

Uche UMEZURIKE**Prose and poetry****Three Angels**

He ran barefoot to the hospital when he heard his wife had given birth to triplets. He felt his head and lungs would burst as he paused at the gate to catch his breath. He shuffled towards the ward, conscious of the lousy thuds of his feet on the concrete floor, people brushing against him, jostling into him. He collected himself; he picked up pace, but couldn't quell the waves of anxiety and apprehension shooting up, crashing into, rolling over each other.

The harried-looking man hoped it wasn't true, hoped the woman who gave him the news was mistaken. After all, those who were talkative and nosey were hard to rely upon.

His hands shook. His stomach heaved up and down, like something with a life of its own; something cold and restless. Like hookworms.

He clamped a sweaty hand over his mouth and sank into the plastic chair by the cot in which the babies slept. He glanced around. The walls had no touch of beauty, no light. Someone should have covered it up with posters.

He heard a sound. He turned. He didn't want to believe she was snoring, so annoyingly, like a pig. He scoffed, wondered where she had picked up that nasty habit; he hoped she wouldn't come back home with it.

"Who will feed them?" he said, feeling his voice turn scratchy.

He cleared his throat, and fixed his eyes on the ceiling. He began counting the smoky squares, but stopped at once, because, for some strange reason, he sensed someone was watching him; someone unseen. Like God.

His eyes darted to the window at the sound of someone laughing carelessly. The curtains hung lopsided at one side, dirty and worn-out; the months-long dust that had clogged up the holes in the old net could frighten mosquitoes, he imagined and snorted.

What did the hospital management do with all the money they took from people? Perhaps the chief medical doctor hoarded it all to himself, after all this was Nigeria; even highly-paid government officials still looted the safes, despite the nationwide campaign for integrity and transparency!

Thoughts bumped against each other in his head, catapulted down his stomach, and sudden fireflies twinkled before his eyes – as he brooded over the amount he would have to pay at the counter. And quite vividly, he saw himself lying stretched out across the ragged carpeted floor, shameless and importunate, because he was unable to solicit for more money.

He rubbed his brow hard and realized he just couldn't think straight any more. Everything was indeed confusing. Chaotic, almost.

Goose bumps broke out on his arms and before he could rub his palms together, it occurred to him that it would have been much more convenient if his wife had delivered the babies at home. After all, there were so many decrepit details in the hospital. Sadly, there wouldn't be a next time, he murmured determinedly.

For a moment he had to shut his eyes, shut out jerky images which now attempted to obscure his vision, which now threatened to pitch him into darkness. Into bottomless hardship.

And when he finally opened his eyes a nurse had strolled in and leaned over the cot. She seemed not to have noticed him or maybe she just didn't want to pay him any attention. He watched her put out a forefinger. She touched the babies one by one on the cheek. Just quietly she cooed into the cot.

She turned and caught him watching her. She didn't appear embarrassed rather her eyes sparkled.

"Three girls! You're a rich man, sir," she said, very good-naturedly. "Just buy a puppy Alsatian and start training it to scare away the crowd of men that would flood your doorstep."

He bared his teeth in a grin but couldn't help feeling stupid. Feeling like a stray sheep. If she knew the state of his pockets she would keep her mouth shut. Even assist him to raise funds. Look at her, how could she talk about bride price when he couldn't even figure out what the triplets would eat?

Did she think he would feed them on sawdust?

The nurse left after a while. He raised himself up from his seat, not taking his eyes off his peaceful wife yet he longed to wake her up. Then he tapped her elbow, but she didn't stir. Again, he tapped her. She only gave him a gurgling sound and still didn't open her eyes.

"Three girls, *sha?* What will I do with all three?" he said to himself, still incredulous, a finger stuck between his lips, before darting to the counter to ask another nurse. "Is it the same bill?"

The fat nurse was absorbed poring over some papers lying spread-out across a manila folder on the counter.

"Em, nurse...?"

She raised her head and gave him a lost look. "I don't understand," the nurse replied.

"The amount, em, you charge for triplets is it, uh, different from single childbirth?"

Her face turned puffy with smiles. Her mouth widened. Her nostrils fluttered. Her left hand balled tight as she shot it out. “Ohh, you’re the father,” she exclaimed. “We’ve been expecting you – oh, congrats!”

He smiled and shambled away. It would be foolish to ask her any further questions about the hospital bills, he thought scratching his scalp.

His eyes gazed into the distance, avoiding the watchful stares of pregnant women who sat sprawled out on the benches in the dim corridor as though they were completely drained of strength. The instant he sat on the old bench in the pavement, he felt an iciness in his buttocks; he almost jumped up.

Shouldn’t make a fool of myself, he thought. Not the end of the world, though. He yawned and patted his mouth. He scratched his scalp again.

Now, five children were a blessing if you were rich, if you had enough money to devote to their upkeep, but then what could a struggling porter like himself boast of?

This was January; everyone agreed it was difficult to lend money immediately after Christmas festivities. He wished they hadn’t observed the New Year too; they’d sipped garri with groundnuts, and not wasted money on rice and chicken and beer. He tried to recollect how much he paid for his twins’ hospital bill when they had been born three years ago, and he felt something yank at his heart.

He clasped his wife’s shoulders when he trudged back to the ward. “You are too fertile,” he mumbled, shaking her.

“Not my fault,” she said, fully awake.

“Whose fault? Tell me, which of us has a history of twins in their family?”

She moped at him.

He remembered how he starved himself of sex for about two years and slumped back into the chair. He had groveled before his supervisor just to be placed on night duty; he didn’t want to touch his wife. He had avoided her like she was infected. And yet...

He felt lightheaded watching the babies doze so untroubled like lakes, so calmly like nothing mattered, and he saw himself sinking in a whirlpool while their mother couldn’t even reach out a hand. Unable to stand this any longer, he dragged himself out of his seat.

“Are you leaving?” his wife asked, sitting up.

“Watching you won’t pay the bills,” he replied.

“The doctor will discharge us tomorrow at noon,” she said. “He said I don’t have to stay –”

“I’ll be here,” he cut her short.

“I’m hungry,” she whimpered.

He plunged his hands into his pockets and poked around. She thrust out her right hand and took the loose change he shoved at her. He noticed that she took the money without meeting his gaze. Something nudged his heart, and guilt crushed him. He wanted to hug her and tell her, “You’re strong,” but his knees knocked against each other. Besides, he didn’t want to take back his decision.

“You’ve not carried them,” she said. “Touch them, at least.”

“I know,” he said in a cracked voice.

What he’d decided to do was cruel, but that was the most economical option he could think of. All he needed was two weeks, and the hospital management would waive the bills and discharge his wife and the babies when they discovered he was missing. After all, he thought, what he planned to do was better than trading two of the triplets and using the cash for the upkeep of the other family members, which some fathers did. It wasn’t as though he would use the babies for ritual-induced wealth.

She would manage; the babies would survive. But would she ever forgive him?

There was no time to think about it. He bounded out of the room, without saying anything reassuring to his wife, without looking back at the babies.

As he lumbered past the counter, two nurses stopped chatting animatedly and glanced over at him sneakily. Quick smiles glowed in their eyes. It took him a short while to reciprocate their warm gestures, although he made out something fake in their smiles. Yet he nodded at them like a dutiful employee. He smiled very generously back at them for he did not wish to rouse their suspicions.

“How are your angels?” one of them asked.

“Fine,” he said, his cheeks robust with the sheen of a smile.

“Sir, buy us malt drinks when you come back. We are supposed to rejoice with you o-o, sir,” the other nurse said.

“Yes, certainly, yes,” he relied, laughing at them because they would be totally disappointed.

Now he had almost turned a corner when he thought he overheard one of the nurses say, not loudly though: “...his type make a fuss when their wives give birth, but they can’t *bold still* at nights.”

“Don’t be shocked if he takes flight. Nowadays, you can’t tell who is crazy and who’s not, o-o.”

He froze in his tracks but his ears buzzed. He didn't want to believe it but they were scorning him. He took a deep breath and swayed. The nurses' voices had stilled too. But hesitant smiles quivered on their faces as he slowly, unsurely, turned to look them in the eye.

"I wouldn't hurt her," he said fiercely and stepped through the hospital doors. The sunlight scalded his face, but the intense heat released him from his agony.

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The Outsider

extract of a novella in progress

The language of origin is English. The work is a soon-to-be-completed novella. As a full work the novella has not been published, but extracts of it have been published in *Word Riot* January edition 2008 as Flash Fiction under the title Angelica's Story, and in *Fiction on the Web* February edition 2008 as a short story under the title "The Outsider."

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Angelica sat as still as a painting, hands in her lap, knees pressed together, wishing she hadn't worn her nightdress but her pleated sweater. Chief had been ranting about his Skill Acquisition Centre that would be the pride of the village.

"She'll make a dutiful wife," he said. His eyes flicked from her parents' face to her chest as he began talking about his need for a second wife. His first wife had only female children.

"My wife has brought her up god-fearing," her father said. "*Nne*, is it not so?"

"Yes, oo. The Lord's doing," her mother said.

At first Angelica was elated that she could now pursue her dream of being a fashion designer at the Centre. But as she listened to this *stupid* old man describing her body, as if it were a piece of textile being measured out, her delight soured. He said she'd the exact body for "bearing a son". Her hips were rounded and her calves firm. Pregnancy would fit her as perfectly as earrings.

Why doesn't he smile? Angelica wondered. Is he afraid that it will highlight the tiny pockmarks on his taffeta face? Even on his coronation day he had set his face like frozen mackerel.

"Look at her chest." Chief spread out his palms.

Her parents swung their heads at her. Angelica focused her attention on the way Chief's mouth moved as he chewed kola nut: it made her think of someone kneading garri.

"Full to suckle a king," he added.

Her parents smiled. It puzzled Angelica that no man noticed how squat she looked. Like a heavy sow. They readily saw her motherly breasts standing out, big and quite full for a girl of fifteen.

"Chief, God will bless you," her mother said.

"Amen!" her father said.

Angelica scratched her itching scalp. She would cease plaiting her hair and wear braids or weave-on when she finally made it to the capital. She'd no longer use pomade that stank of burnt palm nuts, but perfumed hair cream. She yawned as Chief wrapped up his boast. As for her, she wasn't interested even if he brought heaven down to their farm. She believed she was an outsider desperate to escape before the millstone of quotidian chores suffocated her.

"Are you sure you don't want some oil bean?" her mother asked again.

Chief said no, thank you. Angelica smiled at him as he shook hands with her father.

When Chief limped out, her mother danced into the room. Angelica rolled out her mat, remembering *Style & Design*, the magazine with smooth pages of girls in bewitching outfits. If only her mother could differentiate between a fashion designer and a seamstress, half of her problems would go away. But her mother thought both involved making and mending blouses.

"He has his heart on you, oo!" her mother exclaimed.

Angelica stretched out on the mat. "Let him look for his age mate," she said.

"You should be glad. Not that you can pass your exams, oo."

"Why can't he smile?"

"What do you mean?"

"His face saddens me," Angelica said.

"Dislike him, oo," her mother said. "But his pockets are full." She stamped out of the room, without shutting the door.

Angelica stood up and shoved the door with a foot. Lay back on the mat, brooding. One night she'd seen herself creating patterns no one had ever conceived, blending silk and adire; chiffon and Ankara; tulle and Batik.

"God, please," she prayed, wishing she could just disappear from this *crawling* village and its sickly smells of fermented cassava and old age.

The September sun prickled her neck as she balanced the bundle of firewood on her head. Trudging out of the dirt road, she spotted Chinelo on a motorbike, clutching a backpack between her legs. The cyclist slowed down because of the pothole in front. Before he could speed up, Angelica raised her voice. Chinelo turned her head.

Angelica let the bundle clatter to the ground. She tucked the pad under her armpit and shouted, "Girl!"

Chinelo slid off and took a fifty-naira note and slapped it in the palm of the cyclist. She slung the backpack over her shoulder. The girls ran into each other's arms, then pulled back an inch. The pad fell down.

"Girl, you are shining," Angelica said.

"Baby, you aren't looking bad yourself," Chinelo said.

"You are home?"

"I want to give that man some pocket money."

"Yes, he's been sick."

"He thought I'd beg for food because..." Chinelo frowned. "That's past tense. So you're still training to be a headmistress?"

Angelica picked up the pad. She replied that secondary school had since become a nightmare. Exams brought poor results: she was not troubled, anyway, because her scissor-sharp mind was always producing captivating designs that would fit the slim, the fat, the tall and the short.

Chinelo laid a hand on her shoulder. "Baby, you are a child of the future. Come to the city."

"Is it possible?"

"I'll soon buy a car before Christmas."

"*Eziokwu?*" Angelica gnashed her teeth. "I'm finished in this village. Finished," she said.

Chinelo grinned and told her that she had the right body. She only needed the *backbone* for a sales girl. Angelica ran her fingers along her spine, then asked her if she'd sell girls for a living.

"You are even lucky a girl resigned just last week," Chinelo replied in a serious tone that impressed Angelica with a picture of a drained girl stepping out of her boring world into another that would both electrify and shock her. She had only visited Owerri at sunset, to deliver a message to her

father's cousin, and left before sunrise the next day. Now the prospect loomed so near it was daunting; so vivid it was unreal.

The first few nights she couldn't sleep well, even though Chinelo had given her a room with a toilet and bathroom. Angelica had to tweak her ear to make sure she wasn't dreaming. "Girl, you are now in the town. Behave," Chinelo had said. When she went out, Angelica hopped around the room. Then traced the length of the thick mattress, the blanket dotted with red and yellow-breasted parrots and rosebush, and squealed. Ran her fingers across the wine-red rug, thinking if anyone had considered making a dress with a fabric this thick and sensuous; this velvety.

But the designs she now saw in her dreams were horrible - an old woman with a mouth as toothless as a cave laughing at her because her breasts had turned stumps; of a man sucking out her breasts until they oozed out like marrows. One night, she sat in bed reading Psalm 23 when Chinelo asked if she now wanted to be a nun.

Even the row she had with her father sometimes billowed into her dreams.

"Your brain can't even hold water. Eh, you dress like a wet vulture," her father said, seething, because his daughter had insisted on going to the city to look for admission.

"Did you go to university yourself?" she had shot back, glancing down at her skirt and blouse.

Her father slapped his head with both hands. In his fury, she expected him to beat her to porridge. But he did not. Although, the few times he'd hit her, she kept a face of bone.

Remembering this drama, Angelica sat up in the bed. The room glowed poorly, because of the hazy purple bulb hanging in the ceiling. The mustiness of cigarette smoke and masculine odour from a man called Kings, with nostrils like a horse's, who had slept over in Chinelo's room the night before, still saturated her room.

Angelica squinted at the wall clock. Past three. She started thinking about how to raise the fees required for the Geraldine School of Fashion & Design she'd enquired about. Tuition, use of sewing machines, etc, added up to twenty thousand naira - what her father earned monthly, as a tools operator in a lumber company.

"Let me introduce you to my boss," Chinelo once suggested. "Madam Politics has connections here and there."

Why can't Chinelo understand? They'd grown up together, fetched water and wood together, but they did not have the same destiny! Angelica didn't want to be a sales girl, even though Chinelo's skin was fair and soap-smooth; she attracted men like bees; lived in a two-bedroom flat with the floors of the bathroom and toilet tiled and blue like the Oguta Lake; had a wardrobe full of expensive clothing and shoes; and owned a fridge stocked with juices, fruits, and iced water.

Angelica scratched her hair. "My father thinks I am crazy." She wondered if he wasn't right as she called to mind the afternoon she and her friend went to the market and sighted the man dressed in tatters digging into a potpourri of festering rubbish. Chinelo said, "Dream for too long and you run wacky." The city is for hustlers, people who can fit within the toughest frame. Not dreamers, who hope God would appear and expand the frame for them, she'd said.

Angelica rubbed her forefinger on the rug and licked it as a vow that she'd become a woman whose exciting designs would cram boutiques and shops.

She heard him but bowed her head. She was smiling for the first time since she began work as a sales girl in Madam Politics' bar. Chinelo had advised she wear the friendliest smile possible, but Angelica knew keeping a face as scrawled as Chief's was the best way to fend off detractors.

"He says you are arrogant," Chinelo told Angelica.

The young man often sat alone in a corner of the room sipping Gulder. He never spoke to her until now she caught him whispering to Chinelo. He wore his usual saccharine fragrance she wished she could pluck from the warm air. Roll it between her fingers. The perfume made her think of palm wine; yet, it filled her with a hint of nervousness that if she stood long in his presence she'd dream away.

She spoke in her dialect that the man was a dog. Chinelo giggled. She replied that Angelica might suffer heart attack with the clinical method she put on in dispensing duties; a sales girl was simple and natural, not thorny and affected like the catwalk girls Angelica often yapped about.

"So I should smile at every dog that shakes his tail, sister?" she asked Chinelo.

"You will soon become Madam Medusa."

Angelica repeated "Arrogant" in her head, and glanced at the man again as she picked up an empty beer bottle.

"Angelica?"

"Yes, Aunty."

"Bring a table outside. Four chairs," Madam Politics said, a woman whose age you could not guess because, although her skin looked nourished and compact, her face suggested the tell-tale wrinkles of over-ripe pawpaw.

Angelica arranged two pairs of chairs in a circle, then brought out a plastic table, and laid out the table mats. Three men in flowing brocade kaftans and Madam Politics sat down. Angelica took the orders: Guinness and *isi-ewu*.

"Don't forget toothpicks. Serviettes," Madam Politics added.

Chinelo met her in the bar as she scurried past saying: "That's Felix?"

Angelica set the chopped goat heads in wooden bowls down on the table. Then she placed a small basin of water each on the feet of the table. She folded the serviettes, and kept a jar of Morning Fresh on the table.

Some moments later, the young man locked eyes with Angelica before he shuffled out of the barroom. She wanted to ask him what the name of his perfume was; she'd like to get one for herself. But she decided against it.

Madam Politics handed her a flask of chicken pepper soup. She pointed at the man in lichen-green brocade, who needed her to warm the broth for him because he lived by himself in a guest house.

"Aunty, it's late," Angelica said.

"Bush girl, I know."

"How will I get back home?"

"Don't look for a taxi in the midnight. Or try anything clever. If anything - anything - happens," Madam Politics said, wagging a finger, "I will break your backbone."

Angelica took the flask, looked across at the man who had already sat in his Benz, and wished a truck would crash into him. The man tooted his horn. Madam Politics patted Angelica on the shoulder. "Go, go!" she said.

Bent over a table, pretending to rub out a stain, Chinelo said, "He's a businessman, baby, lucky you," to Angelica as she marched out towards the car.

The man pulled his kaftan over his head and hung it on a nail on the wall. He plopped into the settee and told her to forget the soup. She noticed how exquisite the brown damask curtains seemed, with the light gold voile trimmings arched over and flailing at the sides. She wanted to touch it, but caught him staring. That instant she despised Madam Politics who made her accompany a man with a forehead like a gorilla's because he bought her a gold necklace in Dubai as birthday gift, a week ago. The loose folds around his belly had frightened her as though she'd seen a python; when his hand had flapped towards her breast, she had spilled the juice he offered her into his face. Madam Politics had almost slapped her but held herself.

"Sir, where can I keep your pepper soup?" Angelica asked, cuddling the flask.

Grinning, he patted a side of the settee, and crooked a finger at her. "I might get hungry from watching you," his voice rang like something filtered through an amplifier. Rich, echo-laden.

Angelica avoided gaping at the hairs on his chest that reminded her of the tawny down of a lion, and his belly-button which was just as round as it was peculiarly small. She sat down beside him.

"How old are you?"

"Seventeen, Sir," she lied.

"You look so mature to be twenty," he said.

"Thanks sir."

Using the remote, he turned the TV on. The face of a white man filled the screen. "Bush this. Bush that. Who cares about 9/11?" he said and searched another channel. Black girls in expressive dresses gyrated across the screen, breasts dangling in bras and bottoms shuddering in minis. "Fine girl, what's your choice of drink?"

Angelica wanted to go home and plan her life. Her fingers jerked as he dropped a hand on her thigh and said, "Let's try something, a mix of brandy and juice?" Then he glided over to a cabinet of assorted drinks.

Angelica glanced at the dancing girls as he handed her a glass and sat next to her, crossing his legs. Their outfits are too bright; I can make them slighter, less expressive, but still meaningful, she thought. She furrowed her brow as he took a sip and remembered how a classmate had gone to a New Yam Festival in a neighboring village. Some boys had ground hemp and, using a syringe, injected it into a strawberry drink. The girl discovered semen between her legs when she came to, and her father ignited an uproar in the village when he petitioned the five boys at a shrine.

"Drink," he said. She gazed into her glass then put it to her lips in such a slow, watchful way that forced a crinkly laugh from his throat. The drink dribbled in the glass, almost syrupy. "Why, you are afraid?"

She sipped finally. Her hand flew to her mouth as she hiccupped. He slapped her gently on the back, then rubbed her spine. She put the glass on the side table. "It... tastes like coconut," she said, giggling.

He rubbed his chin, leaning back. "Amarula and brandy," he said.

Angelica watched him kick off his trousers and noticed how short his torso seemed. The limb was strikingly longer. She found this funny, but could not laugh. In his yellow pin-stripe shorts, he hurried towards the bathroom. She wondered why men always wanted to jump her, was it the same way with other girls?

She remembered the first time. Three years ago. She was twelve. Ken had led her to an uncompleted building while the sun beamed tomato-red. He made her lie on the floor, although she knew she was supposed to - because her class girls often whispered about it. But she'd given him an energetic push that sent him reeling across the floor when she saw the elastic contortions of his face, fearing that he had become epileptic as he panted and quaked on top of her.

His footsteps made her body jerk and she saw Felix smiling at her with a towel wrapped around his waist. "You aren't drinking it," he said.

Angelica picked up her glass. "Sorry sir."

He sat down. "You should have a bath too."

She stared at him, thinking: How would you feel if I jam this glass in your groin? This time around, Madam Politics would keep to her threats; unlike the time she slapped a drunk who had grabbed her bum. Madam Politics got wind of it the next day, barked that she'd crush her brain into breadfruit, if she tried it again.

"Are we going to sleep in one bed?" she asked.

He coughed. "You are beautiful," he said.

Gulping down her drink, Angelica swore that she would find a way to get back at Madam Politics, but for now she'd lie beneath this man. Inert like a trunk.

"Forget all this talk about fashion designing."

"That's what I want to do."

"You're too young to keep dreaming, baby," Chinelo said.

"Girl, am I not too young to allow men to empty themselves into me?" Angelica said.

"Here, no one cares about what you wish to become. Make the money first. Waste it on your dreams afterwards."

Angelica brought out her notebook, thumbed through the pages scrawled with sketches she'd already drawn. "I am tired. So tired."

Chinelo smoothed her pleated skirt. Stretched her arms. Then twirled in front of the mirror.

"Because you act raw every time a man touches you. Act bold."

"I didn't come to Owerri to act bold for men."

Chinelo narrated how she wanted to train as a nurse, but couldn't pass any of the exams. She met a doctor who told her that he'd assist her to get into the General Hospital, even help her process some nursing admissions in America. She needed a quiet place she could study, so she left her aunt's place at Works Road. He sheltered her in his Boys' Quarters, gave her money. Brought her books on medicine. He didn't have any girlfriend so most nights they slept together.

"Why did you not stay?" Angelica said, crossly, and flung the notebook on the floor.

"How much did I have then?" Chinelo sat down. She soon sparred with the doctor, then one evening she returned from her job search; she saw her bag of clothing on the veranda. He had travelled, the security men said. "I wished I'd put rat poison in his drink," she mused, regretfully.

Then one day Chinelo saw a vacancy. Madam Politics looked at her, ran a hand over her backside, then smiled, and helped her secure a room in a shack, until she raised enough money to rent a one-bedroom.

"That's the brief of my life," Chinelo said, closing her eyes for a moment. "If that man who calls himself my father was sensible enough, I would have become a nurse."

Angelica remembered the face of Chinelo's father. Warped like an old leather bag. The widower loved pissing in the gutter with his trousers falling down his twine-like waist. Chinelo's mother had died of elephantiasis when she was barely five. A few persons said she must have stepped on juju in her farm and her limbs had turned elephant-size. No medicine man could cure her; she died wailing in her room while her husband got consumed by alcohol. Chinelo had acted out a fierce drama with her father, some years ago. When she came back one evening from where she worked in a drug store and found out he'd squandered her earnings, she had pushed him down, and then nobody saw her until last year.

Angelica was glad that her own father did not drink. He was only brainless; he believed money was more important than his family. She recalled how he had clutched his shorts when she told him that Chief could build a stadium in the village, and she still wouldn't marry a bullfrog!

"It's just God," Chinelo said. She slung her handbag over her shoulder, then got up. "I might not come back this evening." She spun round at the door. "I'm cool?" she asked.

Angelica replied, "Why don't you rest today?" Madam Politics had offered the girls a day off because she was a member of the funeral committee of a late senator.

"I have a target. If I fold my arms, will it materialize?"

"It doesn't matter how hard or long you work. God settles everybody in the end."

"Pastor Angelica!" Chinelo said. "Well, if you continue sleeping like an expectant woman, your breasts will fall."

Angelica lunged at her but paused from running into the door.

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Later in bed, flipping through a magazine with girls in backless tops and taut skirts, she calculated her savings for the past two months. Almost fifteen thousand, thanks to the tips from some drinkers. Five thousand more and she'd register at Geraldine. Though she knew that for some time now the sales girl routine left her feeling dog-tired whenever she came back home. She climbed out of the bed as she heard someone rapping on the door. "*Onye?*" she asked.

"It is me." She was the female student who lived downstairs, wearing short braids with flaxen ends, with a voice that sounded like a pigeon's coo.

Angelica opened the door. The girl was leaning against the frame.

"Hi," she cooed.

"Hello," Angelica answered.

"I see you are pleased." She sauntered in, and Angelica thought she had bow legs, but realized that it was some sort of fancy gait.

"May I sit down?"

"OK."

Angelica shut the door and sat down in the opposite chair, noticing the girl's shaved eyebrows penciled thick and black.

"Your sister has great taste; of course she dates men only," the girl cooed, scanning the room. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

Angelica listened as the girl complimented her attitude, then said that she'd never noticed her with any man since she moved into the building. She assumed the girl was implying that she was inexperienced: a plain rural girl. The girl moved over to her side. She draped an arm over her shoulder. "I've been watching you. You're different," the girl's voice charmed Angelica like music; she listened on, dumbly. "You and I don't like men. Men are selfish. Let's care for each other." She stroked Angelica's cheek with the back of her hand.

Angelica twisted her head sideways, shoved the girl backwards.

"Tough, I like that," the girl said, giggling.

"Leave this place," Angelica said, embarrassed.

"Some other time then." The girl strolled out of the room.

Madness, Angelica thought, clicking her fingers.

"I always felt you were arrogant. Wouldn't have come to your Madam's place again, if you'd refused me," he said, biting off a piece of his hamburger.

She focused on cutting up the greasy drumstick with a knife. It was tricky, so she picked it up, with her thumb and forefinger, slanted it to her open mouth, and drew a bite.

"You only act up to confuse people. I've watched you." He sipped his Mountain Dew.

"From your precious corner," she said.

"Bad girl, you knew and played with my feelings." He took a toothpick and stabbed at an onion ring. "I bled every night," he whispered.

She raised an eyebrow.

"You think I'm lying?"

She shook her head, remembering Chinelo had said he fitted the picture of a man who read in the candlelight. "Did you get those words from a text book?" she asked.

He chuckled. He tossed the toothpick out of the window. "You have a pink tongue, I like it," he said, and her nipples tingled. She reached for her Maltina.

Silence filled their table where they sat under the awning of an eatery. His eyes rested on her lips as Angelica munched meat. She had pitied him when he held her wrist, two days ago, as she neared the bar kitchen. Call me Ted, he'd told her. Then he begged, "Let me buy you snacks." After work, he escorted her to the junction where she boarded a taxi.

She knew he liked her, so she had sacrificed the church service to eat out with him, being Sunday - while she'd complained to Chinelo that since her sojourn in the city she'd lost her sense of godliness.

He glanced at his watch. "Feels like Cinderella," he said, wiping his mouth with the serviette.

"Me?" Angelica asked.

He told her about a young girl maltreated by her stepmother, but a godmother brought her to the man of her dreams - a prince, young and charming and rich!

"I am now Cinderella?" she said.

"No, but I feel tormented like the prince."

"Am I that mean?"

"You made me want to cry many a night," he said.

"Cry, cry baby," she sang.

He took her hand and pressed it against his cheek. Her buttocks throbbed as she imagined her mother's fond reaction when she would meet Ted.

The sky stood out like a lace, sequined with stars. The smell of noodles wafted around their table. She was aware of some nameless sensation leaching into her bones, suffusing her mind with a kind of dreaminess, casting an effervescent glow over her skin, thawing her cares, and she believed that this man could love her so, to buy her a Singer sewing machine.

He dropped her off. "Let me sleep well, my beautiful princess," he said as she slid out of his Bluebird.

"What did Cin-der-ella do?" she asked.

Ted stuck out his head. "Kissed him."

She looked around. Only a handful of girls sat in the balcony upstairs, while others lounged outside. The breeze rustled the voices in the corridor. No light in her room, which meant Angelica would sleep alone in the apartment, again.

"You're acting up, darling," he said, motioning her to his side.

Angelica bent forward, longing to feel his breath on her lips, but she withdrew and skipped upstairs. At the window, she peeked out as the car sped into the night. Then she kicked off her shoes and, laughing, tossed her weight into the bed.

Imagine a forest

Imagine a forest's

Beauty without trees, earth

Without moisture; imagine

A sky without clouds,

River without flow, sun

Without light; imagine

Night without the moon,

A room without hue, floor

Without footsteps; imagine

A bed without sheets,

Faucets without water, perfume

Without fragrance; imagine

Wine without flavour,

A kiss without warmth; desire

Cold as ash; imagine

Lips set without smile,

Your flesh shorn of fire, me

Without you; imagine

Boughs without leaves,

Full of wilted twigs: forests

In slow decay; imagine

Life.

*

What Colour Was the Sun?*(for Christianah Oluwasesin, teacher killed by fanatics in Gombe)*

What colour was the sun
when the school playground went wild –

the clouds flinched at the approach of dust,
the earth quaked beneath the crashing hooves.

What colour was the sun
when the wind moaned out its report of alarm –

they cornered you like mother hen,
hurled you to the gyrating ground.

What colour was the sun
when the cymbals of their voices clashed in the air –

their nostrils flared, the swords flashed,
their faces blazed, the flames billowed.

What colour was the sun –
was it blood? or blinding white?

*

I am What You Die For

I am what you die for –

the oil that you fight for
you kill for
die for

the gold that you fight for
you kill for
die for

the diamond that you fight for
you kill for
die for

the land that you fight for
you kill for
die for

the politics that you fight for
you kill for
die for

the religion that you fight for
you kill for
die for

the ideology that you fight for
you kill for
die for

I am not love
I am
Africa.

*

In Congo, 2003

Vultures circle overhead
Eager to pierce the bloated bellies

Tanks rumble like elephants
Eager to crush men and huts

Soldiers prowl back and forth
Eager to butcher another civilian

Little boy wears a face like mask
Eager to snatch the dead man's rifle.

From the poetry collection *Dirges of Barren Fields*

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