

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lagos smelt of nothing than itself. The air didn't change. It remained the same. Days run into nights and nights run into days. It had always been so and it would always be so. It would never change. With its millions of population parted in every corner of that largest city of Nigeria, its landscape seemed a little bit changed to Ife's eyes as she wasn't in years back. To her eyes, certain things seemed changed, shifted from their original places. Her Aunt Sade was a striking example. She no longer lived where she had been before. She moved.

"How did you do, Aunty?" Ife asked her one day after she had told her Aunt her whole narrative.

Aunt Sade looked at Ife and laughed.

"Daughter of wealth, be smart. Use your brain." She said. "I told you that I would show those people I'm a strong woman"

"Aunt, this is not the answer to my question oh," Ife said.

"Maybe I am not telling you what you want," Aunt Sade said.

"Ahn-ahn, Aunty."

"They thought I was a small woman. But I wasn't," she said. "They thought I would beg men to marry me so that I could take care of my children after Christopher died. Or they thought I would spread my legs. But they were wrong. I struggled hard. It was not easy. But I won. I owned shops, and this house, I owned it, too. And I pay my children's education. I hear people talking rubbish. They are saying it is his money I stole when he was alive. But I ignore them."

A silence fell on them as though something fell from the ceiling and silenced them. A silence that also said that something was not said the very day Ife was back, a silence that said something, a word, an apology should be talked.

Ife watched Aunt Sade sipping playfully the mango juice one of her stewards who sold at one of her shops at Oshodi market place brought her three days ago. Then her mind switched back to her stewards at Akpro-Misséréké back in Benin Republic.

She woke from her memory, her eyes still set on Aunt Sade.

"I'm so sorry, Aunt," she said and the almost sepulchral silence was broken. Aunt Sade put the bottled juice down on the carpeted table and looked up at her.

"Why are you sorry?" Aunt Sade asked, pretending to be a bit angry. Her tone was harsh. She took back the bottled mango juice and sipped a gulp. The liquid trickled down her throat and you could see her Adam's apple.

"I didn't call you for years and I didn't pay you any visit," Ife said in an apologetic tone.

"You didn't want to," Aunt said. "When life is good for people they forget you. But when life is bad they come back to you. Life is so," she added. Ife felt deeply hurt. Teardrops trickled down her cheeks.

"I'd wanted to call you. I'd wanted to. But that number you gave me never worked. I tried it so many a time," she paused. Her voice was shaky. "I'm so sorry. I went through hard times."

Aunt Sade left her seat and went to sit beside Ife. She pulled her right arm on her shoulders and her left arm on her thighs.

"*Ma jowo, omobinrin oro mi*, excuse me, my daughter of wealth," she said. Her eyes were pleading. "I didn't mean to hurt you. You know, sometimes, devil enters my head, Satan enters my mind and I say rubbish things to my good people. Forgive me, Ife," she said and started praising Ife with their panegyric. The dark on her face vanished. There was light on face now. She smiled. Aunt Sade wiped away the tears on Ife's face. There was happiness. She felt home again.

“How did you come here? How did you know I live here?” Aunty Sade asked then.

“When I came I went to your last place. But I couldn’t see you. There were a man and a woman on the gate. The man seemed not to like visitors. But thank God they pitied me and gave me your address,” Ife said.

“It’s Adekunle and his wife, they bought the house after my in-laws said that I was not my husband’s legitimate wife,” Aunty Sade said. Another silence followed. But this one was different now.

“You look different, Ife,” Aunty Sade said. “Let me touch your belly and diagnose you.” She let her left hand travel on Ife’s belly as though she was checking something. She looked up at Ife and smiled. Ife returned the smile. They were happy.

“There is a little something inside your belly,” she said.

“*Ahn-ahn* Aunty, are you a doctor?” Ife asked her and they burst in laughter. Afterwards Aunty Sade touched her breasts, still up and provocative.

“They are no longer what they were,” Aunty Sade said. “But they are still up. Men do not like to see these ripe fruits,” she added with a sarcastic tone and they laughed.

“Then what about Loko and his family?” Aunty Sade asked. Ife was startled by the question. They didn’t mention Loko since she came back home.

“They are fine, Aunty,” Ife replied. She and Enagnon visited them twice when they had started dating and thrice after they were married. They heard of her in-laws chasing her away after Enagnon was dead and wondered why she didn’t run to them.

They were still talking, Aunty Sade sipping her mango juice when her daughters, Iyabo and Subusola made their way into the yard through the gate. It wasn’t locked. They walked past the avocado tree planted in the middle of the yard. They came back from school. Both were in a private school. They were beautifully dressed in their school uniform. They had become what men call *Ready to be Tasted*. Iyabo, the elder, she was the exact teenage copy of her mother, gorgeous, Black-skinned, her hair tied up behind her neck and fell on her back. Her cheeks were like riper avocado, beautiful things that wanted to be kissed. Subusola, the younger sister, was strong-boned like her father. Aunty Sade called her “*Oko mi*, my husband”. They were well educated and did well at school.

“*Awon oba binrin mi ti pada de*, my princesses are back,” Aunty Sade said when they entered the living room. They bowed to greet Ife as a well-educated girl did traditionally.

“Yes, these are my princesses, my future, my tomorrow. I won’t let any man suck them provided they become something first, Big Women like Big Men in this Lagos. Or you two people, will you bring shame on me?”

“No, mummy,” they chorused, smiling. Aunty Sade hugged them.

Ife imagined her Aunty going out behind her daughters protecting from men. She smiled. She watched daughters and mother in admiration. She, too, would become mother soon. She did it, my Aunty did it. She has won. She owned herself. She pays her daughters’ education. She has changed and things have changed with her. And me, what’s of me? What’s of my future baby? What’s of its future? How will I bring it up alone in this expensive Lagos of ours? How will things go for me? How will I do? I have to do something so that my future baby could have a good education as my Aunty’s daughters. I have to be a *Woman*. I have to own *myself* as my Aunty owned herself. Such thoughts were rioting in her mind.

The following months when Ife’s belly started bulging she began to feel like a burden to her Aunty. Aunty Sade didn’t mind taking care of Ife and her future baby. For, after all, Ife was her brother’s sole daughter. And she would not mind taking care her, her pregnancy, and until she had her child. But Ife no longer felt at peace from the moment her belly began to take size. She didn’t want to be under her Aunty’s responsibility any longer. She wanted to leave, she wanted to go somewhere, anywhere. She wanted to own herself. She wanted to be a *Woman* now. Provided she had her commerce, so as to pay her future baby’s education. At least she still

had more than one hundred thousand naira under her clothes in her luggage, the last account she got from her stewards before Kpossou forbade them to visit her, for she was a witch that killed their bother. She wanted to bring it up alone whatever the sacrifices. "Soon I'll have my child and I couldn't permit myself to stay here any longer, with my Aunty looking after me and my child, it's a shame. I have to go," she usually said to herself, inwardly.

They sat in the dining room around the dining table eating coconut rice and chicken Aunty Sade cooked herself. She had a cook, a young man about twenty two called Aremou. He had tried to have a love affair with Iyabo, the elder daughter. "I didn't hire you to sleep with my daughter," Aunty Sade told Aremou one day and sacked him the day after.

As they sat still around the dining table eating with a silence hanging over them, Ife seemed absorbed by a deep thought. She would turn this or that thought in her mind or think of this or that, or remember this or that or spoon a little rice, eat it, and wait for a while before spooning another.

She woke her mind from wandering through thoughts, so many of them still fighting inside her. She raised her head and noticed Aunty Sade's eyes on her.

Aunt Sade's daughters were chewing enjoyably the coconut rice with the chicken and bottled Fanta. She sighed.

"What's the matter?" she asked her.

Ife seemed not to hear the question, although she was looking Aunty Sade straight in eyes.

"Ife, what's the matter?" she repeated. You're not eating your food," Aunty Sade added. Ife didn't give her aunt another chance to talk before saying "I want to leave. I have to go." Aunty Sade's eyes stood wide open, her eyebrows raised, and her lips apart.

"Ife, *Kini o nso*, what are you talking? Go where?"

"Somewhere, anywhere. Soon I'll have my baby. And I won't have you always look after me and my child. I don't want to be a burden for you any longer. I've been living here for months now. I have to be myself. I have to own myself. I have to move, Aunty," Ife said, her voice shaky. The words came out of her mouth one after the other as though she planned them to be so. She didn't let the tears that formed in the corners of her eyes fall.

Days later when Aunty Sade helped her rent a two-room house near Oshodi bus station, just two miles away from her house, she told her that she didn't want her to be so far away from her. She also helped her set her kiosk at the bus station near Mama Abby's, her neighbor. They walked home together after sale. Even after Enagnon was born months later, she, Mama Abby, and the other tenants gave Ife their old clothes. "*E dupe. Olorun bukun fun o*, thank you, God bless you," Ife said to them.

On evenings when Ife and Mama Abby came back from their kiosks and after mama Abby's husband, Abby's father, Souley, came back from work, because he was a driver, Abby and the children of the other tenants trooped around his father listening to stories. He liked telling them stories. But Mama Abby kept questioning the originality of those stories. He would be telling one story and skip it and start another one and would be going on and on. Or he would tell a story of a driver who disappeared mysteriously during the collision of his bus against another, or a stubborn woman who smacked a driver because his bus pushed her tray down. He would tell stories about a giant beast that came from overseas and swallowed all African raw materials. The children would be laughing and shouting as though they quite understood what the so called giant beast that came from overseas looked like.

Souley always kept his cap on his head even if he came back from work, until Mama Abby got irritated one day.

On one such evening after stories were told and evening meal was served and children retired in their mothers' legs, and the moon brightening the darkened yard, Mama Abby

watched Ife singing songs to the little Enagnon on her lap, who was already three years old and started walking.

“This name doesn’t sound Nigerian,” Mama Abby said.

Ife didn’t answer and mama Abby didn’t know whether Ife heard what she said or not.

“Your child’s name doesn’t sound Nigerian,” mama Abby repeated.

Ife sighed. “Yes, it’s a Beninese name, his father’s first name,” Ife said.

“Why did you give your child a Beninese name instead of a Nigerian one?” Mama Abby asked.

“To preserve his father’s line. I don’t want his father’s line to disappear. He loved me too much.” Ife said.

“And what does it mean, your child’s name?” Mama Abby asked.

“It means “*It will be good*,”” Ife replied.

The name sounded prophetic to Mama Abby. She watched the child on Ife’s lap and smiled.

“It’s a good name. It sounds prophetic. It really will be good. Everything good will come. He will be a Big Man,” she paused. “I didn’t know Beninese have such good names.”

“They do,” Ife said.

“I’ve never been in this country,” Mama Abby said. “A cousin of mine lives there. She marries a French teacher who came here for teaching and they left together later.”

Ife said nothing. The little Enagnon was asleep now on her lap. They were alone in the courtyard, talking.

“But na those Beninese people be saying Nigeria no be good country, *oh*. But they go come here. They dey come here for business. Some live in this *no be good Nigeria* and never go home. I no know why they say Nigeria no be good, *oh*,” mama Abby shifted from Yoruba and broke in her Pidgin English.

Ife raised her head and watched her neighbor straight in eyes. But Mama Abby couldn’t see her questioning eyes although the yard was brightened by the moonlight.

“My late husband had never said that,” Ife said.

Mama Abby couldn’t see the teardrops from Ife’s eyes down her cheeks. And it was from that night that Mama Abby realized that Ife was a widow. Because Ife had never told her, because she had never wanted to, and because Mama Abby, too, had never asked after Ife’s husband. She felt sorry for not asking her. That evening Ife told her what had happened. They became closer than ever.

Aunty Sade visited the following month, on a calm Sunday after mass, an afternoon. Ife and mama Abby didn’t go to their kiosks on Sundays.

That afternoon was different. The sun didn’t shine as it used to. The sky seemed cloudy as if it would pour water from its vast and infinite belly down the ground. But it wouldn’t. Not until Aunty Sade would leave. She came with her daughters on different *okada*. They walked in the courtyard after the *okada* men drove off. The little Enagnon, as handsome as his late father, was playing with other children in the sand. Abby was sitting at the doorway of their living room. His father wasn’t at home. His mother was lying on a mat in the living room taking siesta. There was a man, tall and bald, standing at Abiola’s living room doorway, Ife’s other neighbor and shouting, “I say I go get my money before I go. I say I go get my money sharp sharp before I go.” It was the landlord. Abiola owed him three months-rent.

Aunty Sade and her daughters said *Ekaaro*, good afternoon. The landlord didn’t respond. Only Abiola and Abby did. The little Enagnon ran to them and Iyabo picked him up. “Good afternoon Aunty Sade,” he said in English.

“Good afternoon my Big Man. How are you? You are growing fast-fast. Where is your mummy?” Ife heard her voice and stepped out. She bowed and Aunty Sade praised her. She

always did that. That custom of bowing and being praised. Iyabo and Subusola bowed to greet Ife at turn.

“My sisters, *bawo ni o se wa*, how are you? You are beautiful and grown up. Soon your suitors will come with big-big bride price,” Ife teased and they smiled.

“Not until they become Big Something, like Big *Oga* in this Lagos,” Aunt Sade said and they all laughed. But Ife felt bitter and sad at the same time inside her. And me, what has become of me? I should have become A Big Something or A Big Somebody as my aunt said to her daughters. I failed my life. I failed my late parents. I wish I wouldn’t fail my son. She thought. Regret and self-blame rose inside her.

As she led the way into the living room she spread a mat on ground and Aunt Sade and her daughters sat on it. Iyabo put the little Enagnon on her lap. He rushed his dusty hands on her breasts, laughing and showing his gum.

Ife fetched water for them in a bowl. She bowed, handing Aunt Sade the bowled water. She retired in the backyard and lit the oil stove and started the cooking. Iyabo and Subusola went to help her while Aunt Sade was playing with the little Enagnon. Iyabo and Subusola washed the plates while Ife was cooking.

They sat all around a plate of *jollof* rice with a fishless soup and ate in silence.

“He is growing fast,” Aunt Sade said after they had finished eating.

“Yes. I’m waiting for him to reach five before sending him to school. He will read more books like his late father,” Ife said in a high-accented-Yoruba.

“He will become a Big Lagosian *Oga*,” Aunt Sade said, smiling.

“Yes,” Ife said.

“Then how is the kiosk?” Aunt Sade asked.

Ife shrugged, to mean it was so-so.

“It is not giving too much but I manage,” Ife said.

Before they left Aunt Sade slipped some naira notes in the little Enagnon’s hand.

“Mummy, are they father’s people?” the little Enagnon asked after Aunt Sade and her daughters had left.

“No, my darling. They aren’t,” Ife said. She always said “Your father went to visit his ancestors,” whenever he asked, “Mummy, where is father?”

Two years later when Enagnon started school, the same school as Abby, Ife started worrying. Her only kiosk could no longer cover Enagnon’s school fees and their daily needs. Then she worried; she worried not only about her son’s school fees, their daily needs, but also about the child’s incessant demands of his father as well. “Mummy, where is daddy?” he would ask. Even after he reached secondary one, he came home one day thinking about a poem, Birago Diop’s *Breaths* he read in a book her mother bought for him.

“Then where do people go after they die? Where do they live and how do they live after death? Then where is father since it is said that dead are not dead, that they are living around us? Where are those ancestors he went to visit, mummy?” Enagnon asked his mother.

Ife watched her son in admiration, the perfect copy of his father, her pride. There were tears in her eyes. She didn’t know what answer to give to her child. She cradled him closer. They were sitting on the mat spread on ground, leaning against the wall after the evening meal, a silence hanging over them, the oil lamp lit. He was smart and doing well at school. He always came first since primary school. He promised his mother to work harder until he got harmed because he hadn’t known his father, because his mother was suffering, and because a pitiless poverty was hanging over them. Sometimes he would walk to school to save money.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The sun was going down and the dark was descending little by little on Azohouè Carrefour. The traffic was going a little heavy and there was no policeman in the middle of the crossroad to give direction to the motorcyclists and car drivers now. But they seemed disciplined. Some would wait until others made their way before they drove off.

On one side of the road was a woman, not tall, black-skinned, a scarf tied around her head, her wrapper knotted at the side of her waist. She was selling boiled cassava and bean and palm oil. Her customers called her *tout chaud* or Mama-Joe because her first born was called Joseph. Every evening her devoted customers clustered around tables, each with their plates of boiled cassava and bean mingled with palm oil, dipping the boiled cassava in the bean and swallowing it. Her customers liked her for her food was tasteful. At her left side there was another woman. She was selling fried fish. Three other women had their stalls there with different products. The most respected among them was Mama-Joe because she was old but her food tasted good. A few yards away from that small market where *zémidjan* men clustered every evening to gossip, there was a restaurant from where echoed Babadaho's *Tôlivi hunxwan yonsí*. On the other side of the road was another woman, about sixty, selling cans of fuel, not far away from Ife's old shop where she had been with her neighbors Sisolé, Rabiath and the Gunnu woman before she got married with Enagnon. Now that Enagnon was dead and she had been chased away, Kpossou had become the new boss. Enagnon's properties were shared and he had received the biggest share. He had insisted on going in Nigeria with Enagnon to meet his suppliers two or three times before he was dead.

Now he had become the new boss, a boss different from the former ones, the couple Enagnon-Ife. He had become rich, a rich lazy man. His brothers inherited the lands Enagnon and Ife had bought together and he himself, had taken control over the trade. All the shops belonged to him now.

The employees feared him because he never joked. Some weeks after Ife had left he halved all their wages. They grew angry and wanted to go on strike. They chose Sèmako to lead the trade union. But soon they gave up their strike because they were threatened of being sacked and replaced.

"There is no job in the county. Even government work is rare. With one single mistake civil servants are fired. There is unemployment in the country. Can you not see that?" he had told them one day. And as they seemed not to hear him, he went on, "Instead of managing this little something you get as wage for this nonsense job you do and take care of your wives and children, you want to go on strike. Other people are looking for job."

He had married two other wives, all widows. He had a special taste for them. He paid big bride price for each. Dodji was the first to come with a ten-year-old boy and Dansi came next. She was childless.

They were four now, his wives. But each of them had to care for their lives and children.

The *Hilander* descended slowly from the tarmac and headed towards the floor lamps that shone in the darkness ahead as the night just enveloped the whole village. The shops which had become his were just some yards away from mama-Joe's stall and her neighbor's. They were closed and the workers there had left.

He drove past Ife's old neighbors' shops. Sisolé and Rabiath were there, about to close their shops. The Gunnu woman had already closed her shop and left with her child. Sisolé and

Rabiath were already married and had two children each; Sissolé married her Ahovi man and Rabiath married a Muslim.

They saw the car driving past and recognized it. The car wasn't his. It was Enagnon's. But he had inherited it with the house just after Ife had been chased away.

They resented him as he drove past. They had always resented him. So many people knew him, especially women, for his wrongdoings. But he was feared. Nobody dared to challenge him for he was friend with the corrupt superintendent. Once, he had employed a twenty-one-year old woman as his secretary in a shop at Djèvali, the woman he wanted to make his *sugar girl* as he was a *sugar daddy* himself. The woman had refused to go in his bed and was devoid her pay for months and sacked afterwards.

His fame started spreading throughout the whole village from the day he had been to Tolikukanwé festival. He had been nicknamed *money pourer*. He had poured money on the face of all artists who chanted his praise on the crowded platform that day. He was dancing, swaying from side to side in his *agbada* suit bigger than himself, with his *gobi* on his head.

Rabiath and Sissolé were still there as the car had driven by. Rabiath Spoke Toligbé and Gungbé now, but still mixed with her Yoruba accent. She had been to the Cultural Center for Teaching and Promotion of Local Languages.

"You are not getting rid of your Yoruba accent now that you are speaking our languages," Sissolé had told her.

"I can't. This is my language and I can't leave it even though I speak others," Rabiath had said. Once, at the Center, she had mispronounced one word and their teacher, a woman, got alarmed and rebuked her. "There is no *r* sound in Toligbé. The *r* turns *l* in Toligbé. *Ômon nukunu djè émè yà*, do you understand?"

"*N'mon nukunu djè émè*, I do understand," Rabiath had replied.

They had closed their shops now and stood face to face, each holding their two children in both hands.

"The country is dry. People are not coming to buy," Rabiath said.

"It's everywhere. There is no money in the country. Sales are not giving too much but we are managing," Sissolé said. There was a silence. The traffic was heavy now. More people clustered at Mama-Joe's place to buy their boiled cassava and bean. She liked the night sale. She was an independent woman.

A Nigerian music was echoing from the Igbo man's shop just some yards away from Mama-Joe and her neighbors. Flavour's *Baby Oku* was being played loudly: *You set my soul on fire. You are my heart desire, o*. The man was sitting on a stool on the terrace, nodding to the sound of the music. The hair braid salon next to him was closed. Most of the shops at Azohouè Carrefour were closed now as the whole village was moving slowly in the belly of the dark of the night.

"The woman over there, her food must taste good. See how people clustered," Rabiath said to break the silent.

"Ah, Rabi, you are being jealous," Sissolé said laughingly.

"I'm not being jealous. I'm just stating a fact," Rabiath said.

"The fact is that she is selling food and food must be eaten. Stomach doesn't know "there is no money". It has to be filled," Sissolé said. There was another silence, shorter than the first.

"It's years since Ife was chased away by those cruel men, her in-laws," Sissolé said.

"Ah, what could she do? She is a woman. We can do nothing against them," Rabiath said.

"Of course we can. Ife could go to the police station to show the papers of the house, all those lands and the shops."

"Which police station? Do you forget that this Kpossou is friend with the chief there? And this chief is corrupt to the soul. What else could she do?"

“She could have been to the Court. This Kpoussou should have married someone like me.”

“What would you do then?” Rabiath asked her.

“I would castrate him,” Sissolé said and they burst in laughter.

“They own us,” Rabiath said at last.

“No man owns me. And no man will own me. I’m married. But I’m not owned. Before we got married, I decided that our children bear my surname.”

“Did he agree?”

“It was not that easy,” she replied. There was a silence again. She didn’t say whether her husband agreed or not.

“You are a kind of *revolutionary*,” Rabiath said and there was silence again.

The road was crowded, the traffic became heavier now as motorcyclists and car drivers went in all directions and as if deads were out of their grave to fill the road. But Mama-Joe’s clients were leaving one by one now. Her neighbors had left. The Igbo man closed his shop. He didn’t stay as long as usual tonight. The woman selling cans of fuel on the other side of the road had left. Sissolé and Rabiath and their children were alone talking in front of their shops. “Maybe she will come back with her people,” Rabiath said at last. The two women said to each other “good night” and carried their children and parted.

Kpoussou drove into the compound after he went in a restaurant where, sitting in front of bottles of beer, asked a servant, a woman, about twenty three; “How much is your merchandise?” He was a little drunk. The woman didn’t answer. She was a Togolese. He wanted to touch her right thigh and she slapped his hand off. “I’m not a merchandise to be bought,” the woman had said and left. He had paid for the bottles of beer and driven off angrily.

He parked the car under the mango tree. The compound was silent except for the rustling of the tree’s leaves by the wind and only night spirits seemed to be talking. His wives and his brothers and their wives were asleep. He no longer lived in the compound with them; Enagnon had driven Ife there once or twice to introduce her to his brothers and their wives. He lived now in the house Enagnon and Ife had built after she was chased away.

He marched towards Dansi’s room. He reached there and knocked loudly at the door. The woman didn’t open the door at first. He was still angry against the barmaid who didn’t let him touch her thigh. He knocked loudly again. One, two, and three times. She still didn’t open the door. Then he broke in. The woman was lying on one side of the mat, asleep. She had come back from wandering throughout the village with her tray of plantains, exhausted. An oil lamp was lit. There were two stools; one bearing two bowls of water and two plates of *owo* and palm soup. He sat on the other stool and dipped his right hand in one of the bowled water. He ate silently, eyeing the woman lying on the mat. He finished eating and washed his hand and headed towards her. He pulled down his trouser and stood on his knees as though he wanted to perform a ritual, a prayer. She sensed there was something beside her and opened her eyes now. “I’m tired,” was the only thing she could say.

“Who are you to talk to me like this?” he roared. “I took you as a second hand thing and paid a great deal of bride price and you don’t have to deny me what is mine.” He unwrapped her and turn her back and entered her and sodomized her thereafter.

She was crying. She could only cry to sooth her pain. She had to obey. Because she was the woman and he was the man. Because she was the wife and he was the husband. Because she was the thing and he was the being. Because she was the servant and he was the master. Because she was the owned and he was the owner. Because she was the powerless and he was the powerful. Nothing more. She was childless. She was said to commit several abortions. Some said her enemies tied her womb within a tree. Other said she might have been promised to a deity because her mother couldn’t conceive. So they promised to give the child to the deity after they had been to a powerful witch doctor, a *bokônon* who promised them a miracle.

He finished having his way with her and pulled up his trouser and dashed out of the room, leaving the door wide open and climbed on the car and started it and pressed on the accelerator and drove off.

She was alone in her world now, her world of loneliness. No messiah existed in her world now. She no longer believed in the coming back a messiah to save her from her world of loneliness, and give her a decent burial when she would be dead. She thought she deserved what was happening to her because she was an old woman. Nobody cared about her because she was an old person. Enagnon was dead. Ife she considered her daughter in law had been chased away. Sourou the vidomègon boy had left. Children no longer came for stories because they sensed tiredness in her entire body. She walked on three feet now. There was no daughter in law to wash her dirty clothes, to draw her water from the well, no grandchild to look after her, she did the washing and drawing the water herself although she had grown older. Life had become an inevitable weight to bear, a cross to bear, a weight to lift, that made her bones crack. Sometimes she would remember Enagnon and Ife's last visit, one week before he was dead and smile although her inside boiled.

Enagnon had given her some money to start a small trade and have her stall among the gossiping women in front of the gate of the compound. That day she had hugged Ife and didn't want to let go. Ife was her Virgin Mary who would give birth to her messiah who would save her world from loneliness and give her decent burial when she would be dead. Now Enagnon was dead and Ife was gone. She thought her hope was gone forever, too. But still she would not die. Death would have to wait before taking her away. Sometimes there would be a tiny bit of hope that raised inside her, that her messiah would come back. She didn't mean her children who had gone abroad. She didn't know where that hope raised from, too. But even in that unbearable loneliness, something told her that her messiah would come back before she would join her ancestors in the other world.

Now she was sitting on a three-legged low stool in the small market with her stall of palm nut in front her. There was a tray of charcoal tied in small bags, supported by a four-legged stool beside her. It was hers, too. Naked children, half naked children and naked belly children were playing hide and seek. Others were running on the untarred road while their mothers were shouting on them. A mother, one of the small market women pulled her child's ears with both hands for saying "*Tènon yômè*, your mother's pussy" to another child. "I didn't give you this education. Where did you find those words, *hìn*? You are watching *gbléwa* on TV, *abi*? You are doing *gbléwa*, *abi*?" the woman had said.

The smell of dried and roasted fish and roasted maize was hanging heavy in the air. Clients were running in and out. Some would bargain about the price of something, low the price down and leave it and go to another stall. "Go to Akpro-Misséréte market place to buy it with this price," the seller would say angrily.

The old woman was still sitting on the low stool, sucking her cheeks, her third foot near her. She seemed absorbed. The last rays of the sun were setting and the dark seemed to be descending. Her eyes were set on a cock running after a hen. She shifted her eyes from them and set them now on a mother hen pulling her wings over its chicks and the memory of her dead children and the two left who had gone abroad and didn't come back so many years ago flashed across her mind. Then her mind switched back to Enagnon and Ife. She didn't turn her eyes from the mother hen. An eagle was hanging in the air. It couldn't come down because the mother hen was there, protecting its chicks. Her face darkened. She thought she failed her life. She thought she failed her late husband. She thought she failed her dead children. She thought she failed her ancestors. She felt guilty. Self blame rose inside her. There were tears in her eyes to flow down. She didn't let them to. She held them tight. Sadness, desolation and hope were

rioting inside her while other thoughts were crowding in her mind. She didn't turn her eyes from the mother hen protecting her chicks with her wings from the eagle hanging in the air. Slightly, two teardrops slid from her eyes down her sucking cheeks. She wiped them away with one knot of her wrapper with her shaking right hand. She had grown really old. But she would not die now.

The other women didn't notice her. They were now engaged in their usual gossip, talking their usual talk: a man who didn't play a husband role, a girl who ran from home to join her lover because she was tied by *obo*, a woman who squeezed her husband's testicles because he cheated on her, a man who came back home drunk and tired and couldn't touch his wife, children of today who no longer listened to their parents, who ran into corners and showed one another their inner part and *bla bla bla*.

The old woman seemed not to be interested in their gossips. They were not of her world. She was not of their age and they were not of hers. They never mentioned her in their gossips. Some of the women even protected their children from going to her, because, they argued, that she was a witch, and that was why she had eaten her husband and six of her children, and that was why the two left had left her alone and run to America or France.

The mother hen rose and its chicks followed her towards a dustbin. The old woman's eyes followed them until they disappeared from her sight. "The hen has many children, then," she daid inwardly. Now she gazed at the gossiping women. They were talking and laughing at something only God knew. She turned her eyes from them and shook her head. They were from different world.

The whole Gbèdji was in the belly of the dark now. But stars came out and shone brightly in the sky while the moon was out of its horizon, too. The moon and the stars seemed to act intimately. The stars circled around the moon. Though the moon and the stars shining up in the sky, oil lamps were lit on the stalls in the small market place hither and thither. Clients were still running in and out. The women's gossips were still on. But this was nothing compared to Akpro-Misséréké market place.

Children retired from their various games now. Some, tired from their incessant expeditions and asleep, clang to their mother's thighs. The little ones were clung to their mother's backs while others were sucking their breasts. And others were helping their mothers for the sale. The traffic on the untarred road was free. Motorcyclists seemed to forget about the existence of that road at night. But one would drive past once in a while.

The old woman raised her head and looked up in the sky and saw the moon encircled by the stars. "The moon, too, has many children," she said to herself. And she, where were her children? Of course they were dead, six of them. And the two left had gone far, very far away from home. She looked down now, after watching the moon and the stars in the sky for a long while. There was a darkened-face boy, about fourteen in front of her. It was her last client of the night.

"*Amun naho kon odé*, what do you want to buy?" she asked the boy, her voice shaky. The air was cold. The boy fingered the charcoal stall. He handed her a coin of two hundred cfa and picked one sack of charcoal. She knotted the money in one corner of her wrapper and sat back on her stool. She didn't wait any longer before covering her stalls with a mat and entered the compound.

The market place became empty now. The other market women had left, too, their children lining behind them, other clung to their mother's back. They had to prepare the dinner for their husbands and nourish their hungry children.

The crickets' incessant chanting echoed in the market place and the night spirits seemed to invade the place. The wind whistled and the night spirits seemed to get along with it. The crickets would stop their chanting for seconds or so and start it again and it would be going on

and on, and on and on until it would be morning time and their chanting would stop. And the sun would raise from its remote horizon. And another day would start. The small market place would be crowded by the women with usual gossips. Naked children, half naked children and naked belly children would be playing hide and seek. Clients would be running in and out. The old woman would sit on her three-legged low stool before her stalls, her third foot parked beside her. And the sun would set again and the night would come. The stars would come out and shine brightly in the sky encircling the moon out of its horizon, too. And the oil lamps would be lit on the stalls. And the women would leave with their children lining behind them and others would be clung on their mother's back. The place would become empty again. And the crickets' incessant chanting would be going on and on and the night spirits would invade the place and the wind would whistle and stand on the side of the night spirits and they would get along with each other. And it would go on, on and on...

The borders were locked now.

Kpossou's real descent into hell started some weeks after Nigerian borders were blockaded on Benin Republic and other nearby countries. Sales didn't go as they used to. The trade was collapsing. Lorries went in Nigeria and couldn't cross the borders back. Money was no longer coming as it used to, because people were not buying too much. He started accusing his workers of stealing him. One afternoon after shops were closed at Akpakanmè, but not many people came to buy that day, he had visited the local chief. The trade was going down and there was no other way to set it right. So he had been to the local chief so that he could find false witnesses so he could sell out the properties. He didn't have any paper. Ife had taken everything back to Nigeria. So he would bribe the local chief.

He drove past Akpro-Misséréte market place, slowly. He opened the front door's window to let the night air in. The sun had already set and the blanket of the dark had covered the place. But oil lamps were lit and put on stalls. There were lights in some shops. And others didn't have.

The market place was crowded. Clients were running in and out. Voices of clients and sellers buzzed out of the market to the other side of the road, highly lighted by the floor lamps, where women were lined for the night sale. *Zémidjan* men clustered in a corner waiting for clients for the night drive. They would reach anyone who passed by and grab their arm and ask "*Mí djéyi wè*, are you leaving? My drive is safe and doesn't cost too much even at night." Not far from their corner was a Nigerien, selling roasted *suya* in cement paper, whose smell hung heavy in the air.

The traffic was not as heavy as it used to be. The young moon was out of its horizon and as bright as ever. People were still running in and out of the market place. Voices were still buzzing out of there to other side of the road. It had always been so in Akpro-Misséréte market place every night. Some would bargain about the price of this or that product, low it down, leave this or that stall and go to another one and the same process would be going on and on. "Come and buy my fish with your nonsense money. *Adjotô*, thief," a roasted fish seller would say.

He parked the car in front of an iron-gate. Oil lamps were hanging on the wall. The gate was open. He made his way into the house. He didn't knock. The man, the local chief, a chocolate-skinned man was sitting on a wooden chair on the terrace with his round naked-belly. A slight smile appeared on the side of his lips when he saw Kpossou step in. He knew why he had come. And kpossou, too, knew why he was smiling. So they didn't waste time any longer. He pulled out an envelope from the right pocket of his *boumba* suit and handed him. He didn't count. He knew how much it was in the stamped envelope. Fifty thousand fcfa to provide him

with false witnesses and false papers for the sale of Enagnon's properties. He didn't wait any longer. He dashed out of the house as though haunted by a night spirit for what he did. He climbed on the car and started it and drove home.

Then two months later, the months after which he had sunk in poverty, the months after which money was gone, the months after which things had fallen apart, the months after which he had sacked all the employees because he could no longer pay their wages, the months after which he had reopened his work shop because he had closed it for he had become rich, the months after which things could no longer be what they had been after Enagnon was dead and Ife was accused of witch and was chased away and their properties had been taken, the months after which Toviho and the second apprentice had returned to the apprenticeship because their boss had reopened the workshop, the months after which he had taken money from El hadj Amidou and didn't do his work... he returned to the local chief. Now he had gone with his brothers. They, too, wanted to sell out their part of the share they had received from Enagnon's properties.

The *Hilander* was parked in front of the iron-gate. The hair braiding salon at the gate was open. Trays of fried plantains and cassava flour lined ahead.

He honked and the gate swung opened. A little boy was standing there. They came out of the car and trooped into the house. The sunlight was flaming and burned heavily under their feet.

The local chief was sitting on a four-legged low stool, holding some papers. He had got them signed by the required false witnesses. His eyebrows cocked and a slight smile showed on the side of his lips when he saw them step in. He knew they would come and he knew why they had come. He was used to unfair land business.

They sat on a wooden bench facing him. They didn't waste time because there was no time to waste. Kpossou handed him an envelope full of cfa notes.

"The money you are giving me is too small," he said after he finished counting. A silence hung over them for a while. An unfamiliar smell hung from the pigpen over the house. They struggled to breath. The local chief was used to it. He breathed it easily.

"The perjurers must have a big sum of money. You know it is a risky job. I met a big deal of troubles to have those papers signed. And the superintendent of the police station is making trouble. You know he is protecting us from going into jail. So he needs his commission, too," he added. Kpossou nodded approvingly on behalf of his brothers.

"The rest of the money will come once the job is finished," he said at last. "You know the shops are no longer selling too much since Nigerian borders are blockaded. So...," his tone was pleading. "Don't worry for the superintendent. I'll go to see him myself. We are friends." They left afterwards. The deal was sealed.

The car and the house were the last to be sold out. Then Kpossou had come back in the compound to live in Enagnon's two-room house, where he had lived. No single land was left. Nobody could tell where all the money from the sale of Enagnon's properties had gone. His workers were sacked without being paid. They became jobless. Some converted in *zémidjan* driving. Others converted in smuggling across Nigeria. But few among them didn't take this risk of being shot by Nigerian soldiers for crossing Nigeria through shortcut because the borders were blockaded and they couldn't go the right way. So they went in *zémidjan* driving, too.

Kpossou's wives didn't stand on his side. They never did. But they couldn't speak out. They dared not to.

Ife had come realize that it had never been easy and it would never be easy for a woman, a widow without a steady job, to bring a child up in Lagos. *Lagos is expensive*. As the saying goes. And it had become more expensive, things had worsened, things would no longer be what they were for her and her son, since the borders were locked. Rice for example cost more than what it cost before.

Both countries suffered much when the borders were locked. Beninese cursed President Buhari and Dangote and even Patrice Talon. They accused Dangote of being a heartless capitalist. Because, they said, it was he who urged President Buhari to lock the borders so that he could sell his products. They accused Patrice Talon of being too stubborn, selfish, that he could have been to the Nigerian President, Muhamadu Buhari to negotiate with him so that the borders could be unlocked or seek another way out. But another group of Beninese, those who supported the government would say:

“Nigeria is a country. Benin, too, is a country. Nigeria is a sovereign State. Benin is a sovereign State as well. President Muhamadu Buhari is a president. And Patrice Talon is a president, too. Our President is not going to bow before anybody. We deserve respect. We will resist Nigeria. We know how to adapt such situations. President Muhamadu Buhari cannot just decide in a manner that is one-sided to lock the borders on his neighboring countries because of only one person. Nigeria needs Benin and Benin needs Nigeria. Nigeria is big, but we are not small. Benin is not small. We will resist. We will not die.”

There was almost nothing left in Ife’s kiosk. But she managed. She had to. Because she was a woman, a mother. And because women, mothers always manage for the sake of their children.

Fear parched her entire body the day Enagnon didn’t go to school for unpaid school fees. She felt aghast. She cursed her dead parents. She cursed her uncles. She cursed her ancestors. She cursed her in-laws.

“Why not tell Aunty Sade, mummy?” her son asked her. She raised her head. Her eyes widened. “We need not show everybody we are poor. We need not show everybody we are poor. We won’t die. Do you hear me?” she told him, her voice a little raised.

“But mummy, she is your family. She can help,” Enagnon said.

“She has already done too much for us. And she has her own children to look after.” Ife replied.

Of course she wanted to tell Aunty Sade about her son not going to school for unpaid school fees. But something she couldn’t tell held her from doing so. She felt sorry for not doing too much for her sole child.

“You will go next year,” she blurted out. “We will find a way out,” she added. “You will be home reading books and doing mathematics and physics. At least you have the benefice of being brilliant.”

Enagnon’s heart pounded. Stay a whole year at home doing mathematics and physics... and reading books... He thought. But he would do it. Because his mother had said it.

“Our ancestors will look upon us, mummy,” he said, finally.

“Shut it up,” Ife shrieked. “Which ancestors! Are they blind to see us suffer?” Her face reddened. Enagnon moved and cradled her mother close to him in his wide arms one would not think he was just fifteen. “I’ll take care you, *iya mi*. I love you too much, mummy,” he said, smiling. Ife smiled, too. Her face brightened now.

The voices of the others tenants’ children playing hide and seek in the courtyard broke into their living room. Abiodun was inside, sleeping. His wife had gone for her shop at Oshodi

market place. He barely talked with Ife and Mama-Abby and her husband. The last time he talked with them, two weeks ago or so, was when he had got an argument with his wife who treated him as a lazy man. He kicked her and she caught his testicles and he screamed for help. Then Ife, Mama-Abby and her husband rushed in and set the two people apart.

“This talkative woman will never leave me alone,” Abiodun said, kept tightly by Souley.

“You are a lazy man. I say you are a lazy man. What can you do to me? Your age men work hard to feed their families. But you never get out. You wait for me to come back before you eat. You are not ashamed.” She paused to gather her breath. She was kept by Ife and Mama-Abby. “Look at him. And he is cheating on me with something people call *ashawo*. You are not ashamed. If you are a man come and touch me again. If you have penis and you call yourself a man, come and touch me again,” she had said, almost breathless.

Souley parked his yellow bus and walked into the yard. Children run to him for stories. The sun was setting and a blanket of dark was slowly covering Oshodi. Ife was in the kitchen cooking yam from the foodstuff Aunty Sade sent her by one of her stewards some days ago for the dinner. Enagnon was washing the plates. She didn’t go to her kiosk today. Only Mama-Abby did.

She set the plates of the boiled yam and palm oil and bowled water on a plastic mat Enagnon spread on the cemented floor. They sat and ate silently, dipping the boiled yam in the palm oil and swallowing it. Mother and son were happy. It was good, really good.

Enagnon returned to school the following year, more zealous and purposeful. Ife had told Aunty Sade about his son not going to school the year before, finally. And she helped them. Ife had refused. But Aunty Sade had insisted. “You shouldn’t have bothered, Aunty. You’ve done too much for me,” Ife said.

“I have to. It’s my duty to help the daughter of my brother. You are not poor. If those greedy uncles didn’t seize your parents’ properties...” A silence hung over them for a while. “If I don’t do it our ancestors will disregard me,” she said. They spoke only Yoruba. One month later, the month after which Enagnon had come home and announced his mother that he had come first at school as usual, the landlord came. He was in his long boobo Fulani –like, wearing his slippers making *slap slap* sound. It was on a Sunday after mass. The rain was preparing to fall and the thunder rumbled, making *flash flash* light in the sky. He had come for Ife. She owed him one month rent.