ a nod, and with an enthusiastic smile he began working the keys to the song that was to come. And she turned back to the choir while she waited on him, with a swoosh of that dress with its edges sharp and impeccable; almost as if they were a reflection of her. For those few moments while the organ played, and the congregation waited, as if with bated breath, she was the owner of us all, this girl on the podium. And she didn't seem fazed by this, not in the slightest. No, she made us wait; she made the priest, and the brothers, and the VIPs, and the white boy seated behind the altar, and the altar boys, and the crucifix heavy and somber, and the clouds beyond the



barn-door that held the embers of that dying day; she made us all wait on her. Until she was ready. And only then did she let go.

With a wave of her hand, the choir broke into an Igbo rendition of the *Agnus Dei* – one that I could vaguely remember from the masses Mama had taken me to during our year-end vacations at Grandpa’s house. But then, in seconds, the entire congregation picked up the song, and soon the voices all melted together in a wave of vibrant melody that shook that warehouse to its core. And soon it appeared that the girl on the podium wasn’t just commanding the hundred students that made up the choir, but the thousands that filled that chapel from end to end, junior, senior and brothers alike. It was spellbinding to see, that she had unquestionable power over their voices, voices that now trembled, and rose, and paused in accordance to every wave of her hand.

“Nwaturu Chineke, nwaturu Chukwu,” they rumbled on; with Abaz surprisingly soulful alto ringing in my left ear.

And I could not, for the life of me, take my eyes off of the girl standing there on that podium, right beside the picture of *The Virgin* on the wall. And in that moment, it all seemed fitting; in that moment she embodied that picture of *The Mother*, yellow halo and all, and it caused me to feel that she was the one who held the keys to my existence; one who I did not want to disappoint. So, I threw my head back, and I picked up that song I hadn’t sung in so many a year, and I sang it loud, like my life depended on it, like it would absolve me of my every sin – even my sacrifice of that boy’s body on the altar of *Linus’* madness. Like it would make me a whole new man. I ignored the looks of puzzlement on my seatmates’ faces and I kept right on singing, keeping my eyes on the girl on the podium; hoping she would, in the midst of it all, cast a look my way, and acknowledge that I was in fact signing more than every other person there in that chapel.

I looked to the white boy on the altar, and his eyes were fixed on me. I shuddered my surprise down my spine, and offered him a semi-nod, the kind I reserved for black strangers at the

grocery store; the kind that gave the impression of kinship despite unfamiliarity. He held my eyes for a few seconds, offered nothing in return, and turned his eyes back to the choir mistress, singing the whole time as he did so.

I turned my eyes back to her.

I felt a nudge against my arm, turned to find Abaz and Ranjit grinning sheepishly at me.

“What?” I mouthed.

Abaz looked in the direction of the podium and then back at me. Then again. He jerked his eyebrows up twice in quick succession and flashed a mischievous leer my way.

I shook my head and turned back towards the choir stand.

“What’s your class form?” Abaz asked, above the singing voices.

“SS2B,” I said.

Abaz and Ranjit exchanged looks, and the former’s grin widened even more.

“Why?” I asked.

“Nothing,” was all he said. And then he shared another giggle with his mute buddy.

They were impossible.

I turn my attention back to the girl on the podium, and I screamed what I remembered of the song like I was calling out for her.

Jonah didn’t come back to the corner. And I was, for some reason, relieved by this. There was something about that look he had given back at the chapel that unsettled my being and gave me the impression that he perhaps harbored some ill-will towards me. Although that hardly made any sense when I considered saved me from being swindled by Obi Okoye – the crook I hadn’t yet seen since the incident. The fact that he hadn’t said a word to me, even though he had been listening to my exchange with Obi Okoye, and intervened when it almost got out of hand, made it all the more

puzzling. There was a chance, of course, that I was merely overreacting; that he had not in fact seen me but was just staring in my general direction. Still, something about the whole exchange needled at me.

I pondered on this as I sat on my bed that night upon our return to the hostel. They had rung the bell for supper, but I had declined to go, choosing to finish the rest of Aunt Nkechi's rice left in the flask, while the raucous from the other side of the window next to my bed flitted into the hostel. I could have been napping of course; but I found out, much to my chagrin, that the corridor on the other side of my bed window, wasn't in fact some random one, but doubled as the refectory as well. I wasn't ready to make the full switch to Marist food yet; not on my first day, no sir. I was more than content to catch the whiff of it all from the comfort of my bed.

I put the flask into my cupboard, and I took off my sandals now coated with a film of red dust, and I made a mental note to clean them the next day. I snuck out the phone, a Nokia 3310, and checked for service. No luck. So, I laid back onto my bed, and I let the clatter of spoons and forks on stainless steel and enamel ebb into a light hum of lulling sounds. And I thought, yet again, of the girl on the podium, and I wondered who she was, and where she came from. There was something about her, something inscrutable, fleeting, indescribable yet heavy and tangible, something without a name, that reminded me of Mama when I knew her best. And a ripple of terror flowed through me at this thought; the thought that she might perhaps hold the answer to the questions I sought. The thought that she might be Mama's after all; and the disastrous implications of what that meant with regards to the way she made my chest pound against its cage, with every motion she made.

Soon, my thoughts began to muddle into each other, and I truly was impressed by how quickly I had gone from admiring a graceful choir mistress to deducing that she in fact might have had something to do with Mama's disappearance. And then I remembered that I hadn't barely slept

at all that day. If I was to keep my wits about me out there, I knew I had to take better care of myself. I had to eat better and sleep better. I made a mental note to do all this. I then I thought of Papa for the first time that day, and I thought of our big fight, and everything that followed. And I pondered yet again on how much more different our lives would have been now if I hadn't picked that fight at that shop all those weeks before.

Soon, the chatter from the other side of the window and the creaking of my worn bones rocked me to sleep.

I looked forward to the trips to Grandpa's bungalow, back when our lives made sense.

Back when Mama scarcely paid Papa any mind; back when I was the center of her world. And I've often wondered why this was so; why she had, at that moment in her life, made her entire existence about me. I could, of course, chalk it up to her being this maternal goddess who loved her only child to the edge of the moon and back, but even then, when I was seven and clueless, I could sense that there was something more to this devotion; something I couldn't quite articulate. Of course, if you were to ask me that now, I'd say she poured her life into mine to keep from dealing with her marriage to Papa which was crumbling like a sandcastle in a rainstorm. For in those last years I knew my mother, our home felt like the battlefield of a festering war. And I caught in the middle of it, with my hands tied behind my back, could only sit and watch as those two tore each other apart, over what I never could glean.

It would rage on, this war, over all hours of the tortuous days and the endless nights, and even though divorces were, for the most part, unheard of in our pocket of Nigeria – in most pockets, to be honest – I was most certain that my parents were close to one. In fact, I hoped they were, because I felt that it had to be a better alternative than listening to them bicker all day.

All of this came to a head when Mama decided to pull me into the fray. She would come up to my room, right next to the one she shared with Papa back at the house in Port Harcourt and tell me to go call "my father" for dinner. And over said dinner, she would make sure to top my plate every chance she got, completely ignoring Papa's, never mind that I would grumble "I'm full, Mama;" that I, in my naiveite, would ask that she fill Papa's plate instead with the hope that this would spark some conversation – any conversation – between them. Not that this ever worked; not

that I ever stopped trying. Until, with time, it became obvious, that Mama and Papa existed in two disparate, almost incompatible dimensions, and that I was but the only bridge connecting them.

But the trips back home, they always changed everything, even if momentarily. For with the excitement of seeing their relatives again, came a freeze in the war; a ceasefire of sorts. And, all of a sudden, their searing differences paled into insignificance. See, those trips back home from the city – sometimes for the New Yam Festival in the summer, more often for the Christmas holidays during the Harmattan – meant the world to Mama and Papa. For even though they seemed to have nothing in common, they did share the same affinity for positive public representation. Nothing mattered more to them than putting on bold and happy faces for the people back home to see.

I remember the last of those trips. Mama dragged me from school, before the closing bell, to the tailor down the street from her job at the State Secretariat, and with the bribe of coconut cookies in my hand, I stood still and waited for the man with the crusty hands and the missing front teeth to take my measurements while speaking through me to my mother sitting on the wooden bench at the back of the shop. And when that ordeal was over, Mama took me to the barber's shop further down the street. She disregarded my request for a round cut and asked instead that I be given a clean cut, as always, which she monitored every inch of.

“Chai, Nna, you look so handsome,” she said to me on the drive back home.

I kept my hands folded tight, there in the passenger seat, and I fought to keep my pout strong amidst the assault of a blushing smile. I snuck a peak at my reflection in the side mirror, begrudgingly admiring the clean look I was now spotting.

“Hmmm, fine boy” Mama continued, reaching across to pull at my chin. “See, if I wasn't already married eh...”

The chuckle was out my mouth before I could suppress it. And I hated myself for giving in, for laughing even more as her hands reached down to tickle my sides.

And we rode on, darting and weaving down the boulevard that cut through the Government Residential Area in the heart of Port Harcourt where our home was. I gripped the sides of the passenger seat till my knuckles turned white, and I remembered all over again why I often preferred to ride with Papa who didn't seem to have the same death wish Mama had. But a calm always coursed through my veins whenever I looked beside me, to my grinning mother, who had one eye on the road and one on me, and deep down I knew that everything was fine, so long as she was there beside me. In that moment, I tried to remember the last time I had seen her so gleeful, and that took me right back to the last Harmattan, to the few days before the trip back home the year before. By this time I already knew that those few days before the trip were sacred ritual for Mama and me, for something about preparing for the trip back to the village, filled her with a joy and a longing that had been missing all year; and it was as though the thought of being in a place that gave her a respite from constantly going at it with Papa, gave her a new lease on life, an infectious one at that.

This, of course, didn't change the fact that the drive itself was often fraught with the same smoldering tension that had been hanging over us all through the year. As we pulled onto the dirt road that shot through the center of that red-soiled town, I would watch from the backseat of The Beast – the name Nigerians coined for Mercedes S500 – as Papa rolled down his window and giggled with the kids, barefooted and dusty, chasing the car, screaming “Pa Ike!” while Mama looked out the passenger window, paying the spectacle no mind. Before long, Papa, would reach beneath the driver seat, and pull out crisp twenty-naira notes which he would send billowing into the air, out the window and the open sunroof, and squeal – yes, squeal – in infantile delight as the kids let go of the car to clasp and grasp at the green papers fluttering through the air. And Mama would suck her teeth, as she always did whenever she was particularly ticked off about something, and shrug when Papa asked her what was wrong.

“Nothing, Ike. Just... keep throwing out money like it grows in our backyard.”

Papa would chuckle at this; wave it off with a prideful smirk.

He adored the adoration he got, my father. He was, after all, the first son of the soil to get a PhD, from the almighty Harvard no less. And he was the highest-ranking government official to come from those parts too. In the eyes of the locals, he was something of a god. Even though it made no sense to them that he had kept the bungalow his parents had died in, untouched where it stood in the bottom of a valley. He had simply handed the deed over to Auntie Nkechi, as the will requested, and kept his hands off of it; only bringing Mama and me to visit every year-end.

It was quite a sight, Grandpa’s bungalow. And I never cease to marvel at it, each time we drove back home. It was always the same. Papa would shoot down that dirt road until the kids grew tired of chasing, and then where it led to a cul-de-sac of irokos with a brook that ran through them, Papa would take a left off the road and onto an even narrower one that led straight down into a valley at the bottom of which the bungalow would rise into view from among a groove of pines, green roof first, and then the yellow body with the black highlights on the windowsills. The deeper we descended into the valley, the higher the black front gates rose, until it blocked out the whole of the house when we were right in front of it.

Oftentimes, Mama would get out of the car at that point to hold the gates open for Papa, but that year she didn’t. She sat still, there in the passenger’s seat of the car. Didn’t move a muscle. I held my breath as I watched them both seating in the front seat on the car, not saying a word to each other.

Papa turned to look at Mama, “Nne?”

“What?” Mama asked, without making any motion to alight or even look at her husband beside her.

“The gate.”



Mama let out a low hiss and adjusted herself deeper into her seat.

“Let me go and open it,” I said unbuckling the belt around my waist and reaching for the door.

“Chidi, if you touch that door, you will cry this afternoon.” Mama’s growl was something terrible.

I buckled myself right back in and kept my eyes off the rearview mirror than now had a pair of highlighted eyes glaring at me.

“It’s ok, Chidi,” Papa said, and he unbuckled his belt and turned off the ignition. But just as he reached for the door, a clang rang from the other side of the gate. It swung open to reveal the bungalow, and the yellow bushes that lined the sandy lot in the front yard, and Aunt Nkechi in a plastic chair by the dwarf wall that shielded the front verandah along with a shrub of purple hibiscuses, and a boy, no taller or younger than I was, holding onto the gate open with barely suppressed effort. Papa buckled himself back in, glanced at his wife beside him, and with a shake of his head, he started the engine again.

I didn’t appreciate then, the significance of that evening in the car, of my parents dragging their war out into the open, before me, and before the gates of the bungalow that had, until that moment, offered something of respite.

By nightfall, after the pleasantries and gift-sharing had faded with the light, out on one of the recliners on the front verandah where I had my head buried in Mama’s ancient copy of *Brer Rabbit’s a Rascal*, squinting to see past the scribbles on the page, to see better with the yellow light of the kerosene lantern on the coffee table between me and the snoring new help, I listened to Mama drag Aunt Nkechi into the fray. I listened to her give a detailed rundown of Papa’s transgressions that year. From his ludicrous spending habits, to his unwillingness to become more involved in my upbringing – which, until that point, I had never considered a problem of any sort. Papa was Papa,

was how I had always thought of it. And even though we were never the kind of duo that went to football games together or talked for hours-on-end about the burning questions I had. He was, at the very least, a good backup to Mama whenever she was out of reach. And I was fine with that. And we did have our moments, Papa and I. We would, during the December bazaar event at the parish back in Port Harcourt, explore the games that were on offer; smacking a horse-doll full of sweets while blindfolded – what I would learn was called a piñata after we moved to America – the card games, the ludo, the ring tosses. We would play them all, and we would stuff ourselves full, even as Mama ran around with the Catholic Women Association she was the president of at the time, cooking, and organizing, and sending people to check that I wasn't up to my usual mischief on the parish grounds. And even though that was about the only time of year Papa and I bonded outside the mediation of Mama, I still wasn't aware of any burning absence of fatherly care.

But then again, what did I know? I was just the little boy stuck in the middle.

“And then there's that nonsense with the oil spill,” Mama said, with a heavy note of finality.

“Jesus. He still hasn't settled that?”

“No. He said he doesn't have the money.”

Aunty Nkechi hiss, deep and profound, raised a stir out of Ejike. And that gave them pause, for they looked towards me and the snoring boy, and they caught my eyes, exchanged a knowing look between them and said nothing as they picked their mugs of Lipton off the verandah table and sipped it in unison.

Every now and again, as if to mock my mother, Papa's voice would bellow in from the darkness of the front yard where he sat under the udala tree with his childhood friends – none of whom had left the village; all of whom had married light-skinned, soft spoken women they had known all their lives, and opened stalls selling car parts from Nsukka, or imported from Germany; all of whom spoke a brand of Igbo more raw, less diluted than the often Anglicized version Papa

spoke. All of whom were constant reminders that Papa had made it out of Umunze; that he had become much more than the “half-caste” boy with the pretty face. I think this is what Papa relished most about those trips home at the end of the year. He lived for the “Chief Chief” or “Doc” or “Honorable, Sir” that greeted him each time he made exaggerated motions of whipping open the boot of his Mercedes to hand out a hefty bottle of Schnapps or a roll of brocade worth so much money it kept Mama up at night.

Mama and Aunty Nkechi picked up their chatter again, this time on the gossip around town. But the voices of Papa and his friends would, like a refrain, interject the banter between Mama and Aunty Nkechi, and each time, without fail, Mama would grunt and purse her lips. And I would get the sense that she was close to close to blowing her top.

“How long have they been out there,” Aunty Nkechi asked after a lull.

“Who knows? Do you know he gave Fr. Nwodo another thirty thousand naira?”

“Wait. When?”

“This evening. He sent Ejike to go and drop off the envelope.”

“But he doesn’t have the money to settle the family Ken told him about?”

“My dear,” said Mama, shaking her head in resignation. “Speaking of Ken, I’ve been trying to reach him for the past couple of days. I’m started to get worried.”

“I’m sure he’s fine,” Aunty Nkechi said. “You know how moody he gets sometimes.”

At this point I was trying hard to remember the last time Uncle Ken had visited our place in Port Harcourt. It had been a good while. I began to worry that something might be wrong too. And I must have been visibly restless at this, for when I looked over at the table, Mama and Aunty Nkechi were both watching me.

“Nna, are you ok?” Mama asked.

“Yes.”

“Shebi I told you that light is not good for reading,” Mama said for the umpteenth time that night. And, once again, I nodded and made the motions of closing the book, till I was sure they had taken their attention off of me.

They looked a curious couple, Mama and Aunt Nkechi, there in the yellow light of the lantern; with Mama’s coal-dark skin in sharp contrast to her much fairer sister-in-law. Yet, they were alike in height, and in garb – same heavy weaves wrapped tautly beneath hairnets – in mannerism, and in speech – finished each other’s sentences and everything. And it was most uncanny, this similarity in disparity, so that it kept me in a perpetual state of wonder whenever I saw them together.

“So, let me guess: Father would call his name out at mass tomorrow.”

“Of course.”

Aunt Nkechi let out a sigh and said nothing more. And it was obvious, at this point, that whatever the outcome of the tussle with Papa, her loyalties lay not with her brother, but her sister-in-law. This made me feel for Papa, for it seemed like it was him against the world. And as much as I felt closer to Mama, I couldn’t help but feel that it was all unfair; this ganging up on my father.

“But I don’t understand Ike. I really don’t,” Mama went on. “Thirty thousand naira? For what?”

“God’s graces?”

Mama’s chuckle was cut short when Aunt Nkechi nudged her and motioned in my direction. They both then feigned some level of comportsment, even though I could make out their shoulders shuddering in the dark. I couldn’t understand what was so funny about God’s graces.

“I think you’re seeing that coconut head there,” Mama said to my aunt after a lull, pointing in my direction as she did so. “I’ve told him, how many times, to stop reading in that light. If I send him off to bed now they’ll say I’m wicked.”

“Nna, come here,” Aunty Nkechi motioned for me.

I closed the book a little too forcefully and turned down the yellow glare of the lantern till it was but a faint halo of yellow in the thick darkness of the verandah. I shuffled over to the bench and planted myself in-between Mama and her sister-in-law. Aunty Nkechi ran her hand through my hair, ruffling it and gently scratching the crown of my scalp, while Mama took my hand in hers and checked my nails to make sure I hadn't grown them out again.

Ejike jolted out of his slumber just then and looked around for a few seconds like he had no idea how he had gotten there. He then stood up, picked the lantern off the coffee table and staggered into the house with a mumbled “kachifo.” We grunted our goodnights in unison, just as we were plunged into total darkness out there on the verandah.

“See what I'm dealing with?” Aunty Nkechi voice hushed now, and she wasn't done massaging my scalp. “He didn't even say ‘excuse me’ before taking the lamp.”

Mama snickered and gave my hand a squeeze.

“Ifeoma, you were right,” my aunt said after a few moments. “His head feels like a coconut.”

Mama deafening snort made the jab sting even more, and my attempt to run off into the house to hide from their chuckles was thwarted by four strong arms pulling me back down onto that bench.

We sat there for much of the night, staring into the darkness of the front yard; at the blips of cigarettes floating under the udala tree like orange fireflies. And every now and again a roar of laughter would ring out towards us, punctuated yet again by Mama's sigh, by my desire to be out there and in on the joke; by my longing to make my own orange fireflies in the night.

Fr. Nwodo did call Papa's name in church the next day, for what he termed “special recognition and blessing.” And my father sauntered down the central aisle of the church, through

endless rows of applauding parishioners, and I can swear I saw his feet lift off the ground and float through the air. He took his Nze cap off as he knelt at communion banister, right before the priest who placed his hand on him in an all too solemn show of blessing. I looked to my mother, there beside Aunty Nkechi and me in the middle pew, and the stoic façade her face bore told so many stories I couldn't yet read.

What surprised me wasn't the scantily dressed woman screaming, clawing at Papa out on the church parking lot after mass that day; nor was it the crowd of congregants, Aunty Nkechi included, that rushed to shield him from the barbs and spittle. It was the look of sheer horror my mother cast onto the spectacle, there where she stood on the front steps of the parish, shielding me from view, crushing me into her backside; there where she had said "I do" – to the now irate former minister fighting off his restrainers with spittle dripping down his face – nigh a decade before. I craned my neck forward and I looked up to my mother, and I burned that visage onto my memory, for in all my years until that moment, I had never seen my mother so scared.

That was the summer of '94, and that woman was the mother of one of the activists arrested with Ken Saro-Wiwa two days before by Abacha's regime. She hadn't wanted her son involved in the protests, however peaceful they were – after all he was an Igbo son, and not from Ogoni where Shell was doing all that pillaging. But Papa and Mama had convinced him that it wasn't just a fight for Ogoni but for all of Nigeria, and, in his starry-eyed naivete, he had joined the cause. And he had come by our house in Port Harcourt to celebrate with them after Shell packed up and left Ogoni Land for good. "We won," he'd screamed atop his lungs, there on the back balcony that starlit night, as Mama and Papa patted his back in pride.

I know Mama felt responsible for that woman's boy. I heard it in through the walls in the days after we returned home to Port Harcourt that summer. Mama knew that the boy wasn't getting out alive, not if Abacha had something to say about it. And she was right. And it broke her soul, it

did. And it wasn't up to a week later that she drove The Beast off the road and into the electric pole at the edge of the ravine just outside the front gate of our home, where it blew up in a fireball so angry nothing was left of Mama to put in the ground.

The hand that roused me from my slumber was anything but polite. I felt first the sting of its calloused palm against my cheeks, but I grumbled it off, turning away from it and pushing myself as close to the wall as I could. But then it grabbed a hold of the back of my pajamas and began tugging at it.

“Chidi!”

“What?” I opened my eyes to the wall before me, and an enveloping darkness, to the whiff of dew and stale food waltzing in from the other side of the window; to the shuffle of a hundred pairs of feet and the clangs of metal buckets against bunks and cupboards.

“Shower time. Get up,” Abaz’s voice found me through the dark and the crescendo of chaos.

“What happened to the light?” I bit hard on my lips to keep the panic that was now swelling at the back of my throat at bay. I was reeling from the darkness, unable to pinpoint my bearing, and it was most disconcerting. “Can you put it on, please?”

“Lights-on is at five,” Abaz’s voice called back to me, a little further away now.

Five? I reached beneath my pillow, slid my hand into the front pocket of my backpack and, after looking around to make sure no one was close, I pulled out my phone. Papa hadn’t called. And it was 4:30 A.M. And for a few moments I stared at those black lettered numbers against the green backlight, and I tried thinking of a time, ever in my life, that I had been up that early.

Just then a flashlight flicked on, at the foot on my bed, and sent a sharp ray of white light straight into my face, blinding me.

“What the hell?!”

“Oh, sorry.”



The beam moved down to my torso, flicked off, and then came back on again, revealing a ghostlike impression of Abaz's face.

"Use this," he said, handing me the flashlight. "And hurry up. I'm already late."

"It's 4:30 in the morning."

"Exactly," Ghostface said, as he floated back to his bunk.

I set the flashlight on the bed beside me, and I checked my phone again, to be sure I hadn't missed a call. And I wondered if the solitary network bar would have been strong enough to receive a phone call, had one come in. I slid my phone back into my backpack, sat up from the bed and then I tossed it into my cupboard. I took my shower bag, the pink one Auntie Nkechi had bought for me, and I padlocked the cupboard just as a group of boys sporting only towels across their midriff wafted through our corner, knocking my cupboard askew as they did so. I stood up, and set it right again, and looked at the bed above mine to make sure it was still empty, before I sat back down.

I sat there for a few seconds and took it all in: the blanket of darkness that covered that hostel, punctured only by the occasional flicker of flashlights from corners at different ends of the hostel. And even these momentary flashes of illumination had an edge of hesitancy to them – like the owners would rather not use their flashlights, if they could help it. And the rest of those still left in the hostel pretty much fumbled their way through their belongings in the hard darkness. I found it most curious, this embrace of the dark. And I wondered what it said about my hostel mates. Maybe if I stayed long enough I too would develop the ability to see in the dark.

Just then Ranjit sat up from his bed opposite me, sporting a wife-beater that had seen much better days and a hair wild and disheveled, and made a gripping gesture at me with his right hand.

"Huh?"

He made the gesture again, with more emphasis this time, like it would somehow make me understand him better.

“I don’t know what you’re trying to say, Ranjit.”

He dropped his shoulder in exasperation and banged his fist against the underside of the bunk above him.

Abaz poked his head out and took one look at the wild-haired boy below him, and then at me.

“Where’s your bucket?”

“Bucket? Do I need it?”

Abaz and Ranjit exchanged looks.

“I thought you said ‘shower?’”

Ranjit shook his head, reached under his mattress, and pulled out a pair of mangy slippers.

I reached my hands underneath my bed, where I had chained the bucket the night before, and I grasped was cobwebs and thin air.

“The hell?”

I got on my knees and swept the flashlight under my bunk. And save for the chain encased in blue rubber lying in a tangle, there was nothing else there in that dusty space. I reached, and picked up the chain, and the padlock beside it, and I sat back up on my bed, staring at it like it would somehow solved the mystery of my vanished bucket.

“It’s not there?” asked Abaz.

“Nope.”

There was only one person I could think of that could have pulled this heist off from right underneath me. I was sure I would toss Obi Okoye over the balcony the next time I saw him.

“You can share mine,” Abaz said, as he jumped down from his bunk, and pulled his own slippers from under his mattress. Ranjit shook his head in agreement, and I offered them both a half smile.

“Biko turn off that flashlight before they skin us alive.”

I stumbled my way out of the hostel, behind Abaz and Ranjit, and together we made our way down the Campus One corridor, through the stench of urine and sweat, down the stairs and through the gate, and then across the corridor that held the JSS3 classes atop which our campus stood. And as we made to the stairway on the opposite end of the corridor, right there on the fourth floor, I looked out over the assembly grounds, and the exam hall and the fence at the edge of it all, and the road on the other side of it that ran all the way through Uturu, back down the hills Aunty Nkechi and I had ascended the afternoon before. It was all, everything, encased in a gentle shroud of moonlight blue and morning dew, and I wondered for a second if this here place was as terrible as I had come to believe. In that moment, I thought I gained some understanding of why my mother had any ties to this place at all. I stopped in my tracks, and I walked closer to the concrete railing, as if pulled by an inscrutable force that hovered over that place, and governed it, and understood why I had come all the way out there. And I reached out my hand to touch it where it floated, right there beyond the balcony, in the gentle showers of the morning dew. I reached out to it, to grasp it, to ask of it questions I was scared I would never find the answers to – questions of my mother, and of me, and of everything in-between.

“Chidi, what are you doing?”

Abaz’s voice tore through the fog and reached to me. And I pulled my hand back from over the balcony. Abaz and Ranjit were already at the head of the staircase on the other end of the corridor, staring at me in mild wonder, with their buckets in hand, and their towels wrapped loosely around their waist. Just then a boy ran up the staircase, past them, and then across the corridor

towards me, with nothing on but the sponge around his neck. He sprinted past me, with not a care in the world, shivering and dripping wet as he did. I stood there, trying to decide if I had actually seen what I just thought I did. Yet, what was even more worrying was how Abaz and Ranjit barely reacted to the streaking fellow.

“Lights-on is in fifteen minutes. We need to hurry,” Abaz said.

I scurried down the corridor towards them, clenching my shower bag closer to my check, and suddenly wondering if with my t-shirt and boxer shorts I was overdressed for the occasion. Soon were bounding down those staircases in the semi-darkness, keeping to the right, to stop from bumping into the naked folks running back up towards the hostels, as if they were being chased by angry ghosts. And hovering about that place was a low, rumbling din. And the more we descended that staircase, the louder it grew; so that by the time we were reached the first floor, it was something of a rumbling roar that sent the floor beneath our feet rumbling in response.

We took a turn into an alley-like corridor that ran between the building holding our campus and the junior secondary classes, and the one holding the senior secondary classes. And it was so dark, and bereft of moonlight that Abaz flicked on his flashlight for a few moments to give us a bearing, and then he turned it off again. In the darkness, I could make out a shimmer of light floating in from the end of the alley, and as we grew closer to it, the roar became more distinguishable; became less a chorus and more a cacophony of deafening chatter above a constant streaming of something hitting steel. We got to the edge of the darkness, and we turned into the space from whence the light came. And I was stunned to a standstill, for there in front of me was a sight unlike anything I had ever seen.

There in that yard behind the building, in the open air and the clobbering chill, with nothing to shield them from the world but the fence more than a hundred yards to the edge of the space, were hundreds of bodies in every stage of nakedness, chattering without a care in the world, without

an inkling of shame or worry. They were at the pipe borne taps – buried into the embankment at the entrance to the yard, which, like the pavement closest to the class windows, was made of German concrete – waiting in line to fill their buckets with water so cold the steam hovered around their pails; they were in the gutter that ran the entire length of that yard, pouring the icy liquid to wash off their lathered bodies; they were in the sandy patch that ran the rest of the yard all the way to the fence with its crown of iron thorns and barb wire that looked like their sole purpose was to keep the naked boys from escaping into the town and terrifying the people to death.

For a few moments I stood there, taking it all in, this revelry in the moonlight. And I wondered if this was what Abaz meant when he said “shower” to me that morning. Surely, it wasn’t. Surely there must had to be a proper place for normal human beings to have a shower than to stand in a gutter that was, I imagined, infested with the germs that had been running through the whole day before; a proper place with bars for hanging towels and undies, as opposed to stuffing them onto the louvre panes of the unfortunate classes whose windows overlooked the bathing area.

“Chidi!”

I looked towards the faucets to find Abaz beckoning to me as he lifted his bucket from under the tap and began lumbering his way towards the opposite end of the yard. I sidestepped an onrushing naked boy, and I jumped the gutter, past the taps and the waiting souls beside it, and I caught up with Chidi who kept his arm out in front of him, to part the curtain of naked bodies in front of him as he made his way through. I stuck behind him, like a child to a mother on the first day of school, and I kept my chin up, lest they fall and pull my eyes down to behold even more hefty penises – for Lord knows I saw more than enough that morning to last me two lifetimes, and I wasn’t planning on seeing any more that wasn’t mine, if I could help it. I mean, I was already feeling inadequate, and it wasn’t even 5 A.M.

We weaved through that crowd, Abaz and I, through a series of cloth lines that were mostly empty save for the occasional boxers and towel, until we got to the very edge of the yard, where it was decidedly less chaotic than the beginning of the yard. And, judging from the familiar faces I now saw, I figured this part of the yard was designated for the SS2 students, while the chaotic part we had just passed through was for the SS1 students.

Just then I caught sight of Ranjit, already standing in the gutter, scrubbing himself with such rigor I was afraid he would rip his skin right off. Abaz walked up and into the gutter beside him and another boy who happened to be taking his bath with a thong-like undie on – he was a prude, that one – and immediately ripped off his towel without ceremony; baring himself to the world.

“What are you waiting for?” Abaz called to me, motioning to the space beside him.

I stood there for a few seconds, trying to figure out how the whole situation would work out. But after Abaz threw the first three bowls of water from the pail over himself, I knew that if I didn’t get in there that moment, the water would be gone, and I’ll have to go all the way back to the part of the yard we had just come from to get the bucket full again. Speaking of buckets, I turned around and took note of as many buckets, hoping that somehow, I might catch a glimpse of the one that had disappeared that morning. And it wouldn’t at all be hard to miss – Auntie Nkechi had made sure of it, branding the pail with a red permanent marker that spelt out my name in full force, around the bucket and under it. But I was, for some reason, more interested in catching the weasel that had stolen it from under me.

I took off my t-shirt, and then, ever so slowly, my boxers, and soon I was as naked as Adam, right there in front of that gutter. I crossed over to the other side, forced my clothes between the louvre panes closest to us, and then I made my way – quite tentatively, with my hands shielding my equipment – over to the gutter. But just then, the thong-wearing guy beside Abaz bent down to take a pail of water, and, in so doing, seared the image of the thong getting lost in his business right into

my brain. I jolted at this, and I raised my chin up again, and I let my eyes roam across the crowd of bodies in that moonlit yard that chilly October morning, and I couldn't help but wonder if all this was really happening. It all felt too surreal, like I was the subject of a Stanley Kubrick movie.

I shuddered the thought off, walked into the gutter and planted myself beside Abaz who was already fully soaped-up at this point. I took a bowlful of the now milky-hued water, held my breath, and doused it over me. And the cold rattled my bones, set my teeth clattering into each other, but at once, for the first time that morning, I felt fully awake. I got my soap out, and then my sponge, and then I set to work washing the last 24 hours off me.

I was almost halfway through, completely covered in white lather and about to reach for a bowl of water to rinse off, when I heard the familiar chuckle. I ran a hand across my face to wipe some of the soap off, and I strained my ears to see if I could pick it up again. Sure enough, it rang out to me, loud and irritant, above the chatter and the splash of water on concrete, and I could swear it was coming from the other side of the thong-fellow. I leaned over to see past him, to look down that gutter-ful of bathing bodies, and sure enough I saw the little fellow all soaped up, laughing hard with the macho guy who had grabbed my trousers the years before. I strained my eyes hard, but I couldn't make out the bucket. And I needed to – I just needed to see whose name was on that bucket. I stepped out of the gutter, and I winced hard to fight back the sting of the soap that was now rolling into my eyes.

As I pulled closer to the Obi Okoye, I pepped out the markings on his pail. They spelt his name out in black marker. But his buddy's bucket, that one was gleaming with red markings all over it. I couldn't believe it. I squinted again, just to be sure. And the name smiled back at me: "Chidi Okafor" in Auntie Nkechi's rather rabid penmanship.

I took a long look at the macho guy, with his heavy forearms taking scoop after scoop of icy water out of my bucket, with not a single care in the world. And I was stunned by his bravery, by his

guts to use the reward of his thievery so openly. I considered smacking the back of his head, hard as I could, right where he stood, but I thought the better of it. I had gotten lucky with him the day before, but I wasn't so sure of my luck that morning.

So I walked across the gutter, between him and Nnebe, and I grabbed my bucket and began making my way back to Abaz and the Ranjit, emptying the contents of the water onto the pavement as I did so.

“Hey!”

I kept on walking, gripping the handle of that metal empty bucket as I did so; ready to swing it, hard as I could, should the need arise.

“Hey! Okpo!”

I made the mental note to find out the meaning of that word later. But at that moment, I just wanted to get the soap out of my eyes.

I walked back to the spot in the gutter where Abaz and Ranjit stood staring at me in wide-eyed wonder, and I took a scoop of water and poured it onto my face to get some of the soap off.

“Hey you!”

The voice was closer this time, and I gripped the cold handle of the bucket tighter, poised to swing.

“No be you I dey call?”

I took a deep breath, looked to Abaz and Ranjit who appeared half terrified to death of something behind me, and I turned around to face the macho man.

“Isi odikwa gi mma? Have you gone mad?” asked the fully-soaped boy storming towards me. And before I could blink, his mammoth hand was wrapped around my throat, with his fingers squeezing hard, cutting off my air supply in seconds. I pounded my left fist down hard on his



forearm, again and yet again. It didn't lax; not for a second. I dropped the bucket I had held onto, useless as it was in such close quarters, and then I rammed my fist straight into his throat.

I felt something give way in his throat; I swear I did. He let out a groan so guttural, so primal it rang to the edge of that yard and back. And before I knew it, Nnebe had dropped to his knees, gripping his throat, and fixing up to me a stare filled with horror and wonder, like I was a brother who had just fed him a poisoned apple.

I turned to look at Abaz and Ranjit, whose jaws had fallen slack; who looked at me that they were only just realizing that I possessed superhuman powers. And under more propitious circumstances I sure would have reveled in this.

I turned back to Nnebe too late to duck the charge. In a flash I was barreling backwards, under the pounding force of the ram at my torso. And my legs gave way, just as I slammed my back into a pillar behind me, the concrete and the paint grating against my skin. I was pinned now, held against that pillar by Nnebe. Before I could think to wiggle my way out of the hold, he hit me with two quick shots to my left side, knocking the wind right out of me. I set my hand down to block the third, but I wasn't quite enough to stop the fourth. I was done now. The pain shooting up the right side of my torso had pretty much done me in.

The fucker could fight.

And now a small crowd had gathered around the pillar, watching the pounding, cheering on in a feverish roar. And I could swear I heard Obi Okoye's voice leading them on.

Now Nnebe, no doubt intoxicated by the audience, heaved upwards, taking me off my feet. And almost immediately I could tell that he was trying to hand me the ultimate humiliation: slamming me, back first, onto the ground. I knew I couldn't let that happen, not if I wanted to survive that place. I clenched my frame tighter, and I wrapped my leg around his, like Ejike had taught me all those years before. And it helped, of course, that I was slippery with a copious amount

of soap and so getting a grip of me was proving a little trickier for him. I set my elbow up and brought it down as hard as I could. And the crack that barreled up my arm told me I had connected just right with his spine. He buckled, and he dropped me. And he staggered a step and then another backwards as he did so. That was when I went for it. I stooped low and I aimed my arc just right. And I sent an uppercut that slammed into his nose with a sickening crack. He staggered further back and bumped into one of the cheering onlookers. He clutched his nose hard and set himself to charge again at me. But just then the yard was flooded of glare of yellow lights.

“Lights-on!” Someone screamed.

And in seconds the crowd, with their nakedness now in glorious view, began flying in every direction, grabbing clothes and towels, and shower bags. Abaz and Ranjit still stood in their spot in the gutter. Nnebe stared at me a few seconds, panting just as hard as I was, even as he stemmed tried to stem the blood now dripping from his nose. He pointed his finger straight at me, with stare red as death in his eyes. “I will deal with you in this campus,” he said.

“Touch my stuff again, and we’ll see,” I replied.

Just then Obi Okoye ran up to us. “Senior Linus is almost ready,” he said.

In that moment, the episode from the day before came rushing at me. And I was absolutely certain that I didn’t want to get caught up in another whipping mess. I turned away from the two buddies and walked back to my spot in the gutter beside a now toweled Abaz and Ranjit, and I began rinsing off the soap and the pain in my back off of me. Ranjit emptied the water that was left in his bucket into the one I was now scooping water out of. When I was done, Abaz handed me my clothes that he had retrieved from the window panes.

And together, without a word to each other, we made our way back up to the campus, climbing the steps that were now illuminated by harsh yellow bulbs every few meters of the

corridors and the classrooms; so that the one moonlight grounds beyond the balcony was that pitch-dark and brooding.

We made it to the hostel now alive with a flurry of feverish preparation for the mass and the day ahead. I got out my school uniform, a white shirt and pair of trousers now rumped beyond recognition, and I tossed them on anyway. I had just done the second strap of my sandals when the assembly bell began clanging, sending another ripple of activity zapping through the hostel. I snuck my phone out of my backpack and checked the time. It said 5:15 A.M.

“Are you ready?” Abaz asked. It was hard to miss how much sharper his uniform looked, like it had been pressed for by a team of dedicated laundry masters.

I nodded.

“Do you have your rosary?”

I reached inside my shirt and pulled out the Mama’s rosary around my neck.

“Prayer books?”

I reached under my pillow where I had kept them the night before and pulled them out.

He tapped Ranjit up from his bed, and together we followed the group of white-clad boys out of the hostel, down the steps and onto the assembly ground that we had looked out on before the lights came on. And down on the assembly ground, we made our way through the lines of SS1 and then SS2 students, all in pearly white uniforms. We had barely made our way into one of the SS2 lines when a student walked up to the podium and began the rosary. A few Hail Marys in, someone pulled open the gate, and starting with the SS1 students, the crowd began filing out of the ground. For every line, which was supposed to be made up of students from a particular form – either A, or B, or C – someone stepped up to lead the chant, as the Register – a stocky fellow that was as dark as that unborn dawn – walked through each line, with a clipboard and a scowl, taking note of everyone present.

Before long, we were marching out of the school grounds, across the road, and then into the grounds that held the chapel, saying the rosary as we did so, with our voice ringing through that dark October morning. And whenever our voices faltered, a prefect or two – who at this point I was able to distinguish from the rest of the us mere mortals by how much sharper, and cleaner they looked – would appear out of thin air, and glare at us until we picked our voices back up in fervent prayer. Before long, we reached the road that led down into the valley and then up to the chapel in the hill, and even in the dim light of the morning, I could made out the lines of students in white, filling all the way up the hill and through the barn-doors of the chapel. And even as I mumbled along with the rosary chanting, I was stuck by the orderliness of it all; by the almost unnerving uniformity of the ritual; by the lines of girls saying their prayers too, melding with the lines of boys pouring in from Campus One and Two, and together lumbering up that hill, like white ants, where the chapel waited to welcome us in from the cold.

The chapel that morning was but a sea of white. And we sat there, just like we had the night before, waiting for the priest to come. But there was something different, almost ritualistic about us sitting there in that chapel in our perfect whites, before the crack of dawn, waiting for the man who would begin the ceremony.

I took my spot at the same bench as I had sat in at the mass the evening before, with Abaz and Ranjit beside him – who, before the ceremony had even begun, began snoring with eyes wide open. And I marveled at the finesse with which he pulled it off, so that the patrolling prefects passed right by him without so much as a second glance in his direction, moving on instead to smack the head of other boys who dozed off with much less subtlety.

I looked around that chapel covered from barn door to barn door in a sea of white, and at once a wave of mild panic washed over me. I couldn't imagine how I had gotten to that place at that particular time, considering that only a couple of months before I was sneaking out to Bayo's party

all the way down in Florida. It was all too quiet, there in the chapel that morning, way too quiet. For unlike the chatter that governed the chapel the night before, there was a somber silence to the place that morning. Even the choir, had not been spared the stupor that morning. I strained my eyes to see if I could catch a glimpse of the choir mistress who had held us spellbound the mass before, but I could not make her out from the sea of white, up there on that platform.

Our resident comedian – Victor, as I had heard him called – was still as stone that morning, not bothering to look behind or beside him to engage anyone in conversation, even though his constant neck-cracking made it obvious he wasn't pulling a Ranjit. I wondered if it was the bone-chilling incident with the Brother the evening before that had gotten him so calm. I looked up to the altar, to the VIP section, and I caught sight of the reverend brother; the Principal as Abaz had told me that evening before. He was sitting upright, on the bench closest to the altar, in his soutane that somehow managed to outshine every other white getup in that place. The fingers on his left hand rolled atop the black cylindrical beads of the rosary he held in his hands. I squinted my eyes across the distance from my place on the bench to the raised platform, and I stared at that rosary a while, taking in the beads and the blacked-out crucifix, suppressing the chill that coursed through my veins when it dawned on me that what I was looking at was identical to the chaplet Mama had left me. I reached my hand across my chest, and felt Mama's rosary through my shirt, and I gulped back the frenzy now stomping wildly at the back of my throat. And maybe you would say I was overreacting, that it is not impossible that someone else had a similar rosary to Mama's. But you must understand how rare that rosary was. I had never seen another like it in all the years it had been in my possession; through all the masses and novenas I had gone to in the wake of Mama's death and our new lives in America. So, it truly was a big deal, to see what looked like an exact replica of that rosary, almost a decade after it came into my possession, in the exact place I had come to find out what had happened to the original owner.

“Where did you learn to fight like that?”

I turned to Abaz beside me, to find him watching me with those deep-set eyes of his.

“My Aunt’s house-help. He taught me when I was younger.”

“Oh,” said Abaz, with a nod of approval that I couldn’t quite decide was sarcastic or not.

“He taught you well.”

“Yeah,” I said. He had, and I missed the little bugger, even though I would never tell him so.

“He actually was here a couple of years ago.”

“Really?”

“Yup. Maybe, you know him? His name is Ejike.”

Abaz turned to look at me, squinting his eyes as if trying to tell if I was being serious or not.

“What?” I asked.

“What was his surname?”

I froze. And then I felt the fluster rushing through my cheeks. I strained, hard as I could, rummaging through my memory to see if I could pull out some semblance of a remembrance of his last name, but nothing came up. And I was stunned beyond words to realize that I had never once asked for Ejike’s surname.

“I can’t remember now.”

Abaz gave another of those approving nods, and this time I had no confusion as to its sarcastic intent. But, of course, I had much bigger fish to fry. I looked up to towards the VIP section again, but this time the Principal had his head up, and was whispering to the revered brother beside him. He had put away his rosary too, much to my disappointment. And then for some reason, my eyes flitted to the row behind, only to behold the Senior Prefect, the lanky guy with the sunken cheeks, staring right into me. I flinched at this, and I looked away, but then I cringed at doing so, and looked right back at him. And I held his gaze for a few seconds trying to read his expression. I

gave up soon as a pair of headlights flashed across the door behind the chapel. And as if on cue, the white kid bounded in through the door spotting the same briefcase and headed for the table to lay out the priest's vestments.

"That guy, Jonah. I thought you said we were bunkmates?"

"Yes?"

"He didn't sleep in the bunk last night."

"Oh, he does that sometimes," Abaz said with a shrug, nudging Ranjit awake as he did so.

"So, where does he sleep then?" I asked.

"He's the Assistant Liturgy Prefect; so, he's supposed to share a corner with Linus. He just chose to keep his old bunk too."

The white boy and the albino. "Must be a very white corner," I said.

Abaz threw his head back and let out a silent chuckle – he was a seasoned survivalist that one; down to his laughter.

I let my eyes follow Jonah's folding motions over the table. The way he glided the cincture into a loose loop; the way he let the chasuble float above the table, before laying it open all the way up to the neck hole. And as I watched him, I became aware of how much of a ritual in its own right this was; with the congregation watching in silence, as if following his every move. At once I thought again of Mama, how I would do the same when she kneaded the flour for bread, when she pounded yam on Sunday evenings, with one hand pounding the pestle into the mortar with an intensity that shook the house, and the other hand, dipped over and again in the pot of water by her feet, reaching in and folding the pounded yam into itself and then pulling out a millisecond before the pestle came back down. I would marvel at this, at how she did it all herself, with such quiet grace it made me feel incapable, unworthy of even observing her from my favorite stool by the oven. And as if hearing my

thoughts, Mama would turn to me, every now and again, and offer that gap-toothed smile of hers that always sent a flurry of warmth through my belly, almost as if to say, “you’re worthy, my son.”

I reached for my rosary again, as I now found myself doing every time I thought of her within those walls, and, for the first time since the madness that had begun that summer, I felt her in the cut of those beads through my shirt, in the heft of that ornament around my neck. And I looked up again, at the severe man in the soutane, and I wondered how he had gotten a hold of that rosary.

Just as the priest walked into the chapel, the PA system crackled to life, and a stern, deep voice heavy on the Igbo accent floated out the speakers.

“Stand up for the Angelus.”

And the chapel, which had been silent up until that point, rumbled to their feet with a deafening rumble.

“The Angel of the Lord declared onto Mary,” said the voice.

“And She conceived of the Holy Spirt,” a few thousand voices roared back.

I listened along and moved my lips in case any of the prefects or brothers were watching, as I tried to recollect the words to a prayer I hadn’t said since I was seven.

By the time that was done, the priest, escorted by a couple of scrawny acolytes, made his way around to the front of the altar to begin the mass. And, as if kicked awake by the Angelus, the choir – conducted by a fellow with far less guile than the girl from the evening before – roared to life, sending a thousand voices out and up into the still sleepy skies, as if to rouse them.

It was during the offertory that a junior student walked up the aisle from the back on the church and whispered into my ear, without warning.

“Senior Ekene said he doesn’t want to look for you after mass.”

In an instant, the kid was darting back down the aisle. I looked to Abaz beside me, who didn’t seem to have heard the kid’s message.



“Who is Senior Ekene?”

“That’s the SP,” Abaz said, nudging his chin in the direction of the VIP stand where Mr. Sunken Cheeks wasn’t using his eyes to burrow into my soul anymore. “Why?”

“Oh, nothing,” I said, stealing another glance at the SP, wondering what fresh hell I had just gotten myself into again.

Soon as the priest proclaimed the final blessing, crossing the entire congregation with as massive an imaginary cross as he could muster, the chapel descended into chaos. The students, starting with the most junior who were closest to both doors, began streaming out of there in lightning speed, like they would spontaneously combust should they spend one second more in that chapel. Soon the whole body of students not seated up on that platform began rushing for the doors, scrambling over each other as they did so. I looked up to the VIPs just in time to catch a glimpse of the SP chatting with a few of his SS3 buddies, who so happened to be the only ones not in any kind of hurry whatsoever.

“Where’s everyone running off to?” I asked of Abaz as we made our way towards the back-exit swimming through a crowd of streaming bodies.

“Morning duties. We have to be there before the prefects,” Abaz said.

I looked behind me again, towards the altar. The SP was gone now, vanished with the wind. I wondered if he was already looking for me. I bundled out the back door, squished between Abaz in front of me and Ranjit behind, and a slew of bodies rushing out that chapel – out the door, down the short steps and then left in the direction of the west end of the chapel, towards that road that led down the hill to the boys’ and girls’ campuses. As we got to the front lawn of the chapel, I looked as far down that road as I could, and I couldn’t help but hold my breath. For pouring down into the valley and up the hills towards the campuses, in the faint light of that dawn, were hundreds of boys and girls clad in white, racing with such speed their whites danced in the wind behind them.

Ranjit and Abaz broke into a trot ahead of me, unaware that I wasn't keeping up anymore. I stood there on the chapel lawn, on the tips of my toes, straining to catch a glimpse of the SP above the heads of the students flying by me. He was nowhere in sight. I pulled a 360 there on the lawn and took a whack in the elbow from a junior girl running past, all to no avail. This puzzled me. Because I figured that if the SP had sent word that he wanted to see a student, he would have made himself readily available, at the very least. It made no sense, you see, that he was instead pulling the opposite, making himself hard to find. I was already starving, and worried sick about the whole "morning function" frenzy.

Just as I was about to turn back towards the hill road and join the last of the students fast disappearing into the distance, I caught a glimpse of the SP deep in conversation with Jonah – still holding that silver briefcase – and the priest, Fr. Nwigwe. They stood in circle, listening to an animated Jonah who would give a knowing wink here and a nudge there, so that Fr. Nwigwe would throw his head back every now and again to send a deep, bellowing laugh into the skies. It was painful to watch, even from where I stood, and I couldn't understand how the SP and the priest couldn't see how patronizing it all was. But what did I know? I was hungry, and tired even though it was just dawn, and my back and elbows were still smarting from the scuffle at the bathroom earlier that morning. I really didn't have it in me to solve the riddle of the white boy who spoke authentic Igbo and saved unsuspecting newbies from dwarfish swindlers.

I took a breath and began making my way towards the gossip crew. I was about a few feet from the group when the SP caught sight of me, sent distant stare up and down my frame and then, without a word, refocused his attention on the storyteller, who, up close, was almost a spitting image of Leo DiCaprio ala Titanic, but with a hair way more blonde and a buzzcut, and a nose, much too big for his face – pointed and broken at the ridge, so that he looked like he had been a low-level

brawler in his previous life. It did lend a rugged edge to his visage, that nose, and, in the years I knew him, Jonah would ride on it to conquests impressive enough to make the real Leo fluster.

“So, my father told him: ‘If you touch my plantain tree again, I will call the President.’”

Wait, what?

Fr. Nwigwe sent a screech of laughter that echoed around the now deserted churchyard, and I felt a sudden pang of regret that I had missed the first part of that tale. I inched a little closer to the group, and for a few moments, I considered breaking up the party and announcing myself to the SP. But I thought better of it and kept myself within his line of sight instead. I placed my hand behind my back, for some strange impulsive reason, but then I winced at the pain that shot through my back, and placed my arms by my side again, and I cursed Nnebe and the pillar against which he had pinned me.

I must have been standing there for more than fifteen minutes the priest turned in my direction and noticed me.

“Yes?”

The crew had their attention on me now.

“Oh, ermm. Ekene, asked to see me?”

The priest, sized me up some, wearing that familiar look of amusement on his face.

“Where are you from?”

It took everything in me to keep my eyes from rolling. “Anambra State,” I said this time.

“No, I mean, where did you come from?”

“US.”

“Where?”

“Florida.”

“Oh, Miami.”

No; not really, I was going to say. But, who had the strength for that?

“Ebee na Florida k’ibe?” Jonah asked. In Igbo. Crisp, Aunty Nkechi-style Igbo, no less. And I didn’t know whether to be annoyed or impressed by his code-switch.

“Tallahassee,” I said, racking my head to see if I had ever heard an Igbo pronunciation of the city.

“Ezioku? Nwannem bi na Panama City,” he said.

I mean, that was easily an hour from Tally, but I wasn’t about to get into a discussion about the geographic layout of the Panhandle, not with someone clearly determined to test my deficient Igbo.

“Small world,” I said, not bothering to check my head for an Igbo translation of the phrase. That the boy expected me to be impressed with the fact that he has a relation living in a city an hour away from mine was more preoccupying to my mind.

“Ezioku. Even my brother-in-law bi na Cincinnati,” said the priest.

“Cincinnati?” I asked, keeping as straight a face as I could.

“Yes!”

“Wow, such a co-incidence,” I said.

Fr. Nwigwe chuckled hard, flashing an impeccable set of teeth, with a slight, rather tasteful gap between the front two, and his skin, not unlike fresh-peeled paw-paws glowed in the dawn-light. And for a few seconds I was disarmed.

I looked to the SP to find him watching me, with an inscrutable expression on his face, just like the one he had on that morning in the chapel, and I immediately felt a shiver of unease ripple up my spine. And I looked away from him, wondering all over again what he wanted with me.

“Alright boys,” Fr. Nwigwe announced, reaching down and taking the suitcase from Jonah’s hands. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” And with a wink he was lumbering towards his car, a rather pristine, lemon green Peugeot 505 sedan on the far end of the churchyard.

“No assembly this morning, okwaya?” Jonah asked the SP, who nodded without a word.

Jonah looked to me, with a smirk that didn’t exactly improve the opinion I had formed of him up until that moment. “Stay out of trouble,” he said. Like he was my father. And he walked between the SP and me, whistling as he did so. Soon, he was sauntering down that hill road like the world belonged to him.

“So, you beat up my cousin,” the SP said, turning his attention to me now.

“What?”

“You broke his nose,” he continued. “In two places.”

I felt the chill course through my bones. I let my eyes roam over the SP for a split-second, trying to spot some shadow of a resemblance between the lanky, sunken-cheeked fellow standing before me, and the bulky buffalo that I had been in a fight with two times in less than 24 hours. It made no sense that the two were even remotely related.

“He stole my bucket,” I said, making sure to keep my voice even and my eyes staring straight into the face of the guy trying to stare me down because he had a few inches on me. “And he came at me first.”

“When did you get here?” he asked, completely ignoring my comment, it appeared.

“Yesterday.”

“Yesterday? And you’re already getting into fights?”

I shrugged. This was starting to feel too much like another episode with Papa, and I wasn’t there for it.

“What do you mean...” He imitated my shrug.

I said nothing; kept my eyes fixed on his face and ignored the shard of pain in my spine as I folded my hand behind me.

His eyes followed my hands, and then they roamed back up to my face and then down to my feet. And soon I saw the shadow at the edge of his mouth stretch downward in what I could swear was barely contained disgust. Now that stare in the chapel wasn't so inscrutable anymore.

"This isn't America," he said, his voice low and raspy. "And I will mend you."

I said nothing, did nothing. I focused my mind hard on that word. Mend. On the dark halo around it.

"Fly out of here," the SP said.

I turned from him and began walking towards the road that led down the hill.

"I said 'fly,'" came the deep voice behind me. And I broke into a jog. And I felt the cold morning air dance across my face as the bridge in that valley rushed towards me. And it filled me with a verve I hadn't felt in a long while. So I picked up speed, sprinting down that road, and then up the hill opposite it, as far away from that chapel as my legs could take me.

The morning function was already done by the time I climbed the stairs back up to Campus One. The school yard below had already begun filling up with students in their gleaming whites, some hurling desks and chairs, some books beneath their arms, some brooms and wastepaper baskets. All bustling like soldier ants in the gentle light of that young day, like the world would fall off its hinges should they stop for a second. It truly was remarkable that the grounds that had, an hour ago, been a graveyard in the moonlight, was now bustling with life.

I turned the corner from the stairwell onto the Campus One corridor, still panting from my little run. But the place was deserted. As I pulled closer to the dining hall, however, I could hear the clamor coming from within. I caught the aroma of what I was sure was akara – or “bean cakes,” as Papa called them now – and suddenly, a heavy grumble crept out my stomach, and I cursed the SP for keeping me so long. I hadn’t eaten anything since the leftover rice from my flask the night before. And it was obvious, at this point, that if I didn’t eat something soon, I was going to keel over.

I made my way over to the SS2 Hostel, past a few stragglers in the corridor, and I found my corner. I pried open my cupboard and began searching for the can of Pringles I had tossed in there the day before. As I munched hard on the chips, there were I sat on my half-made bed, I began replaying that morning in my head. Again, and again. The rosary, the reverend brother with the rosary, the hollow-cheeked devil. And I hadn’t even been in that boarding house 24 hours. It all felt surreal. Like a dream that I was about to jerk awake from.

There on that bed, with the clatter of cutleries and plates floating in from the window behind me, with the crunch of chips in my jaw and the grumble of hunger in my belly, I knew I had to make a quick work of finding out what Marist had to do with Mama, of finding the woman

named Martha. I knew I had to get this done or that place would eat me whole. In that moment, it appeared that my quest had to begin with the rosary I had seen in the principal's hand. I had to find a way to get close to him; to find out if indeed it was a replica of the one Mama had left me.

A bell started clanging just then, and the dining hall on the other side of the window by my bed descended into chaos. I reached for the trunk beneath my bed, pried it open, and pulled out a notebook. I stuffed them into my backpack, along with the half-finished can of Pringles, and began making my way towards the exit, slipping out just before the bodies trooping in from the refectory descended on the place. I was almost at the stairs when I heard the voice ringing out above the chaos.

“Chidi!”

I turned back to find Abaz strutting over, pushing through the crowd as he did so. Ranjit was nowhere in sight, which was a surprise – they were always together, those two.

“What happened with the SP? We didn't see you at function?” he asked.

“Oh, some nonsense.”

“It was about his cousin, abi?”

“You knew?”

He shrugged.

“Gee, thanks for the heads-up,” I said.

“Ahn ahn. What was I supposed to do? I blink, and you and the guy were already pounding each other.”

He had a point.

“Besides,” he continued with a grin. “We hadn't seen a good fight in a while.”

“Very funny.”

“Did you eat?”



What was he, my mother? “A little.”

“And you’re going to class?”

“Yup.”

“SS2B, abi?”

“Mhmm.”

“Thank me later,” he said. And began making his way back up the corridor.

I was way too hungry to ponder on that. I joined the bodies trooping down the stairs, and I followed them all the way to the ground floor, reading the names branded on the back of their collars in black permanent markers, and wondering what the rationale was behind that; why they had chosen to brand their white uniforms but not their day wears. I followed the boys I recognized from the hostel, down the corridor on the ground floor, towards the alley that led to the bath area. But instead of turning into the alley, we walked right across to the building on the other side. It was identical to the one that held the junior classes and Campus One atop them all, except that the corridors were a lot cleaner, and there were less missing louvre panes, and there was a stairgate on the ground floor stairwell. And the students that were clambering up these stairs were a lot older. The boys were in trousers, not shorts and they girls spotted better tailored dresses that were breathtaking in their whiteness. And none of them looked like they had left home a few years too early. They didn’t race up the stairs, and yell like they were fighting a mental affliction – like the kids in the junior building did. On the whole, there was something immensely relaxing about being in the midst of the students in the senior building, away from the chaos of hostel life, and in the company of the far more comported girls whose aura of calm seemed to rob off on the boys.

Just then I caught sight of Obi Okoye and his sidekick, Nnebe, as they rested against the banister on the SS1 floor, exchanging chatter with a couple of girls. They looked responsible, the two miscreants, with their whites all tucked in, and their sandals polished, and their hair combed and

slicked with too much oil. For a second, I paused my ascent to make sure my eyes weren't deceiving me. Obi Okoye locked eyes with me, offered a nod and a smirk, before resuming his chatter with the giggling girls towering over him, way too engrossed in his yarn. I shook my head and looked to Nnebe, the brute who'd cost me a breakfast. He was deep in conversation with the other girl and hadn't seen me. I glimpsed the edge of the plaster on his nose, and I did everything I could to suppress the smile crawling across my face.

I found SS2B at the end of the corridor on the next floor, right next to the Chemistry Lab that stood between the Form A, where the brightest students were kept, and the rest of the SS2 forms – B through E. As I waited for the crowd of students milling past the doorway, chattering the building into a tremor, I wondered if I'd find my desk in the classroom. Obi Okoye's boys had taken charge of it the afternoon before, but I still wasn't sure what they'd gotten the job done. Some part of me feared that Obi Okoye might have instructed them to hide it or maybe toss it out after our fall out. I took a deep breath and walked into the classroom, with its lemon green walls holding paintings of the respiratory systems and a Map of Africa that looked significantly bigger than the ones I had seen in my Geography class back in Florida. The class was awash with daylight flooding in from the louvre windows that ran the entire length of the wall opposite the door, and the wall beside it, so that there was a sunny ambience to the place. And my soul sat at ease, there in that space. So that I didn't pay much mind to the look of puzzlement on the faces of the few students already seated, to the frown of Big J up on that framed picture above the blackboard.

I let my eyes scan the room, I strained hard as I could to pick out my desk and chair, from the many assortments already crammed into the space – there must have been at least forty of them. I realized how awkward I looked, the new student, standing out there in front of the blackboard, surveying every inch of that room like I owned the place. And just when I was starting to wish the ground to open up and swallow me whole, I caught sight of my desk, all the way back in the corner

adjacent to the classroom door, right next to the desk by the window. I made my way over, squeezing between the strange desks, and finally planting myself in mine, grateful as ever that it was at the back of the class and not in front.

I scanned the classroom again, and I slowly realized that I might have come in a little too early. The wall clock mounted above the doorway read 7:45 A.M. and there were no more than eight other students in the class – two boys whose faces I recognized from the hostel, four girls huddled together on a desk closest to the door, deep in an argument about someone in their hostel, sounded like, and two other girls seated in the row next to mine, with their heads buried in textbooks. Once again, I took note of how better fed and groomed the girls looked compared to their male counterparts, like they hadn't even left home, and I wondered if there was a rule that would have allowed me to become a guest resident on the girl's campus. My stomach growled in agreement, and I reached for the can of Pringles in my backpack, cursing Obi Okoye and his thieving sidekick. I looked to the desk beside me, the one closest to the window, and I envied it, wishing I had that spot instead. It was a better crafted desk than mine, with deep mahogany finish and a sturdy chair. I stared at it a while and judging from how clean the desk seemed – it was clear of markings and drawings, unlike every other desk in that classroom but mine – it appeared that my neighbor had an obsession for tidy things. And I was a little unsettled by that.

I leaned over, hand across the desk, and craned my neck so I could see out the window, beyond the balcony, and the fence, all the up the dirt road that led, on the right, to the other campuses and the chapel grounds, and on the left, through a grove of mango trees to the village, and the highway that cut through it – the same one Aunty Nkechi and I had driven in on. The stretch of that dirt road that led to the front gate of the school grounds was now brimming, in the early sunshine, with bodies clad in white, strutting towards the school compound like cattle to grazing fields, and leaving a cloud of red dust in their wake.

“Excuse me.”

I looked forward, and saw her standing in front of the desk, hands on her hips, thumbs nestled between the black belt and her pristine white uniform. And I blinked, again and again, checking to see if I was imagining the sight before my eyes. I wasn't. She really was the girl on the podium, from mass the evening before. And even though her voice had been firm, her eyes, big and piercing, betrayed a mild amusement.

“Oh sorry,” I offered. Then regretted I did because of how weak it made me sound. I jerked my hands off her desk like someone had passed some an electric current through them. I flashed an apologetic smile, then I wiped it off, hoping I'd feel less silly.

She stared at me a fraction of a second longer, then she stepped forward and squeezed into her seat. She reached into her pocket, slid out a key bunch, and began working the padlock on her desk. I reached for my keys and began doing the same, not sure what I was even doing it for – I had only brought a notebook with me. Just then my stomach let out a prolonged growl, deep and heavy. I clenched my gut, hoping it would stem the grumble, hoping the girl beside me hadn't heard it. And in that moment, I swore I'd make Nnebe pay. I stole a glance beside me, but the girl had her head buried in her desk whose lid was now flipped open, digging patiently through her books. It seemed she hadn't heard the growl, and I could breathe again. I picked the can of chips off the floor beside me, and slid it into my backpack, resisting the urge to slide a couple more chips into my mouth. Bayo had once told me I didn't eat pretty, and I wasn't ready to put that to the test in front of the girl.

She closed her desk lid after a while and let out a deep sigh, turning to look out the window, at the hills that stood like giant sentries to the school grounds. She had a lot on her mind, that was obvious. And soon I began to wonder if it had anything to do with why she hadn't been at mass that morning. I took another glance at her, at that face sculpted to symmetric perfection, with the chin

pointed and fierce, with the lips rosy and whole, and the eyes hazel and true, and her skin the shade of fire-kissed peanut, and the world slowed around me. She was a great beauty, the podium girl. And I was in awe. And I wondered what I had done to be so lucky as to have gotten a seat right beside her, the day after I had seen her for the first time, holding an entire congregation spellbound.

It was then I remembered that Abaz had asked me what form I was in after he and Ranjit had caught me staring at mass. Then there was Abaz's "thank me later" earlier that morning. I couldn't stop the smirk spreading across my face. They must have moved my desk, Ranjit and Abaz – had to be.

Just then, the girl turned from the window, and fixed her eyes straight at me. And I couldn't avert my eyes without looking silly.

"Are you ok?" I asked, to cover-up my embarrassment.

She nodded. Smiled absent-mindedly and turned her attention back to the window.

Even when the classroom began to fill up with students, and later on the teachers, from one lesson period to the next, she remained that way. Staring out the window, chin-in-hands, like the world had crumbled all around her. It worried me so. Even though I didn't know her well; even though she'd only said two words to me the whole day. Even though I had my flaring hunger, and my search for Mama, and my survival in that place to worry about. I was most comfortable when I kept to myself and said little or nothing to people around me. But for some reason, the silence between me and the podium girl was a most unsettling kind. The kind that felt like it should be, needed to be filled with words.

The podium girl left the classroom soon as the break bell was rung, with the two girls that sat the row in front of her holding her by the hand and caressing her hair – she didn't return that day, or the next. Soon after, Ranjit and Abaz walked into the class, their faces bearing such wide

grins I was worried they'd tear their mouths apart. Abaz took the podium girl's seat by the window, while Ranjit perched himself atop my desk.

"So?" asked Abaz, even before he had settled in.

"You're crazy, you know that?"

Abaz threw his head back and sent a shrill laugh ringing through the half-deserted classroom. He smacked Ranjit's legs as he did so, almost as if to make sure the latter was laughing along. I shook my head at this – they were a curious pair, those two.

"Do you want to get something to eat?" Abaz asked, after he was done.

"Yes," I said. My stomach had been a riot all morning.

We squeezed our way through the bodies on the corridor, down the stairs, and on to the school grounds now awash with sunlight. We crossed the sandlot that ran between the school sanctuary and the SS3 classes and walked across the shaded corridor that ran along the side of the soccer pitch that had been split in two with a cluster of rocks, so that two sets of football matches were going on at the same time, with four teams of boys, differentiated only by those that wore shirts and those that didn't.

"You guys don't play soccer?" I asked, as we pulled closer to the tuck shop already brimming with bodies.

"Soccer?" asked Abaz, turning to give Ranjit a look.

"I mean, football."

"Nah man. It's too hot for football today," Abaz said.

Right he was. I couldn't imagine myself standing out in that merciless sun, much less running around in it, in my whites, chasing a little ball and getting clobbered with two-footed tackles whenever I had possession of it. Never mind that I hadn't played soccer – nay football – in such a long I had no doubt grown terrible at it at that point.

As we walked up to the tuck shop, the barricaded room at the end of that corridor, where all the transactions were conducted through the iron-bared window, I stopped, and took in the crowd of screaming kids, thrusting their money through the window, and yelling in pain when the attendant, a bosomy woman in her late forties, smacked their hands out of her face, yelling “Chere! Wait!” as she did so. But just as I began to make my way to the back of the line to begin the struggle, Abaz tugged at my arm.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Food. Anything. I’m starving.”

He and Ranjit chuckled at this.

I reached for the wallet in my back pocket, pulled out three crisp hundred naira notes and handed them over to a slacked-jawed Abaz. The exchange rate between the dollar and the naira had done me a generous favor when I left the States.

“You can get yourselves something too,” I said.

They nodded, a little too earnestly, and dove right into the crowd at that window, shoving and pushing. It was a curious sight that – the way the students reacted to Abaz and Ranjit’s assault. First the shove, then the turn-around stare of incredulity from the victim, fist raised for a smack-back and everything. But then they’d recognize Abaz and Ranjit, realize that they were senior students – the most senior in the school, barring the VIPs, who couldn’t be bothered with such peasant chores as coming down to the tuck shop to buy their own food – and the victims would offer a weak obliging smile, standing back, with ill-concealed grudge, to let them through. And standing right there in front of the tuck shop, watching Abaz and Ranjit disappear into the sea of whites, I gained weeks-worth of knowledge as to how the hierarchy in that school worked.

Before long, the boys dove back out, panting and wheezing, as the sea of white closed up behind them. Ranjit handed me two cupcakes wrapped in plastic and a can of coke. Abaz handed

me a fistful of twenties which I took and stuffed into my pocket without counting, tearing open one of the wrapped cupcakes and ignoring the puzzled looks on their faces.

Abaz mumbled his thanks as he tore his packet with his teeth; Ranjit nudged me and nodded his. I waved them both off, and immediately I recoiled at how much that seemed like what Papa would do.

“What do you know about the principal,” I asked Abaz, as we sat atop the dwarf wall in front on the exam hall, the one on the north end of the field, and adjacent to the warzone that was the tuck shop.

“Brother Chris?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s been here too long.”

“How long?”

“He got here in ’95.”

The year after Mama died. I took another sip of my coke and said nothing.

“Too long,” Abaz said again, almost to himself. And I didn’t need anyone to tell me that he wasn’t a fan of the guy. And this pleased me, no end. For somehow, I knew I could use this to my advantage. I had already taken a big step towards that by buying him and Ranjit lunch. I just had to keep working at it. More importantly, I had to get as close as I could to the principal. It was the only way I could know for certain if that rosary was the same as the one Mama had given me.

The ball from the football game on the north end of the field sprung high into the air, well over the post, and hurtled straight in our direction. Ranjit jumped off the dwarf wall, set himself right, and cushioned the ball into his chest, and down to his feet in one fluid motion. It was graceful, breathtaking in its simplicity. And it raised a smattering of applause and cheers from the students on the dwarf walls beside us, and the boys who had lost the ball. Ranjit took a step back and swung his



foot at the ball. It flew back towards the field, over the post again, and straight to the chest of one of the players. Abaz began cheering again, tossing cake crumbs at Ranjit, who was beaming from ear to ear now, incredibly pleased with his skill. He took his seat back on the wall and tossed some of his cake crumbs back at Abaz.

Just then a couple of players trotted over from the field and motioned to Ranjit to join them. He was hesitant, shaking his head a few times to tell them off. But they were persistent. And soon they were dragging him off, towards the field. Ranjit looked back at us, his face a mixture of amusement and surprise, and an innocent kind of joy when Abaz and I cheered him on.

We watched the game in silence for a few moments.

“What’s his story?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“What caused him to go mute?”

“Ranjit isn’t mute,” Abaz said.

“He isn’t?”

“No. He took a vow of silence when he was 14.”

“Wait, isn’t that like, what, three years.”

“Mhmm.”

I looked at the boy now racing down the wings, towards the goalpost of the opposite end of the grounds, and I was filled with a sense of wonderment.

“How did he end up here?”

Abaz sighed. “It’s a long story. But, basically, his dad is a Kashmiri rebel who was arrested three years ago by the Indian Government.”

“When he was 14.”

“Right. After his dad’s arrest, the mother’s family, who are mostly Indian Catholics, took the boy from her. Then they sent him down to live with his uncle who works for Shell down in Port Harcourt. Ranjit started giving the man too much wahala at home, so he sent him down here to Marist last year.”

“Wow,” was all I could say. And I thought I had troubles. “Have you ever heard him speak?”

“Once, in his sleep,” Abaz said.

Just then Ranjit began jogging off the field towards us. He appeared winded, like he was going to collapse at any moment. He made it back to us, before splaying himself atop the dwarf wall, panting harder than a dog. Abaz and I chuckled at this and turned our attention back to the football match.

“So, I’ve been wondering. Where does the principal live?” I asked.

“Brother Chris?”

“Yeah.”

“He lives in the Brothers’ Quarters. Just outside the school grounds.”

“Near the chapel?”

“Not there.”

Ranjit was tuned in to our conversation now. He sat up and pointed in the direction of Campus One, looming above us in the top floor of the junior’s building.

“You know the bath area?” Abaz asked, ignoring his buddy. “Beyond the fence, you’ll see a road that leads towards the village. The Quarters is not far down that road.”

“Oh ok.”

That obviously wasn’t going to work for my purposes, and I wasn’t sure why I even bothered asking.

“So, if I wanted to get close to the principal, what do I have to do?”

This time Abaz and Ranjit turned to look at me, and from their expression, I was sure they thought me mad.

“Hian. What do you want to ‘get close’ to him for?” Abaz asked.

“Oh nothing, major. I just have some questions.”

Ranjit nudged Abaz, then pointed in the direction of the senior building where our classes were.

“Why don’t you ask Brother Jude? He handles almost everything around here.”

“What does the principal do then?” I asked.

“He only handles the big cases,” Abaz said.

For the rest of that school day, I pondered on what Abaz meant by that. The big cases. I wondered if my fight with Nnebe qualified as one. It had barely raised an eyebrow from the SP who was the boy’s cousin. It became obvious, at this point, that I had to go a whole lot bigger.

So, two mornings later, I forced myself to sleep through the rising bell. I brushed off Abaz and Ranjit’s smacks and tugs, until they grew weary and let me be. And when the lights came on, I buried myself beneath my beddings, laying as still as I could, basking in the warmth and darkness of those sheets, in the patter of feet scrambling out the hostel when the bell for mass was rung. And after a quarter of an hour, when I was sure the hostel had emptied out, I pulled my sheets back down, and set my pillow aright, and traced, once again, the spring marks on the mattress above me, as I waited to be found out.

Just then I remembered I hadn’t spoken to Auntie Nkechi since she dropped me off two days before. I reached for the phone in the backpack underneath my pillow, thanked the stars that it had two network bars, and I called my aunt.

“Chidi, idikwa mma? Is everything ok?” Her voice was pitched high with worry.

“Everything is fine, Aunty. I was just checking on you.”

“Are yo—”

“Hello? Aunty?”

“— hear me?”

“Sorry, the network is terrible.”

“It is, Nna. I was asking if you’re eating well.”

“Yes. Don’t worry about me.”

“No wahala. Have you called your father?”

“No, why?”

“I’ve been trying to get to him, but he isn’t picking his calls.”

I shook my head. Aunty Nkechi propensity for finding new things to worry about truly was remarkable.

“I’m sure he’s ok, Aunty. You know how he gets.”

“True,” Aunty Nkechi said, with a sigh of resignation.

“How are you feeling?” I whispered. It had just occurred to me that there might be stragglers left in the hostel that might turn me in for possession of a contraband. I sat up and poked my head out from between the cupboards to check if anyone was in sight. Only a cluster of bunks and cupboards awash in the amber glow of the bulbs dangling uneasily from the ceiling greeted me.

“I’m doing alright. It’s still in remission. So, I might start teaching again in January.”

I laid back down.

“That’s great.”

“I’ve missed it.”

“I know.”

Loaded silence. I swatted at a fly dancing on the cupboard by my head.

“How’s our friend? The cute one,” asked Aunty Nkechi, before she broke into yet another fit of giggles.

“Don’t start again, Aunty.”

“What? He’s so funny. I like him.”

“Mhmm.”

“Oh, that’s true! Nna, you wouldn’t believe who called me yesterday.”

“Who?”

“Ejike.”

I sat up again. “No way. I thought he was in Cameroon?”

“He’s back now. He’s working at a mechanic shop in Aba.”

“Mechanic shop?”

“My dear. At least he hasn’t joined a gang.”

I thought about the possibility of that, of Ejike – strong, agile yet calm beneath it all – being a gang member, and this gave me pause. And it occupied my mind, so that I could ignore the pangs that hit my chest at the realization of how Ejike’s life had ended up. He had always told me, when we were younger, that he wanted to be a boxer, “the next Sugar Ray,” he’d say. And I wondered if he still would have made it as a boxer if he had not gotten pulled out of Marist.

“Can you tell him to come visit me?”

“Who? Ejike?” Aunty Nkechi asked.

“Yeah. Aba is not too far from here, right?” It was in the same state, if I remembered correctly.

“No, it’s not.” There was an edge of hesitancy to Aunty Nkechi voice. And I’m sure it was because she was wary of the influence Ejike had over me – she always had been, even though she never quite said so. “I’ll tell him,” she said after a pause.

“Thank you, Aunty. I have to go now. I don’t want someone to catch me on the phone.”

I had already drifted off into wistful beach dreams about the girl on the podium when someone finally found me. I felt the kick against my shin first, and then the voice, gruff and impatient, ripped through the tender curtains of my sleep.

“Get up now!”

I peeled my eyes open to find the hostel now awash with daylight, with the sound of brooms dragging across the concrete floor. Then I caught sight of the stocky boy who had kicked me up, and I recognized him as the Register who was always walking around the hostel taking note of who was present and who wasn’t. I was hoping for a more high-profile prefect, say the Linus, the Liturgy Prefect, or the SP himself. But I figured the clipboard guy would have to do.

“I said, get up now. One. Two...”

I ignored the count, and slowly pulled myself off the bed and to my feet. The hostel was deserted for the most part, save for the sweepers, whose function it was to clean the hostels in the morning, and the prefects whose primary duties, as far as I could tell, was to lounge in their corners, and make everyone else’s lives hell while they were at it.

“So, e gaha mass, okwaya? You’re too big to go to morning mass.”

I turned my attention to the nuisance in front of me, clipboard and clicker in hand, and it took everything in me to keep from waving him off. I took a step closer to him, just so I could loom even more over him, just so he could see just how insignificant he was to me.

He took a step back to keep some of his dignity. Took the pen out his pocket. “Kedu afa gi?” He asked, keeping his pen poised above the clipboard in his arm.

I kept silent.

“Chidi Okafor, okwaya?” He was scribbling on his clipboard now.

Little man already knew my name.

“You also missed function on Monday, and yesterday.” I had dragged my feet at the chapel the day before, until function and breakfast were over – but the tuck shop lunch I shared with Abaz and Ranjit made up for it, yet again.

“Yes.”

“Because you’re the oga in this place, abi? You’re the boss and we’re all here to serve you. Right?”

It was a nice thought.

“Ok. We shall see, Mr. Americana.”

I bit my tongue. He scribbled furiously on his clipboard. A few heads poked themselves out of the bunks in the prefect corners.

“Follow me,” said the Register, after he was done doodling. “Let’s go and meet Brother Jude.”

It hadn’t been enough.

“Why are you so short?” I asked the prefect.

He stopped still in his tracks, with his back to me. The student in the opposite aisle paused his sweeping, with his broom suspended in mid-air. He looked stunned beyond words.

“What did you say to me?” the Register asked, turning slowly back towards me.

I sat back down on my bed, pulled out my sandals from under it, and began strapping them on.

“Ewu, I asked you a question.” The prefect was walking back to me.

I finished putting on my sandals, and I stood up again, pulling myself to full length in front of him.

“I asked why you’re so short.” I made sure to keep my voice even, although my chest was pounding with wild excitement at that point, bringing me to a realization that I was maybe enjoying this more than I had any right to.

The Register looked at me, without word and without a motion, and we stood there in a stare-off for the ages, until his face cracked into a smile that was most chilling in its cheerlessness. He set his clipboard on his arm again, scribbling hard, against my name no doubt, muttering to himself “disrespecting a prefect.”

I crossed my fingers and hoped that maybe that was enough to get me an audience with the principal. “Shall we?” I asked, pointing my hand in the direction of the door. And this time the Register looked completely stupefied. I was sure I heard a few snickers from the aisles where the sweepers were, but they were immediately buried soon as the Register turned in their direction.

As I followed the Register down the alley that led to the bath area, I caught sight of Abaz and Ranjit in their school whites, swinging their ceiling brooms at a cluster of cobwebs tucked high up the alley wall. They paused to stare at me, swaggering down that alley, behind the Register no less. And I flashed a smile just because I knew it would shock them even more.

But that smile vanished the moment we walked out into the bath area. For there, in the swamp of used bath water, in the morning sun that had just now begun to burn with a fury for the ages, lay a group of boys – must have been at least ten of them – face-down in the mud. With their whites one. And their hands stretched out in front of them, like they were prostrating in worship of that most unholy sun; all while a group of luckier students scrubbed the gutters and picked up the litters around them.

It stopped me in my tracks, is what it did. So that I too stood there in the sun, watching the spectacle, wondering when, in my life, I had ever seen something so debasing, so inhumane.

“What are you stopping for?”



I turned to look at the Register, who had stopped as was facing me. Whose look of scorn was unmistakable now.

One of the students on the ground heard him and peeled his face from the mud.

“Senior Basil, please na.” With his face caked in mud and sweat and the beginnings of a cruel sunburn, the student pulled himself to his knees, and smacked the back of his left hand into the palm of his right. Over and again. The front of his uniform was no longer white, but now a running hue of brown. “Please, Senior. Please.” His voice was quivering now. None of the other students in the mud had so much as stirred.

“Did I tell you to stand up?” asked the Register, moving towards the student now, in a prowl that was nothing short of menacing.

“No,” said the begging student.

“Then why are you up?” asked Basil, dropping his clipboard onto the floor. In one swift motion he pulled the leather belt off his trouser. And before the boy could so much as mutter another plea, Basil swung the belt hard at his face. But he flinched, just in time, so that the belt landed on cheeks and curled around to the back of his head with a sickening splat that rang through the bath area. The boy screamed and clutched his face in agony and didn’t see the second blow coming for his exposed back. That one sent him writhing in the mud, calling out to his mother. And I felt the bile shoot up my stomach and into my mouth.

“Come on, lie down. Lie down now!” screamed Basil as he stood over the groaning kid, with his belt poised for another strike.

I willed the boy to turn back into the mud. And just as I was dreading another blow from Basil’s belt, the kid turned his face, and planted it back into the mud, shuddering in agony as he did so.

“Hands out,” said Basil.

The kid stretched his hands in front of him again. And I let my breath go. And Basil stood down and began fixing his belt back on. He then picked his clipboard off the floor and began walking around the corner from the bath area, towards the front gate of the school.

“Don’t let me wait for you,” he said, without a glance in my direction.

I looked to the boy, who was still shivering in pain, and I couldn’t find the words. I turned behind me to find Abaz and Ranjit peeking out of the alley and their face told me just how much they feared for me. I gave them a shrug and followed behind the Register, rolling my fist into a ball to keep them from trembling, to keep the fury that was boiling inside me from spilling over. It wasn’t the time, I said to myself as I trailed behind the swaggering pig with the clipboard. It wasn’t the time.

“Wait out here,” he said to me when we got to the yard that stood between the front gate and the Admission Office where Aunty and I had met Brother Jude a couple of days before. He knocked on Brother Jude’s door and walked in.

I stood there, in the red mud of that yard, still shaken by the barbarity I had just seen. I wondered if the same fate awaited me. And suddenly I was glad that I still had my day wear and not my whites. Now that it would make any difference. But my anger began boiling up again, and right there in the sun, before that structure that stretched high into the blue, cloudless skies, I swore that I was ready to risk it all. That if that brute so much as laid a finger on me, I was going to pound him within an inch of his life, so help me God.

Soon the Register bounded out of the office, with Brother Jude – sporting his soutane and a pair of shades – in tow.

“Follow me,” Basil said, as he walked past me towards the gates.

Brother Jude walked to the pillar opposite his office door and leaned against it, hands folded.

I followed the Register a few paces behind, towards the front gate through which the girls and the junior students were trooping in from their campuses, ready for another hot October day to be spent in overcrowded classrooms.

Basil stopped at a room beside the security post, next to the front gate of the school grounds. It was a small enclosure, no more than five feet in length and breath – which is why I hadn't noticed it before, even though I had passed through that gate at least twice every day for the few days I had been living in Campus One. The inside walls of that enclosure were a dirty green, and the gate that separated it from the rest of the sane world was more of a crude contraption of iron bars than anything else. The Register then whipped a key out of his pocket and began working the padlock that held the gate shut. He then pulled the gate open and stepped aside.

“Get in there.” His grin was wide and full.

“You're joking,” I said, standing my ground.

The Register looked past me, in the direction of Brother Jude's office. I followed his eyes and I found Jude still resting against the pillar. But now he was holding a cane in his hands – he must have gone into his office to fetch it when my back was turned.

“Should I go and tell him that you don't want to go in?” Basil asked, still grinning like the scoundrel he was.

Just then a group of senior girls walked in through the gate. Without thinking I turned from them, lest they see my face. They slowed their walk, and for a few seconds they stared from Basil to me to the open cell, and then they moved on.

I waited till they were out of sight, took a deep breath and then I walked into the cramped space, swiping away at a string of cobwebs as I did so. I turned to face the Register, and the yard, and the reverend brother rested against the pillar.

Basil closed the gate in my face, worked the padlocks shut. He turned to walk away, but then he paused.

“You’re lucky I know who your father is,” he said as he turned back to face me. “I would have dealt with you today.”

“Why don’t you come in here and try,” I said to him.

Basil flashed a hollow smile, shaking his head from side to side as he did so. Then he tapped the gate twice with his clipboard and began walking back to Brother Jude. He put the key in Brother Jude’s outstretched arm and in a flash The Register disappeared around the corner of the building towards the bath area.

I roamed my eyes across the walls of that cell, at the drawing of what I was sure were dicks and balls, at “toto” etched hard into almost every inch of those walls, along with the “Bucky was here” and “Tonedo lives” and many other such autographs, and at once I knew that I was following in the footsteps of great men.

Just then someone on the other side of the gate blared a horn. The security men, in the room next to the cell, ran out and pulled open the gate. And a black Mercedes Benz, with tinted windows and the insignia of the Marist Brothers emblazoned across the front door, pulled into the compound and stopped directly outside the cell. The driver’s window pulled down, and the Principal’s face came into view, and he was staring right at me. I swallowed a gulp and stared back, trying my best not to flinch at the scowling face peering into my soul. And I don’t know what came over me in that moment, I really don’t. But I raised my hand and waved at him. And I can swear I saw him hesitate at this; saw a shadow of disbelief crawl across the face. But the window was back up before I could peek any closer, and the car roared into the compound in a mist of angry dust.

I sat in that cell the rest of the day, in the stifling heat, and the crippling hunger. Until the minutes melted into hours, and the dawn into midday. I stood as far away from the cell gate as I

could, just beyond the reach of the sun's ray fractured by the gate bars but still creeping on into that space, like nothing was going to stop it from getting to me. I sat against the backwall of the cell, there in the little shade that was left, and I saw the blur of whites trooping in and out of the gates. I was thankful that only a handful of them bothered to look in, and that mitigated my shame somewhat.

I ripped my day shirt off when it began to stick to my back about an hour into my incarceration, and my vest too, which I tied around my nose to keep from inhaling the dust and stale ammonia floating around in the place. I rolled my trouser up and used my sandals as a buffer between the German concrete floor and my delicate behind. And all the while, as I went through the motions of making my new dwelling that bit more habitable, I couldn't keep from cursing myself for my expensive stunt. What infuriated me no end, there in that cell, more than the heat and the hunger, was that after all this, I still hadn't gotten any closer to the principal. What had been the point then?

I took another look around the walls of that cell, at the endless scribblings and signatures, and stick figures that appeared to be doing unmentionables to each other, and I wondered how many offenders had been in here before me. I knew the school had been built sometime in the 50s, was a refuge for Biafrans during the blockade at the height of the Civil War – so there was a distinct possibility that the cell had stood since that time – it sure looked that way. With the naked wires dangling from the ceiling, and the once lemon green wall now a festering shade of brown, it sure looked that way. A wave of calm washed over me, as I ran my eyes over the writings on the wall with a new sense of reverence and wonder. I marveled at it all, at that decades-old monument to shame that I now sat right in the middle of. And I couldn't keep the smile away.

That was when I saw it, right next to the gate. The name. And then the handwriting. It was unmistakable. I had seen that handwriting countless times, so I knew. From the way the K looked

like an R with an antenna on top, to the way the n looked like a rushed h. I pulled the vest off my face, stood up and walked closer to that writing on the wall.

Ikenna “Lasky” Okafor was here.

Rebel.

I stood there, glued to the spot, wondering what the odds were that Papa had gone to this school; had been in this same cell all those decades before. Surely it couldn't be. Papa would have mentioned it, when I left Florida, that he'd been to Marist. Even though we hadn't been on talking terms since the dinner, he would have said something. But then he had lied about Mama all these years, so I couldn't exactly put it past him. But what about Auntie Nkechi? How come she hadn't mentioned it either? What had been so scandalous about his stay that Papa and Auntie Nkechi would rather bury any talk of it, and keep anyone, myself included, from finding out?

“Hey.”

I turned to the gate, and there was the podium girl, standing on the other side of the gate, with the sun bouncing off her white dress, and casting a halo of sorts around her. I hadn't seen her since she left school during the break period two days before, but in the couple of instances that we had crossed paths, she sure had a way of appearing out of thin air.

“Hey.” I said, suddenly conscious of the fact that I had no shirt on. She seemed to be making an extra effort to keep her eyes on my face, so I took that as a good sign.

“Have you eaten anything?” she asked.

“Nah.” I had been in that cell about three hours at that point, and I was starting to find my fingers appealing.

“Jesus,” she muttered under her breath, as a crease of concern etched itself into her forehead. She stole a glance behind her to make sure no one was watching. Then she dug her hands into her pockets and pulled out a couple of sausage rolls, wrapped in a package that screamed “Gala!” And from her other pocket she pulled out a pouch of Capri Sun, ripped the straw off the body and stuck it in. She passed the goodies to me through the bars.

“Don’t let them catch you with that,” she said, as she started to make her way back to class.

“Hey!”

She stopped, turned and walked back to the gate. And I took another look at her, at that kind face, and that graceful poise, and suddenly it didn’t feel so maddening in that cell, not anymore.

“You never told me your name.”

“Virginia,” she said, still straining to keep her eyes on my face. “And you should find a shirt.”

I patted my chest and my torso and looked down, with a look of shock plastered on my face, like I was only just realizing that I was shirtless. I saw the shadow of a smile dance across her face before she turned away and began walking back towards the senior building.

“The name’s Chidi,” I called after her.

“I know,” Virginia said, without turning back.

The next time I saw her was in class the next morning. She was already seated by the time I got in, and I noticed that she was a world merrier than she had been the last time we were in class together.

“When did they let you out?” She asked even before I sat now.

“At 4 P.M.”

“You were in there from 7 to 4?”

“How did you know I was in there at 7?” I asked, settling into my desk.

Virginia pointed out her window. And then I remembered that our classroom overlooked the front grounds of the school, where the cell was.

“So, you were stalking me.”

Her face flushed at this, but she brushed it off with a chuckle.

“I hope you’ve eaten this morning?” she asked.

“Yeah.” I said, noting that it was the second time in as many days that she had asked me that question.

“Good. Because I’m not sure I can handle all that stomach grumbling today.”

My breath caught in my throat, causing me to cough it clear. And I resisted the urge to turn and look at her beside me, lest she see my shame.

“Ah, good one,” I said. And she chuckled in agreement.

We sat in silence a few moments.

“You know, I saw you at evening mass last Sunday,” Virginia said.

I turned to find her watching me.

“You were staring,” she said.

Of course, I was. Who wouldn’t?

“If you saw me, maybe you were staring too.” I said. And some part of me was proud of my comeback.

Virginia chewed on that a few moments, with a countenance of heavy contemplation.

“I was,” she said. “I wonder why.” And then she looked to me, like she was expecting an answer from me. I gave her all I had in that moment, a shrug and as warm a smile as I could manage.



Just then the Math teacher, a cranky octogenarian who was blinder than a bat wobbled into the classroom. For the rest of that period, and the ones after that, all I could think of was the girl beside me. I had never been so enamored, so intrigued by another. And there was something about her, about that vulnerability tempered by a will as sturdy as that chair she sat on, that kept me in a trance whenever I was around her.

It wasn't long before a junior student walked into the classroom, and asked leave of the bow-tied Literature teacher reading from a dog-eared copy of Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. He made his way over to the aisle between Virginia's desk and mine and walked straight to me.

"Senior, you have a visitor," the boy said.

I excused myself from the class and followed the boy down the stairs of the senior building, and then towards the front grounds of the school, wondering all the while who my visitor was – it sure as hell wasn't Papa, and Auntie Nkechi would have called before coming down.

"He is outside the gate," said the Security Chief, a bulky fellow with an inflated sense of importance – the kind that caused him to wear his baton and his torchlight on his belt at all hours of the scorching day, pouncing around the grounds, with hands behind his back, like he had nothing else to do. "And you better hurry up. Today isn't Visiting Day."

I nodded and pull open the gate. Standing beyond it, rested against a parked motorcycle, was a much older Ejike. With sideburns and beards, but still the same glow to his eyes, and the same open-toothed smile. He had on a kaftan with flowery patterns across every inch of it, and he looked so grown-up.

"Chidi boy!" He yelled and bounded towards me.

Before I could respond, he crushed me into a hug that smelt of Vaseline and cheap perfume. And I was certain he would have snuffed the life out of me had he not released me when he did.

“Chidi boy!” He said again, holding me away to take another look at me. “Nekwanu Chidi o? E tor go! You’ve grown.”

“You too,” I said. “Look at you, you’re now a big boy.”

He threw his head back and laughed in that hearty manner that was his alone.

“Hmmm. You now sound like all them oyigbo people o. Americana boy.”

I laughed at this. He was about the only one who could get away with calling me Americana.

“It’s still me, jor.”

“Ezioku?”

“Ezioku.”

We shared a laugh, and then stories of all the years we’d missed, as we rested against his motorcycle there in the front parking lot of the school. He told me how his fortunes had changed when he moved back to Cameroon to live with his uncle who ran an auto repair shop out of Yaoundé, who didn’t care about him getting educated beyond what was necessary for him to make it as a mechanic. It was the same uncle that set him up with the shop he now owned in Aba.

“Have you given up boxing for good?” I asked.

He let out a haunting sigh. “I have,” he said.

And we stood in there in silence, as if to mourn his broken dreams. And a smattering of clouds eased across the sun, sparing us a few seconds of her rays, in commiseration no doubt.

Then I remembered the writing on the wall.

“Did Papa attend Marist too?”

“Here?”

“Yeah.”

Ejike squinted his eyes at me. “You’ve been to The Cell already?”

I shrugged. “Yesterday.”

Ejike nodded and reached into his breast pocket. He pulled out a toothpick and stuck it between his teeth.

“That might be a record,” he said. “It was two weeks before they got me in there.”

I offered a chuckle and mulled on that. Two weeks was a luxury I couldn’t afford.

“I asked Aunty about that.”

“About Papa going to Marist?”

“Yes. But she said she didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“And you believed her?”

Ejike shook his head. And carry on his assault on the pick.

“She said you escaped twice.”

Ejike smiled, his face awash with nostalgia. “And they caught me both times.”

“How did you do get out?” Now I had gotten to the reason I called for him.

“Nna, that’s the easy part. Staying out, that’s the thing.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Are you having any problems? You’ve only been here a week.”

“No, not that.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m just curious is all.”

Ejike nodded again. He took the pick out of his mouth and flicked it into the dust.

“Nna, you know you have always been a terrible liar,” he said.

I laughed at this, at the memories it brought back to my mind.

He told me about the section of the fence, at the south end of the bath area, where the top was rid of barb wires and iron shards. He told me of the ladder than was hidden in the grass at the

foot of the fence, and then he mentioned how the grass on the other side of the fence had been padded with old mattresses.

“As long as you jump, right where the barb wire is broken, you’ll be fine,” he said.

“So, it’s a leap of faith then?”

“Asusu oyigbo,” he said in jest. “Yes, it is a leap of faith.”

I pondered on that a few moments.

“Chidi,” Ejike turned to me, and held my eyes in his. “Whatever happens, don’t stop, and don’t look back. Enugo?”

“Anugo m.”

“And ask for Otolor. Settle him before you leave. A hundred bucks should be ok.”

“Otolor?” I asked.

“Yes. Make sure you see him before you go.”

Just then the Security Chief poked his head out the gate and motioned me back in. Ejike reached into the pockets of his kaftan, pulled out a few hundred-naira notes and squeezed them into my breast pocket. I took them out in protest and tried to hand them back to him. But Ejike was adamant.

“I’ll just waste it on beer,” he said. And I thought those were the saddest words I’d ever heard.

That night, the Harmattan winds howled with a vengeance, ignoring the fact that it was only October, a month too early. Abaz and I stood against the banister on the Campus One corridor, there where the wind was coolest, and we watched the orange flames of a bush fire crawl up a hill in the distance, consuming the trees in its path, and sending a giant bellow of smoke into the darkening sky.

“Doesn’t it remind you of Mount Doom?” I asked.

Abaz fixed his stare hard on the hill, squinting his eyes as he did so. And as I was beginning to think he had missed the reference, he smiled. “Yes! Definitely.”

Behind us, a group of students had begun to line up – plates and forks in hand – by the shut refectory door, ready to burst in once the dinner bell was rung.

“Do you know anyone named Otolor,” I asked Abaz beside me, who had his chin buried in his arms that were folded atop the banister.

He poked his face up. “But you’ve met him,” he said.

“Who? Otolor?”

“Jonah. Jonah is Otolor.”

The white boy. Who spoke better Igbo than I. Who had tried to embarrass me in front of the priest and the SP. That guy?

“No way.”

Abaz grinned and planted his chin back into his arms.

I was disgruntled by this, by the fact that I had to pay a settlement to someone as pretentious as Jonah. I had, at that point, embraced the fact that I nursed a deep dislike for him. There was no way around that. But the notion of paying him – even a cent, or a kobo in this case – when he wasn’t aiding me in any way was a bridge too far for me. I decided, there on that corridor, to ignore what Ejike had said about paying the boy. I decided that when the time came, I would do it all on my own, consequences be damned.

And the fire on the hill raged on, spurred by the gusts of that Harmattan, by the oaks in its path, by a primal kind of anger I couldn’t yet comprehend. At once I remembered the scribbling on the wall. Rebel. I didn’t know if it meant that my father was one, or if it was a call for me to be one. Maybe it was both. Maybe. For on that burning hill, I saw a new sense of purpose bellowing up into those skies amidst the smothering smoke. And I stood in awe of it all, of the flame and the fury, of

the will that wouldn't be tamed. And somewhere, deep in the recesses of my being, a longing that I had once thought buried was born anew.

It was exactly a fortnight later that the call came in. It was about 15 minutes to lights-out, and Abaz was already snoring on the top bunk opposite me, above Ranjit who was hard at work polishing his sandals for school the next morning. The thrill of the phone in the backpack under my pillow jolted me upright. I reached under the pillow and pulled the phone out.

It was Auntie Nkechi.

“Chidi, they got him. They got him. Oh my God!” Her voice was shrill and trembling with a fear I never knew she had the capacity for.

“Auntie, what happened? Who did they get?”

“Your father, Nna. They took him.”

I was stunned breathless. And the cupboards, the bunks, the aisles they pulled away from me. So that all I could hear, all I could feel was the voice floating out the phone and into my ear, carrying with it my aunt’s horror.

“Took him where?” I muttered.

“Abuja.”

“How? I don’t understand. How did get him out of Florida?”

“It’s on the news, Nna. The Service smuggled him out in a cargo box.”

Jesus Christ. Papa’s worst fears had come to life. My chest was pounding furiously now, and I was scared it would give way at any moment. Ranjit had long abandoned his polishing and was now watching me.

“Chim o! Kekwanu udi nonsense bu nka? Eh? I thought all this nonsense stopped with Abacha?”

“Auntie calm down.”

“I told him to forget about that campaign. I told him. Shebi you were there, Nna.”

“I was.”

“That man is so stubborn.”

She was hyperventilating now. I could hear it from my end of the line.

“Aunty, he’s alive, okwaya? That’s the most important thing.” I tried to keep my voice calm, even though my chest felt like it was housing twelve pistons pounding away in fury.

“It is, Nna. But... I dunno. I just don’t know. At least some people are protesting now. Maybe that will help.”

“Maybe,” I said, without much hope.

“I have to go now. I need to make some calls. And get over to Abuja.”

“Are you coming to pick me?” I asked.

“Nna, you’re in the safest possible place right now. Just keep your head down. And don’t tell anyone who your father is. Enugo?”

The line clicked shut before I could tell her that that ship had long sailed. I thought of Basil and his comment about knowing who my father is, and I wondered how many more people were privy to that information. In that moment, the sense of security I had felt since moving into Marist sailed from me, and it was replaced with a crippling sense of vulnerability. Now that place on the hill didn’t feel as secure as it once did. If they had gone through all that to get Papa, what was to stop them from picking me up – not that they would care if I had anything to do with the whole mess or not. Sure, Abacha’s death in ’98 had brought with it a sense of ease within my family. But still, bubbling just below the surface, was the sense that things hadn’t really changed with the country’s switch to Democracy in ’99; that beneath the new garb of democracy, the country still wore the old uniforms of tyranny. And I was there when Aunty Nkechi had told Papa as much the year before, when he watched the news report of the students celebrating his butt antics at the height of



Abacha's power and got it into his head that he could ride his new cult status back into political power in Nigeria. He hadn't listened, and now he had dragged us back into this mess.

Smuggled in a cargo box, like he was less than an animal. And now they would most likely let him rot in some jail in Abuja.

The pounding in my chest soon began to ebb, and a shroud of relative calm eased over me. I cast my eyes around that hostel, filled with the prisoners getting ready for bed, for another day of humiliation and hunger. And it dawned on me, in that moment, that I had dragged out my stay too long.

A piece of peanut hit my chest. I looked to the bunk opposite me, at Ranjit with a questioning look on his face. He pulled his thumb and index finger apart to mimic a phone, and he put it up to his ear.

"My aunt," I said.

He gestured a "why?"

"They kidnapped my father and brought him back to Nigeria."

His eyes pulled open in shock, and I was certain he was just as surprised with my candor as I was.

I didn't understand his next gesture, didn't care to. I looked up at the wall clock by the hostel door – it read 9:55 P.M. It was only five minutes to lights-out now. And I knew the stairgate to Campus One would be locked once that happened.

I pulled my backpack from under my pillow, slid my phone into the side pocket. I opened my cupboard and reached for the running shoes in the lowest rack. Then I stood up and walked to the bunk opposite me. And with as much care as I could manage, I slid my hand beneath Abaz's pillow and pulled out his flashlight – he didn't pause his snoring even for a second. I then took a knee, and reached under the bunk, right between Ranjit's legs, and pulled out the plastic bottle of

kerosene Abaz usually kept there for lighting his reading lamp after lights-out. I sat back on my bed, tossed the flashlight and the bottle into my backpack, and put on my shoes.

I then looked to Ranjit, who had been sitting still watching me the whole time, with a blank expression on his face.

“Do you have a box of matches?” I asked him.

His stared at me a few moments. And then he leaned over and opened the cupboard beside him. He reached in and pulled out a red lighter and handed it to me. It had the inscription, “R.F.,” carved into its face.

“My father’s,” Ranjit said.

I paused and looked to him, to the boy without words. He looked so proud in that moment. And I didn’t know which got to me more, the fact that he hand given me something so precious to him, or the fact that he had said his first words in over three years to me.

But “thank you,” was all I said, as I took the lighter and slid it into my pocket.

I stood up, took one last look at Abaz snoring on that top bunk, and his loyal friend grinning at me from beneath him. And I offered a smile and walked out the hostel.

I was already in the alley leading to the bath area when the lights went out. I stopped, pulled the flashlight from my backpack and flicked it on. And the glow was like a tunnel of light in that blanket of darkness. I made my way into the bath area, and I swept the place with my flashlight to make sure it was empty. I knew where the break in the fence was, the one Ejike had told me about a couple of weeks before. I had checked it out a few times and hidden the ladder better.

But I needed to do something first. I turned off the flashlight and turned the corner of the building that sheltered much of the bath area from view. Before long, I was in the front grounds of the school, right before the corridor that held the Admissions Office. And the darkness of that night

cast an eerie feel upon that place, so that it felt as though it was haunted by a legion of restless ghosts.

I stayed close to the fence, on the opposite end of the yard from the offices, and I watched the gate and the security post beside it. There was no movement, not a whisper or flicker of light anywhere around. Just the chirps of a thousand crickets, and that darkness most immovable. I stooped, and I crawled along that wall, edging closer and closer to the gates, keeping my eyes peeled for any movement. I knew at this point, that once it was nightfall, the security men turned their attention to the grounds outside the gates, checking more for intruders, than elopers – so I was in luck.

I was almost at the gate when I peeled off the fence and belted across the yard, towards the cell beside the security post. Even in the darkness, I could make out the bars on the gate, and I could smell the dust and the urine sweltering around in that space, beckoning me back to it. I paused there before the gate, and I tried, hard as I could, to remember the names on the wall – every single one of them. I recalled the one that may or may not have belonged to my father. And once again, that word leaped to me, as it had every night since I saw it first.

And then I took off my backpack, and I took the bottle of kerosene out. And with one more glance around, I began to squirt the liquid through the gates, over the walls, and the floor, and the naked wires in the ceiling. I made sure to spray every inch of that space with that most holy liquid, till there was nothing left. And then I tossed the empty bottle in, cursing myself when it landed with a clatter that rang through the empty grounds. I took Ranjit's lighter out of my pocket, and I flicked it on. And for a moment I let the yellow flame dance in the breeze of that calm night. Then I tossed it into the cell, and I took off.

I was already halfway to the bath area, when I stopped and turned to find the flames – about five feet high now – basking every inch of that cell with a furious glow. I turned back around and

zapped into the bath area, using whatever morsel of light the stars offered to keep from stubbing my foot against a stone. I was almost at the escape spot when I heard the first voices screaming. They sounded deep, guttural and at once I knew that the security men had found the fire. It took everything in me to keep from looking back at that chaos. I stayed close to the fence, and I stooped low to keep from running into the cloth lines.

When I was sure I was almost at the spot, I pulled out Abaz's flashlight, and flicked it on for a couple of seconds. I was standing right by it, the spot where the barb wires atop that ten-foot fence parted ways. I turned the flashlight off, dropped to my knees and began crawling along the fence, reaching out to feel the grass in front of me, hoping to God I didn't grab a snake instead. Before long, my fingers touched cold steel. And I tugged, pulling the ladder from where it lay hidden in the grass. I set the ladder against the escape spot, and once again, I flashed the light at the top of the fence to make sure the ladder aligned with the break in the barb wire.

Then I began to climb, feeling my way up the wall as I did so. I pulled myself to the top of the fence, thankful that I had made no contact with the barb wire, and then I reached my foot down and kicked the ladder off the wall. It fell back into the grass with a thud. I sat atop that wall and looked in the direction of the flames. It was roaring now, and it had spread closer to the gate, so that the security post was now engulfed in an orange glow that was creeping across its roof. A few shards of flashlights were hovering around the flames, and I could only guess now that some of the prefects had join the fray. Up ahead of me, past the field of green was the dirt road that led to the Brothers' Quarters, and I could see the headlights of what looked like a motorcycle turning onto the road from the school parking lot. Someone was going to alert the brothers.

I had to pick up my pace.

I looked down at the ten-foot drop below me, and Ejike's words came to mind. The leap of faith, we'd called it. But I didn't have the time to contemplate such sentimentalities, I had to get to the Quarters before that motorcycle did.

I held my breath, and I took the plunge. And my body sailed through the cold air for what felt like an eternity and a half. Then it tore through the sea of elephant grass that felt like a hundred little razors tearing at my skin. And then I thumped, hard, into the half-buried mattresses. It knocked the wind out of me. So that I laid there on grass blades and on the mattresses, counting my breath, checking my bones – them seemed alright.

I looked back up, from the darkness below, and it occurred to me that whoever had crafted the escape spot had a skin of leather, and had no plans of ever coming back. I had to think the same way now, if I was going to make it through that hell.

I got to my feet, and I winced away the stings of a thousand tiny cuts. I was buried in elephant grass, a few of them taller than me – and I was no Basil. Elephant grass. Of all species of grass on God's green earth. What kind of sicko put that escape spot together, was what I was dying to know. I adjusted my backpack behind me, and I squinted hard across the field ahead of me. I saw the faint glimmer of a moving light up ahead. I set my forearm in front of my face and I began bounding towards the dirt road. And the grasses tore at my arm, and my feet, and my hair, every inch of me but my face – which I was saving more for Virginia than anyone else – but I pushed forward, grunting my way through. Up ahead, no more than thirty meters, the headlight of the motorcycle was creeping past my position as it groaned over the bumps in the road. I picked up the pace, ignoring the pounding in my chest, and the searing pain in my lungs. I hopped and ran and hopped again, through that cursed field ripping at my skin, calling at me to give up the chase.

I burst through the last patch of grass, and pulled out into the dirt road, no more than twenty meters behind the motorcycle now. And the night breeze cruising down that dirt road was a

welcome respite from the grass and the cobwebs. I was amazed at how I had managed to gain on the motorcycle, but I had no time to bask in my feat.

The headlights floated by a signpost ahead that announced the Brothers' Quarters. I pounded away, pushing with everything three weeks of Marist hadn't taken from me. But I had to keep reminding myself to keep out of the glare of the motorcycle's backlight. Until it took a sharp right and disappeared through an open gateway. I reached the spot and turned right too, past the open gate. And the road turned into a cobbled street, with two rows of identical duplexes stood on either side. The houses each had front gardens, and yard gates, and scrubs of roses by the front porches and bougainvillea vines creeping up their sides. I slowed to a jog, and I took it all in, the picture-perfect houses that still had their lights on, even though our hostel not so far away had been plunged into darkness. I blinked once, and then again, just to make sure I hadn't stepped into the pages of an Enid Blyton book.

The motorcycle had pulled up to the front of one of the houses. The engine went silent, and the headlamps tripped off. And soon the silhouette of the rider was racing up to the front door of the house. He then began banging at the door that stood not far away from the blacked-out Mercedes parked in the driveway.

I had found what I was looking for.

I jogged up to the yard fence beside the house, and I stooped beside the rosebush on the outside of the fence. I held my breath like it would hide me better. I waited.

The front door creaked open. A smattering of quick-fire Igbo. And before long the motorcycle roared to life and made a swift 180° turn. It sped back up the street, and then turned left onto the dirt road that led to the school grounds. Not long after, the Mercedes roared to life, and backed out of the driveway. I pushed myself as far as I could into the flower bed, wincing as a thorn

pricked at me. As the car turned to follow the motorcycle, sending a flood of headlights my way, I caught the glimpse of the Marist insignia on the driver's door.

I waited a few minutes until all was dark and quiet again. And then I stood up. I jumped over the yard fence and made my way over to the side of the duplex. Somewhere in the distance, a dog began to bark. And I began to say a Hail Mary in the hopes that the principal didn't have one of his own hiding inside. I made my way around to the backyard, with the tire swing in the tree, and the abandoned Chopper bicycle. And it almost seemed as though the principal didn't live alone. The reasonable thing to do at that point would have been to abort the mission and scope the place out more. But I was way past the point of reason the moment Ranjit handed me his father's lighter. I just wanted to know, to make sure, that my feelings about the principal's rosary beads was off. That was it. Then I could finally drop the whole Marist mission and go figure out what to do about my father.

I walked up the back stairs and tried the door. It was shut. I looked at the window beside the door. It was the sliding kind; the kind that would make a world of noise if I broke it. I tugged at it. And it moved, but only by an inch. I set down my backpack, and I pulled harder, and harder again. And each time, the moved a little more towards me, creating just enough space on the other end. I kept this up for a few more pulls, until I was satisfied that I had created a wide enough space.

I picked up my backpack and I crept to the other end of the window, keeping my head low as I could. Then I took a deep breath, and I placed my hand on the sill, then pulled myself up and through the space. I tumbled through the window; landed on the terrazzo floor inside the house with a painful smack.

I took the flashlight out of my backpack again and turned it on. Right in front of me was a carpeted staircase, and to the side of it a corridor that seemed to lead into what appeared to be the

kitchen. I figured at this point that the principal was already at the scene, that it was only a matter of time before they got the fire under control. I didn't have that much time left.

I stumbled to my feet and began creeping up the staircase as gingerly as I could, fearing all the while that there was someone – a servant, maybe – still in the house. The first door to the right led to the bathroom, and the one to the left to a room filled with mops, brooms, and cleaning liquids. The second door on the right led right to a bedroom. I floated the flashlight around the place; I let it coast over the king-sized bed and the soutane hanging from the wardrobe door, and the crucifixes fixed hard into the wall. There was the bookcase that held countless Bibles and Theology texts, and motivational books with cringeworthy titles. But I didn't care for it all – I only wanted that rosary. I walked over to the armoire beside the bed, and I tried to pull the doors open. They didn't budge. Tried the drawers, and only one gave way. It was empty.

I walked over to the bedside table and tried the drawers there too. And all I could find were prayer pamphlets, and holy pictures, and figurines of The Mother. There was a roll-on deodorant buried in there too. Everything but a chaplet.

I scoured every inch of that room, but I found nothing. I searched till I grew weak, till the cuts on my arms and legs itched with a vengeance. It stunned me so, the absence of rosary beads in the house of a reverend brother. I sat on the edge of the bed, beside the bedside table, and I pondered on my fruitless search. It was almost as if he had been expecting me and had hidden the rosary somewhere only he could find it.

Just then I thought I heard the faint groan of an engine. I set the flashlight on the bed, and walked over to the window, cracking it open by a hair's breadth so as not to give away the glare of flashlight behind me. Sure enough, there were two headlights turning into the gateway that led into the street.



I pulled the blinds back together, and I leapt away from that window like it was on fire. I had miscalculated just how much the principal would care about a burning security post. I hopped across to the side of the bed where I sat a few moments before; picked my backpack off the floor. And just as I made to snatch the flashlight off the bed, I saw it.

In the glow of that white light, there within the frame that sat atop the bedside table, was a picture of Mama, much younger than I had ever seen her, of a toddler that had my eyes, sitting in her arms, of a far, far younger Brother Chris, in a suit and tie, and the smile of a proud paterfamilias, looming over us, smiling down at the child in my mother arms.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Obiomachukwu Calvin Umeozor received his B.A. in English from the University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria and taught English Literature before moving to the States in 2015, where he teaches Freshman Composition while pursuing an MFA at Florida State University. His work has appeared and is forthcoming in the *New Orleans Review*, *Shift* and others.