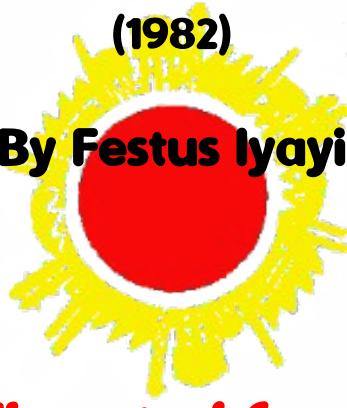
The Contract

(1982)

By Festus Iyayi



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Chapter 1

He had been home only a day and now it was the quiet of the evening. They were sitting in the upper part of the house, on the balcony.

'You did not receive my telegram then?' Chief Eweh Obala asked, and in his eyes the frown was deep, while his voice clearly showed his anger.

'No,' replied Ogie Obala. 'No. I did not get it. When did you send it?'

'Let me see,' said Chief Obala and Ogie could see from the way his father's eyes narrowed that he was counting the days. 'Fifteen days ago,' the older man said finally. 'Fifteen days, which makes it twelve days before you left there. Twelve whole days and you did not receive the telegram!'

'We must have crossed each other on the way,' Ogie Obala said. 'The telegram and I.'

'That is, if the man at the post office sent it at all,' Chief Obala pointed out. 'And what if you hadn't come home? What if God in his mercy had not . . .' He stood up and went to the railings; his hair was grey and black and it shone softly in the last of the evening's light. Chief Eweh Obala was dark and tall and broad and, standing as he did, with his left foot bent over backwards on one of the lower bars of the railings, the broad of his back against the upper bars, he cast a large and long and powerful shadow across the whole length of the balcony until the shadow disappeared, headless, into the vacant space outside.

Chief Obala returned from the balcony railings and sat down on the raffia chair. It creaked but held.

'Important decisions concerning contracts will have to be taken very soon at the Ogbe City Council,' he announced finally. 'These contracts will be worth hundreds of millions of naira. I need a man of my own there. Somebody outside the family will make a mess of

things. But if you are there . . .' He let the statement hang in the air.

Ogie Obala did not say anything immediately but looked beyond his father to the trees, the houses, and the sun which was setting far, far away. The sun was red as palm oil is red and round as the world is round, and full of soft luminous fire. The horizon was very, very beautiful what with the sun, the clouds that were red and white and brown, and the trees that were tall and thrusting and full with leaves, all dark and black but glowing now.

'It is a beautiful evening,' he said generally.

Chief Eweh Obala did not say anything, but smiled because he understood very well what was happening. The old divide was back, with Ogie, like the unbroken horse, always rearing to throw off the saddle which he, the horse tamer, wanted to keep on. But the boy has changed now, he told himself. Listen to how he quietly disregards my statement. This is a tame horse now, still with a will of its own maybe, but all tame horses need a stable. And so, still smiling at his son, his broad back against the raffia chair, his eyes dark under his bushy eyebrows, his lips firm and unyielding to his age, his chin firm and disciplined, he laid the bait before Ogie Obala.

'The job is worth ten thousand naira a year. If you do the national service, you start at about a quarter of that sum. Any other job and maybe it's one third of it.'

'Ten thousand naira a year? For doing what?' Ogie Obala asked.

'For being the principal secretary in charge of special projects,' his father explained.

'Isn't that rather too much? Ten thousand naira?'

'Too much?'

'Yes. A lot of money.'

Chief Eweh Obala looked at his son and his teeth flashed as he laughed suddenly, in the half light. 'Nobody uses such words in this country. Nobody ever says "a lot" or "too much". They are words that are never used. Always, the words are, "it is not enough". Everybody says that what he has is not enough. Even the head of

state, the state administrator or Mr Oloru will tell you that the much they have or are given is not enough. Too much? Never.'

'I still think that ten thousand naira is a lot of money,' Ogie Obala said, and stood up.

'You will accept the job then?'

'Can I think about it?'

'Of course. Of course. Think about it and then let me know sometime tomorrow when you have made up your mind. Although, quite honestly, I don't see what it is that you want to think about.'

Ogie Obala did not say anything, but went through the door and then downstairs to his room. He shut the door and sat on the bed. Ten thousand naira, he said to himself, ten thousand naira a year for being a principal secretary in charge of special projects and nobody will admit that it is a lot, or too much money. No wonder there is so much vomit, so much dirt and so much chaos in the country. He sat down, his head bent low, like a dog looking between its hind legs at its tail, and remembered his homecoming only the day before. What a homecoming, he told himself.

Chapter 2

The baggage hall was crowded with people who had come to wait for their relatives. They had crossed the immigration barrier without being stopped and, as the automatic doors opened and shut, Ogie Obala could hear dogs barking outside and the voices of people cursing and abusing each other.

He shook his head as he stood by the conveyor belt, waiting for his two suitcases to arrive. There was a lot of noise around him, a lot of noise that came from the slapping of backs, the hugging of chests, the exclamations of surprise or delight. Questions were being asked and answered in equally loud voices. High up above them and around them, there were booming announcements coming from the many loudspeakers: 'May I have your attention please! Will Dr Okuiya who has just arrived on Nigeria Airways flight WT 780 from London please proceed to the information desk at gate 5 to meet Chief Ogunpa?'

Thirty seconds passed, then came another announcement, louder than all the others that had come before it: 'May I have your attention please! Senator Wayo is waiting for Major Ole and Colonel Oyi who have just arrived on . . .'

Ogie Obala looked at all the faces that milled around him. He did not know any of them. He had informed no one he was coming home, and so, he had expected to meet no one. He had planned everything to be a surprise. A dark excitement surged within him. How he would surprise everybody! His parents, Mallam Mallam and above all, Rose. Ah, Rose!

He waited for two hours in the baggage hall and found he was lucky. His baggage had arrived with the plane and had been put on the conveyor belt without being tampered with. The customs officials asked him why he had brought four shirts instead of three and

when he told them he had been out of the country for four years, they asked why he had not brought any shoes with him and when he could not answer that, they told him he would have to wait; apparently they were suspicious because he had nothing suspicious on him. He could not understand but waited, and after about fifteen minutes the customs officials had evidently forgotten about him and left him standing there with several others, so they all took their suitcases and went through the automatic doors. Nobody stopped them, and then, at last, he was really in his country.

The faces that he saw here were desperate. Hundreds of faces that crawled around the airport buildings, staring or asking for favours. They were all hard faces with wild eyes and bones that showed through the tightly drawn skins. None of the faces had any fat in them.

'Can we carry your suitcases sir?'.

'No,' Ogie Obala said to the two nine-year-olds. 'No, thank you. I can manage myself.'

'You want to go to the domestic airport sir?' Here Ogie hesitated because there were five of them, all taxi drivers, each struggling to get hold of his suitcases.

'Who was first on the line?' he asked.

'There is no queue here,' they all said together.

'Then with whom do I go?'

The five taxi drivers looked at each other momentarily and then lunged forward for Ogie's suitcases.

'No, no, no!' he cried, waving his free hand. 'Do you want to tear my suitcases? 'You there,' he pointed to the smallest man among them, 'You take me. I will go with you.'

They were already half way to the domestic airport when the small man told Ogie that the fare would be ten naira; it was only when they got there that another driver told Ogie that the standard fare was five naira. At the domestic airport, the standard procedures no longer operated. Intending passengers were behind the counters, milling around the airways staff. There was a great din, so much pushing, so much fighting, so much shouting. There was no queue, no order to do things.

A man came past Ogie waving a boarding pass and Ogie heard him say to the man next to him, 'I told you, it only took thirty naira.' The man next to Ogie shook his head in regret and dug his right hand into his breast pocket. He brought out a wad of notes and then he was climbing up the barrier and standing on the counter, sweating and shouting. A bottle was broken and Ogie could hear somebody screaming. He saw a duty officer fighting his way back towards a door with blood on his hands, on his shirt and on his neck. There was more shouting, more abuse, complete chaos.

The excitement that had surged within him – the excitement of coming home – now died; Ogie felt bitter and, for a reason he could not understand, ashamed. He was ashamed when he looked around and saw the faces of expatriates in the crowd, standing aside, perplexed. He was ashamed when he saw the man who had stood next to him, standing on the counter now with the wad of naira notes in his hand. He was ashamed when he looked round, at the vast hall with all its dirt and filth and desperate angry people. He was ashamed and bitter and depressed. He had come home.

The driver who took him from the city airport at Benin wanted to talk, but Ogie would not respond.

'You have come from overseas?' the man asked.

'Yes,' he answered curtly.

'I hear that life is good there,' the man said.

'Yes,' Ogie Obala answered again.

'You are not happy to have come home then?'

Ogie Obala answered again with the same monosyllable. The man was perplexed and then fell silent.

They were going up Airport Road now and the man was going to drive past Celina Avenue when Ogie said, 'You should take Celina Avenue. That is the shortest route.'

The driver looked at Ogie Obala in his front seat mirror and smiled.

'You have been away a long time?'

'Four years.'

'Four years,' the man repeated and nodded under-

standingly. 'Celina Avenue was closed last year to all road users but the state administrator and his authorised personal staff.'

'Celina Avenue is reserved for the use of only one family?'

'Yes. Celina Avenue and Eronmonsele Avenue.'

'So how do we get into the reservation?' Ogie asked. 'Our house is on Itohan Avenue.'

'Itohan Avenue?'

'Yes. We used to get in there through Eronmonsele Avenue.'

'We will take an access road,' the man said. 'Although if you had told me at the beginning, I shouldn't have come.'

Ogie did not say anything.

Looking at the streets as they went by made him even more depressed. They were littered with all kinds of refuse – corn leaves, plantain peelings, bottles, cans and sewage. Gigantic heaps of dirt were left at the roadsides. And then there was the sand – sand which was washed on to the roads from the sandy fronts of the houses, or deposited on the road by the house builders, sand which came from the open gutters that were themselves full of sand and refuse and dirt. Each squalid house vomited rubbish from its entrance which then overflowed into the road. Everywhere there was dirt and filth and chaos.

Chaos was there in the way the houses stood, in the way the refuse spilled into the roads, in the way drivers used whatever parts of the road were usable. They drove on the wrong side of the roads, blocked each other's way, drove into each other. And there was nothing but abuse and curses and the blaring of horns and the screeching of brakes and then more abuse and finally, swift physical violence and then death.

'He did not have to kill that dog,' Ogie Obala said to the driver and covered his face with his hands. 'That dog was not on the road at all. Why did he go after it?'

The taxi driver was silent and then said, 'You have only just come back.'

'Yes,' confirmed Ogie Obala, because there was

nothing else to say to that really. He wound down the window and spat into the road in disgust.

The driver looked at him in the front mirror. His face was dry and hard and sunken, and his eyes burned bright in his head.

'You haven't seen anything yet, sir,' the man said, sensing Ogie's reaction. 'You ought to go round all the places. You ought to go to the markets. Even the prices there smell of the filth. And does the government care? Absolutely not at all. The people can rot for all they care. You go to the burial grounds and all you see are the bodies of babies, killed by the kwashiorkor or by the dysentery. The women are hungry, the men are hungry and we all live in dirt. But what does the government do except reserve special roads for itself? The politicians are busy awarding themselves huge salaries and they are aided in the enterprise by the cream of the military, whether still serving or retired. You read the newspapers and they are all filled with the crimes of the politicians. These people are daring and shameless. Listen to a politician defend his right to hundreds of thousands of naira of public money as an annual salary. He will tell you he is your master, that he took a risk going into politics, that you, who voted him in, were afraid to take the risk of standing in the elections. So, sir, if you want to spit, you will need all the saliva you can find because there is neither a beginning nor an end to the vomit and the filth and the callousness.'

'And the people?' Ogie asked.

'What about the people?' the man asked, and Ogie could see his cheek muscles twitching with emotion.

'Don't they care also? Do they not worry about what happens to them?'

'Oh yes,' the man said. 'They worry all right. They complain at home. They talk about it in the taxis, as we are doing right now. They talk about it in their offices. They complain and they talk, but they do nothing.'

'So they are complacent?'

'What?'

'They do not take any action? They do not do anything?'

'You tell me. What can they do? The police are always watching, the army too. The police watch for what they call the trouble-makers, warn about them, imprison them, even without proof . . .'

'And the armed robberies? I heard a lot about the armed robberies.'

'The armed robberies are a daily affair,' the man said, matter-of-fact.

'And the police?'

'They complain they are ill-equipped.'

'And the army?'

'They say they are not in power.'

'And the politicians?'

'They say they are not in command of the police or of the army.'

'Wonderful!' Ogie Obala exclaimed. 'Wonderful. So the robberies continue.'

'Yes, because you see nobody really wants to stop them.'

'What do you mean?'

'That is what I have heard,' the man said, 'Money is king in this country. Everybody wants money. People are bought and sold, the same way beer is bought and sold. The armed robbers steal to make money. The politicians steal to make money, the police and the cream of the military and the establishment all steal to make money . . .'

'So money is the common denominator?'

'Money is *King*,' the man repeated. 'And so the armed robbers buy the police and the politicians. Their hands become tied.'

'Whom do they rob?'

'The poor mostly. The rich buy the guns which are denied to the poor, the rich have the guards and the dogs and the fences and the barricades and the telephones. The poor have none of these things. So the armed robbers go to the poor. And sometimes they raid a bank but the rich man is always safe, always protected.'

'It is terrible,' Ogie Obala said. 'Very terrible.' And again he spat out of the car into the road.

'See?' the man said. 'I told you you would need all your saliva. And what I have said is only a very small part of a very long story. You have perhaps only one toe, the smallest one, in the vomit now and yet you spit. Wait until you have one foot in it, wait until you have one leg in it, or even two legs. Wait until then and spit.'

Chapter 3

Chief Eweh Obala's house was painted white and it was a storey building. You walked down the drive bordered by tall acacia trees and lawns, and you came to the three steps which led up to the house. On the left of these steps were the massive doors of the huge garage. You climbed the three steps and you came to the front door and you opened it and there was a passage, on the immediate right of which stood a door that opened into the luxurious sitting room.

Further along the passage, you came to two more doors. The one on your right opened into the dining room, cut off from the sitting room by a tall bookcase. On the left of the passage was the door that led through the store to the kitchen. The kitchen itself had two doors leading out of it: the one, in front, going into the huge garage that could hold four cars at once; the other, opening to the back of the house to the lawns and then to the quarters for the servants and to the trees.

If you walked past the two doors that led to the dining room and to the kitchen, again, on your right was another door and it opened into the bedroom which Ogie had occupied before going away and was now occupying once more. Opposite this door was the flight of stairs, about twelve of them, which took you to the upper part of the house. About four feet beyond the foot of the stairs was, again, another door. It opened into the toilet that served the lower part of the house. And so you came to the end of the passage now and there was a final door. It opened to the back of the house and, again, you saw the green grass and the servants' quarters and the guava, orange and palm trees.

In the upper part of the house there was again the passage and seven doors opened into it. Five of these were bedroom doors. The last and the largest of these rooms was occupied by Chief Obala alone. The sixth

door was the toilet and the seventh opened to the flat-decked part of the house that was really the upper part of the huge garage and the kitchen. This was the balcony. Chief Obala had a railing round it and he also had five raffia armchairs arranged there so that in the evenings, when the weather was good and it did not rain, he would come out of his room and sit there and he could see beyond his house to the other houses, separated from his by the trees and the road. Itohan Avenue it was called, along which passed the big Mercedes Benz cars. He could see these houses and the tops of the young palm trees. As the wind drove through the palm fronds, they sounded with the sound of the sea and moved with the movement of the sea.

In his room in the upper part of the house, Chief Eweh Obala paced to and fro while his wife sat on the bed. He was impatient and he was angry.

'If he doesn't make up his mind by today,' he said irritably to Madam Igho Obala, 'then all is lost. Everything goes down the drain just because he is strongheaded.'

Ogie's mother was a quiet, soft-spoken woman but she was not afraid of her husband.

'I am sure he will eventually make up his mind,' she said now, as if from a secret store of maternal knowledge. Chief Obala turned in his pacing and looked at her sharply.

'He had better make up his mind to accept the job,' he said finally. 'Not many people get the opportunity he so carelessly wants to throw away.'

'But you can wait?' Madam Obala advised him.

Chief Eweh Obala lost his temper and stopped in his tracks. 'Wait! That's what I have been doing these past weeks, waiting! And God knows I am already tired of doing that. People are getting impatient at the office. They want somebody quickly and each man wants his own man there. I am being accused of deliberately delaying the appointment.'

'But do you think it's that important for him to get the job?'

Chief Obala looked at his wife darkly, 'It's not the kind or even the number of degrees that a person has that matters these days, it's the amount of money he has in his pocket, how many houses, what kind of cars he has. And nobody cares how you get these things. It's the result, the end result that matters, not the means. People want results because they can see them. Look at Chief Ekata or Mr Oloru. They never even went to school.'

'He may not like it,' Madam Obala insisted.

'He has no choice,' Chief Obala said stubbornly.

'I think you should try to persuade him.'

'By going on my knees?'

'I didn't say that.'

'Then what do you want me to do? Uncle Suralo was here yesterday. Do you know what he told Uncle Suralo?'

Madam Obala did not say anything.

'He wants an honest job,' scoffed Chief Eweh Obala, and the bitterness was back in his voice and in his eyes. 'If only I had a father who struggled for me half as much as I am now struggling for him.'

Still Madam Igho Obala did not say anything.

'I even saw Mallam Mallam . . .'

'You saw Mallam Mallam?'

'Yes. He now has a Mercedes Benz car and four years ago both he and Ogie were at Omani together.'

'Each man carries his own cross,' the woman said.

'And it looks as if your son does not want to carry any,' the husband replied. He was going to say something more but he had heard the sound of a car on the drive outside.

Chief Obala went to the foot of the bed where the window stood and parted the curtains slightly.

'Who is it?' Madam Igho Obala asked from where she sat.

'I think it is Mallam Mallam,' he replied and the light came back to his eyes as he turned away from the window.

'I hope to God we are not doing the wrong thing,' the

woman said and looked anxiously at the man. But he would not look back at her.

Ogie Obala was sitting in his room when the outside doorbell rang. He heard steps hurrying across the verandah. The servants. He heard the door being opened, then his name being called. Suddenly, an electric wave went through him. He sensed deep down within him that something was going to happen. But what it was, what form it was going to take, he didn't know.

There was a knock on his door. Ogie stood up and answered. The head of Anselm appeared.

'A man wants to see you sir,' Anselm said.

'What man?' Ogie asked.

'I don't know sir,' Anselm answered in the habit of servants, avoiding the eyes of the master.

Ogie went out of the room and into the parlour. The same wave of electricity which had gone through him, now flowed back, intensified. It was Mallam Mallam. They had not seen each other since that memorable day when they parted nearly four and a half years ago. Not once. But what did it matter? Mallam Mallam stepped forward to greet his friend. They embraced each other like long-lost brothers and their hearts exploded like firecrackers. They laughed, disentangled themselves and embraced each other again.

'So long!' Ogie said at last, breathless. 'Why, I have been praying these past days for you to come around. What happened? Why didn't you reply to my letters.'

'It's a long story,' Mallam Mallam said. 'But suffice it to say that I have had problems trying to cope with life here.'

Both men fell silent. The memory of the past was too strong, the present meeting too sudden, too abrupt. It was like the confluence of two rivers, this meeting between old friends. There was confusion, a whirl of emotions and a strong unspoken undercurrent of feeling.

'Why don't we go out for a drink?' Mallam Mallam suggested. 'The home is too formal, too pre-arranged. Let us go out – shall we say to the Wayo Hotel? And then we can talk. After that we will come back here.'

Ogie hurried out of the sitting room to get ready. Mallam Mallam looked around him. Surely, Chief Obala hadn't done too badly. The expensive furnishings, the rugs, the big bar . . . these were marks of affluence that could only have been piled up after an exceptionally successful career.

Ogie came back in blue trousers and a yellow shirt. He had washed his face too and looked quite fresh now. They both went outside to where Mallam Mallam's car stood, a big maroon-coloured car. Mercedes 280. Ogie whistled.

'Why!' Ogie cried, in spite of himself. 'This is a beautiful car.'

Mallam Mallam smiled. He was pleased at the applause of his friend. 'I have just bought it,' he said.

Four years and then a Mercedes Benz, Ogie thought. Four years and a seventy thousand naira car. How did people do it?

'What have you been doing with your life then?' Ogie asked to break the bitterness of his thoughts. 'You said it was a long story.'

Mallam Mallam laughed as he urged the big powerful car along the road. 'Not so long,' he said. 'I quit Omani and entered business. I am a businessman now.'

'A businessman?' Ogie asked, and reduced the volume of the stereo cassette in the car.

'Yes. I am a businessman now. I am a contractor . . .'

The Wayo Hotel suddenly emerged in front. There were two cars coming out, one blue, one red. Mallam Mallam knew the occupants of the red one. He waved to them. They didn't see him properly and drove off. Somewhere inside him, his pride was offended and he grimaced as he brought the car to a halt. They walked up the gravel path towards the hotel. The large, red sensuous petals of hibiscus flowers mingled with the dark lush foliage of well watered shrubs. The tall whispering pines surrounding the hotel pointed upwards to a sky which was deep blue with great stripes of silver and gold.

Mallam Mallam led Ogie Obala into the hotel and steered him to seats in a dark corner far to the right. Out

of the gloom they could observe all others who came in from the light into their darkness. They perched there like two great brooding hawks, watching the passage from the darkness into the light and from the light into the darkness. It was almost as if both life and death hung in the air. Life passed out and went into the darkness or death rose from the darkness and dampness of the other side and burst into life... The swing-doors worked constantly, letting the dead in, letting the newly-born out. And as life came in to die, and death went out to be reborn in an unending cycle of negation, Mallam Mallam sat perched in his corner and continually observed to Ogie, 'I know that man, I know that woman, I know that young man there. That girl is known all over the place. She has gone the rounds of the majority of men in this city...' Then the two men would laugh, united temporarily in their consciousness and in their understanding of people, in their own understanding of people. And as they laughed, they sipped their drinks. The drinks burned their throats. They coughed and their eyes watered. A noisy group of youths sat in a far corner. Their laughter cracked across the vast hall of the Wayo restaurant. Their discussion was about women. Always the discussion was about women and about money.

'So you have done very well,' Ogie remarked, his eyes still on the swing-doors.

'Through hard work,' Mallam Mallam asserted.

Both fell silent, allowing their thoughts to sway them any way they felt. The drinks were taking effect. Mallam Mallam's tongue began to unfold.

'My business is a very good and simple one,' he confessed. 'I deal with cheques.'

'How?' Ogie asked. 'I have never heard of such a business before.'

Mallam Mallam debated whether or not to explain to Ogie the nature of his business. Four years ago, he wouldn't have hesitated. He would have talked easily. But now, more than four years of separation had passed, and time has a strange way of playing with the affections, beliefs, desires and feelings of people.

Ogie waited. He had never heard of any business in cheques before.

'There is a group of government officials in the services, in the forces,' Mallam Mallam began to explain. 'As I said before, I am a contractor. I supply them with various items. Each week, I receive a cheque for one hundred thousand naira. I go the bank and cash it.'

Ogie waited, not understanding. One hundred thousand naira in cash weekly? That surely was too much money!

Mallam Mallam decided to tell the whole story.

'Actually,' he admitted, 'I supply them with nothing. The money I cash, we share out again. I get my portion, the others get theirs. It's easy cash, the sort I always wanted.'

'Really?'

'Yes.'

'And there's never been a hitch?'

'Well, there was some trouble last Easter. You see, the man at the top wanted to go overseas. The bank was unusually busy and there was some delay. A jeep-load of the top man's aides had to be called in and in no time the cheque was cleared. I got twenty thousand out of that.'

'Twenty thousand naira for supplying nothing?'

'It's business,' Mallam Mallam said. 'That is the way we live here now. You either make it or you break.'

So that is how it is now, Ogie thought. Easy money. Steal money, buy a Mercedes Benz. Cash fake cheques and make twenty thousand naira and then buy a Mercedes Benz. At least the job his father offered him meant earning money honestly.

'You are quiet,' Mallam Mallam said and Ogie Obala smiled but did not say anything.

'Have you thought of doing anything yet?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, what?'

'Earning ten thousand naira a year.'

'Ten thousand naira?'

'Yes. Isn't that enough?'

'Well, well,' Mallam Mallam laughed. 'For some

people too much, for others just enough, but for still a few others, not enough. It depends.'

'Upon what?'

'They call it ambition. Where you want to go.'

'I see,' Ogie said and stood up. Mallam Mallam was alarmed.

'What? Not going just yet?'

Ogie smiled down at him. 'No. I am only going to the toilet.'

I am a little drunk, he told himself as he made his way from the bar. I am a little drunk or I wouldn't sway on my feet. I am drunk and naive and stupid but I think I prefer me stupid and naive. I'd rather do honest work and earn ten thousand naira a year than deal in fake cheques. My god, he said to himself. One hundred thousand naira every week in cash for nothing! One hundred thousand naira times fifty-two – in a year that makes five million and two hundred thousand naira of public money, stolen. Stolen and nobody the wiser.

He spat into the toilet bowl and looked at himself in the mirror that spread across the wall of the outer toilet, below which were the blue and white washbasins. He washed his hands and spat again, into the wash basin. His eyes were expressionless as they looked back at him from the mirror. I am a little drunk, he repeated to himself and went back out into the bar of the hotel.

As he sat down, he remarked to Mallam Mallam who had a broad smile on his face now, 'Don't you have a conscience?'

'A conscience?'

'Yes,' Ogie said. 'A conscience about the business in cheques.'

The laughter spilled out of Mallam Mallam. 'Oh come on, you only talk about consciences when dealing with decent people. We are an indecent people. The first rule is to rule out morals. There are no morals in this country. If you realise this and accept it, then you have the potential to succeed.'

'And if not?'

'Either you are a fool, or you are a coward. You must

be a realist because only realists have the potential to succeed in this country. We are an indecent, immoral people. You must never forget that.'

'And when did you find these things out?'

'It's not a matter of when,' the other said seriously. 'I guess it's with us all the time. But then experience removes the blindfold.'

'What?'

'You learn from experience. You see things. You not only see them, they happen to you and so you come to accept what you have really known from the beginning. After that, everthing else is easy. You do not ask yourself any more. "Shall I do this?" You just do it. You steal from your friends, they steal from you. You go to bed with their wives, they go to bed with yours . . .'

'Are things really so bad?'

'Worse,' the other insisted. 'Much worse. Which is why it is wrong to talk about a conscience. The African has no conscience, never had. And what is public money anyway? Who is the public but a faceless and harmless mask? How can you have a conscience taking money from something that you do not see?'

'I am going to earn ten thousand naira a year,' Ogie said, stressing the word 'earn'.

'Congratulations on wasting your time.'

'You think ten thousand naira a year is a waste of time?'

'You heard what I said before. For some . . .'

'Oh yes. I heard,' Ogie said, the bitterness in his throat now. How could Mallam Mallam call ten thousand naira a year a waste of time? What had happened?

'. . . And so you must have no illusions,' Mallam Mallam was saying. 'Indecision is the great killer. You must make up your mind which way you want to go.'

'Yes,' Ogie Obala said simply but seriously. Mallam Mallam looked at him and wondered what he was thinking about.

'Have you seen Rose?' he asked now.

The cloud lifted off Ogie's face immediately. 'No,' he replied.

'Are you going to see her?'

'Yes. And you? Who is the girl-friend now?'

'The girl-friend?'

'Well, girl-friends then.'

'Better,' Mallam Mallam laughed. 'Much better. You talk of girl-friends now, not *the* girl-friend. I prefer to go out with the married women. That is where the excitement is. When you take them, you do so with a certain amount of risk, but you never get caught.'

'Really?'

'The women are so clever.'

'And you?'

'You know me. I have to be more clever than the women and their husbands.'

'And it doesn't bother you?'

'Oh my God!' Mallam Mallam exclaimed. 'There you go again with that conscience.'

'I am not sorry about that,' Ogie insisted.

'Then you will learn the hard way, and probably when it is too late.'

Later, when he was home and in his room, he stood by the window, his nose against the window pane. The glass was cold against his nose because of the night and as he looked, the outside was a blur of trees and lights and houses and sounds. I must not think of myself as defeated, he told himself. One can only talk of defeat after the event. I have only told him that I will accept the job. I told him that I will accept the job and he slapped me on the back and broke the cork of the brandy which Anselm had brought up. And Uncle Suralo congratulated me and gave a long speech about the importance of continuity. 'Your father wants you to continue where he leaves off . . . He can't be there forever! You will have your own people to help. Many will come begging for jobs and other favours. If you are not there and my brother is also gone, there will be trouble. There will be nobody to help them. Your father wants the best for you and you must thank him for his foresight. Another man would have left his son to find his own way in the rat

race. My brother wants to build you up. You must, yes, yes, you must be grateful to him.'

Perhaps really I ought to be grateful to him, he said to himself. Perhaps my intuition misleads me. But I do not think I have been defeated. I ought to make up my own mind regarding what I want. And the choice is between doing what Mallam Mallam does and doing some good honest work at an inflated salary. And how do I know that the salary has been inflated anyway until I know what is involved in the job? Yes, perhaps really, my instincts misled me.

He came away from the window and sat on the bed. He tried not to think but to be light-hearted and he couldn't. Mallam Mallam has changed a lot, he reflected sadly. He is experienced in the ways of the Nigerian, not in the ways of the world. The ways of the Nigerian are indecent, chaotic and without conscience now. But they were not always like that and will not always be like that. I am going to be an example, he said to himself, and the light came into his eyes. I am going to be decent and straightforward and clear-headed about money.

'You are an idealist,' the knowing part of his mind said.

'No, I am only trying to be different, which is what I am,' he answered himself back.

'You are mistaken,' the first half of him said. 'You are all the same from the beginning.'

'That is what Mallam Mallam said.'

'And Mallam Mallam is right'.

'How do you know?'

'He has experience on his side.'

'And I?'

'You have ideas, and ideas are like the smoke. Put a little wind under it and it disperses, scatters in different directions.'

'Then you do not know me,' the other, second part of him answered now. 'You do not know me at all, in spite of the fact that we have lived together all these years.'

'I am the real you,' the other replied.

'Oh no, you are not.'

'Of course, I am,' the other insisted.

It's no use, he said to himself now. It's no use. I should just get some sleep and then tomorrow I will go and see Rose and surprise her, and break the news to her. Doubts rose up in his mind as he thought of Rose. Had she had another boy-friend all the time he had been away? Of course, she must. If married women had affairs with Mallam Mallam, what wouldn't single girls do with other men? But no, the point was to see Rose and find out if there was anything left between them and also what she thought about the job he had accepted. Yes, he would go and see Rose and find these things out.

Chapter 4

Rose Idebale was very surprised to see him.

'So you have come back,' she said. He held her and for an answer he kissed her. 'When did you come back?'

'Last week,' he replied and released her and turned her round slowly and examined her. She was still very beautiful.

'You mean you have been in Benin for a week?'

'One week.' He eyed her and knew that he had never been away. And what about her? he asked himself. Was she ever away from me? He wouldn't ask her. He couldn't ask her. It would be absurd, asking her to swear to her faithfulness. Yet, because he couldn't ask her, he was inwardly jealous.

'And you couldn't come earlier?'

'No,' he said and then he told her about the job.

'I guess there is nothing else you could have done about it. Give the job a trial. If you find it distasteful you can always look for another job. When do you start?'

'Tomorrow,' he replied, falling back on her bed, his head on the pillow. 'How have you been getting on?'

'The way people get on in this country.'

'How?' he asked.

'By managing. One manages. One scratches and scratches until the fingers are broken and the head is broken. But the spirit remains.'

'So that is how it is.'

'Yes. I mean for those of us at the bottom of the ladder. We are constantly trying to make ends meet. We are constantly trying to survive only. We do not live really, we just survive.'

'You have changed,' he said seriously.

'Things are different now,' she said. 'Perhaps we all change because the things around us change.'

'You mean ten kobo change?'

'No,' the woman Rose said, and her voice was quiet

and firm. 'Do not attempt to trivialise this thing. Let me give you an example. You finish from school and you want a job. So you pack your certificate and testimonials in an envelope and go into an office to look for a job. In the office, it is always a man that sits behind the desk. And what does the man demand in order to help you? He demands that you go to bed with him. It does not matter that he is already senile. He demands it all the same. And of course, you refuse. You are shocked and you show it and the man laughs, then he becomes angry and calls you a fool and asks you to leave his office. But thereafter, each man you come across places the same demand. And so in the end, you close your eyes and go with a man to a hotel, what they now call a "slaughter house", and in all it takes less than two hours and perhaps some fifteen naira. And after you have been "slaughtered", you ask him about the job and he tells you he is sorry, that you must wait for some time because you know, these things are not easy but if you will meet him again tomorrow same time at another "slaughter house", he may have some news for you. You go the next day and you get into bed and get raped and at the end, it is the same story . . .'

'You mean somebody did that to you?' Ogie asked, and sat up on the bed.

'Let me finish,' Rose Idebale said. 'I simply want you to understand that things are really different now. The people were much better four years ago. In fact they were better six months ago and they were certainly better yesterday morning. All our people are now caught up in this intense craze for money. Money and women. People are terribly mean to each other now. The old trust, the old open handshake is gone. There is so much hatred now, a lot of hatred and a lot of bitterness and a lot of greed and a lot of jealousy, in short, a lot of everything that is bad. And the reason is that everybody wants to be rich. So they all steal from each other, and murder each other and plunder the nation's coffers and use the people carelessly and shamelessly. Yes, that is the most terrible part of it, the way the people are used,

callously, coldly, with neither pity nor sentiment nor conscience. And women are amongst the most cruelly and callously used. Women are used as logs are used for fire.'

'That is terrible,' he said. 'It is terrible and frightening. But tell me, where do you stand in all this?'

'Where do I stand in all this?'

'Yes.'

Rose shrugged her shoulders. 'I am a person, and a woman.'

Ogie Obala shook his head because he was deeply impressed. 'That's an excellent answer,' he admitted. 'But what are you going to do about it?'

Rose wiped the sweat away from her forehead with a loose corner of her wrapper. 'What can I do about it but struggle and fight to survive? One thing I have made up my mind about though and worked towards these last two and a half years. I will go to the university. Our society respects strength. The man who argues from a position of weakness is lost.'

'And you think the university will give you strength?'

'Some,' the woman said and smiled in anticipation. 'At least it should give me some independence. People suffer a lot in this country, Ogie,' she added, and her voice was passionate now. 'People are trampled upon, treated worse than slaves. Human life counts for nothing in this race for money and wealth . . .'

'The race for individual survival,' he said and she looked at him and some of the light came back into her eyes because she saw that he understood her.

He looked back at her and he could see and sense her slimness and trimness like a young stalk of corn, he could see her brownness and smoothness and softness, all harbouring a strong determination, rearing to go. She stood up from the bed and walked over to the fan standing on the table. The room was getting hot.

'What will your job be then?' she asked, turning on the fan. It spun round slowly and then gathered speed. The air flew in all directions in the room.

'My father has said nothing concrete,' Ogie replied. 'But I think it will have something to do with contracts.'

'Awarding contracts?'

'Perhaps, but I am not sure.'

'Then you'll soon be one of them,' she commented.

'How?' he asked, not understanding.

Rose smiled. 'It's not important.'

'All the same, explain,' Ogie insisted. 'How can I be "one of them?"'

'I have said it's not important.' She drew the chair back from the table and sat on it.

'I want to know.' Ogie leaned forward on the bed. His voice was firm.

Rose faced him directly. 'Yes, you ought to know,' she said. 'There is nothing to hide about it. And it goes back to what I said before. People who award contracts, public servants, ask for percentages. They not only ask, they demand it. I think it is criminal. You think about it. Some money is voted to build a public hospital and because of these percentages and the general hunger of our contractors, the hospital never gets built. The money, public money, is shared out, stolen. They are worse than armed robbers.'

As she spoke, she remembered the tarred road that was supposed to have passed through her village. It had been so badly done that the next rains had washed the tar away. The road became worse than before because of the stones. The stones, loose, lay by the roadside in heaps. Any passing car picked them up and spun them. It was also difficult to walk on the road barefoot. And yet the road was put down on record as having been tarred and nothing could be done about it. When the people complained to the contractor, his exasperated reply was, 'How much was I given to tar the road? Go and ask them.' Of course they didn't know who to go and ask, so the road lay there like a curse. Even the compensation that was to have been paid was cancelled. It was all very annoying.

'Oh yes,' she said aloud, 'they are worse than armed robbers.'

Ogie looked at her and he didn't know whether or not to be angry. 'So you think I am going to demand and receive the bribes?'

Rose was silent. Ogie stood up from the bed and the anger was in his voice now. 'What do you take me for?' he asked. 'A common thief?'

'Well, I am sorry,' Rose said. 'But you cannot award a contract without getting the percentage.'

'Then you do not know me at all.'

'Oh, no. I know a great deal about you. But what I would like you to ask yourself is why your father wants to have you near him so desperately. To obstruct him?'

'I think that's very crude,' Ogie said.

'I am sorry,' Rose replied quickly. 'I did not mean that.'

'You should be very careful about what you say,' he cautioned. 'You may say anything about me but not about my father. I think that was very crude.'

'Yes,' murmured Rose. 'And I am sorry. But you see, I happen to feel very strongly about this thing. You look everywhere and the handiwork of contractors and those awarding the contracts is evident.'

'And you think I am blind?'

'No,' she said. 'I do not think you are blind. You have been away.'

'And you think I cannot see?' He shook his head.

'What is it now?' Rose asked. 'Why do you shake your head?'

Ogie sat down again on the bed and his head was bowed and his hands were clenched into tight fists.

'I am simply surprised,' he said slowly, his voice shaking. 'I am surprised at the look of defeat that everybody now wears on their face. This feeling of defeat is also in the people's voices, in their speeches, in their actions. We seem to have concluded that the black man was born corrupt, that it is in his blood and that nothing can be done about it. But I think we are wrong. I think we are wrong because there are alternatives. Okay, let us agree that my own father also demands and receives the percentages.'

'I didn't say that,' Rose said.

'All right then,' Ogie said, 'but let us assume that he is morally sick and that he is corrupt . . .'

'No,' Rose said. 'We will not say that, let us talk about other things . . .'

'No,' cried Ogie. 'We will not talk about other things but about it. We will not only imply that he is corrupt . . .'

'Oh my God!' exploded Rose.

'We will agree, we will say that we know that he is corrupt,' Ogie continued with great passion. 'But the thing is, does being a son to such a man condemn me, his son, to being also corruptible? Does being my father's son condemn me to sharing his beliefs any more than being your mother's daughter condemns you to sharing her belief in witchcraft?'

'No, it does not,' Rose admitted, 'it doesn't.'

'Then why do you think I am going to be one of them? That I am going to demand and accept the percentages? Why can't you imagine that I could fight them as others have done in the past? Or aren't demonstrations against corrupt systems worth anything?'

Rose breathed in deeply. 'Well, it is not that I am worried about you. It is them that I am worried about, it is the everyday, commonly accepted, believe-it-or-not practice that I am worried about. How can you single-handed fight a vast organisation, a government, the whole fabric of a society? How could you fight it alone and hope to come out of it alive? No,' she said, shaking her head, 'it is not that I do not believe in the principle of your alternative. It is that it is unrealistic.'

'And the realistic thing?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Better to swim with the current than against it.'

'I see,' he said. 'I see it very clearly now.'

'You must not misunderstand me,' she said.

'Really?'

'Yes. Because I hate all of them. The corrupt government officials who go to church on Sunday in their big cars bought from the proceeds of their corrupt

practices. Yes, I think they are worse than the armed robbers whom they now blindfold and shoot on the hill.'

'Really?'

'Yes. But I wouldn't have them shot.'

'Oh, and why not?'

'I think that would be too quick, too merciful. Death by shooting is too quick. They should be hanged, slowly.'

'Isn't that going too far?'

'Too far? Hm. Is denying the public hospitals, good roads, water, electricity, transport and many other basic necessities not too far, too severe on the public?'

Ogie didn't reply.

'Anyway,' her voice became less hostile, 'I can still forgive those who use the money in providing jobs for people in this country by setting up businesses. But I can never forgive those who steal public money and then salt it away, overseas. I detest them. They are the people who should be hanged. But . . .' She stopped, and Ogie looked at her.

'Well?'

'I know that will be impossible.'

'Why?'

'Because these same people are those who are now doing the sentencing and the shootings and the hangings. They are the law of the land.'

'How well you put it,' Ogie said. 'But let me assure you here and now that I will never be one of them.'

'Please do not say that,' Rose said. 'Please.'

Ogie looked at her and wondered about this woman who sat facing him. Could a man ever really understand the mind of a woman? How could she be against corruption and yet want him to accept it? No, he did not understand her.

'I do not understand you,' he said to her, aloud.

She looked at him and she smiled. Something heaved inside his heart, presently it was in his eyes and he got up from the bed and came to stand in front of her. Smile, Rose, smile, he said to her in his heart and he put his right hand on her shoulder and then with the left, lifted her head up by the chin so that her pear-shaped face

looked up at him, and he bent down and kissed her and then knelt down before her and embraced her, his hands going up and down the curve of her back. And now they were on her bed and he was leaning heavily on her, up on one knee and even when she turned on her side on the bed he never stopped kissing her but was on top of her, both of them breathing heavily until suddenly, something in her mind clicked and she broke free, dazed but free, and stood up from the bed.

'No, no, no. It is enough. Another time. Not now. Please, another time.'

Ogie looked at her back from where he sat on the bed and twisted his hands miserably. 'But why not now?' he cried. 'I have only just come back. What does it matter, now or another time?'

'What does it matter?' she echoed. 'It matters a great deal. I could become pregnant and where would that lead me? Nowhere. Now it is dangerous. It isn't safe, so you must wait.'

'But we could get married. I have thought about that too.'

'No,' she said. 'No.'

'Then I do not understand you.'

'You know I want to go back to school.'

'No, I do not,' he said, ignoring what she had told him earlier.

'Well, I do,' she repeated and eyed him. Her breathing came more evenly now. 'I want to enter the university in October and getting pregnant would ruin everything.'

'But I do want to marry you,' he said. 'Seriously. Perhaps not immediately but I had planned it for some time next year.'

Rose laughed and shook her head vigorously. 'I do not want to get married. I don't want to get tied down. At least, not yet.'

'And I thought . . .'

'Do not think of anything,' she said and now she was sitting on the bed beside him, again. 'We have all the time in the world.'

'Yes,' Ogie said, disappointed. There was nothing he could say. Not really.

Now, it was late into the night and he couldn't sleep because of his thoughts. I should go to sleep, he told himself. I should go to sleep and forget her silly insinuations about me accepting the percentage. I should go to sleep and forget about the whole thing, that tomorrow I will be going to work and that I will be fighting a lone battle. Yes, go to sleep, he told himself. Shut yourself off and go to sleep. Then he was quiet and he tried not to think, only his heart made loud painful noises and he could hear them distinctly. He was worried and nervous and afraid. And he couldn't sleep. Thinking is worse than drinking coffee, he said to himself. I could always drink a cup of black coffee and still go to sleep, afterwards. But thinking gives a man no rest. I cannot sleep for the thinking, this thinking. It keeps coming to the top of my efforts to go to sleep, like a slick of oil on some slice of water. And I do not want the wakefulness, the thoughts, he told himself. He did not want them, because he was afraid of what they made him see, of what they said to him in small voices.

'You'll soon be one of them,' the small voices said and his conscience laughed.

'No, that is impossible,' he said to the small voices.

'They are worse than the armed robbers,' the small voices said again.

'Yes,' he agreed. 'They are worse, and they should be hanged.'

'Your father . . .' began the small voices, and he closed his ears. 'Obstruct your father . . .' the small voices began again, and he cried to himself, 'No!' He turned on his side so that now he faced the wall. 'But what if he is?' the small voices said and he could no longer lie down but dragged himself up, so that he had his back against the head-rest of the bed.

Strange, he said to himself now. Strange, that I should have taken things for granted all my life, never

questioning, never asking, always thinking that he was somehow above those things, above-board. But you cannot, in fact, you can never entertain doubts about the integrity of your parents. That isn't possible, not possible at all. So what happens now? he asked himself. What happens if I am asked to take part in it, to accept the percentage? No, I shouldn't think about it. I shouldn't think about the percentage, about my father. All that is rubbish, absolute rubbish.

He shook his head in the darkness of the room and his back hurt, pressed as it was against the bare bars of the head-rest. He slid down to lie on his back. Staring at the ceiling, his mind was on Rose and he frowned because he really couldn't understand her. Why does she resist me? he asked himself. Why does she behave the way that she does? Has she got another lover now after all? I should have asked her, he told himself. I should have asked her because all that talk about being different must mean another lover now. So, I should have brought it out into the open but I didn't. And what if she has another man now? No, I must not think about that either, he said to himself. I will think instead about her as a woman.

He thought about Rose and the smile came to his lips in the darkness, and then the smile was replaced by a lump in the back of his throat and he coughed and wondered about her. She is a good girl, he said to himself. A good girl and I am in love with her although I have been gone four years. Or, was she a good girl because he was in love with her? No, he answered. She is good because she is what she is in spite of me or anybody else. The goodness exists in spite of me, even if I didn't know her, it would still exist and my love has nothing to do with it. Love has nothing to do with values, with what you are or with what she is. Even if she were a criminal, I would still love her, and that has nothing to do with goodness either. You simply fell in love, no, not fell, he corrected himself. That has a ring of degradation, humilation to it. You did not fall in love. You collided with it and you were knocked

senseless and in that state, everything was quick and sensitive and painful but elated. Yes, elated and beautiful.

He fell asleep.

Chapter 5

Time has a queer way of passing. One day of twenty-four hours seems an intolerably long time, the clocks build up the hours, slowly, monotonously and one gets the impression that the day, the present is there to stay, never to go away. But even as the clocks drag their feet, somewhere a cock crows and then, as if from nowhere, you have another day. And so time seems to build up and then to dissolve suddenly like the waters of a river at the opening of the dam. This rushing away comes suddenly, in fact so suddenly that it undercuts everything else. The child looks in the mirror and sees that the hair has greyed and that the wrinkles have piled up, one on top of each other, on his face.

February, Ogie said to himself. February and that makes three months and thirteen days. Fourteen weeks and now, I have a car of my own, an office of my own, a secretary and an army of messengers and drivers. Fourteen weeks and I have learned and changed more than I have done in all my life. Learned about my father. How little we really know about our parents until . . . No, he didn't want to think about his father. The pressures were building up all right. He would have to do something about them soon.

'Barman!' he called, and one of the two men who stood at the bar in the Wayo Hotel came over to him. 'Another beer.'

The man took away the empty bottle and then he came back and placed another one in front of Ogie and opened it, and then poured the beer into the half-empty glass. He went away.

Ogie picked up the glass and drank the beer slowly. Then he placed the glass back on the table and looked round at the other tables. Not many people were there, and the few there were he didn't know. He drank more of the beer and then he leaned back in the chair. His

mind took him back a few days. He had been in his room at home.

'Ogie!' He stood up from the bed, because he thought he had heard his name called. 'Ogie!' And now he was sure that he was being called and he went towards the door of his room and opened it and both his mother and Uncle Suralo stood there.

'Good evening,' Ogie said and the man smiled and came into his room as his mother went back towards the sitting room.

'So your father hasn't come back yet?' Uncle Suralo asked and stood by the door inside his room.

'No,' answered Ogie. 'He left the office in the afternoon.'

'Yes,' Uncle Suralo said and he placed his hands at his back so that his palms were open and against the wall. 'He told me he was going to see the administrator but I didn't know he would be this long.'

'I didn't know either.'

'And you didn't go with him?'

'No. My presence was not required. He said he was meeting the administrator and some senior army officers.'

'And commissioners as well.'

'Yes,' Ogie said and went towards the window of his room and shut it, to keep out the mosquitoes and the gathering darkness. Then he came back towards the door and turned on the light.

'They will be discussing the contract?'

'More or less. The contract was one of the things they were going to discuss.'

'Don't you think . . . ?' Uncle Suralo began and stopped. Ogie looked at him and the older man looked away.

'What, uncle?'

'Nothing. 'Why don't we go upstairs to the balcony? Let us go there and sit down and talk and then we shall see your father when he comes back.'

Then they were on the balcony and Ogie stood with his back against the railing so that he could see the

servants' quarters. Uncle Suralo pulled up one of the raffia chairs so that he faced Ogie as he sat on it. Ogie looked at the servants' quarters and he saw the manservant Anselm coming from there towards the house and he carried a kerosene lamp with him.

'What would you like to drink?' Ogie asked.

'Something to drink?'

'Yes. Some whisky, beer or wine perhaps?'

Uncle Suralo seemed to think briefly. 'I think I'll have a whisky.'

'Anselm!' Ogie called to the servant just before he disappeared into the main house, and Anselm stopped and looked up at the balcony unable to see Ogie. 'Bring the bottle of whisky. And a glass. Up here.'

'Yes sir,' Anselm said to Ogie's voice, and went into the house.

'What about you?' Uncle Suralo asked. 'Don't you want anything yourself?'

'No,' Ogie replied. 'I do not want anything.'

They were silent for a while, then Ogie said, 'I have told my father to connect the electricity supply to the servants' quarters but he simply won't do it.'

'I am sure it is not his fault.'

'Oh yes it is. It is a shame for us to have electricity in the main house and for the servants to use kerosene lamps in their quarters.'

'It's not your father's fault,' Uncle Suralo said again.

'Then whose fault is it?'

'The electricity people, of course. Until your father offers them a bribe, they won't come to fix it. I know he has applied.'

'Disgusting,' Ogie said and spat out away from the balcony into the dust and gravel below.

The other man shrugged his shoulders. 'It's the accepted thing,' he said. 'You want a telephone installed and you pay the official and then the unofficial charges. And the second is the higher. Always.'

'Disgusting,' Ogie said again and he looked at the houses on the other side of the road. They had their outside lights on now.

'And what about this contract?'

Ogie turned away from the houses and looked hard at his uncle, 'You mean?'

'How are the tenders coming in?'

'Oh quickly. There are very many of them.' He turned back to look at the houses on the other side of the road.

'And there will be more,' said Uncle Suralo. 'Have you been approached?'

'Approached?'

'Yes. I mean by some of the contractors.'

'Oh, several of them. In fact all of them. Some of them even brought cartons of whisky to my office.'

'So you see . . .'

'But it is disgusting,' Ogie said. 'Disgusting and shameful and I refuse ever to be a part of it.'

'Well,' Uncle Suralo said as he stretched out his legs on the floor, 'I wouldn't exactly say that. It is the way that our society functions and there is nothing that be done about it.'

'We are sick.'

'Not at all,' Uncle Suralo said soothingly. He rose from his chair, moved across and placed his hand on Ogie's back and patted him gently. 'The way the society works is quite different from the way you people see it at college. Never make yourself laws. Do not say to yourself, "I will never do this or that." Always go with the wind.'

'That way you end up in the Niger, drowned and very wet.'

'No,' argued Uncle Suralo. 'You'll be afloat and smiling. Never make yourself hard and fast rules. Never make resolutions. In your kind of work it never works.'

'Isn't that a lot of "nevers"?' Ogie asked and turned so that his uncle's hand fell away from his back.

'Yes. A lot but useful. Life isn't a lot of New Year Eves. At least not in our country.'

'I know that.'

'Then don't make resolutions, don't make promises to yourself. That way you don't get hurt.'

Ogie thought about what his uncle had said.

'What is Anselm doing?' he suddenly asked impa-

tiently and turned again, so that he was leaning on the railing with his stomach now. He called out loudly into the darkness, 'Anselm!' There was no answer.

'He will come,' said Uncle Suralo. 'Do not bother yourself.'

'He certainly seems to be taking his time.'

'Well, perhaps he is busy inside. But as I was saying, there is no need to be disgusted because a contractor brings you a carton of whisky or even offers you his wife.'

'You mean . . .'

'Yes, sometimes. Or his daughter. People want money and they will do anything to have it.'

'It's living like rats.'

'You can call it that. But there is no substitute for it and no one is going to come to change these ways. What is required is some cleverness. You have to be careful and clever. If you are then everything will be all right. If you are not, you are made into a public scapegoat.'

'Pessimism,' Ogie said. 'And that is what is ruining the country.'

'No. It is being realistic. Doing the proper thing.'

'Yes, my father also says that. A man must do the proper thing, be realistic.'

'You musn't blame your father.'

'But I do. I didn't want this job. You talked me into it and now I am trapped.'

'You musn't see yourself like that,' Uncle Suralo said and returned from the railing to the raffia chair and sat down. 'Let me tell you what happens,' he continued and stared at the floor, his hands folded in front of him on his lap. 'Your father and I, and you included, are small parts in a machine, a vast machine that operates on certain principles . . .'

'Principles of corruption,' Ogie muttered.

'What?'

'Nothing.' Ogie continued to stare into the darkness.

'Well,' his uncle laughed, 'those principles were not laid down by either myself or yourself or your father. For example, your father attends a meeting and he is

told by the administrator that a contract for one million naira or more should be awarded in a certain way. The administrator himself may have his orders from higher up. In that kind of situation, neither he nor you nor I can do anything.'

'Yes,' Ogie said. 'I can see that. But why bring me into it? I would have been perfectly happy if I had not been brought into it.'

'And you will be happier if only you will learn to separate your dreams from what is real. Please do not go on having illusions!'

Illusions, Ogie repeated to himself now. He inhaled deeply and sighed. What kind of life could a man have when the desire to remain sane was considered illusory?

'Barman!' he called again and one of the barmen came over, took the empty bottle away and presently brought another.

'How much does all this come to?'

'Three naira,' the man said and Ogie drew out a five naira note from his breast pocket and gave it to the man, who promptly came back again with the change.

'Why do you bring so many coins?' Ogie asked.

'There are no notes sir.' The man eyed Ogie and went away.

But you are mistaken, Ogie said after him in his mind. You have the notes all right. You knew that I wouldn't leave you a one naira tip. So you brought over as many coins as possible. But you'll have no tip, not even if you had brought me all the coins in the world.

He stood up from his table and crossed the bar and then went into the passage and the door to the toilet stood on the right and he opened it and went in. I must find a way out of this trap, he told himself as he urinated, holding his head high, his nose towards the high open window of the toilet so that he wouldn't breathe in the smell. I must find a way out of this trap if I am to keep my sanity. He zipped up his trousers and returned to the table to finish his beer.

Three people have used the word 'trap' to me already,

he told himself. Mallam Mallam, Uncle Suralo and Rose. And all have advised me to separate my dreams from what is real, to acknowledge the trap for what it is and to live within it instead of attempting to fight it. And all are earnest, deadly earnest and very sincere in their advice. And so, I must not leave myself any principles, I must not talk or even think of perfection. But first, I must be a hunchback to accept that kind of advice. I must be a hunchback to acknowledge that all ways of walking are upright. He stopped in his thinking. All this is no use. I should go home and sleep and try not to think. I should try to stop thinking and not even attempt to remember that I, as I was, exist.

But Mallam Mallam is another matter now. Mallam Mallam promises to come but he never comes. And when you meet, there are the usual excuses. 'I had to go away to Kaduna suddenly. You know these army officers.' Or he just laughs it off. Can't even friends be trusted any more? Of all things this hurt most. Nobody cares about anybody but themselves. People always seem to be hurrying somewhere, to make money. Yes, the taxi driver was right. And Rose was right. Money is indeed king now. Your friends do not want to see you because they are too busy chasing after money. You meet with a so-called friend and you make an appointment to meet at some place and, invariably, he does not show up. You tell him your child is ill, is in the hospital at the point of death and he asks you how much it will cost to pay the hospital bills or perform the burial rites. You tell your so-called friends things that matter to you most and they shrug their shoulders and look the other way. They only look your way when they see benefits for themselves, when they are sure they can get something valuable out of it. Everything is commercialised now. Your friends are those who think you have as much or even more money than they have. And everybody asks you how many houses you've got and what kind of car you are thinking of buying next. Money is the great church in which all now come to worship. Mallam Mallam was going to come here but he isn't here. He is somewhere

making money, cashing a cheque for items he never even supplied.

He emptied the last of the beer in his glass in two straight gulps and stood up, and the coins shook and sounded in his pocket and he smiled. You'll not have even a coin, he said to himself and laughed. Not even half a coin, barman. I am not going to satisfy your expectations, not even if you had brought me all the money in the world, changed into billions of coins. He left the hotel.

Madam Obala was in the sitting room when he got home. She was watching a comedy programme on the television and she looked away from the television and at him.

'So you are back,' she said and looked at his face, searchingly. 'You are back, but you have been drinking.'

'Yes,' Ogie said.

'And must you drink so much?'

'I don't drink,' he said, in defence of himself. 'At least I didn't until you forced me into this job.'

His mother didn't say anything.

'Why didn't you try to dissuade me, mother?'

Madam Obala looked away from him. 'The decision wasn't mine to make. It was your father's. Your father's and yours.'

'I had no choice,' he said, and sat down in the chair opposite his mother. Again she was silent, and then she was back, searching his face.

'You are lean,' she said. 'You are thin. You should treat youself much better. At least you should eat.'

'I do eat,' he said and looked at his hands. 'I am not lean.'

'This is how the Chinese get the names for their children,' a voice said from the television and both Ogie and Madam Obala turned to look at the television. There were two men displayed on the screen, both of them dwarfish figures but one very fat, the other very thin. The comedy programme was called Fatso and Thinso.

'After the child is born,' Fatso said, 'and depending on

whether he is the first or the second or the third or the fourth child, the parents gather either one, two, three or four sets of cutlery.'

'Then what happens?' Thinso asked, leaning forward and pretending to strain his ears.

Fatso pulled a serious face. 'The father throws the cutlery up in the air and the mother listens for the sound of cutlery as it falls . . .'

'And then?'

'Well, the woman listens and she repeats the sound of the falling cutlery.'

'Like Chang Clang Pung . . .'

There was laughter from the television audience.

'Or Ching Chang Kang.'

There was more laughter from the television audience, and both Ogie and Madam Obala chuckled too.

'Those people really do have funny names,' Madam Obala said, smiling.

'Yes,' Ogie agreed, infected with laughter, 'but not really funnier than ours.' He grinned at his mother and stood up.

Madam Obala looked at him and smiled. 'You ought to laugh more often,' she said. 'It is good. It is healthy.'

'There is nothing to laugh about,' Ogie said. 'Everything is always so black and so dark.'

'No,' his mother persisted, 'the dawn always follows the darkness.'

Ogie disagreed. 'Not in this country. Everything is dark and the pity is everybody keeps thinking it is bright. That is the great danger.'

Madam Obala did not reply for some time. Then she said finally, 'And what are you going to do?'

'I don't know,' Ogie answered, the laughter completely gone now. 'I honestly do not know.'

He went to his room, stood by the window and parted the curtains to look outside. We ought to hang out some lights on those trees, he said to himself. Then the place wouldn't look so black in the darkness. He turned away from the window and the curtains fell back into place. He walked over to the chair that stood beside the bed

and sat on it. He knew he was deliberately trying to stem the tide of his thoughts once more. Each night now he would lie on his bed and think about the office, about the contractors, about his father. Fourteen weeks and he had been kept awake thinking of the men in their big *agbadas* and the cartons of whisky that they brought to him but which he refused again and again. Then there were the telephone calls, hundreds of them each day, and then the women with their daughters or by themselves, looking and telling him they were his, if only he cared to ask.

'And I have refused them all, refused them all and told them how I felt,' he said to himself.

'So far,' his deep, knowing self answered back.

'Yes, so far,' he agreed, with a sigh.

'And there is your father,' the knowing part of him pressed.

'Yes.'

'And Uncle Suralo.'

'Yes, and Uncle Suralo. But I am going to beat them all.'

'And let them down?'

'No. This isn't a question of letting them down.'

'Then what is it?'

'Doing the right thing. Standing by the correct thing. Not letting go of that part of you that matters, that part of you that is decent. That is what it is.'

'And for how long do you think you can hold on to yourself? Nine months? One year? One contract, three, ten, one hundred?'

'I don't know, but as long as I can.'

'Your father holds a pair of scissors. He can pry you loose, cut you loose of this hold on yourself any time he wishes.'

'No! He cannot!'

'Oh yes, he can!' his knowing self insisted, and then he was at a crossroads with himself; he stood up from the chair and sat down on the bed for a while. Then he stood up again to remove his clothes and prepare for bed. As he did so he stood in front of the long mirror and looked at himself. Yes, he could see that he was lean now. He

looked at his long naked body and he could see the collar bone was sharp under the skin and his face was thin and his eyes tired. Yes, I have thinned down considerably, he said to himself. He sat down on the bed and, kicking away his slippers, pulled up the bedsheet and lay under it and closed his eyes. But closing his eyes did not make him sleep, for in the darkness of his soul, his thoughts threw out pictures that were brighter than any he could have seen with the full glare of daylight. And he had to watch over and dissect these pictures. It was a vicious circle.

Chapter 6

Fifteen weeks, Ogie told himself. Fifteen weeks and now this. Fifteen weeks of slaving, and now this treacherous stab in the back. He went into the toilet attached to his office and looked in the mirror; he saw the anger that lurked like a tiger in his eyes. He turned away from the mirror. His hands trembled as he washed them in the washbasin, so great was the anger that burned within him. He came back into his office and turned on the air conditioner. Then he went and stood by the window and, parting the curtains, looked outside. The clouds were dark and gloomy and hung low. He turned away from the window and the curtains fell back into place.

The bastards, he cried in his heart. The mean bastards! Fifteen weeks, and all I get is treachery! He adjusted the knob on the air conditioner so that the room would not become too cold. Then he sat down on his black swivel chair and covered his face with both hands. Imagine their guts! Imagine their disgusting guts! But I am going to show them what it means to be my father's son. No, not my father's son but the principal secretary. Yes, I am going to show them that you do not write petitions against the principal secretary and get away with it. I am going to kick their teeth in!

Within the last few days, a petition had been signed and sent to the administrator accusing his father of fielding the council with his children. In particular, they had demanded Ogie's immediate removal from the post of principal secretary. Further, they had demanded an examination of the qualifications of the incumbent principal secretary. They even suggested that his qualifications had been forged!

Clutching at straws, Ogie told himself now. But even then, the petition had had its effect. Instead of dismissing it, the administrator had sent for his father only yesterday. The administrator had been very understand-

ing of course. But he had told his father to make sure that no more dust was raised in the council. Otherwise . . . The only other thing Chief Obala had been prepared to tell Ogie was that it had been signed by seven of the senior officials in the council. He had refused to show the letter to Ogie, let alone tell him the names of those involved. So, who among the office staff had signed and sent the petition? Who had written the petition? Who had initiated, organised, planned and executed it? And why had he known nothing about it until the administrator had sent for his father yesterday? Ogie asked himself these questions, and now his anger was like a mass of clotted blood in his eyes.

He was angry because he thought he had worked hard all the time he had been there. Against his father's wish, he had even attempted to make friends with some of his fellow officials. Yes, he had gone out of his way to make friends with them. They had even shared jokes, laughed and gone out a few times to drink in the hotels. And so while I laughed with them, they laughed at me, he told himself now. They laughed at me and plotted my downfall. How could people be so dishonest? Then my father was right, when he warned me against them. My father asked me to keep to myself, to make no friends but I disagreed with him. He asked me to be realistic and I laughed.

Why did people have to behave like that? Why? Couldn't anybody be trusted? Did people always have to laugh with their eyes only? Did they always have to pretend to be friends when in fact . . . No, he couldn't understand it. It did something to him, this betrayal of the trust that he had placed in his relationship with his fellow human beings. And his work? Was that as incompetent as the petitioners had declared? Was he as irresponsible as they had made him out to the administrator? Did he avoid work? When he had come into the council, there had been no records kept of important decisions, neither had there been records of money spent on various items. He had immediately set up a records department, even invited an auditor. Then too there was

the internal organisation. There had been too many people in some sections while others had starved. He had helped reorganise the staffing of the various departments. How had he not worked hard? The bastards! he cursed, his mind unbalanced by the anger. He had even caught the messenger glancing suspiciously towards his door this morning.

What if his father had been responsible for his appointment anyway? Had he not compensated for that by slaving himself, always thinking about the job, even at home, at the clubs, everywhere? He would certainly warn Mr Ofoh, the under secretary. Yesterday, Mr Ofoh had asked sarcastically, 'Well, how are you finding the new swivel chair?'

'Swinging,' he had answered innocently.

'Well, make sure you don't swing along with it,' had been Ofoh's comment. Yesterday he had taken that remark as a joke but in the light of what had happened, he had second thoughts now. He leaned forward and rang the bell. The messenger came in and glanced nervously around him, his two hands hanging down limply by his sides. Ogie looked at the table for some time before gazing caustically at the messenger.

'What were you staring at this door for this morning?' he asked the messenger.

'I was trying to clean the door, sir,'

Ogie leaned back in his chair. 'You were trying to clean the door with your eyes? Anyway, just remember that the next time I catch you in a similar act, I'll kick your eyes downstairs before sacking you!'

The messenger's face became contorted with fear.

'Now, go and call me Ofoh.' The messenger melted away.

I am in it now, he said to himself. I am in it, and I am going to see it through and damn the consequences. What if I am my father's son? What if I came here through his influence? Haven't I done enough to prove that I am equal to the demands of the position? It is a pity that I do not see eye to eye with my father.

Otherwise, the battle line would have been more clearly drawn. As it is, I stand outside and alone.

Mr Ofoh came into his office. He was a small, thin, middle-aged man. He wore a suit that was several years old and his tie too was dark and narrow and badly knotted.

'Good morning,' he said to Ogie Obala who noticed that, as always, the disrespect and the resentment were in the voice because he should have added 'sir'. But Ogie had never bothered about it, at least not until this petition. He kept the older man standing and watched him shift from one leg, then to the other.

'A man brought in the feasibility report,' Mr Ofoh began, trying to take control of the situation.

'Leave that out of this,' Ogie snapped.

But Mr Ofoh wouldn't be quietened now. 'It is important,' he insisted 'The gestation period . . .'

'I didn't call you to discuss that,' Ogie stopped him. 'I want to persuade you this morning to stop gossiping. I want to warn you that it might get you into trouble . . .'

'Mr Obala!'

'I want to advise you to desist from rumour-mongering. You are old enough not to start spreading rumours and lies.'

Mr Ofoh stood back, away from the table, his face twisted with anger. 'Nobody has ever insulted me in this office, nobody and . . .'

'You can clear out of my office,' Ogie shouted now. 'Get out! Go and write another petition!'

He stood up, and began circling the big table. Mr Ofoh swore as he backed away towards the door. With a savage jerk, he tore the door open and ran out.

Ogie cursed after him, 'Bastard! Liar!'

He was trembling when he took his seat again. He twisted the hairs of his small black moustache with one hand and then with the other, he picked up the telephone.

'I want the chairman's office,' he told the telephone operator. And while he waited to be put through to his father, his mind whirled with what he would do further to Mr Ofoh.

It was two minutes before the call came through. His father wasn't in the office.

'Do you want to leave any message?' his father's secretary asked. He shook his head and told her, no. He had hardly put down the receiver when the telephone rang again. His secretary's voice came first. 'Mr Oloru, sir,' she said and paused.

'Put him through,' he told her.

Mr Oloru came on the line. 'Is that Mr Obala?'

'Yes,' Ogie said and paused. Then he asked, 'What can I do for you?'

'Er, well,' stammered Mr Oloru. 'Must you always be so distant and difficult?'

Ogie paused. 'How?' he asked.

'Each time a man speaks to you on the telephone, you pretend not to recognise him. You shouldn't treat people like that.'

Ogie pouted. 'How should I treat them?'

'I am a friend of your father,' Oloru said, 'and of course you know that. All I wanted to do was to congratulate you on your promotion.'

Ogie smiled somewhat bitterly. 'Thank you.'

Mr Oloru hesitated, then said, 'I thought too about asking you out to dinner.'

'Thank you,' Ogie Obala said. 'But I cannot.'

'Oh,' Mr Oloru said, disappointed.

'Well, thank you for telephoning,' Ogie said and was about to drop the receiver when Mr Oloru cried, 'Mr Obala!'

'Yes?' Ogie answered.

'At least tell me why you cannot honour my invitation.'

'Oh, that's simple enough. I am a very busy man.'

'I know,' Mr Oloru agreed. 'But that was precisely what you used to put me off the last five times.'

'I cannot remember any other time,' Ogie said.

'Five times,' Mr Oloru repeated. 'Five times, and I have been prepared to wait.'

Ogie said nothing.

'Hello?'

'Yes?'

'Won't you consider my invitation? I invite you to have dinner with me at the Wayo Hotel this evening to congratulate you on your promotion. Is anything wrong with that?'

'No, Mr Oloru,' Ogie said. 'But isn't that rather late? And anyway, it is not the dinner. I am grateful for the honour but it's my time. It's the pressure of work . . .'

'Well, how better to deal with the pressure of work than to have dinner with a well-meaning friend!'

Ogie didn't say anything.

'Hello?' Mr Oloru's voice rose, showing some panic.

'Hello.'

'You shouldn't turn me down again, Mr Obala. I simply couldn't bear another failure. Please.'

'It has not always been my fault,' Ogie said. 'That's what I have been trying to explain.'

'Well then,' persisted Mr Oloru. 'Give the dinner a trial. If you don't like it, then you will have ample reason to turn down my future invitations.'

Again Ogie was silent.

'Shall we say seven o'clock then? At the Wayo Hotel?'

'No,' Ogie replied, reasoning and struggling with himself. 'We shall say that I will think about it and that you will have my answer if you telephone back in an hour.'

'Oh, that would be quite fine,' declared Mr Oloru. 'Just fine. I will call you back in an hour.'

'Well, until then.'

'Thank you, and goodbye.'

The line went dead. Ogie sat back in his black revolving chair and thought about Mr Oloru. The man had been at him these past months ever since he had become the principal secretary, and he knew why. Mr Oloru was on the tender list for the contract on the low cost houses, and if he sought a meeting, then the only reason would be to solicit support in winning the contract. My support, Ogie repeated to himself, and smiled. And my father thinks I ought to co-operate, no, that I will co-operate when the time comes. Well, they are mistaken to think that support can be exchanged for

percentages and that this exchange should be the normal practice, the code of conduct.

If only Mallam Mallam was around, he sighed. If only he was here we would have worked out how to steal the carpet from under their very feet. But I am going to work something out, he told himself. I got myself into this trap and I am going to get out of it in my own way. Perhaps I have been too direct, too simple. I have been like a wild horse which people think they can always break in with time. But perhaps I ought to do this thing in a different way. Perhaps I ought to pretend to be going along with them. Then there would be no attempts to break me in. There would be no attempts to lecture me, to try to convert me. The ministers would have no more ministries to deliver.

This evening he would go to the Wayo Hotel to have this long-overdue dinner with Mr Oloru. He would go and he would listen to Mr Oloru's proposals, for he was sure there would be proposals. He would go and he would listen and he would pretend to understand, to be sympathetic. And then at the appropriate moment, he would come out and tell all of them what he thought about their 'normal', their 'proper' way of living. That should give all of them the shock of their lives, he told himself. From now on, I am going to play this game my own way. I am going to be a self-conscious player and this contract will either make or break me.

Then he telephoned Rose where she worked.

'We have been invited to dinner at the Wayo Hotel this evening,' he told her.

'We?'

'Well, I was invited, but I would be glad if you could come with me.'

There was a pause on the line during which he knew that she was thinking about it: to go or not to go. But finally she asked, 'At what time?'

'Seven o'clock.'

'That will be fine,' Rose said. 'Gives me enough time to get home and get ready.'

'Good,' he said. 'Very good. I'll pick you up then at your place around seven.'

'I will be waiting for you,' she answered and dropped the receiver back on to its hook. The line went dead and Ogie replaced his own receiver slowly back in its cradle.

This Rose Idebale is another matter, he said to himself. Yes, quite a matter, one I cannot understand. There are so many women I could have for the asking. I only have to ask and the women will come running. But Rose? No, not her. I do the running while she does the thumbing. Yes I do the running and sweating all right.

But what did he find attractive in her? Her poor social background? Her good common sense? Her challenging mind? Her simple but compelling beauty? He didn't know which particular quality attracted him but he knew that like a fish he had swallowed the hook and there was nothing he could do to free himself. He would flirt all right and sleep with other women, but like a bird he would always return to his love nest with Rose. He would fly and bathe in the clouds of the freedom which money had provided or would provide him but he would always come back to earth. And that earth was Rose.

Something in Rose maddened him. No, it wasn't in anything that she said or did. It was rather the way in which she said or did these things. Ogie could never be sure that she really loved him. 'Love?' she had said during the last time they were together, pouting her lips. 'It's childish to love,' she had added, pouring scorn on the word 'love'.

'Do you mean that you do not love me?' Ogie asked, his heart on fire.

'I like you a lot,' she had answered. 'You are rich and handsome and clever but . . .'

'But what?' he snapped impatiently.

'You are not sure of what you want,' she spat out, her voice flat. 'You lack resolve.'

And he hadn't known whether or not to be angry.

Ogie knew one thing. His father disliked her. But his father was wrong. It would have been wrong for any one, no matter who he was, to have disliked Rose. Rose

always said the truth, at least what she thought and that was always close to the truth. And he wanted to marry her. Yes, more than he had ever wanted anything in his life. But how was he going to do it when she was all set on going to the university? If she did, then she would never come back to him. He knew what went on in university campuses. He knew how promiscuous life was there. He knew the pride the boys took in the number, the quantity of their conquests and how easily the girls allowed themselves to be influenced by each other. No, he told himself now. She musn't go to the university. Not if I can help it.

Chapter 7

Now it was the evening and they sat, the three of them, at a large round table in the restaurant of the Wayo Hotel. Rose wore a bright blue dress and as the lights of the hotel, red, yellow and green spun round in their places on the ceiling, she was all softness and very, very beautiful. Ogie looked at her and smiled; he felt proud. But he did not tell her that she was beautiful.

Mr Oloru was a man who didn't waste words. 'The principal secretary before you . . .' he began and stopped and Ogie looked at him encouragingly.

'We were very good friends,' Mr Oloru said.

Ogie said nothing.

'We were working on the contract.'

'Yes?'

'Oh yes. The principal secretary and I were on the verge of coming to an agreement, then bang! He was transferred.' Mr Oloru laughed suddenly as if the transfer had been in his favour.

'And now?'

'I think his transfer has worked out as the greatest blessing in disguise. Your father and I are very intimate friends.'

'So you ought to be giving him this dinner,' Ogie suggested and sat back in his chair.

Mr Oloru shook his head and waved his hands expansively. 'No, no, no,' he said quickly. 'Well, I thought it would be good to cultivate your acquaintance, to get to know you, to work with you. You know, Mr Obala, sooner or later, a man learns to be independent.'

'In what way?'

The sudden question coming from Rose caught Mr Oloru off-balance. He had completely ignored her before, thinking she didn't matter. Now he was forced to look at her and smile.

'In every way, madam,' Mr Oloru said deprecatingly.

'A son becomes independent of his father, a daughter becomes independent of her mother.'

Rose shook her head firmly. 'Not in this way, sir. This way you may be creating problems between father and son. And I think you know that.'

Ogie smiled at Rose. 'Let him land,' he said softly. 'Let him come down.'

Mr Oloru came down and said, 'I want to give you a ten percent commission . . .'

'For what?' Ogie asked sharply.

'And if possible build a house on top of it for you.'

Ogie smiled. The crudity of the man was alarming. Ten per cent of one hundred thousand naira would give . . . ten thousand naira. And the house. That surely was something, and would have been very tempting to a greedy man. No wonder people defend it with their lives, Ogie thought, and smiled.

'Well?' Mr Oloru asked, and looked at Ogie benevolently.

'I'll think about it,' Ogie said. 'You must agree that this is a surprise.'

Mr Oloru laughed. 'A pleasnt surprise,' he agreed. 'But think about it and then we could meet again over another dinner. Ten per cent, and a house. That's what I am offering.'

'But if you are prepared to give out ten per cent of the contract's worth and build a house on top of it,' Rose said slowly and eyed Ogie, 'how much will you take for yourself?'

Mr Oloru was surprised again.

'You wouldn't say "nothing",' Ogie prompted, laughing.

Mr Oloru saw the way out and took it. He began to laugh, catching Rose on her sleeve. 'Of course I wouldn't say "nothing." I'll definitely take something!'

'And what will be left will not do, even for building a kitchen,' she said sarcastically.

'Ha! Ha! Ha!' laughed Mr Oloru, still louder. 'I can see you've got a very beautiful and shrewd girl!'

People at the other tables turned and looked in their

direction. But Oloru took no notice of them and continued to laugh loudly.

'And what if another contractor comes along and gives him a twenty per cent deal?' Rose said again.

Mr Oloru stopped laughing, his eyes became glazed. 'Don't worry about that.' he replied sharply. 'He won't add a house to the list.'

The dinner was over and Mr Oloru had long since gone home. After seeing him off, Ogie and Rose had come back into the hotel and now they sat in the lounge.

Ogie laughed, holding the toothpick in his left hand, a beer in his right. 'That man is stupid.'

Rose raised her eyebrows. 'You have taken some wine,' she said. 'Now you are drinking beer. It is bad.'

'I am not drunk,' he said. 'I am angry that the man should think that I can be bought.'

She looked at him sideways. 'You don't have to be angry,' she said. 'You just have to be realistic.'

'There you go again,' he said. 'What do you mean by my being unrealistic? Is refusing to be one of them unrealistic?'

'Yes,' Rose said. 'It is because life is not as simple as you see it. You are angry that the man should have offered you a house, offered to buy your support? Refuse it and see what happens.'

Ogie was silent for a while. Then he said, 'Honestly, Rose, sometimes I simply cannot understand you. Whose side are you on? I mean, really?'

Rose shrugged her shoulders. 'I am telling you the facts of life. Everybody expects, demands and receives the percentages. These are the cold, hard facts.'

'But the facts do not make the practice right. People steal in this country. Thieves form associations, cults and societies. These are the pervasive facts in our everyday life but their existence does not make them right.'

'Of course I agree with you there,' she said, and folded her hands across her lap. 'I agree with you that bribery, the whole percentages issue is wrong. Morally wrong.

But at the moment, everybody practises it, even the law makers, top government officials. Everybody indulges in it and so it becomes right at last. And whoever refuses to participate in it becomes odd. These are the facts which underlie the real situation.'

'And so what would you advise me to do?'

Rose looked him straight in the eyes and her voice was very matter-of-fact. 'Do what you told him you would. Think about it.'

Ogie shook his head. 'Then Rose, you do not know me at all,' he said.

'You mean you will not consider his offer?'

'I mean I have already forgotten the whole dinner.'

Rose looked at him again and this time she laughed. 'How can you say you have forgotten about it, about the dinner, when the wine and the food are still warm and undigested in your stomach? How can you come this far and then persuade yourself that nothing really has happened? Can you really believe that? You accepted the job and from the time you accepted it, you joined them. You can't beat them after you have joined them. How many times do I have to tell you that?'

'Oh no, you are wrong,' Ogie said quickly. 'You cannot win a war that does not involve some contest, and a contest means joining with the other party. You cannot beat them when you have not joined them.'

'You will have to be really exceptional.'

'And you think I am not.'

'Well, yes. I do not think you are. Mind you, I am not saying that you are wrong in your beliefs. I am against the percentages. And, oh how nice it would be to have somebody come out and fight them. Onise Ine, the schoolteacher tried it, and he was imprisoned. His father died while he was in there and he was released only last month, after five years. What I am saying is that while it is wrong to accept it, it is practical to do so. But if you really feel strongly about it, then you should resign from your job.'

'Resign?'

'Yes, resign. Resign and let somebody else occupy your

post who will be prepared to accept the percentages.' She paused, then added, 'And thinking about it, you may have to resign after all.'

'Oh?'

'Yes,' she said, 'because people like Mr Oloru and all the other government officials who have lived and profited by it will have you pushed out in no time. Even if you are the son of your father. They will have you reassigned.'

Ogie thought this over and he sipped the beer. Resign? There could be no question of that now. Not after the petition. He was determined to stay on now and if he was going to leave, then he was leaving on his own terms. Not on their terms. Yes, he couldn't resign. 'From the time you accepted it, you joined them . . .' So I have already joined them, he said to himself. Joined them, one of them!

'I want to go home,' she said.

'Yes,' he said, startled.

But I haven't joined them, he said to himself as they drove away from the hotel. I haven't joined in anything. I am a spy in their camp. I am a spy working on enemy grounds. And a spy has to work with the enemy always. Rose is mistaken. Sincere but mistaken. What if I look odd anyway? Isn't that better than being 'normal' and yet a thief? He shook his head and smiled. This country has indeed gone a long way off course, he thought. How else could it be taboo, or an oddity to have dreams, to want to do the right thing?

He was lying on the bed, his head hot, his eyes half shut when his mother came to him. She had two letters and a photograph in her hand.

'Ezekiel has written,' she said and sat down on the chair by the bed. Ogie heard, but did not answer her.

'He says he is getting married, that either I or your father should be present.'

Ogie sat up; his mind was wide awake now. 'Whom is he marrying?'

'She is here, a black girl, but only God knows where

she comes from.' She handed him the photographs, then the letters.

'So Oniha has also written,' he said with some excitement. Oniha was the youngest of the three brothers. 'Why didn't you give me the letters in the afternoon?'

'Your father brought them after you had gone,' his mother said.

He took Oniha's letter and looked at the stamp to see the date. He was about to open it when his mother said, 'Don't you want to discuss your brother's future?'

Ogie placed Oniha's letter on the bed beside him, and then he took Ezekiel's letter and read through it.

'He should face his studies there,' he said aloud when he had finished. 'He didn't go there to get married.'

Madam Obala wrung her hands. 'I said so too. Look at her in that pair of trousers! Look at the type of blouse she is wearing.'

Ogie studied the photograph critically. She was a small, compact woman like a time-bomb, beautiful but dangerous, he guessed. What did Ezekiel want with a woman like that?

'We should write a letter,' Ogie said to his mother at last. 'If he wants to get married he should but neither you nor our father is going there.'

'When will you write it?'

'Tomorrow,' he said,' and I will speak to our father about it.'

'Make the letter strong,' his mother said.

Ogie smiled. 'It will be very strong.'

'But you can see your father now. He is upstairs in his room. Go up and see him. Then discuss it.'

'Yes,' Ogie murmured, as his mother left the room. 'I will go up to see him, but later. First, I want to read Oniha's letter.'

Ogie took Oniha's letter from where it lay on the bed and then, propping the pillows up against the head-rest, he settled himself and broke the seal of the envelope, carefully. Always, he liked breaking the seal of his letters carefully, neatly, so that he could always replace the

letter in the envelope and it would look as if it had never been opened.

He took out the roughly folded paper, opened it and looked at the date at the top right-hand corner of the letter. He calculated in his mind how long it had taken to reach him. Ten days. Ten days, not counting the Saturdays and the Sundays. Counting the Saturdays and Sundays makes it exactly two weeks. Fourteen whole days.

Now he was on to the main body of the letter and as he read it, he frowned. He did not stop frowning until he had finished reading it and then he put the letter beside him on the bed, his right hand on top of it. A moment passed, and then he got up and took a packet of cigarettes from the inside pocket of his jacket. He came back and sat on the bed again. Placing the packet of cigarettes beside him, he returned Oniha's letter to its envelope and, stretching forward, he put it in the upper drawer of his bedside cupboard.

And so the students are going to ask for the vice chancellor's resignation, he said to himself. And if he fails to resign, they will force the issue. But why had the vice-chancellor used the university's materials in building his own private house? Even the labour, the workforce, had come from the paid staff of the institute. Would the vice-chancellor resign? And what would the government do?

He smoked a cigarette and thought about these things. What could prompt a vice-chancellor, a full professor, to steal from the university? Why had he done it? After all, he earned a high salary. He lived in a house provided and maintained by the university. He had a car that was also provided and maintained by the university. What more did he want? The information shocked him because, well, the university, academics! How could they, too? If one could not even turn to the teachers for advice, to whom could one turn?

It is useless thinking about it, he said to himself. It is useless wondering why it happens. The thing is not to get involved in it. But if I do not do it, I become odd. I

become an outcast. He remembered Rose and then he lay back again on the bed, and a long time passed before his mind went blank and he was asleep.

Chapter 8

Ogie was shaving when his father came down to him the next morning. He couldn't understand what his father was saying, due to the noise of the electric shaver, so he switched it off.

'What is it, sir?' he asked, feeling his shaved chin and turning to his father at the same time.

'I want to know what happened yesterday. What did Mr Oloru want? I was told you had dinner with him.'

Ogie studied his father, and at the same time turned on the shaver. His jaw was still rough.

'He wants the contract on the low cost houses,' Ogie said, between shaving movements.

His father did not answer immediately but walked into the dining room, his hands behind his back. Ogie finished shaving and put the shaver back in the packet. Then he walked to his room. Unwrapping the towel which he had tied around his waist, he put on a pair of trousers. It was already seven forty-five. He put on his shirt. He didn't like wearing ties, although his father always insisted on them. His father was sitting in the dining room, his hands spread across the table.

'So Mr Oloru wants the contract, heh?'

Ogie filled his mouth with some food slowly and after chewing and swallowing, he replied, 'Yes, he wants the contract.'

His father was angry, but did not show it.

'Is that all you discussed?' he asked.

'Well, yes.'

His father dropped the knife and fork he had just picked up. A cloud of anger swiftly gathered on his face.

'And the ten per cent?'

Ogie did not answer.

'And the house he promised he would build for you?'

Ogie spoke slowly. 'I told you that we discussed the contract strictly. The ten per cent and the house were

part of the contract. I decided not to tell you about those details because. . . Anyway, I thought the man was mad'.

His father stared at him, surprised. 'What do you mean? Who is mad?'

'Mr Oloru,' Ogie answered quietly, anger at the man's treachery seething through him.

'He is mad because he offered you the percentage?'

'The man is mad to think I can be persuaded to do the wrong thing. If he doesn't deserve a contract, he will not get it. And offering me a bribe was criminal, mad.'

'Those are strong words,' Chief Eweh Obala pointed out.

'I wish there were stronger words,' Ogie replied.

Chief Obala was silent for a while, then he seemed to make up his mind. 'I think I should tell you,' he began, 'why the people at the office sent the petition to the administrator.'

Ogie said nothing.

'I saw Mr Ofoh later. He told me how you chased him out of your office.'

'I hate violence,' Ogie said, but in a mocking voice.

'Well, violence or no violence, the men complain that you have made it impossible for them to operate.'

'Operate?'

'They say you keep records of everything, you call in auditors to check the accounts and you want to know how each kobo is spent.'

'Am I wrong?'

'No,' Chief Eweh Obala hesitated. 'But they say they are starving.'

'So they wrote a petition because I would not allow them to steal the council's money?'

'They sent the petition to me at first but I tore it up. Then they came to see me. But I would not listen. Then behind my back, they sent the petition to the administrator. And do you know what the administrator said apart from what I have already told you?'

Ogie looked at his father, but did not say anything.

'The administrator told me to go and establish a

working relationship in the Council. That after all, men eat where they work. . .'

'Meaning?'

'The administrator does not want anything to upset the arrangements for the contract now.'

'I see,' Ogie said.

'You must not be angry,' Chief Eweh Obala said.

'I am not angry. I am just disappointed.'

'You don't have to be, and you shouldn't do anything rash or foolish like resigning.'

'I have no intention of doing that.'

'Good,' the older man said, 'And another thing. The value of the contract has gone up.'

Ogie looked at his father slowly. 'By how much?' he asked, without enthusiasm.

'By five times the original sum.'

Ogie calculated the new total in his mind. 'That means half a million,' he said.

Chief Obala smiled. 'We have given out ten times as much as that before. The contract for the water-tower was seventeen million. In fact we think now that it might be better to award the whole contract at once and that should eventually bring up the sum to more than one hundred million naira.'

Ogie held his father's eyes steadily. 'But is the percentage necessary?' he asked. 'I mean, can't you award a contract without demanding and accepting percentages?' He remembered Rose now.

His father answered him slowly. 'It is quite natural for you to have illusions,' he said. 'You are young and haven't experienced many things yet. But whether young or old, the most successful people in the world today are the realists. And if you want to succeed in this country, you must be realistic. You must be practical. Being a realist means that you recognise the percentage for what it is worth. It is part of the contract. You said as much only a few moments ago. If you as an individual refuses to accept it, somebody else surely will. Even the contractor would doubt your sincerity. He would think you were a fool or probably something worse.'

Ogie thought for a while. Rose and Mallam Mallam had told him much the same thing, that he must be a realist, that he must accept the bribes, be a part of the general corruption. Mallam Mallam, Rose and his father were all realists. First class realists, he thought and smiled.

'And what are you supposed to do with such money?' he asked his father.

Chief Eweh Obala looked at him shrewdly. 'The money will be shared out,' he explained. 'Everybody gets a fair share. It goes round and that way all the fingers are greased. Nobody complains or gets hurt.'

'So this is. . .' Ogie began, and stopped because his mother appeared in the doorway and there was a look in her eyes that told him something was wrong. 'What is it?' he asked.

'The news,' his mother said. 'The eight o' clock news says there is something going on in Oniha's university.'

'Something?'

'Yes. Some students have been shot by the police and the soldiers.'

'Shot?'

'Yes, shot,' his mother said.

'Did they say why?' Chief Obala asked.

'Oh my God!' Ogie said quietly. 'Oh my God!'

'Do you think Oniha is safe?' his mother asked. 'What about the letter you received from him yesterday? What did he say?'

'You received a letter from Oniha?' his father asked.

'Yes,' Madam Obala said. 'It was among those that you brought.'

'Well, I didn't realise that,' Chief Obala said. 'but what did he say? Did he hint at any trouble?'

'No,' Ogie lied and suddenly felt weak at the knees. He couldn't hold his father's keen stare and he looked away, at the floor.

'Did they say how many had been killed?' Chief Obala asked.

'No,' Madam Obala said again. Her husband went out to the sitting room and began to make frantic telephone

calls, while Madam Obala knelt down on the floor and began to pray.

So the government was ready to kill to defend the corrupt, reasoned Ogie as he sat glued to his chair. Kill students who demanded the dismissal of a corrupt vice-chancellor. He was appalled, appalled but not afraid. And what if Oniha was among the dead? No, it did not matter if he was. What mattered was the fact of the killing, the reason for the murder. His father had said the whole establishment was involved. Yes, he could see that now. He pushed the plate away from him, drew the chair back and returned to his room. Here, Ogie Obala sat down on the bed.

So that was it. 'A man eats where he works.' And that from the administrator himself. He smiled bitterly now. He had deplored the filth and vomit that he had found on the streets. He had deplored them without fully understanding that these were merely the outward manifestations of an inward decay and shamelessness in the people. Inwardly the people were as rotting garbage, full of worms, beetles and mice. Yes, we are an indecent people. We are vomit.

But you mustn't cry, he told himself. You must hold the tears back. Remember you are a man now, experience has made you a man. There is nothing to cry about anyway. Nothing is worth crying for in this country.

Ogie Obala wept quietly and his shoulders shook, and the small sounds came deep from his throat, and the tears fell against the back of his hand as he held it against his eyes. The tears ran warm against the back of his hand and fell in between his legs on the plain bedcover.

Slowly he shook himself, and as he leaned against the bedpost, his thoughts began to flow again. After a few moments, he went to stand in front of the long dressing mirror. He smiled at himself in the mirror. Maybe there was a way out. He was beaten but not defeated. Remember the Angolans and the Zimbabweans and the Vietnamese. They were beaten many times but they were never defeated. Not even once. To be defeated is to give up the struggle, to die. Perhaps corruption could be

put to good use if one behaved the way Rose suggested. Use the stolen money to set up businesses and give employment to people. Salting the money away was criminal. At least, he would prevent his father from doing that, if he couldn't do anything else.

He knew, however, that his father would never willingly agree. 'There are too many changes of government, too many problems,' he always said. 'It is easy to see physical possessions but who knows what is in a bank account?' Chief Obala did not even regard the local banks as being safe or trustworthy. The money had to go out, out of the country to Switzerland.

How could people continue to spirit so much money out of the country when there were so many things that could be done with it right here in the city? Rose was right, of course. The people who spirited public money away were criminals, worse than armed robbers and deserved to be hanged, publicly. But if public money was stolen and used within the same society, well that was something else. Or was it? Did the purpose for which stolen money was used make the stealing right at the end? No, it didn't. It was simply that salting the money away converted the original crime to one of treason.

So where do I stand now, he wondered. I cannot accept the percentage. I will not accept it. Never. As for salting money away, it will never come to that. You only salt money away that you have stolen and I will not steal even if one hundred students get massacred and I have as many petitions sent against me.

'You are contradicting yourself,' somebody inside him said. 'You are already involved. You cannot escape it now. Not any more.'

For the first time, he could not readily produce an answer to this.

'See?' the voice persisted. 'That's the correct attitude. You simply accept it, and you do it. To be unresolved, to be undecided is to put the noose round your own neck.'

'No,' he answered himself, firmly now. 'Corruption is decay and filth.'

'And so what?'

'I swore I would never get involved in it.'

'That was when you didn't know anything. You were naive, you were innocent. You must be realistic now. You must not be stupid any more.'

Ogie Obala's eyes suddenly clouded again with tears. He was no longer sure of himself.

Chapter 9

Mr Oloru was not the only one who wanted the contract. As its value increased, so also did the number of bidding contractors. So also did their determination and their lobbying. Daily, from the earliest hours of the morning to the last minutes of the working day, they came round to Ogie Obala's office. And Ogie Obala had to see them all, listen to their invitations to lunch and to dinner and to trips even outside the country.

Chief Ekata's offices were on Odion Street, not far off from Ring Road. You came out of the Ring and entered Mission Road and then you went past the bank and then came to Odion Street and on the corner of this street, there was a storey building. The lower part of the building was occupied by a shop which sold sewing machines and refrigerators and shoes. You went past the front of this shop, round the house and came to the staircase. At the top of the stairs you came to the door that opened into Chief Ekata's offices. A girl sat behind a table here and she had a typewriter on the table and in front of her there was another chair. A man wearing a messenger's uniform sat here. You went past the receptionist and typist and the messenger and came to a passage that had three doors opening into it, one on each side and the third at the end of the passage. Two women worked here. One of them was called the public relations secretary. The other woman was Ekata's personal secretary.

Chief Ekata had realised a long time ago that one of the greatest weaknesses of the Nigerian male was the female. A woman, and a beautiful, young but mature one at that, was the short-cut to the Nigerian man's heart. Send a woman to a Nigerian man with a request that he jump out of the window of a forty-storey building and the man will jump. Send a woman to a man and the first thing he will do is to make a pass at her and

inevitably, when satisfied, he will almost always grant her whatever request she has. Chief Ekata had recognised this fact and built his organisation around it. He always told women what he expected of them when he employed them. Some accepted it. Others did not. Some of those who accepted it changed their minds later and he fired them or they left of their own accord. Some of them stayed for a long time, until he felt they had outlived their usefulness; then he fired them. He had no second thoughts whatsoever about how he treated people. People were to be used. People were building blocks in the great house he wanted to build. All else counted for nothing.

Chief Ekata had heard about the Ogbe City Council contract a long time ago and had decided that he wasn't going to allow the large sum of money to slip through his fingers. He remembered and bitterly regretted the fact that it was purely out of his own stupidity that he had lost the Ogbe Market contract a few years earlier. And with that in his mind he had sworn that, come what may, the low cost housing project would be his.

He was not concerned about the aim of the project. He was only interested in the money he could make out of the contract. Why should he care whether people slept on the streets or not? He told himself that neither the government nor the City Council really cared about that point. After all, both the government and the City Council were made up of individuals, Nigerians whom he knew so well. These individuals had their several desires which, like his own, were geared towards making as much money as possible in as short a time as the circumstances allowed. The society valued results like money; not how the individual got it. People were not concerned about the means. The Ogbe City Market deal had taught him that lesson. There was nothing like an honest businessman; and there was even something rather less than an honest government or public official. But in those days he had been foolish. Chief Ekata had been promised the contract, in fact he had actually come near to the process of signing it. He had made the greatest

mistake by refusing to pay the percentage. At that time, three years ago the percentage had been only seven. Now, it depended on the worth of the contract. Something like half a million upwards attracted more than fifteen per cent. He told himself that even if the council officials demanded as much as fifty per cent, he would be willing to pay it and take a twenty-five per cent cut for himself. After all, he told himself, nobody really wants any roads built, nor any houses erected. All that was needed was to give people the impression. Once people were under the impression that things were being done, the rest didn't matter. They didn't protest. Beggars would continue to exist and perish on the streets, the poor would continue to go to the churches and wear their knees away. That was how God and his messengers had arranged things on earth. And there was nothing anybody could do about it. There would always be beggars, corrupt government officials, and poor but determined contractors like himself. Chief Ekata smiled at this thought. He told himself that poor contractors, like the day's highest officials, were able to steal quite comfortably hundreds of thousands of naira from the public coffers every single month. On occasion, even hundreds of millions of naira, billions had been reported missing by top government officials and contractors. He smiled now, and wetted his lips like a hungry dog that has sniffed at a big and juicy bone. He really liked his country. It was the greatest den of thieves on earth. But so long as the right hand was kept in ignorance of what the left hand was doing, nobody could come out to cry, 'thief!'. He had heard about foolish people swearing to affidavits against government officials and some contractors. But what had become of the affidavits? The courts had declared them to be born out of malice. They had been dismissed.

Chief Ekata pushed his chair back, away from the huge table, and went to the window and looked out at the streets. There was so much confusion there, so much confusion and filth and poverty. He hated the mean, squalid houses that stood on the other side of the street

and beside his office. They were mean and small and dirty. If only he would be given the contract to demolish them! How much would such a contract amount to? Two million naira? And what would come in their place? Probably nothing, but it wouldn't matter.

He turned away from the window and stared at the papers on his table. The name of Ogie Obala stared back at him. He had sent in his bid but he knew that contracts could well be awarded to those who did not even appear on the list of bidders. Contracts were simply awarded, to friends, to relations, to girl friends who then subcontracted the major contract to real firms of builders. But he was going to corner Ogie Obala. Yes, he would send Eunice Agbon to Ogie Obala and, surely, the trick would work.

Eunice Agbon was the new employee. Only one month had passed but Chief Ekata had detected the signs of discontent already. They were usually the best of the women, those who resented the job, because they simply did not throw themselves at the clients. Even when they had become intimate with the men they still managed to hold something back and so maintain a challenge. He knew, because he had made it a policy to be intimate with the women before and during the time that he employed them.

Chief Ekata came back to his chair and rang the bell. The woman who was his secretary came into the office. She was dark and of medium height, not too fat, but with round hips and big buttocks. Her dress was cut low in front to reveal her breasts only slightly. Now, she smiled and, looking at her, Chief Ekata knew that he had been right in his assessment that woman was the greatest weakness of the Nigerian male. He was a living example. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. 'I want to see Eunice,' he said to her; and then added, 'you will wait at the end of the day?'

'Do you want me to?' the woman asked, the knowledge of his desire in her voice.

'Yes,' Chief Ekata said. 'I want you to wait and we will go to the motel.'

'And my husband? He is supposed to be picking me up at four-thirty.' She was smiling now.

'We will do it the way we have always done it. You will leave before time. The driver will take you there. When your husband comes, they will tell him you are out on official business.'

'Purchasing stationery,' she said.

'Yes, purchasing stationery,' Chief Ekata laughed and looked at the back of the woman as she went out of the office. Sweat broke out on his forehead. I am going to get this woman, no, this contract, he corrected himself. I am going to get this contract and nothing is going to stop me. Time was when I had a conscience and worried myself sick after I had cheated other people. But I soon learned that to have scruples in business is suicidal. The only ethic in business is to climb upon the shoulders of the other man. There should be no mercy, no consideration for the feelings of the other man. Business is the big graveyard of all our decency, he thought. It drives a man to do things he never would have done in his pure moments of sanity. It drives a man into strange associations, even into secret cults, he said to himself, remembering the first time he had gone to the administrator's office. They had talked quite pleasantly for an hour, he and the secretary to the administrator. Then the man had said, 'You will definitely be hearing from us.'

'Thank you very much,' Chief Ekata said then.

'And it will positively be very good news,' the man said again.

'Then I will be expecting your letter.'

'For five hundred thousand naira,' the other man said and stood up. He offered his hand to Chief Ekata. Chief Ekata held out his hand fully, the way a man would normally shake another's hand. But the secretary to the administrator had held his hand with his fingers folded half-way, inwards on the palm, and for a few seconds, Chief Ekata had struggled to shake the man's hand properly until suddenly the man had opened his palm

fully and clumsily returned the open handshake, but nodding.

'You are in category A,' the man had said then, and Chief Ekata had inclined his head, sensing that something had gone wrong.

Then the blow came. 'But this work is for category B contractors.'

'Does that really make any difference?'

'I am afraid it does. But', and the man had smiled, 'I'll see what can be done.'

Chief Ekata had, of course, lost the contract. Six months later, another man had taken him to Iyaro, to the building that stood next to the station and he had become initiated into the secret cult. Part of the ceremony had involved eating the meat of snakes, lizards, and, he was told later, vultures. There had been other kinds of meat, four others.

Yes, Chief Ekata said to himself now, the businessman certainly had no place for virtues. Vices worked. To be virtuous was suicidal. To be. . .

Chief Ekata was interrupted in his thinking because there was a knock on the door outside and, after a few seconds, Eunice Agbon came into the office. She wore wide flannel trousers, and her lips were painted a shiny red as if they had been dipped in palm oil. She stood before Chief Ekata with her hands behind her back. This posture stretched her brassiere to advantage and gave her breasts a sharper edge.

'There is a man I want you to meet,' Chief Ekata instructed her now. 'His name is Ogie Obala. He is the principal secretary in the city council.'

Eunice Agbon understood at once. She pulled back the chair in front of Chief Ekata's huge desk, sat down and listened to Chief Ekata tell her what she must do.

'The contract is important,' Chief Ekata said. 'It could be worth millions of naira. You must persuade Mr Obala to come out tomorrow evening to dinner with us. If you fail, our business folds up,' and he smiled coldly at Eunice. 'You understand of course what that means. Getting Mr Obala out to dinner must be considered the

most important single assignment in your career, at least here. So, use all the means at your disposal.'

'When do I go out to see him?' the woman asked, her face blank now.

'Well, well, well. Let me see. A man who has worked half the day already is bound to be tired and listens therefore with one ear to what you have to say. So, today is ruled out. Go out there first thing tomorrow morning. His mind will be fresh and he will listen patiently if you happen to be the person who first sees him in the morning.'

Back in her own little office, Eunice thought about what Chief Ekata had said. 'I ought to leave this work,' she told herself. 'The man uses me as he would use any other instrument.' But then she couldn't go right away. She had to put in three months' notice. And then there were her parents to consider. Her parents were unemployed, uneducated and poor. Since she had found this job, things had become easier all round. Before she had started working, they had always gone without meat and had fed mostly on eba and pap. Could she leave this job now and throw away their chief means of support? She didn't know.

She thought about Ogie Obala. Would he be a difficult person? Chief Ekata had portrayed him so. She had to crack him at all costs. But it would be difficult if Mr Obala was old and unimaginative. She hated all the men she had gone to these past weeks for these very reasons. They were old and unimaginative, except about one thing – her flesh. They always felt that since Chief Ekata wanted something from them, then Eunice had to be the sacrificial lamb. They didn't treat her like a human being, they treated her as if she was nothing but flesh. She would have to wear a special dress tomorrow morning for Ogie Obala. A dress that would excite him. But she told herself that whether she succeeded or not with Mr Obala, she was going to quit eventually. Sooner or later she was going to put in her notice of resignation and quit for good.

Chapter 10

Ogie Obala did not get to his office until late in the morning. He was subdued, quiet but irritable. He did not notice the woman who was sitting in the outer office and when both the woman and his secretary greeted him, he did not return their greeting but turned the handle of his office door and went inside. Once inside the room, he dropped his briefcase on one of the settees and went to the window. He parted the window blinds and gazed out at the square below. The bank stood to his right, the bank where nothing worked, where you had to beg to have your deposits accepted, where you had to tip the cashiers to withdraw your own money, the bank where you were treated contemptuously by the bank clerks and the bank officials. In the centre of the square stood the museum, brown from the dust. All over the city, the cars boiled up the dust, and the fine film of dust, red, yellow, brown and black settled on the grass, on the roof-tops, on the cars, on the trees, on the people's hair, on everything until the whole city was one vast bowl of dust.

He heard a knock on the door and turned away from the window. The curtains fell back into place. The door opened and his secretary came in. She was a young, unattractive woman with a lot of spots on her face. But she dressed quite well and carried herself equally well; with dignity but without the stiffness that usually goes with it. He had sometimes wondered what sort of life she led outside work.

'Yes?' he said.

'A woman to see you, sir,' Tourishe said. 'She has been here since the very early hours of the morning. Since half-past seven.'

'That makes it almost four hours,' Ogie Obala said. 'What does she want?'

'She says her business is highly important. Her name

is Miss Agbon and she is from one of the construction companies.'

Ogie smiled cynically. 'Their business is always important,' he said. 'But send her in. Tell her that I will see her.'

Ogie Obala spread his hands across the desk and waited for her to come in.

'I really am part of the establishment now,' he said to himself.

'Not if you refuse to accept the percentage,' his second self answered back.

'But I am trapped. I thought we had settled that.'

'Yes. But you could resign. You could resign and be free of the trap.'

'No,' he answered himself back. 'Where would I go if I resigned? You cannot live outside society. You cannot be a Robinson Crusoe any more and even he had to find his Man Friday and return eventually. Besides if I resigned I would be running away. You cannot win a war that has not involved a contest.'

'There is no contest here,' his second part scoffed. 'There is no contest. It was settled a long time ago and without you.'

'But I cannot resign.'

He had a moment's peace when the second, intuitive part of him considered what he had said. Then finally, 'Yes. You cannot resign,' it agreed. 'Not for the simple reason of being regarded as a coward but because what you do makes no difference. You cannot settle society's problems by coming to terms with your own conscience. You may make your own peace but that doesn't make the peace of the world. In the end, it doesn't matter, this individual arrangement with your own soul.'

'So the individual counts for nothing?'

'I haven't said that.'

'Then what would you have me do? Start a revolution?'

'I haven't said that either. Though definitely it is the only way.'

'I am not a revolutionary.'

'Then you could accept the percentage.'

'No!' he cried to himself at once, and he stood up from the chair and placed his forehead against the cold strip of wall by the window. 'No!' he cried again. 'Never.'

'Then what did you decide this morning after breakfast? Am I not repeating to you what you made up your mind to do?"

'No!' he cried again, 'No! It was not decided.'

For a second his mind became still, a vacuum. Then almost immediately it erupted again into a battleground where the two voices screamed at each other and wrestled violently. He could feel the blood pounding in his head and ears. Hastily, he turned away from the wall and entered the small toilet that was attached to the office.

'No,' he checked himself as he looked at his twisted expression in the mirror. I may look and feel like a cornered animal but then aren't animals at their most dangerous when they are cornered? My decency will not go for nothing. Something will have to give elsewhere.'

He felt vengeful as he returned through the connecting door into his office. It was there on the settee, as she sat with legs crossed, that he first saw her.

'Mr Obala?' she asked and stood up. 'Good morning. I am sorry I came into your office when you were not in.'

She had very beautiful legs, and her dress that was open in the front showed off her breasts that were brown and round and firm. All of her was brown, she wasn't very tall. Her lips were bathed in red, her eyes that were dark and sensuous and warm glowed under long eyelashes and thin eyebrows. And there was a dimple, only one, on her right cheek.

'My name is Eunice Agbon,' she said and still Ogie Obala hadn't said anything, but he took the card she gave him and walked round his desk and sat on the chair behind it. Then he pushed the chair backwards and held up the card that was printed in black and white and read the name of the woman; he saw then that she was public relations secretary for Chief Ekata and Construction Company. And then his eyes came back to the woman

and in her eyes he could see both the snake and the apple very clearly.

'Please sit down,' he said finally. She smiled and it was a dazzling flash of a smile, like the reflection of the midday sun in the water: 'I am extremely sorry I kept you waiting for so long,' he apologised now. 'But what can I do for you?'

'I was, well... er,' Eunice Agbon stammered, and laughed out loud and her laughter was the echo of a chain of whistles. Watching her, Ogie Obala frowned. Had he said anything funny?

'When I was asked to see you to see if I could fix an appointment with you to see my chairman and managing director, I had the impression that you would be an elderly man,' she said.

'And now you are disappointed?'

'Pleasantly so. You see' she began again, and she placed her hands behind her chair so that the pinnacles of her breasts were thrown upwards and they were sharp and unyielding and inviting. 'My chairman would have come himself. But he has come to see you each day of the last week and yet couldn't meet you. Today he is attending a board meeting. And we always think it is disrespectful to make arrangements such as these over the telephone. Besides,' she added seriously, 'you know the telephone people. They give you a line usually after hours of hard bargaining. More often than not they simply ignore you.'

A light came into Ogie Obala's eyes and he said, 'What exactly does Chief Ekata want?'

'Nothing much,' Eunice Agbon answered and took her hands away from the back of the chair. 'He wants you to do him this big favour by having dinner with him this evening. He wants to see if you can give up some of your valuable time.' The halo of her smile came back to her lips and lit up her face.

Ogie thought quickly. He had seen the name of Chief Ekata on the files. Chief Ekata was a general contractor, an importer and exporter, a transporter and supplier of general equipment, building materials, cement, rice,

stockfish, lace material and general textiles. You name it, Chief Ekata and Construction Company were there. And now they wanted the contract on the low cost houses.

'I will have to think about it,' he said finally and looked away from her.

Eunice Agbon glanced at her wrist watch. 'Well, it's almost half-past twelve now,' she pointed out, and then laid the bait. 'Perhaps you could have lunch with me?'

'Lunch with you?' Ogie Obala asked, smiling. He hadn't exactly expected this move.

'Yes,' Eunice Agbon answered in a matter-of-fact voice. 'I would be most pleased.'

Ogie Obala looked into the warm, dark, sensuous eyes of the woman and again he saw the snake and the apple in them. But what does it matter, he asked himself now. What does it matter if I have this lunch with her and then take her afterwards? We are both in the same trap. We are both the instruments of forces greater than ourselves. We are both being used, and whatever choice we have is restricted. Suddenly, he felt sorry for her.

Aloud he said, 'We will have lunch, and I will pay for it to make it up to you for keeping you waiting. Afterwards you can go back and tell Chief Ekata that I will see him at seven at the Wayo Hotel.' He saw surprise in the look she gave him. He had given her the option of even declining the lunch. She need not do anything that she did not really want to do either. She smiled and he returned the smile.

It was all nonsense, this reasoning, this scheming, he said to himself. In the final analysis, none of it really mattered. Then he shook himself free of the thought. It wasn't nonsense after all, it did matter, it was the stuff of which life, his own life was made, the difference between his and another man's life consisted of these little variations. Then the bitter hopelessness descended and stifled the arguments inside him: I am the percentage with the conscience, the corruption with the human face. He smiled to himself at this, and the woman sitting opposite him, not understanding, smiled with him.

Looking at her now, temporarily freed from his thoughts, he knew that in spite of the choice he had given her, maybe because of it, they were going to be lovers. The snake in his own eyes would make sure of that.

Throughout the rest of the morning and late into the afternoon, two people tried unsuccessfully to get Ogie Obala on the telephone. The first was Rose Idebale. Over the past few days, Rose had been trying to convince herself that what she knew wasn't true. They had been so careful. It couldn't happen! Had she not taken those tablets which Ogie had religiously led her to believe contained all the answers to such problems? Had she herself not used similar ones before? Then of course, it wasn't true! She couldn't be pregnant!

Yet she knew that she was. The signs were there all right. She had this uncomfortable feeling in her stomach, and then yesterday and again today she had begun to vomit. That had been the last straw.

Of course she could get rid of the child. She shouldn't care what the Catholic Church or the national laws said about abortion. She only knew that she did not want the child, that she had to get rid of it and quickly. If she did not, then her whole future would be in jeopardy. She would be unable to go to the university. The university, for which she had saved and starved so much. No, she couldn't think about it. Thinking about it made her head ache, made her want to vomit even more.

She knew what Ogie would say. Ogie would want them to get married. But she could not contemplate being married to Ogie. At least, not yet. She didn't want to marry him. She still wanted to read, she wanted more time to sort out her feelings for Ogie. She knew that she liked him. He was pleasant and kind to her. But did she love him enough? And surely marriage without love would be like drought – the earth without the blessing of the rainfall? Maybe with time, as people always said, Ogie's money and success would help to cement their marriage, but it could also wreck it.

And what about Ogie's father? She knew that he had

never liked her, she felt instinctively that Ogie's parents would always be against her. To them, she would always be the opportunist, the outsider, and eventually, she knew, she would lose. She wouldn't have worried too much if Ogie Obala had been a firm, resolved man. But he changed too often. He listened to his parents too much. How often had she told him to find his own house? And what did he always say?

'What explanation could I offer to my father?'

'Your independence. You want to be on your own.'

'Would you marry me then?'

She had thought about it. Then the same doubts had emerged.

'We will not discuss that. We have all the time in the world. You move out of the house and then we will see.'

And later, some time later, Ogie Obala had returned, beaten, as he said, but not defeated.

'We could get married and that would give me the reason for leaving. At the moment, my father says the house is empty, that the house is mine anyway. But we could get married.'

'And be the reason for separating you from your parents? No,' she had replied, her mind made up now. She would not be made the scapegoat.

Now of course they had too many things against them. They could never win. She had made a mistake by not realising this earlier, for letting the relationship drag on and for getting herself in the state she was in now. But then, she asked herself, how do you ever know in these things? How do you know that what you see so clearly now won't be a mist tomorrow? How does one ever lose faith in hope? We are always hoping, and women are among the most hopeful in the world. It must be our wombs, she thought. Our wombs are the world's great organs of hope. We bring hope into the world, we are the receptacle of hope, we are its citadel.

I must be a fool, she thought, turning her mind to her own situation. Another girl would have used this pregnancy as an excuse; would have gone ahead and gone through with the marriage. But not I. I want to get

rid of it. Well, I may be a fool but I know what I want. I want to be able to stand on my own feet eventually. Not that I will not need a man, but when I go to one, it will be on equal terms. That is what I have saved myself for these past years. That is why I have refused all offers and only very rarely even indulged myself. And I have become the serious, unsociable girl. I have not done these things just to give up now. I will get rid of this child, and because it is his, he will have to pay for it.

She held the receiver of the telephone in her hand and as she waited, she felt depressed and empty, like a crushed lemon. Why did Ogie Obala never stay in his office? The contract. He was busy seeing people over the contract. He is one of them now, she thought. He has joined them, just as I told him he would. She felt sick. She wanted to vomit. Very slowly she replaced the telephone receiver in its hook. She did not wait for Tourishe's voice to say almost happily, 'Sorry, Rose, Ogie is not yet back.' They did not like each other.

Chief Obala was clearly annoyed. From nine o' clock in the morning, he had been trying to get Ogie on the telephone. He had even sent his personal secretary to Ogie's office. And it was now nearly two o' clock in the afternoon, yet Ogie wasn't back.

He had had a word with the Commissioner and they had agreed that the value of the contract was to go up still higher, this time to one hundred million naira. He had also agreed with the commissioner that all the foreign companies who were interested in the contract would not be shortlisted. The contract was to go to indigenous contractors. 'They are far more cooperative' the commissioner had said. 'And in view of the necessity to indigenise. . .'

Both men had laughed heartily, shaken hands and separated.

Chief Obala drummed on the table with his fingers. He went over in his mind the names of people who would take part in the sharing of the percentage. The agent who had given him the figures had estimated that

one low cost house would cost about fifty thousand naira. With the approval of the administrator and some of the highest officers in both the military and police forces, the agent had been made to push up the original estimate to five hundred thousand naira. That meant that about ten percent of the money approved would represent the actual costs while the other ninety percent would be available for sharing. If the value of the entire contract gets pushed up to about two hundred million! Chief Obala thought excitedly and held his head between his hands. Or say three hundred million! Over two hundred million will be available for sharing. Assume we agree on a flat rate of say, twenty per cent each? That gives Ogie and me forty per cent. It is important that Ogie comes in as an equal partner. He has to meet the commissioner, Major Alafia and the chief of police, Aikhon. He must meet all these people and carve out an image for himself, the image of an equal. But where in hell's name *is* Ogie? he asked himself, annoyed.

He picked up the phone again and dialled Ogie's office. 'Is he back?' he asked after Tourishe answered.

'No sir. He hasn't come back.'

'With whom did you say he left?'

'With a young lady, sir.'

'A girl?' Chief Obala frowned. 'Is the girl's name Rose?'

Chief Obala could hear his son's secretary leafing through the appointments book. Finally she said, 'No, sir, her name is not Rose. Her name is Eunice Agbon, the public relations secretary of Chief Ekata and Construction Company.'

Chief Obala hissed and promptly dropped the receiver back into place. 'Chief Ekata! That diabolical man!' Ogie was surely walking in deep water, he said to himself. Deep, deep water that could without warning suck him in and drown him.

Chapter 11

His mother was waiting when Ogie returned home late in the afternoon. She walked behind him to his room and watched him loosen his tie that had little red arrows shooting from it.

'Your father has been everywhere looking for you,' she said. 'Where were you?'

Ogie was angry but he didn't show it. 'I had an appointment in the morning. Then I went and had my car serviced. I had to wait for a long time.'

'Couldn't you have gone back to the office and left the car there?'

He shook his head. 'No, mother,' he said, noticing the hard lines on her face. 'When you service your car at a petrol station, you have to be there. Otherwise the mechanics remove parts of the car.'

'He said the commissioner waited for you. You know what that means.'

Ogie sat on the bed. 'I know what it means,' he said. 'But I couldn't help it. Can't you understand?'

'Of course I do,' his mother said. 'It's your father. He even refused to eat on account of that.'

Ogie looked at his hands. He shouldn't be angry with his mother when his father had already offended her.

'Where is he now?' he asked.

'Asleep. He should not be disturbed.'

'That's good,' Ogie said. 'I don't even want to see him.'

'Ogie!'

He looked up quickly at his mother and then turned his eyes away. 'I am tired, mother. Very tired,' he said and leaned back against the iron bed-post from which the mosquito net hung. His mother stood for a second in the centre of the room, then she went to the door, opened it and went out.

Dusk gathered swiftly. He could see that from the little opening where the two yellow window curtains

joined. We said seven o' clock, he reminded himself. But why should I go and meet Chief Ekata? Why should I go? They are all birds of the same feather, treacherous and deceitful. They are all out to grab and steal. I should not go. No, I will not go. I will go instead to see Rose. I haven't seen her for days now. It hasn't been my fault. I have been busy.

Then his mind went to Eunice. She is a good girl, he thought to himself. A beautiful woman, far, far more beautiful then Rose. Yes, far more lovely. But I wouldn't marry her. As a girl friend, yes. As a wife, no. Rose for a wife, Eunice for a lovely girl friend. And there, I have got myself a compromise. He grinned to himself and his dark face was like the dusk outside, dark but light, half-darkness, half-light. Rose for a wife. Eunice for a girl friend. Then, Chief Ekata for a... for what? For a bastard. For a hungry, crooked bastard.

And should I go? What will he say that I haven't heard before? Percentages, houses, contracts. Yes, the contract. Everybody is struggling for it as if their lives depend on it. See how they ring me, many, many times a day. And see how they wait outside my office. 'Mr Obala. Good morning, sir.' And this from people much older than myself. 'Mr Obala, what about dinner? Mr Obala, what about lunch? Mr Obala, wouldn't you like a nice car for a present? Mr Obala, you must have a good girl-friend who deserves so many of the nice things in life.' And all this said in joke and yet in deadly earnest. And this evening, another invitation to dinner.

I promised Eunice I would be there. I promised her, so I should go. And how do I really know what Chief Ekata has to say until I have heard him anyway? I think I should go. Eunice will be there. And what a lovely woman, this Eunice. Very understanding. But as a wife no, not good. Couldn't even make the bed after we had finished. I had to do that by myself. Rose would have made the bed. It doesn't matter whether it was in the hotel. Rose would have taken the bedsheets, smoothed them out, dusted the blanket, puffed up the pillows. But not Eunice. We had what we wanted to have, and she lay

back, lazily. I wanted her again and again but I must have been tired after the first two times. I am going for those vitamins and those iron tablets. I think I need them. Because I wouldn't want it to happen another time with Eunice. I would want us to keep at it for hours, non-stop, like the fire that burns inside the volcano.

He shook his head again. No, no. As a wife not good anyway. The basis of your first unity, sex, will ultimately be the basis of your last dissolution. I want to see her again, but not in connection with this contract, not in the company of Chief Ekata. I don't want to go and meet this Ekata. No, I don't. But then I promised Eunice that I would come, didn't I? I promised her.

He fidgeted with the tie as he sat on the bed, his back still against the iron bed-post, his legs crossed, so that only one leg touched the floor and the other didn't, his mind busy, undecided, showing in the way he played with the tie.

And see how easy it all is, he thought. All you need is the decision, the first resolve. After that, everything else is easy.

But inside, he felt ashamed. He even felt defeated now and finally humiliated. He had eaten the fruit that he had forbidden himself and he felt ashamed and naked inside.

And now too, he had the wisdom of experience. There was nothing to do now but to go forward in his nakedness and wisdom. I am going to meet Chief Ekata, he said to himself. I am going to meet him, and from now on all others too. He sprang up from the bed and grabbed at a shirt that hung on the post to which one end of the mosquito net was tied. I am going to listen to his proposals and if they are good, accept them, he said to himself. It is wrong to be idealistic. I am either here or gone. I have to work within the system. Nobody can change what is. What is may not be what I want but what is, is now. For the moment. One thing I am sure of anyway. I want all my money here. Not outside the country. I want to set up in real business, here in my country. If there is a probe, I lose everything but

whatever I lose remains here. And whoever worries about probes anyway? How many things were declared seized by the last government? How much money were people to have refunded? Tens, hundreds, thousands of millions of naira. But how much was actually seized or refunded? Nothing. Then why be worried? My father is too conservative. It is a characteristic of his age, to be afraid. This is a different time now, I have learned a lot. The last time I went to Mr Oloru I had no ideas. My mind was open, naive. But now, I know better. I have eaten the apple.

It is getting on to seven, he observed. I had better hurry. But no. Why should I? It's Chief Ekata who needs the doctor. Not I. I will take my time. Let them wait.

Chief Ekata waited outside the Wayo Hotel. He was anxious and irritable.

'Are you sure he will come?' he asked Eunice who stood beside him, leaning against the big Mercedes Benz.

'I am sure he will come,' Eunice replied hopefully. 'He promised he would.'

'You should never rely on promises,' Chief Ekata said sharply.

'It was a serious promise.'

'For what time?'

'Seven o' clock.'

Chief Ekata glanced at his wrist watch. He wore a big, regal *agbada*. Which he rustled in annoyance. His neck was beaded and his black face polished. A big gold-plated ring adorned the second finger of his right hand.

'It's sixteen minutes past seven,' he said, eyeing Eunice.

Eunice made no reply. She wanted Ogie Obala to come. She didn't want him to come because of the business they had to discuss. She wanted Ogie for what she thought he was.

He is nice and considerate, she thought. And young. Unlike all those old men who refused to acknowledge that they have grown up. Look at the way he questioned me about my background. He was interested not just in my body but in my life as a whole. That was the first

time a man wanted to meet the real me. All the others wanted me just because I am beautiful, because I have a beautiful body. I hope he comes.

'What are you thinking of?' Chief Ekata asked her, startling her thoughts like a stone thrown at a flock of birds quietly walking the grass.

'Er, well... I am hoping he comes. He made me believe he would come. It was a promise. A firm promise.'

Chief Ekata eyed her shrewdly and then looked down, digging up the pebbles with the pointed tip of his black court shoes.

'We should go inside,' he said. 'We will wait for him in the bar.'

'I think...' and Eunice broke off, as she caught sight of Ogie's car. Chief Ekata also looked and saw Ogie's car coming slowly up the road. He swore in his heart.

'Look at him coming up as if he has all the time in the world!'

'Well, we need him.' Eunice pointed out.

Chief Ekata hissed. 'Let a change of government come and he may soon find himself at *my* door!'

He walked rapidly towards Ogie's car, the wind blowing the several edges of the *agbada* so that the dress rose behind him like giant wings. There was a fixed smile on his face as he opened the car door for Ogie, helped him out and embraced him heartily.

'We've been expecting you this half hour past! I am immensely glad you found the time to come.'

'Hello,' Ogie said vaguely, then to Eunice who stood still against Chief Ekata's car, 'You look extraordinarily soft and lovely.' His eyes took in the details of the long dress, cut low at the front and back and held up by four narrow strips of cloth, tied two on top of each shoulder.

Eunice smiled. 'I thought you were going back on your word.'

'I never do that,' Ogie murmured; then added more audibly, 'We had er, well, a sort of family meeting. You know the way such meetings go. You can't leave until the elders say so.'

They went into the Chinese restaurant of the Wayo

Hotel. The blue, yellow and red electric bulbs burned behind masks and the walls were decorated with Chinese characters. Ogie always wondered whether they had actually imported a Chinese to do all that writing.

'It is a beautiful place,' Eunice said.

'And expensive,' Chief Ekata pointed out.

'Expensive and good is a compromise', Ogie said smiling. The word had a strange appeal for him in his present company.

The meal was hot, and he was amused when they brought the two long slender sticks.

'I am not a Chinese,' he said to the waiter.

Chief Ekata laughed. 'This is a small China. Inside here you do as the Chinese.'

'Not with sticks anyway.'

They all laughed, the three of them.

When will it come out? Ogie wondered. Not during the meal, anyway. Oloru is precise. He comes directly to the point. But this man goes round it several times. He skirts around it, but it will come and when it does, it will be like a flood.

It came out when they moved to the bar and were drinking white Cuban rum.

'You may have guessed why I decided to make this appointment very personal,' Chief Ekata said.

Ogie knew but he wouldn't show his hand.

'I am sorry,' he said, 'but I don't know.'

Chief Ekata smiled pleasantly. 'Well, then, I guess I'll have to explain. The point is I am interested in the low-cost houses.'

'Many people are interested,' Ogie Obala said.

'Many are called but few are chosen,' Chief Ekata laughed and raised his glass. 'I drink to the few who are chosen. I drink to our coming understanding.'

Ogie raised his glass and drank. Eunice raised her glass and drank.

'I want this contract badly and nothing is going to stop me,' Chief Ekata said suddenly, fiercely. 'I want it. It is worth several millions. And for you, Mr Obala, I have some extremely attractive suggestions.'

Ogie smiled. 'I am easily persuaded.'

Eunice sat back in her chair, relaxed, her wine glass filled to the brim. Hear them haggling as if I do not exist, as if I am not here at all, she thought to herself. And it's all money. Many millions of naira – government money. Hear them discussing how to steal it. Coolly, without panicking. Without consciences. But the whole country is like that now. The conscience of the nation is money now.

'You'll get them,' Chief Ekata said. 'I'll arrange for you to obtain the controlling shares.'

'How soon can you do that?'

'It depends,' Chief Ekata said evasively, but looking Ogie in the eye.

'It will need a lot of money. Even with the other amount we mentioned, you will still need about two hundred thousand naira in hard cash.'

Ogie thought for a moment. 'I am sure I can arrange that too. But these businesses which the government is selling out, how many are they?'

'About twenty.'

'And one of them is a supermarket?'

'Yes, one of them. A large, large supermarket. Lucrative business.'

'It's a deal then?'

'Yes, if you say so. It's a deal. Let's drink to it. Eunice, our glasses.'

The three of them raised their glasses and drank.

'I'll drive you home,' he said to Eunice as they stood outside, calculating what portion of night was already spent.

'Oh that's extremely kind of you, Mr Obala,' Chief Ekata said hastily. He had plans for himself and Eunice and he did not want Ogie to ruin them. 'I wouldn't like you to be bothered. Her place is on my way.'

Ogie shrugged his shoulders in disappointment. He, too, had had plans for Eunice.

Chapter 12

In spite of the fact that the morning was cool, Chief Obala had the office air-conditioner on because he was sweating, and he was sweating because he was angry and worried. Angry at Ogie who sat opposite him and worried about the criticisms levelled against him.

'It's because I am from another tribe,' Chief Obala said. 'When the probe revealed that Imaoye involved the government in a loss of over five million naira, nobody said anything about it. Imaoye is still where he was, a general manager. Nobody talks except when it has something to do with people from our tribe.'

Ogie coughed. 'What exactly are they saying?'

Chief Obala looked at his son and his eyes glowed with anger. 'So you want to know what they are saying!'

Ogie kept quiet.

'Oh well, I suppose it isn't your fault,' Chief Obala continued. 'I have brought the whole thing upon myself. If I hadn't given you the job in the first. . .'

The telephone suddenly shrilled and Chief Obala quickly lifted up the receiver. His face was alert as he picked up the lead pencil and began to make rapid entries on a pad in front of him.

'Five hundred million?' he asked, and then nodded his head vigorously. 'I understand. The major's wife then. Is she using the major's name? No? Her grandmother's?' Chief Obala smiled and his eyes glowed with pleasure now.

'Oh yes, the contract goes out to only one person. The others will come in as side contractors. Of course I have somebody in mind, a good friend of mine. . . No, no, no. I have used him before. He is absolutely reliable, not talkative, you know. . . The adminstrator? How much? One hundred and seventy million? Okay. Let it be part of the five hundred million.'

Then he dropped the phone.

'That was the commissioner,' he said to his son. 'He wanted to see you yesterday but you were nowhere to be found. Where were you?'

'I had an appointment,' Ogie said. 'After that I went to the petrol station to get my car serviced.'

'And in the evening?'

Ogie shrugged his shoulders. 'I had dinner at the Wayo Hotel with Chief Ekata.'

'Chief Ekata?'

'Yes. He wanted to discuss the contract.'

'And no doubt he promised you houses?'

Ogie fought his own anger by keeping quiet. If he talked now, he had no doubt that the anger would show in his voice. He avoided his father's eyes and looked down at the table.

Chief Obala rubbed his hands carefully. 'I am not telling you not to have your own life,' he said. 'But I want you to take off more time from your women and devote it to your work. Chief Ekata is a dangerous man. He is like a vulture who waits for the wounded animal to die. If you have any value at all for your life, then you'll avoid him.' Chief Obala decided not to press any further. Instead, he said, 'The value of the contract has been increased to five hundred million naira.'

In spite of his mounting resentment, Ogie Obala was caught by surprise. 'But it was only one hundred million naira yesterday!' he exclaimed. How could the value of a contract increase by five hundred per cent overnight?

Chief Obala smiled now at his son. 'Oh well, we think it is better this way. I put forward the proposal to the commissioner yesterday morning and he said he would put it forward to the major and to the chief of police. I think they are all agreed it's the best. That was why he rang me up just now.'

Ogie studied his father closely. There was no doubt that he had connections, but he had seen the finances of the council and had his own doubts.

'Five hundred million is a huge sum of money. 'Where will all the money come from.'

Chief Obala spread out his hands on the table. His son

might spend little time in the office but he was not as foolish as he had thought.

'The vote will be made by the government initially. Then it will pass into the authority of our council and it will be marked, "special projects."'

'But how much of this money will actually represent the value of the contract – I mean, will all of it be awarded as a single contract?'

'Of course, of course,' Chief Obala said expansively. 'All of it will be awarded as a single contract. It is important that the man who gets it is entirely reliable. We will be writing down on paper five hundred million. But the contractor will not be getting more than ten million.'

'And what happens to the rest of the money?' Ogie asked.

'The rest of which money?'

Ogie watched his father's mouth moving like the mouth of a fish and he smiled at the resemblance.

'The rest of which money?' his father asked again.

'Well, the other four hundred and ninety million naira. What happens to it?' And to himself, Come to think of it, I have never really noticed it before. It does look like a fish's mouth.

'Well, the money will be shared out. Each person gets his share.'

'And who are they?'

Chief Obala looked at his son. 'The administrator to begin with. He gets a lump sum of more than one hundred million. Part of that of course goes to the head office. Major Alafia comes next. Then the commissioner and of course the chief of police. And two others,' Chief Obala hesitated, then smiled. 'You and I.'

Ogie made rapid calculations in his mind. 'That's nearly eighty million naira apiece,' he said. 'It's too much money.'

'And easy to handle. All of it goes to Switzerland.'

'To Switzerland?'

'Of course. No local bank could handle such sums of money without raising eyebrows.'

'And the banks in Switzerland don't care.'

'No, they don't.'

'Well, it's good they don't care,' Ogie said carefully. 'But I want to handle this contract.'

Chief Obala looked at his son and frowned. 'Isn't that what you are doing at the moment?'

Ogie shook his head and put his hands, one each, on the arms of the chair. 'Not that way exactly,' he said. He knew that the clouds were gathering swiftly and a storm was about to break. 'I will want my money here,' he said. 'I would want to invest my share of the money in business here.'

Chief Obala looked darkly at his son. 'Business? What type of business?'

'Any business. Supermarkets, petrol stations. I haven't made up my mind.'

'And if the probes come?'

'The businesses will be there,' Ogie said quietly. 'In my country.'

'For the government to take, isn't it?'

'No, for me to manage. There's nothing wrong with business.'

Chief Obala suddenly exploded. 'Business! Business! Business!' he cried. 'Is there nothing better than that? Who gave you the idea? Have I not told you before that it's either business or the family?'

You are a bastard, Ogie said in his heart, and stood up.

'And before you go,' Chief Obala warned, 'you might remember that you'll only invest what you have. If you do not have any money you won't invest any.'

Well, we shall see, you bastard, Ogie said again in his heart and went out. He was thoroughly angry.

Chief Obala slumped back in his chair, then threw up his hands. People who see me outside think I am a happy man, that I have no worries, he said to himself. But my worries are heavier than the cross. My cross is heavier than all the crosses I have ever heard of. This one is made of stone, of granite. I have struggled to build up what I have, struggled and suffered setbacks but this is going to be the greatest setback of all. My own son turning against

me. But it will never be. Not while I am alive. His hands trembled and there was sweat on his face. He smiled bitterly. This is just like five years ago, he reminded himself. I have only trembled and sweated like this just that once before . . . It had happened along Odigie Street when he was going to the bank in his brand-new car. Beside him was the briefcase that held the document he had just signed and which was to earn him hundreds of thousands of naira. He was immensely pleased with himself because the document had been difficult to get organised and because he had had to use all the cunning and daring at his disposal. So, he was tap-tap-tapping the briefcase with his fingers while he sang in his heart and did not pay any attention to the street along which he was driving. And it was raining.

Suddenly he heard a crash and cries. His own car lurched forward, screeched to a halt and he could see nothing but blood and bodies and bicycles and clothes. In a flash, he was out of the car, and, clutching the briefcase tightly, ran into one of the nearby houses. Through the back door, he emerged on the street that went back to the square and along which was the police station people called Division F. He walked hurriedly along the street. If he was recognised, he could be lynched. What he did in the next few minutes was of the utmost importance. He went straight to the police station. He looked at the dirty walls of the station in disgust and at the wall clock, which had stopped.

'What happened?' the police constable on duty asked. He was a thin man with a slight hunchback, and a cough.

'I parked my car in front of my office this morning. Then I ran upstairs to get this briefcase.' Chief Obala showed him the black briefcase with the polished silver handle.

The police constable scribbled everything down.

'You know it has been raining all day,' Chief Obala said. 'I just dashed out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition hole and with the engine running. When I returned, the car was gone.'

The police constable coughed and his eyes watered and he looked at Chief Eweh Obala sympathetically. 'There are so many car thieves these days,' he said. 'What time was that?'

Chief Obala looked at his wrist watch. 'Some thirty minutes ago,' he said. 'You mean. . .' The police constable looked up at the wall clock and swore. 'Nothing ever seems to work here.' He wasn't wearing a watch himself. 'What time is it now?' he asked. 'My wrist watch is in the raincoat. The strap is broken.'

Chief Obala immediately realised he had scored. He looked quickly at his own wrist watch. It was getting on for twelve-thirty in the afternoon. But the weather was such that it looked as if even the sun had not yet risen.

'Eleven o' clock,' he said and watched the man write it down. Now he wanted to get out quickly before another policeman could come in and perhaps discover the lie.

'And so, since then, you have been unable to get your car?

'No, I haven't.'

'Did anybody see you park the car?'

'What has that got to do with it?' Chief Obala asked impatiently. 'I want you to find my car!'

'It is routine, sir,' the police constable said. 'So don't be angry. We'll do all we can to recover your car. What else can you tell me about the car?' And he stood up and started going round the small counter.

'Where are you going?' Chief Obala asked.

'To get some cigarettes from my raincoat. I feel so cold inside. Just a minute.'

'No!'

The police constable stared at Chief Obala. 'What is it?'

'I have a meeting. I must be going. Here are some cigarettes and matches too.' He dug his hands into his pocket and it was only money that came out. 'Well, take this and buy yourself some cigarettes later.'

The police constable stared at Chief Obala unbelievingly. There was at least fifty naira in Chief Obala's

outstretched hand. Hearing the sound of boots on the porch outside, the constable quickly grabbed the money and shoved it into his trousers pocket. Chief Obala almost ran out, because he too had heard the sound of the approaching police boots. He went home immediately and there he trembled and sweated as he waited for the police to call him. The call came almost thirty minutes after he got home.

'Your car has been found, sir,' said the policeman at the other end. 'It was involved in a ghastly accident.'

Chief Obala pretended to gasp in surprise. 'Where?'

'In the city centre. At least three people were killed. Many more were taken to the hospital. The driver, who we presume was the one who stole the car, ran away. He just disappeared.'

'But is my car all right?' Chief Obala asked.

The policeman at the other end was angry but he didn't let it show in his voice. 'Three people died,' he repeated solemnly.

'My God!' Chief Obala cried. 'I'd better contact the insurance people.' Then he dropped the phone. And he trembled, and the sweat stood out on his face, large, like coral beads. . .

Five years ago, he now said to himself. Five long years, during which time I have built up my career and now after all my sacrifices, Ogie, a mere boy, wants to ruin everything I have done. Well, he swore to himself, not when I am alive. No son of mine is going to convert my money into dead walls and dead machines. Never!

Chief Obala picked up the telephone and asked for a number. It took the girls at the P and T exchange more than ten minutes to put him through. He would have put the telephone down but he had important things he wanted to get off his mind. At long last, he heard a click at the other end and Chief Ekata came on the line.

Chief Obala went straight to the point, 'I understand you met my son yesterday at the Wayo Hotel,' he said.

Chief Ekata did not hesitate either. 'Yes, Chief. We met in the evening.'

'And. . . er, what did you discuss?'

'The contract.'

'Didn't you think you had to contact me first?'

'Ah Chief!' Chief Ekata exclaimed and laughed. 'I thought that dealing with your son was just like dealing with you. Was I wrong?'

'You are not wrong yet, but you might be if you go on promising you'll help to invest any money in businesses.'

'We didn't promise each other anything,' Chief Ekata said carefully.

'Well, I am just telling you.'

'Thank you very much, Chief, but now that you have raised it, I did intend coming down to see you.'

'I am extremely busy,' Chief Obala said.

'And. . . er, if I may ask, how is the business going, I mean – the thing itself, the contract?'

'I'll be frank with you,' Chief Obala said. 'Many people, very many people are interested.'

'Ah that's quite natural,' Chief Ekata pointed out. 'Many are called but few are chosen.'

Chief Obala chewed this over for a second, then said, 'I suppose you are right. Only a few will be chosen.' And he hung up.

Chapter 13

Outside, the trees that lined Ring Road were being cut down.

There were about three hundred, the majority of them whistling pines, all round and robust at the waist and heavy at the top with their thick wet manes of shining arrow-shaped foliage. Then there were the cassia and the flame trees, the cassia heavy at the bottom and at the top carrying little propellers of yellow petals, millions of them; the flame trees round at the bottom and heavy at the top with leaves and with the parades of red, flaming flowers like the parade of the red guards. About ten men were at work in pairs, bent and sweating against each tree as they sawed through the fleshy roundness of the trees' waists, each man holding one end of the saw that had several sharp shark-like fangs. The saw pulled one way first, then in the opposite direction all the time biting deeper and deeper into the trees so that they shook and trembled and then seemed to stand still before crashing with great agony through the air and to the ground, all their leaves carrying forward as the long, loose, washed-wet hair of a woman is flung outwards to dry in the sun or is swept forward by the wind.

The trees crashed and the din of their splintering and tearing barks was great while the men laboured, sweating intensely under the cold drizzling rain. As they fell, the flame trees shed their parades of screaming red flowers, the cassia trees their yellow blossoms so that everywhere were red petals and little propellers of yellow petals, all intermingled, crushed and finally ugly.

Six years earlier, the government had said, 'Let there be a big square.' And there was a big square after many houses were destroyed and large compensations paid and several contracts awarded running into millions of naira. And in all it took the government exactly one year and thirty million naira to have a square and the government

saw it and the newspaper saw it and all said it was good and the newspaper printed the name of the government in gold and said the government was dynamic.

Then the next year, the government changed its mind and said, 'Let there be a stadium instead,' and the square was reorganised; walls were built and the square became a stadium after one year and forty-five million naira had gone down the drain. The government saw the stadium and said it was good and the newspapers, together with all the rest of the mass media, sang praises and confirmed that the government was progressive and dynamic.

Three years previously, the government said, 'A stadium is not good in the heart of the city what with the market so close and the city council so close. Let there be a park instead.' And after that the papers, the radio and the television said, 'Yes, a park is good. Let trees be planted.' Manure was procured, imported and the trees were planted and the stadium taken apart and benches were bought and installed and a swimming pool built and water rushed in. And all this was after a year had passed and several contracts had been awarded running into fifty million naira. And when the government said with threats that the park was good and the mass media backed the government up, the people of the city were cowed and slunk past the park daily and said nothing.

Then the government employed a Miss Gasfield, a white woman, to plant tropical flowers in the square. Each morning Miss Gasfield, a bony, tall, red-eyed woman, carried a basket of flowers into the square while the servants carried the pails of water. And in the basket Miss Gasfield had sunflowers, roses, bell flowers – the pale blue ones – and dahlias, and while she planted these flowers, her servants watered them. But the next morning, Miss Gasfield went again with another basket of flowers, then she uprooted the ones she had planted the day before and planted the new ones she had brought. And behind her, her servants watered the new flowers and cried out that they were beautiful flowers.

And then the next day, the same thing happened. Each morning after planting the flowers, the woman

went to the administrator's office and smiled that dry and corpse-like white smile to the administrator and said she had planted two hundred flowers and the administrator congratulated her and said since it was agreed that each planted flower would cost three naira, then he would note it down that the government owed her six hundred naira multiplied by thirty, since flowers must also give pleasure on Sundays? And Miss Gasfield answered, certainly, certainly, and then smiled again and went out. Each month the woman collected some eighteen thousand naira from the administrator's office, then at the end of the ninth month, Miss Gasfield ran away to England.

And now the trees were crashing down, making such a din that Chief Obala had to raise the shutters of his window. He looked out angrily at the square.

'My God!' he cried. 'What are they cutting down the trees for?'

What do they think they are doing? he thought furiously. Just the type of thing to bring out a coup. Couldn't the administration see that the people could not be deceived by their plans? Perhaps, because the people had been so docile, ignorant and seemingly blind, the administration had come to believe that it could do anything and get away with it. But he knew better; one day national coups would come, revolutionary ones that would destroy the basis of the present system. That was why it was important he should not keep his money in the country. A massive popular revolutionary coup would no doubt come and it was vital he had all his money out of the country. He must get all his money out. From the way things were happening, it was a wonder that the country had survived without daily revolutions. The word revolution frightened him. He didn't want to hear the explanations for it, he did not want to know that it was a natural sequence of development, that every country whether it liked or not had to pass through social revolutions, that revolutions were the natural consequences of exploitation, decay, economic and political fascism hardly different from what was being

perpetrated in his country. Oh yes, he feared revolution and he had to take precautions against it, prevent its coming, crush it if possible as one would crush a toy under one's feet. But they say it must come, he thought. And if it does!

He was angry that they were cutting down the trees now. It bore a certain resemblance to what he expected the revolution would do, cut down all of them, cut down all those who had lived through and profited by the present decay and exploitation. By changing that square too often, they were letting the people see too much of how the oil money, how the sweat of the people was being dissipated. But there was another angle to it. The people would see that change was possible, and necessary.

He ran his hands along the edges of his large desk. No, I must not think about it, he said to himself. It made him sick deep deep down in his bowels to think about the possibility of a revolution. He wanted to concentrate on this contract whose value was leaping daily. The contract had to be handled with great care. He was not afraid of the present. Only the future worried him, Ogie and the future.

Oloru's office also overlooked the square. Hearing the crash of the trees, he stood up from his desk and gazed out at the square. He saw how the trees were being beheaded and he was dismayed. What a shame! he cried in his heart. What a shame!

He liked the shade that the trees provided. They had also served to screen his offices which were in the building where the ministry headquarters had formerly been housed. He preferred the dust to the flood which was a problem where the ministry now had headquarters in a secluded part of the city. He had hated the noisy stadium and had therefore willingly participated in breaking it down when he got the three million naira contract to take apart its right flank. But now this. He just didn't understand.

Four years ago, he had sat in the stadium and watched three armed robbers being shot. He had shuddered then and he remembered saying to the man who sat next to

him that he did not think it was the actual armed robbers who were being shot. On seeing the questioning look on the other man's face, he had laughed and said, 'To hell with it, the armed robbers are those doing the shooting or organising it or both.' The other man had nodded his head that sprouted so much unkempt hair and said, 'Yes, they are doing the shooting all right because after all, it is surely easier to steal billions of naira with a pen than with a gun?' And if a man had a gun and a pen? Couldn't he steal billions of naira and be declared an institution?

Now he remembered the man's words and he was angry, perhaps because he realised their accuracy. He wanted money anyway. Everybody wanted money. Perhaps I should be congratulating myself instead and find out what is coming up next on that square because there must be contracts, he said to himself. Sure. Many of them. He jotted it down on the pad in front of him so that he would remember to ring the administrator's office. He was smiling now because he realised that cutting down the trees was likely to bring him some money.

Before Oloru had been aroused by the panic spreading through the trees, he had been busy, preoccupied with an important debate: who would be his strongest rivals for the contract to build the low cost houses for the council? Very slowly he wrote down seven names. Against the first name he marked 'X' and wrote, 'petty contractor.' He cancelled out the second and third names. Then against them he wrote 'worthless,' then cancelled out 'worthless' and wrote 'poor.' He studied the fourth name closely, scrutinised the fifth and thought deeply about the sixth. But he did not write anything against these names. He knew that even with the huge mobilisation fee that was bound to be paid, these other three contractors had all their money tied up in the cement business... Yes, they were important but could not constitute threats, at least not serious threats.

Mr Oloru stopped on the seventh name, circled it. He thought about the man. Yes, the fight would be between them. He knew that the man had the cunning as well as

the material resources. Well, he would employ the same trick he had used to get that stadium. He would propose to this man that they team up, that they co-operate to outwit all the other bidders, then at the very last moment, he alone would sign the contract. He alone would get the multi-million naira job.

Having made up his mind, he picked up the phone and asked the exchange to give him the telephone number of Chief Ekata.

Chief Ekata was in the toilet when the telephone rang. He heard it distinctly and called to his secretary to tell the caller to hold on. He had been thinking about his telephone discussion with Chief Obala. Chief Ekata had formed a simple philosophy, based on his experiences over the years: eliminate all opponents. To him there were always only two sides to a coin, his side and the other side. So when Chief Obala had said that many people were interested, Chief Ekata had laughed softly into the phone but his eyes had remained unsmiling.

Ogie had talked about Oloru. Chief Obala had also alluded to the possibility. That meant that Mr Oloru was not only favoured, but strongly so. And if Mr Oloru was favoured, it meant that Chief Ekata was disfavoured. Logically, that meant he wouldn't get the contract, that he would lose more than four million naira profit. Chief Ekata grunted as he sat on the stool.

'Who is on the phone?' he called loudly to his secretary over the toilet door. It was not full height and a man could be seen from the shoulders up when he stood in there.

'It's Mr Oloru,' came the reply.

'Mr Who?'

'Mr Oloru.'

Very quickly, Chief Ekata zipped up his trousers and hurried into his office. He took the telephone receiver from the woman and she went away.

'I have a little proposition,' Mr Oloru said.

Chief Ekata smiled and spat into the palm of his free hand. 'Propose on!' he said softly. 'Propose on, my dear.'

'Are you listening?' Mr Oloru asked sharply.

'Of course. Of course. You have a small proposition you want to make.'

'Yes, yes. Could we meet this evening at the Wayo Hotel to discuss it?'

Chief Ekata pretended to think about it. 'Well, I think I can make it,' he said finally. 'I'll settle the bills.'

'No, I'll settle them,' Mr Oloru said.

'No, no, no. I'll settle them.'

'I have said I will. I am making the proposition.'

'For which I am paying,' Chief Ekata said and smeared his palm, wet with his saliva, on the blotter in front of him.

'Okay then. We'll settle that when we get there,' Mr Oloru laughed.

'Will twelve midnight be okay? It's less noisy then.'

'Quite fine,' Oloru agreed. 'Twelve it will be.'

Chief Ekata was smiling when he dropped the phone. So Oloru had played into his hands! He had already decided to eliminate the man. And he had also decided on the means.

Chapter 14

It was early in the afternoon. The clouds still hung in the air after the morning's rain, heavy and dark. Ogie had no doubt it would rain again as he drove along the dirty, flooded streets, his mind busy. He tried not to think about his father, he had made up his mind there, he was entering business and that was the end to it. He thought instead about the message he had sent through the servant, Anselm, to Eunice. If everything went well, Eunice would be waiting for him at home by the time he returned from Rose. Life was becoming interesting for him.

He drove his car slowly. The road was rough, it had many small sharp ridges on it. The road-menders had attempted to fill up the deeper holes on the road with large broken stones. Now that the rain had fallen, the stones had worked loose and the holes were deep and treacherous. The houses that stood along the road were brown and ugly and everywhere the combination of every imaginable kind of rotting refuse brought out such a stink that Ogie hurriedly rolled up his windows. He drove slowly because the road was still rough and muddy red.

At the end of Atise Street, he stopped at a small house that had a charred rose plant in front of it. There were a few flowers on the plant, about five of them. Some of the petals were dead and already detached from the flower. They hung instead on the cobwebs that the spiders had woven between the roof of the house and the leaves of the rose plant. Ogie was always impressed by this plant; shrouded in the thick black cobwebs as it was, it was the only rose bush along the street. He got out of the car and locked the doors. Then, mounting the single step that led to the verandah, he entered its short narrow passage. He went past the first and second doors, then

stopped at the third, hesitated and knocked. What if he should catch her with somebody else?

The door opened and Rose stood there, a sick, angry expression spreading over her face, the brown and blue headtie hanging loosely from the back of her hair. As always, Ogie was surprised and relieved. Since he had been coming here, he had never at any time found another man in the room, nor Rose absent either. She was always at home and always alone. The hurtful feeling of doubt and jealousy that always seemed to encircle his heart as he stood outside the door after knocking dissolved immediately. He smiled and said, 'Good evening, Rose.'

Rose did not return the greeting but went back into her room and sat on the bed. He could see a small blue bucket beside her bed and on the stool that usually served the dressing mirror were a dozen or more bitter lemons, some of them already cut into halves.

'I tried all day yesterday to reach you by telephone,' Rose said and spat into the small blue plastic bucket. 'At least, you might have had the decency to call me back or even call here in the evening.

He sat on the solitary double armchair and watched her spitting into the little plastic bucket. His eyes narrowed and he rubbed his hands on his knees. 'I am sorry,' he said. 'It was the contract.'

'The contract!' Rose said contemptuously and spat into the bucket again. She wiped the wet corners of her mouth with the back of her hand. 'Well, you've got another contract here! I am pregnant!'

So that is it! Ogie thought. She is pregnant. I wonder when it happened. At that party? Wasn't that almost six weeks ago?

Rose covered her face with her hands and her voice shook. 'What am I going to do with my unfinished education?' she breathed, forcing back the tears. 'And my job? How can I have a child? What will my parents say? What will my friends say? Why didn't you think? Why were you so bloody selfish?'

Ogie removed his hands from his knees and covered

his face also. He did not want her to see that he was elated, happy and proud. He was going to be a father! And the money was going to come in with the contract. He would enter business and if Rose was willing, she could even become a managing director of one of the businesses and when their children grew up, they all would be partners in the business. He could not understand why Rose was so worried. At least she had no reason to feel sorry for herself.

'We'll get married,' he said simply.

Rose looked at him over her fingers, the anger now blazing darkly in her eyes.

'Who are the "we"?' she asked, scorn in her voice. She lowered her hands from her face and spat into the bucket. 'Who are the "we" that will get married?'

Ogie kept his voice controlled. 'You and I.'

Rose laughed. 'So you think I am going to marry you because you gave me a contract here? Didn't you remember what I told you about going to the university?'

'There is no need to think about that now,' Ogie said hastily. 'I want to marry you.'

'And I don't want to marry you,' Rose retorted. 'Besides it wouldn't work.'

Ogie stood up and paced about the small room, along the narrow passage between the bed and the double armchair, his thoughts racing with him, angry at this girl's refusal, which to him stemmed only from her stupidity. What did she mean by 'it wouldn't work'?

'I could easily get another girl to marry me,' he said, and thought about Eunice. 'Any girl would be proud to be my wife, to be in your shoes. At least I am not poor. At the moment I am working on a contract which could give me something like eighty million naira. You are aware of that. What, then, is bothering you?'

'I am not in love with you,' she said.

Ogie was halted, staggered by her confession. 'You are not in love with me?' His face became a shade darker but he rallied quickly. 'Well, you can marry without love, I mean if there is enough understanding and tolerance. Love will come after.'

'You can,' Rose said, 'but I cannot. I want to marry somebody I am in love with.'

'Not necessarily,' Ogie argued. 'Most people do not marry those they love.'

'That's why there is so much unhappiness and divorce.' She picked up a half lemon and slowly sucked at it.

'No, no, no,' Ogie persisted. 'It's the other way round really. People in love are bound to annoy each other. They take so much about each other for granted whereas those who are not, well, in love are careful. They take nothing for granted. I am saying this seriously now. It is not that I want to persuade you by saying it. But it is the truth. Love is not as important in marriage as other things. . . money for instance.'

Rose shook her head stubbornly. 'I don't care about money. I don't care about the other things. I only care about the understanding and tolerance which come with love.' She put the lemon back on the stool, sucked out, squeezed in and dry.

'And you really do not love me? Truly?'

Rose shook her head again. 'No, I do not.' She would not talk about her fear of his parents, that to them she would always be the cheap opportunist.

'And you let me have sex with you?' He was deeply hurt.

'Hear him!' Rose cried. 'Hear him as if he was not the one who always demanded it. You always demanded it and struggled with me. What could I do but give in? Anyway I am not blaming you. I got myself into this. I got myself into this because I hoped, I wouldn't. .' And she began to cry now. Oh that she could tell him all of the truth. He was sincere and yet so blind, and she had to be callous, even when it was mostly herself that she hurt.

Ogie laughed at her now. 'So you hoped you could eat your cake and have it, that you wouldn't be pregnant? And now that your hopes have crashed, what are you going to do? Okay, you won't marry me but then are you willing to bring up the child on your own?' He

talked rapidly. He wanted to hurt her the way she had hurt him, deeply, mortally.

'And who told you that I wanted the child?' Rose asked, staring at his wide, malicious smile.

'So you want an abortion. Don't you? But do not hope that you will get my support. And if I hear that you do carry it out, I am going to sue you and the doctor for the heaviest of all damages.'

Ogie was angry now and his eyes shone with the anger. Rose was, however, not to be frightened.

'You either go and see a doctor and very quickly too, or this child ceases to be yours,' she shouted at Ogie.

Ogie was shocked. With a girl like Eunice, he would always know where he stood. He couldn't understand Rose. I am going to be a rich man, he thought. My father is already rich and from the present contract we are handling, I am sure to make money. What then is worrying her? Is it another man? He looked at her sprawled out on the bed and shrugged his shoulders while the inside of his mouth was bitter as if his bile duct had been punctured. He shrugged his shoulders and told himself he ought to leave her alone. She would regret it. She would come running to him, she would come to beg him on her knees and God knew it might be too late.

Then another idea struck him. Why not agree to help her out? Agree to help her but then stall, man. Yes, stall, delay the whole process so that it will be impossible for her to remove it unless, of course, she wants to do it and kill herself. He could even arrange with the doctor what to tell her. It's money that counts, after all, and he was in a far stronger position than she. The bile subsided.

Rose did not realise he was out of the room until the rude slamming of the door shocked her back to full awareness. With a great effort, she tried to think of him evenly, without bitterness.

He is sincere, I am sure, but I must also keep my resolve, she thought. What I do now is against the future. I would marry him if I could, but why go into something that I feel in my bones would not work? There were too many examples around, proving that point. Then she

thought about the process of abortion and she became afraid, lonely and forsaken. She had heard of so many deaths, of girls who bled to death, who rotted internally after they had attempted to abort their pregnancies. She felt cold and her heart seemed to stand still.

Her mind went back again to the day it happened. That was some six weeks earlier when Chief Obala's son, Oniha, had returned from Omani and Chief Obala said he must throw a party to thank God for saving his son's life in the massacre of students at Omani University. Ogie invited her and told her she must come. She didn't want to go when she remembered that they had quarrelled bitterly only the week before – because Ogie had accused her of being too free with one of his friends at Ero's bachelor's eve. The quarrel had been so deep that Ogie had even avoided coming to her place until a few days before his father's party.

She protested because she didn't want to be accused again, and anyway she hated going to parties too frequently, but Ogie was adamant and said well, if that was the way she wanted it... then he went on to say, how could he go to his own party without his girl-friend? And Rose thought again about Chief Obala whom she wanted to avoid as much as possible. Eventually, however, she gave in, although with some reservations because she still nursed grievances against Ogie for his false and mean insinuations at Ero's bachelor's eve.

Chief Obala's party was a small, lively get-together; in all there were not more than thirty people, so the champagne went round generously and there was so much to eat that she finally didn't eat at all. But she drank the champagne and the vermouth and the Portuguese sherry. Ogie stayed beside her and gave her the drinks.

Rose noticed too how Chief Obala manipulated the music to his advantage because he was interested in the woman who had two small marks on her face, one on each cheek, a beautiful, compact woman in her mid-forties, the wife of a family friend. Any time the music played and Chief Obala happened to be dancing with

any other woman apart from this one he coveted, he would cry gleefully, 'Excuse me dance allowed!' and then rush up to the beautiful woman and seize her. Then he would start squeezing her, pressing himself closer and closer to her. Surprisingly enough, the woman responded to Chief Obala's antics. Rose saw that, saw the woman's hands carefully caressing Chief Obala's groin. . .

It was while she was watching this play act itself out that Ogie came to her side and said they should go to his room so that he could introduce his brother to her more properly. Rose agreed; it was better than watching Chief Obala. So she went to Ogie's room and met Oniha who shook hands with her and naturally said she was a nice and decent girl. After Oniha left the room, Ogie bolted the door and drew her to the bed and started kissing her. She let him kiss her for some time. The taste of the champagne was good on their lips and she was enjoying it when she remembered that she had first to clear up the misunderstanding from the bachelor's eve. It was probably the wrong time to choose; Ogie was a little drunk and they quarrelled. She soon realised that she ought not to have quarrelled with Ogie on such an evening and wanted to make it up to him.

It was then that Ogie had made love to her. She had resisted, of course. She screamed at Ogie that it wasn't safe, that he mustn't let himself into her but Ogie had given her those white tablets and persuaded her to take them, tablets she suspected now must have been nothing more than anti-malaria pills. Even more significantly, she had made the mistake of allowing Ogie to sleep with her after a quarrel. She remembered her girl-friend's warning too late. 'Never sleep with a man if you have just quarrelled with him,' she always said. 'This strange compromise more often than not leads to pregnancy.' That girl had been right. Too right! She could no longer hide from the fact that she was definitely pregnant. One mistake, but a costly mistake. She held her head in her hands and tried to think of ways out. Clearly, she didn't want it. It was ridiculous to think of having a child when she was determined to go to the university. Her father

would never understand her, her father who was always so proud of her before their neighbours, who had taught her that education was the most important thing in life. She could not disappoint him now. She would never have the child. No, never! Her mind revolved in a deep turmoil, for what seemed like a long time.

Suddenly she heard a rat-tap-tap on the door. She raised her feverish head and frowned. Had Ogie come back?

'Yes?' She spat into the bucket as she sat up on the bed.

The door opened slowly and Anselm stood there.

'Master sent me with a letter, madam,' Anselm said.

'Master?'

'Yes. He says it is important.'

Rose took the sealed envelope from Anselm and tore it open. From inside the envelope she took out the small note, folded twice, unfolded it and read: 'I am now prepared to do everything to get rid of our child. You name the time and I'll contact the doctor. Ever yours, Ogie.'

Rose read the note twice, then folded it and tore it breadthwise three times and threw the pieces of paper into the blue plastic bucket. Anselm watched her. 'You can go,' she said to Anselm.

Anselm frowned. 'No message, madam?'

Rose looked into the open, enquiring face of the man. 'No, Anselm. There is no message.'

Anselm hesitated, then moved to the door.

'Wait!' Rose said just as he was about to close the door behind him. 'How did you come?'

'How?'

'Yes, how did you come? By taxi?'

The man shook his head. 'No, madam,' he said. 'I walked.'

'From Ogie's house?'

'Yes madam, from master's house,'

'Wait,' Rose said again and she stood up after spitting once more into the small blue plastic bucket. She felt weak and tired, helpless and empty. She opened the

drawer of her dressing table and brought out her small brown leather purse.

'Take,' she said to Anselm and pressed a fifty kobo note into the man's hand. 'The distance is too far to walk. You must take a taxi home this time.'

Anselm hesitated, then took the money. 'Thank you very much, madam,' he said, almost beside himself with gratitude. Then gently, 'I hope you get well soon.'

Rose went back and sat on the bed. Well, that was something. She had now only to think of when she would do it. It should be during the weekend, she thought, preferably on Friday evening. Then I can rest and regain my strength and by the time it is Monday, I will forget this, all of it, and think it never happened to me.'

Chapter 15

It was deep into the night as the men sat in the bar of the Wayo Hotel, and they were angry and bitter because the electricity supply had been cut off suddenly, without warning or apologies by the Electricity Power Authority.

'Who says we are not slaves in our country?' one man cried out. 'They disrupt the electricity supply, the water supply and everything else at their pleasure.'

Another man laughed but he was equally angry. 'You are complaining about the electricity because you have it in this city,' he said. 'Why don't you go to the villages? They have no water, they have no roads, they have no hospitals and no electricity either.'

'We are slaves in our own country,' the first man insisted.

'Yes,' the second man agreed. 'We are worse than slaves. We are fools. We are a useless people. See how the post office handles your letters. Last week, thousands of letters were picked up in the river at the foot of the hills. Thousands of letters ditched by the post office men. But did anybody complain?'

'No,' the first man agreed. 'Nobody who matters complained.'

'And the P and T people? Are they not the worst? It takes them on the average an hour to give you the number that you want, that is if they are in good mood. And as soon as you start your conversation, they also listen in. Sometimes you can hear them laughing and giggling and hissing. At other times, they cut you off at the middle of the conversation. Or worse still, they connect your line to another person.'

The first man laughed again but now the bitterness was gone from his voice. 'They ought to be hanged.'

'Yes, they ought to be,' the second man agreed. 'But listen to this. Do you know what it is like to ring the exchange and ask for a number?'

'No,' the first man said. 'No.'

'I will tell you. You ring them and the conversation is like this. You, to the telephone operator, "2345 please." Silence. Five minutes. You can hear the radio playing and the clapping of hands. Then you repeat, "2345 please." Still there is no answer. You wait another ten minutes, then say into the mouth of the telephone, "Please, 2345." Then a reply comes back, "Line out of order." You wait five, maybe ten minutes, and then dial their number again. After a quarter of an hour, a voice asks, "What do you want?" You answer "2345 please. I want number 2345." The answer comes back quickly now, "Line engaged." '

'The bastards,' muttered the first man. This time the bitterness was back in his voice.

'You find it incredible,' the second man continued, 'you cannot believe it, so you say to the feminine voice at the other end, "But you have only just. . ." You hear a click and the line goes dead. Meanwhile your house is on fire, or your child lies dying on a couch.'

'They should all be hanged,' the first man said.

'No, Mr Ajole of the P and T ought to be hanged,' a voice shot up from a table nearby.

The second man turned but he couldn't see the face of the man who had spoken. 'You are right,' he said to the faceless voice. 'Mr Ajole, the general manager, ought to be hanged. After all he bought the equipment which the operators are using. I hear he was sent to Europe to buy first-class automatic equipment. But what did he do? He bought second-hand, outdated equipment and shared the rest of the money with. . .'

'Sh, sh!' the first man cautioned. 'You should be careful. You do not know who is in the crowd.'

'Very well,' the first man agreed, 'I will not speak of the man with whom the money was shared. I will speak instead of the contractors who set up the equipment and the. . .'

Chief Ekata and Mr Oloru had both been involved in the installation of the telephone equipment. They had been involved at different stages and from that contract,

Chief Ekata had made fifty thousand naira. Listening to the man talking, he was uncomfortable and angry.

'Can't somebody shut that drunkard's mouth for him?' he said angrily to Mr Oloru.

Mr Oloru shrugged his shoulders. 'It does him good to talk, perhaps. What do people do in this country anyway but talk? It is always nothing but small talk.'

'All the same. . .'

'Ah, forget about him. Let us talk instead about the contract. This is no small talk, there are several million naira involved.'

'Yes,' Chief Ekata agreed. 'Several million. What are your proposals?'

Mr Oloru sipped his drink in the half-darkness. 'My proposals are simple, but concrete,' he said. 'I suggest that we go in, not as individuals to compete against each other, but as partners. This combines our efforts and therefore renders competition from other contractors totally ineffective.'

'Very good,' Chief Ekata agreed absently, his mind busy with what he had planned to do.

'So you do agree basically with my proposals then?'

Chief Ekata shrugged his shoulders. 'It is not that I do not agree. I am even more for partnership than you are. The only. . .'

'Then that is fine,' Mr Oloru cut in. 'Yes, the only thing is how do we eliminate further competition from other contractors? That is the question to which we should now address ourselves.'

'Well, well, well,' Chief Ekata said, angry that his previous speech should have been interrupted, and yet concealing his anger, 'these no doubt are serious problems. But I think even more serious is this problem. . .How shall I put it?' Chief Ekata waved his hands in the air. 'Let us say it is a problem of honesty, of sincerity.'

'How?' Mr Oloru frowned.

'Er, the thing is we are not partners officially. We are two different companies. Obviously, the partnership you are now proposing can only mean one thing, that

whichever one of us gets the contract automatically shares the profits with the other. How am I sure therefore that if you did get the contract, you would let me into the profits, or, the other way round, how are you sure that I would let you in if I win the contract? We are not signing any documents, are we?'

Oloru blew out the smoke that he had inhaled from the cigarette, very slowly. 'So you do not trust me,' he said, thinking to himself, the bastard is going to be difficult. Aloud, he added, 'So you want some form of guarantee.'

Chief Ekata shrugged his shoulders. 'Let's say it's something like that.'

'That guarantee is given by this meeting,' Oloru said, 'and it should become even more firm through future meetings. I am not dishonest.'

Chief Ekata laughed loudly. 'Good talk!' he cried out. 'Good talk, but whoever heard of an honest businessman? All contractors, at least, as far as I know and you know, too, are dishonest.'

'But not towards each other. One thief does not steal from another.'

'True,' Chief Ekata agreed slowly. 'True, but if the stakes are high enough, thieves murder and poison each other. It is happening even today in our city.'

'So?'

Chief Ekata was about to make a reply, when behind them a commotion ensued. He was glad of the disturbance. I shouldn't have mentioned the poison, he thought. That might put him on his guard! But I have to do it and what better time than now.

Oloru turned his head in the direction of the noise; he was angry because the talk had not come off as easily as he had planned. Perhaps he would have to send his wife round again to the administrator and the others; but wasn't that really too high a price? Should they have his wife yet again just to swing the contract in his favour? Still, this contract was worth several million naira. So what were a few men's pleasures with your wife compared to five million naira? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

The noise was now getting on Oloru's nerves. 'Can't anybody get those bastards to quieten down?' he said angrily over his shoulder. Chief Ekata grunted back a reply. He wasn't bothered. His mind was working on something else.

Impatiently, Oloru stood up and proceeded to search for a waiter. At the Wayo Hotel, the waiters wore long red shirts on dark blue trousers. The darkness therefore made it almost impossible to locate them. Oloru finally stumbled against one and grabbed his shoulders.

'Change our seats!' he instructed the waiter and pointed to their table.

Oloru went back to Chief Ekata. Still standing with his hands on the sides of Chief Ekata's chair, he said, 'I have told the waiters to move our table away from the door and from the noise to that corner over there.'

Chief Ekata stood up smiling. 'Is it really necessary?'

Oloru nodded. 'I am sure it is. Noise gets on my nerves. It's like poison.'

Chief Ekata's smile faded. He moved silently aside as the waiters came first to refill their beer glasses and then to move the table and the seats. Chief Ekata watched them filling up both glasses.

'Make sure you do not switch the glasses,' he told the waiters. 'I hate drinking from another man's glass.'

'Me too,' Oloru agreed cheerfully. 'But don't be worried. They won't,' and he patted Chief Ekata on the back. They both followed the two waiters into the corner.

When the drinks had been set out, they sat down. Chief Ekata raised his glass.

'To our new understanding, to the multi-million naira profit contract.'

Oloru also raised his glass and both emptied their drinks.

Chapter 16

Sitting in his room, his back against the wet, deepening night, Chief Obala thought about the various gossips of the day. He thought about the reported arrest of Onise Ine who had been caught distributing offensive anti-establishment leaflets in the city. Ine was a fool, a young, rash fool. However, he felt sorry for the fellow. He had met him once and had been impressed by the young man's manner of talking, his views about the world. But then Ine was an idealist. That was what annoyed him most about all these young men, including his own son, their foolish idealism, their inability to see the world as it really was. 'A people gets the government it deserves,' Onise Ine had written. That was a realistic statement, a correct one. It aptly described their country. But to think that something could be done about it was clearly wrong. That was the idealism and it led nowhere except to the detention camps.

Slowly, he remembered that twenty years earlier, when he had entered the service, he too had been enthusiastic, anxious to work. He had sworn to be honest and reliable and to earn every kobo he was paid. But what happened? Everybody misinterpreted his readiness to work. His superiors suspected he was after their jobs. His own colleagues thought he was out to get nothing but promotion. His superiors frowned at anything he did, or said. 'Not that way,' they always said. 'We have our own established ways of doing things.' Or they patted him on the back and said, 'Young man, you are too much in a rush. Where are you rushing to? Are you a Russian?' Some were even more blunt and simply ordered him to lay off all the enthusiasm, that it would get him nowhere. And gradually he had succumbed. He had become frustrated, angry and bitter. But later on, he had come to accept his fate, accept things as they were, really. And now he was a chief, influential and rich. He

had struggled for everything he had. Of course he would have preferred things to be done in an orderly manner, not the way they were being done now. But he was realistic enough to know that things had to be as they were because obviously that was how the leaders of the country wanted them to be. And the people also. A man was essentially a product of his experience and surroundings. So now he valued and respected money because he knew poverty to be misery. That was it.

He stood up from the chair and went to a side cupboard. He brought out the whisky and a glass, went back to the chair and sat down again. Then he poured himself a whisky. It tasted sharp on his tongue and against his palate. His eyes clouded. Money, he thought. Almighty money. The emphasis everywhere was on money. You had to have it to survive. And so people did anything to have it, because it meant survival. It wasn't wrong to employ any method you could to get it. Corruption was one way. But then corruption wasn't bad because it was a method by which so many people survived. To protest against it was unrealistic. The best thing was to join in, not to work against it. Even the administrator had said as much as that. He remembered what had happened at the last farewell party organised by the administrator. In bidding the former members of the council farewell, the administrator had said, 'Let your sins be upon my head.' By this he meant that he accepted whatever irregularities had occurred either by omission or commission during their term of office. As he said, he had in any case appointed the councillors himself, and hence had full responsibility.

Chief Obala sipped his whisky as he remembered the biblical analogy. The Jews had cried before Pilate, 'Let his blood be upon our heads!' But when that blood had come for its revenge, it had scattered the Jews like dust before the wind. Perhaps it would be like that with the administrator and the new council members. The event was only a matter of time. Oh yes, only a matter of time.

People like him, realists, would be safe, because the edifice wouldn't change. The administrator would go

and all those directly linked with him would go too. But he, Chief Obala, would be safe. Realists were always safe in any situation, idealists always suffered. The idealists are the undecided, he told himself. And the undecided always die first. For this reason he had been careful not to have any direct links with the politics of government. As the chairman of the city council, he was a sort of permanent secretary, not a political appointee. And he knew if he was careful and did not display his wealth, then he would be unaffected in the event of any purge. The administrator would go, all his lieutenants with him, but he, Chief Obala, would be as strong as Peter's rock.

That was how he wanted his son to grow up, a realist, apparently honest, with no hand in any business, his money put away safely in Swiss banks. If the revolutionary wind began to gather momentum as this Ine had prophesied, they could, like Russian gentlemen, elope to Paris or Berne or London. That way they would be able to enjoy their hard-earned money. Chief Obala had no illusions left. He wanted his money protected. He always reminded himself that the source of their money was oil. Since the price of crude oil had gone up the wealth, though not the well-being, of the country had rapidly increased. The land was rich in crude oil and at that moment, oil brought huge revenues for the government. He was well aware of the latest statistics. But as an insider he also knew what proportion of this wealth was exported out of the country to foreign banks. Eventually of course the wealth would dry up. It was fortunate, yes, very fortunate, to be alive at this point in his country's history. It was better still to be in a position where a man could make money. Where else in the world did such opportunities exist for getting rich quickly? His city and country were probably unique in this respect. As Onise Ine had written: 'If on the average, every normal human being in other parts of the world exhibits five senses, then the advantaged man and woman in Nigeria exhibits six. Their sixth sense is the sense for theft, corruption, roguery.' But that is too harsh, he thought. The sixth sense is for getting rich, not for roguery nor theft.

Corruption is no more than a method of getting rich quickly. He thought about the contract, and about Ogie.

Ogie is proving more and more stubborn, he said to himself. He is not planning safely ahead. He is still an idealist. I know now that Ogie wants the money but he is risking his entire success by insisting on business. He will only learn from mistakes and that is the most bitter way to learn.

His thoughts returned to their original course. Onise Ine is wrong to think that we all have the choice to build a system in which we want to live, he argued. The choice is taken from us from the day we are born. We are all trapped, as Ogie says. We are trapped in an iron trap whose jaws do not loosen, no matter how much we struggle. The most dangerous thing is to imagine that you have choice. And we are not cowards either as Onise Ine calls us. We did not abdicate the decision about our lives to society. Those decisions were already made for us. Even more wrong is the talk about the callousness of the country's leaders. We may not all be marxists but we care in different ways for the masses. You could call us the liberal realists. The marxists are the revolutionary idealists, the undecided who always die first. Ogie is now only an idealist; he must not become a revolutionary, however. He must become a realist, like the rest of us. The liberal realist does not believe in revolution, he believes in allowing things to go on the way they are.

Chief Eweh Obala sipped the whisky and smiled to himself at his own cleverness. He heard the steps on the stairs, and then the steps were in the passage. There was a knock on the door which was already partly open, then the curtain opened and Ogie Obala entered.

'I was told you wanted to see me,' Ogie said. He saw the glass and the bottle of whisky but shook his head in reply to his father's move for another glass. 'I do not want any.'

Chief Eweh Obala looked at his son and held up the newspaper. 'I guess you have seen this,' he said, and put the paper back on the floor, beside his chair.

'Yes sir,' Ogie Obala said and remained standing.

'What do you think of it, of him?'

Ogie placed one hand on the door's handle as he leaned and shrugged his shoulders. 'I think he is right.'

'You think he is right?'

'Yes,' Ogie said slowly. 'I think we are all cowards. We are too often ready to blame the circumstances, our past. I do it, so I should know.'

Yes, Ogie Obala thought to himself now. All that talk about being trapped is the real illusion. We are no more trapped than the Angolans or the Cubans or the Ethiopians. We all choose to eat of the apple because each one of us has the snake in his eyes. But the choice is ours in the first place. We are corrupt and then we say that we cannot help being corrupt, that it is a form of compromise, that otherwise we would be outcasts. All that is a lie. All of that is the real illusion.

'Do you know what I feel inside of me,' he said aloud to his father. 'I feel naked, ashamed and humiliated. I feel beaten, like a hunchback.'

'Those are terrible things to say,' Chief Eweh Obala said from where he sat. 'You seem to go from one extreme to the other.'

'But in my private life, I live in the middle,' Ogie Obala said and clenched his free hand. 'We all compromise, we all live the life of compromise.'

'No,' Chief Obala said heatedly. He rose from the chair and stamped his foot on the ground. 'I do not live the life of compromise. I live by a certain number of principles. The fact that I believe our way of life is good but threatened does not make my life one of compromise.'

Ogie gripped the door handle tightly now. 'What is good about our way of life?' he scoffed. 'What is good in the fact that we are degenerates and shameless cowards?'

'You have to make up your mind,' Chief Obala said, quietly but seriously now, and Ogie waited for the anger to break because he knew it was there. 'You have to make up your mind which way to go. The undecided die first. Always. They die first because they are often caught in the middle of the firing. Look,' he cried passionately and went to a corner of the room and seized the shotgun

that stood there. 'Look,' he repeated and he brandished the gun and its full metre of metal gleamed in the half-light. 'I am prepared to use this to defend the way of life I believe in. But you,' he challenged his son. 'What do you believe in? You are confused and cannot make up your mind. Talk of degeneracy and shamelessness and cowardice!'

'I do not believe in taking my money out of the country,' Ogie said quietly and his hand dropped away from the door; the veins on his hands and face stood out sharply.

Chief Eweh Obala placed the gun carefully against the wall at the head of the bed. 'I am glad you called it *your* money,' he said quietly also, turning slowly away from the wall to face his son. 'At least, there is something about which we both agree.'

Chapter 17

Oloru first became aware that something was amiss a day after his meeting with Chief Ekata at the Wayo Hotel. He had a cold in the chest. His heart seemed to expand and contract too. But the feeling lasted only an hour and it was gone. So instead of calling a doctor, he dismissed the feeling as just one of those things. He could have caught a cold anywhere. Today for example, he had been out in the open most of the day, inspecting some of the houses he was building outside the city. And the weather hadn't been particularly warm.

He adjusted his tie, drew his jacket more tightly round himself and called on the receptionist to make him some coffee. He emptied the steaming cup of coffee without even glancing at the girl who had brought it. And the coffee indeed seemed to help. Yes, it must have been the outing earlier on in the day. He poured out another cup for himself and emptied it in the same manner. He felt much better.

Outside, the noise of the city came to him. The noise mingled with the smell of refuse, dirt and faeces. He spat out disgustedly into the waste paper basket. He looked out through the window, after first of all drawing the curtains back with the long stick he usually kept by his desk for such a purpose. He could see the square now, ready for the reconstruction. The narrow road, all dust and sand, was filled by a long line of cars. But the cars were not moving. They were held up in front by something he couldn't possibly see. Perhaps it was the traffic warden. But by the hooting of the cars' horns, he guessed that something else was the matter. He stood up and walked to the window to get a clearer view. He was right. It wasn't the traffic warden who was holding the traffic back. There was a hand-truck in front of the line on which was a high pile of wood. The truck was moving at snail's speed. One day, he thought, he would get those

bastard truck-pushers kicked out of the city. They could be more useful on the land. Of course, he didn't know on whose land, or exactly where.

If the hand-truck was one reason for the slow progress of the cars, then an even more obvious reason was a procession of hundreds of people approaching the line of traffic from the opposite direction – a funeral procession.

In the city, these were daily affairs. Oloru hated them and wondered why the living couldn't bury their dead quietly without inconveniencing, no, exasperating everybody else. What was the necessity of the procession? Tradition. He puffed his lips to show his anger and total scorn. So uncouth, so unnecessary. Were he to die, he would prefer a quiet and noiseless burial. No firing of guns, no procession. Nothing but a heap of sand and a small circle of friends. Yes, he hated these processions because they disturbed routine, and sometimes gave rise to street violence.

He drew away from the window, letting the curtains fall back. Funny, he thought, what Chief Ekata had said yesterday about the honesty of businessmen. So no businessman could be honest. That was very true. How could Ekata have guessed that he would not share the profits? No matter what happened, he was sure that one way or another, Chief Ekata would have to pick the flesh off the bones he was going to throw away. He laughed silently.

He imagined what he would do when he eventually won the multi-million naira contract. True, he had won many contracts in the past but none had come near this in size. This was something special. And if he won it, it would be difficult to share the spoils with anybody. Last year when he got the contract to expand the right wing of the city hospital, he wanted honestly and for the first time to co-operate with Jonathan Bros, another contractor. But the co-operation did not last long. Jonathan Bros was new in the field and was too hungry. He advocated the moulding of blocks with a lot of sand and as little cement as possible. Jonathan Bros hadn't known that even a fool could have seen through the trick, but he,

Oloru, certainly had. Fortunately, the joint venture collapsed at the right time and the hospital superintendent, who owned a block factory and who was one of those to award the contract, was able to sell Oloru the blocks from his factory. Two months ago, he met the hospital superintendent, who had remarked humorously that the walls were cracking up. 'Looks like we are going to award you another contract.'

Oloru had looked as grateful as he possibly could. 'That would be a real gift from you, sir, and something for which I would be grateful to you forever,' he had answered. A week later he won the contract for repairing the hospital blocks. The value of the contract was one hundred thousand naira. But what with the percentages, the value had come down to some sixteen thousand. Half of that, of course, he put in his pocket.

Then he was given the contract to build a section of the mile eighteen road. He was still working on that now. They all agreed that two feet would be taken off both edges of the road. Also he was to buy the gravel from the wife of the commissioner who awarded the contract. The office of the administrator was to supply the tar. They all agreed that in exactly three months, his section of mile eighteen was to be retarred at an extra cost of two million naira.

Each time he was awarded a contract, Oloru always threw a party. And if he won the present multi-million naira contract, he would take a vacation and go overseas for two weeks. He would take some of the money there to be locked up in his foreign bank. As for Chief Ekata, he could go and hang himself. Of course he would get something but Oloru would decide that.

Oloru's mind worked this way for another half-hour and then, feeling tired, he rang the bell for the messenger. 'Tell the driver to bring my car round,' he instructed the messenger. 'I am going home.'

The traffic was heavy as Oloru was driven home. Little mean houses squatted on both sides of the street. Red mud houses. And in front of them stood the open drains and the heaps of refuse and flies. Naked and

ragged people walked on the streets, many mad people among them. But nobody cared. The mad walked among the sane and both frequently jeered at each other, so that it became difficult to tell the difference. Mothers walked barefoot with bare, wizened little babies intermittently sucking at their flapping breasts. Lean men in cheap trousers and shirts walked slowly to and fro. Some of them had their hands in their pockets, and even whistled as they walked along, seemingly happy. But they were going nowhere. They were not happy. That apparent contentment came from ignorance, from lack of knowledge of something better. In the night, such a man entered his burrow and he was empty. He had nothing before him, nothing with him and the day behind him had yielded nothing. And when he slept with his wife with this same emptiness, with this same nothingness, small children, black and tiny like the faeces of dogs were eventually excreted into this cycle of misery. But they didn't know that their children were small and tiny and like dog's faeces. They did not recognise the cycle. So they seemed quite happy.

Oloru's limousine made its way slowly through these people. He looked out at them with distaste. They made the city look like a colony of scarecrows. If they could be evacuated and their habitation given to him as a contract, he would reshape the houses, the streets. And the result would be beautiful.

Soon, however, he was outside that part of the city where the poor followed the lower pursuits of life. His limousine, air conditioned, burrowed deeper into the government reservation area. It was here that, like most rich people in the city, he had his house.

That night, Oloru slept deeply. In the morning he woke, feeling a little tired. Perhaps it was the heavy work of the day before, he thought. He threw open a cupboard, took out a bottle of aspirin and swallowed a couple of the tablets. Almost immediately, he felt much better. He raised the blinds and opened the windows. The sun was just rising and dew still hung heavily in the air. Everything, including the red lizard that climbed up

one of the mango trees immediately below, looked as fresh as if dipped seven times in the River Jordan. He inhaled deeply, swallowing the air greedily. It was so good to be alive, to be part and parcel of this morning's splendour! The lawn below glowed, exuding a peculiar kind of rich greeny, grassy smell. He saw the gardener pushing between the flowers like a bee to water them. In the back yard, he heard the sound of splitting wood. The brown dog flashed past, hot on the trail of some small animal. The birdsong was gay, happy and alive, like everything else this morning. Even a grasshopper flew across his window.

Life! Yes, it was just too good to be part and parcel of this joy called creation. He wanted to live another hundred years, no, another two hundred years. But that was impossible. He would die, one day. When? Ten years hence? Forty years hence? And what would happen after that? The grass would grow on top of his grave, the dew would hang from the blades of grass and hold out like now to the rising sun. Death! He didn't want to die. He wanted so much to be alive.

He slapped himself lightly on the left shoulder and began to hum. Still humming, he entered the bathroom and began to splash the warm water around himself. In just over an hour he was driving through the fresh and awakening lawns of the reserved area. He noted each house in detail, the colouring, the shape, the surrounding trees. Everything was clean and clear. Nothing was confused. Flowers here could grow, they could be nurtured, cultivated, and life could pass on like a soft symphony.

The noise from the square brought him to the realities of the other life. Now it was nothing but noise, confusion, refuse and dirt. Now it was nothing but mean houses, some thatched, some with dark brown iron roofs, all low, all ugly and ill-smelling. If only he could get the whole city as a contract. He would reshape everything, knock down these squalid houses, cover the smelly drains, burn all the refuse. . .But would he ever get that opportunity? And if he did, what about the percentages? What about

his own desire for profits? Would he not make the city even uglier than it was by putting up some mean little matchboxes, packed together like those of the Department of Works and Housing? Would he not be building a large prison yard or rather, a large graveyard? After all, bits of the city had been given out before as contracts and there had been no real change. He scratched his head. He didn't know. Now he was walking up the stairs to his office. As he reached the last step he suddenly felt like vomiting. His feet wobbled. But he held on to the railing. The messenger walking in front of him did not notice the change in his master. Oloru steadied himself. What was happening? Why did his eyes swing this way and that?

He managed to get into his office and sat down in relief. The great desire to vomit persisted. Soon it came out – all over the top of his desk. He looked. Nearly all the vomit was blood. He couldn't believe his eyes! Frantically, his hands reached for the bell.

The messenger and receptionist both came into the office.

'The doctor! The doctor!' Oloru coughed and vomited again. The messenger panicked and ran downstairs while the receptionist picked up the telephone. The exchange did not answer her. A radio was playing at the other end but no voice came on the line. Swearing, she ran out of the office and called to a group of workers in the outer office. Oloru was transferred to his car and rushed to the hospital. Throughout, the receptionist waited by his side. Later, the driver dashed back for Oloru's wife, and she came, unbelieving. But one look was enough.

'Is it bad?' she asked the doctor.

The doctor looked away. 'I'll try my best,' he promised.

'But what is it?' She frowned.

'It's difficult to say,' the doctor admitted, 'but if my theory is proved by the tests, then this is a classic case of poisoning.'

'Poisoning!' Madam Oloru was staggered. 'Who would want to poison my husband?'

'I haven't said it is, madam,' the doctor said quickly. 'I only said it might be. And now if you don't mind. . .'

Both the receptionist and Madam Oloru were swept out of the room by nurses.

Chapter 18

Ogie Obala came down the stairs and opened the door to his room. Mallam Mallam sat there on the bed and a girl he did not know sat on the chair. Ogie smiled, but only his lips moved. His eyes were black and smouldering.

'The old man?' Mallam Mallam asked and stood up. Ogie Obala nodded and sat on the bed.

'I am sorry,' Mallam Mallam said now. 'I am sorry I couldn't come earlier. You know. . .'

'I know,' Ogie Obala grumbled. 'You are some friend.'

'I will not debate that with you,' Mallam Mallam answered. 'Another time perhaps. But allow me to introduce Ejemen.'

The girl who sat on the chair smiled at Ogie Obala and he could see from the way she folded up her legs under the chair that she was tall. She was slim too, slim and black and her skin shone and Ogie told himself that only beautiful women were born these days.

'I have an appointment at the Wayo Hotel,' Ogie told them. He stood up and looked at Ejemen and she did not flinch and he began to take off his shirt.

'It's all right,' Mallam Mallam tried to joke. 'She won't be frightened by your hairy chest and muscular arms.'

'I didn't think she would,' Ogie replied. He went out of the room into the bathroom and the others could hear the water of the washbasin running. When he returned, Mallam Mallam was already standing at the door, and the girl, Ejemen, stood with him.

'I am going to drop Ejemen home,' he said to Ogie. 'I am going to drop her and then I will come to the Wayo Hotel and meet you there.'

'I will be there,' Ogie said and he went out with them. He watched them drive away and he told himself that it did not matter any more whether a man really had friends or not. What was important was his ability to stand on his own feet and hold his ground. Friends were

unreliable and could not be trusted any more. Perhaps that was part of the process of growing up. Perhaps people grow apart as they grow up, he thought. People grow into loners, wolves. They hunt in a pack but essentially each one goes his own way. Growing up replaces the warm expectations of youth with the cold reality of isolation. Each man grows up separately, but alone. But he did not feel alone. He had a mission now. He had come to terms with his life and no longer missed friendship, or its ties. From now on, he was going to deal with people on his own terms.

Ogie Obala drove slowly to the Wayo Hotel. He had contacted Chief Ekata earlier that day and they had both agreed to meet at the hotel in the evening. As he drove up to the gates, a lizard suddenly ran across the avenue. Ogie slammed swiftly on his brakes to avoid killing it. The lizard traversed the street safely. He wanted everything to be alive, at least on this day.

He stopped at the car park. The sky was expressionless now. White. Chief Ekata had not yet arrived. His car was not outside. Ogie waited outside, ten, fifteen minutes. People drove in and drove out. Two girls in high heels walked past. Their heels on the gravel made a loud, unearthly sound. Ogie watched them weaving their bottoms, left and right like a weaver weaving a basket. Ogie's eyes followed the two weaving bottoms down the road. He shifted uncomfortably on one, then on the other leg. His head perspired from imagining.

Still there was no sign of Chief Ekata. He went into the bar of the Wayo Hotel, bought a bottle of beer and sat on the high stool to drink it. Some ten to fifteen people were in the bar. To his right, a man and woman sat on the high stools. They were giggling and sipping brandy. Minutes fled by. He had been waiting almost an hour. Still, Chief Ekata did not come.

Impatient and angry, he strode into the receptionist's office. The girl who sat at the desk wore glasses. Her skin glowed under the red and blue lights. The clock behind her ticked away. It was getting on for seven o'clock. Beside the clock, a calendar hung on the wall. The

receptionist was smiling. Ogie couldn't help smiling back. She was so slim! But because she was sitting down, he couldn't tell how tall she was. He soon found that out when she stood up behind her desk She was tall. Her dress, cut low both back and front, clung very closely to her curving outline. But when she spoke Ogie was shocked. Her voice was harsh.

'Can I help you, please?'

Ogie wished she would transmit her ideas sensually rather than by speech.

'I want to make an outside call,' he said, hoping she wouldn't speak again. She didn't. She stretched her long hands to the phone and picked it up. Ogie gave her the number. They waited for nearly thirty minutes before the exchange gave them Chief Ekata's office. And it was Eunice who picked up the phone.

Ogie didn't bother to ask why she was still at the office. 'Where is Chief Ekata?' he asked angrily. 'You had better warn him that that isn't the way to go about getting a contract!'

Eunice did not answer for some time. Then she said in an extraordinarily soft voice, 'Ogie, Chief Oloru is sick. People say that he has been vomiting blood. They've taken him to the hospital. Chief Ekata has gone there, I think, to stand by him.'

'And what about you?' Ogie wanted to know. 'What are you doing there?'

'Nothing actually,' Eunice answered. 'But,' she added, 'I was just going out to the hospital to meet Chief Ekata. Those were his instructions.'

'Do you know for how long he may keep you?' he asked.

Eunice thought for a while. She had sensed the sudden lust in Ogie's voice.

'Maybe one hour, perhaps less.'

'Then I'll be waiting for you at the Wayo Hotel. In the bar.' He dropped the phone without giving Eunice the opportunity to protest. Turning to the receptionist, he smiled.

'What is your name?' he asked her.

A smile also lit up the girl's face. 'Tessy,' she said.

'A good name,' Ogie observed. 'Are you married?'

Tessy shook her head. 'No.' Her eyes sparkled. Ogie began to think, her voice isn't so bad after all, particularly when one has got used to it.

'Are you doing anything particular tonight?' he asked.

'My boyfriend will be coming over here, as soon as I close. He'll be deciding what we shall do.'

'Then good luck to both of you,' Ogie laughed and walked back to the bar. The fact that Oloru was sick and vomiting blood did not bother him seriously. Oloru would surely recover. He was still drinking, sitting on the high stool, thinking about the business deal when Eunice came in.

'You were quicker than I thought...' Ogie began, pulling Eunice to the high stool next to him. But Eunice took his hands off her and put her fingers to his lips instead.

'Sh, sh...' she whispered. 'Oloru is dead!'

Ogie nearly jumped off the high stool. 'Oloru dead? Incredible! Impossible!'

'I couldn't believe it myself. The whole hospital is flooded with his waiting friends and foes. I couldn't even get to Chief Ekata.'

Ogie got off the high stool and led the way into the restaurant. There, he picked a table for them both far out to the right in a dimly lit corner. From the microphones of the Wayo Hotel came an old popular song, 'Jolly Papa.' The mellow sound and the disturbing news Eunice had just brought affected Ogie deeply. He was thinking. Face to face with a universal truth which in time was bound to surround and engulf him too, Ogie's mind was forced to grapple with the principle of death. The news of death shocked really because somehow in the human consciousness, it sounded a bell about the inevitable. People were normally so involved in the art of living that they forgot everything about it. Yet, when one of them fell, after being beseiged by death, the fall generated sober reflections. It wasn't really the fact of dying that mattered. It was the 'when' of the

event, the time. It was vital that a man did not die suddenly, nor young like Oloru. Let the man have grey hair, see his great-grandchildren, even if life and living were filthy, dirty, or empty. The smallest, the tiniest spectre of life was superior to the entire splendour of death. Life was the essential flame. Death was the cold ashes of a flame gone out, burned out. And it was disheartening, sorrowful.

Eunice too was silent, pensive. She had been reminded that one day, her long and beautiful sensual legs, her soft warm, brown body, her round hips, her firm breasts would all mingle with the dust, with the soil. When? Forty years hence? Perhaps then it wouldn't be so terrible. She wouldn't be as beautiful as she was now. She would be wrinkled, she would be ugly. . .But did beauty ever fade? Really? Was being beautiful once not being beautiful forever? Did beauty not mature with age as the green in grass matures with the passage of time? Certainly she wouldn't want to die. She would want to live. And where was Oloru now? Where had he gone to? Who ever knew or would ever know?

All major catastrophes, individual or collective, have a way of inducing a philosophy of some kind. Sitting beside Ogie in the dark restaurant, Eunice was forced to look at the unknown future, at the certainty of death when above everything else, she desired life. She wanted to be alive always and for Eunice, life was concentrated in her sex, like colour in a diamond, in a rainbow or in a flower. Sex and money. These were, to her, the aims of life. She knew what poverty meant. She had come of poor parents herself. Poverty denied a man money just as death denies life and sex. She hated both, although she knew that she would ultimately lose against the latter. And this was why now, the death of Oloru sobered her, threw iced water on to her face.

Ogie broke her thoughts. 'You said he was vomiting?'

Eunice nodded. 'Blood, he vomited blood. So the story has it.'

'Sounds like poison.'

'But who would want to poison Oloru?' Eunice was

amazed by the suggestion. Poison was mean, a device for rats.

Ogie seemed to have read her thoughts. 'Business', he said, 'is a rat race. There's always so much venom, so much poison in the way. What would you do for instance if one woman stood between you and one million naira?'

Eunice thought. 'I would remove her,' she admitted.

'How?' Ogie asked.

When she did not answer, Ogie helped her out. 'You would wish her dead. You would wish she didn't exist. But since you cannot shoot her because you do not have a gun, you would poison her. You would poison her if you had a chance.'

Eunice kept quiet. She couldn't contest the suggestion. Surely it was much more mean for one person to stand between another man and his fortune than for such a person to be poisoned? She agreed with Ogie.

Chapter 19

All at home was quiet, very quiet, when Ogie returned after dropping Eunice off. He sat down on the edge of his bed and attempted to visualise Oloru as he had always known him. He couldn't. Somewhere in the picture, something went missing. He failed to place one or other of his features. He had to see that face again, alive. And this, he knew, was impossible. Oloru was gone for ever. But why so suddenly? Why the hurry for the exit? Had Oloru spent his time well? Had he made good use of his life? A man had to enjoy himself, had to make sure that he was doing something, always in the active living process. And what did that involve? Ogie supposed that the essence of active living was consumption. A man had to consume money, women, food, people, all the resources at his disposal for the sole aim, for the purpose of active living. That was true, but not enough; to consume, you surely had to produce? Was active living only consumption? He smiled as he caught at another thread in his mind. No, active living was not merely consumption of resources – not unless you were a parasite. Active living had to be creative as well. But then, since need is the basis of all creation, the most creative people would surely be those who needed most, from themselves, from life. They must be. Creative living meant knowing your needs. You had to know your needs if you were to create anything to meet them. And behind every need was a purpose. Need was the vehicle in which purpose was driven. All creation had to have a purpose, or satisfy a need.

I have a purpose, Ogie thought to himself, to be a businessman. Once I have established the purpose, the need arises to create the business. If I want to live actively, I must create my business. At all costs, or else, I won't have lived at all. My life would become useless, empty. I must have my business. He remembered what he had

asked Eunice at the Wayo Hotel. And now he asked himself the same question: what would I do if somebody stood between me and not just one million naira, but my life's purpose? I would remove him, he said to himself. Kill him, if necessary. And if that person were your father? And not just your father but Chief Obala?

Ogie's heart stopped beating, momentarily. He remembered what he had heard a long time ago: 'Inside every seemingly decent man or woman, a criminal waits to break out.' The criminal in him would break out at the right moment, but not before then, nor before the moment had reached its own crisis. After all, hadn't his father with great passion said the same thing?

He wished now he had waited for Mallam Mallam to come before leaving the Wayo Hotel. He could have told Mallam Mallam the whole story and both of them would have reached a decision. Mallam Mallam may be unreliable but he is resourceful and daring. He would have provided the right answer to the great confrontation that was coming. But I am on my own now, he thought. He should not really regret Mallam Mallam's absence any more.

I shouldn't brood here all night either, he thought. I should go out and enjoy myself and chase out this death feeling. He stood up and stretched out his arms fully. I mustn't sit all night long on one spot, he said. That is death. No hen ever sits all day long on her eggs. It is a colossal waste, this sitting. It can destroy the very eggs of life itself.

And now that he had made up his mind to go out and enjoy himself, an internal pandemonium gripped him. He hurried into his trousers, shoes, shirt and tie. He had become used to dressing properly. Always, he had to be in a suit. Always, he had to wear expensive clothes. 'The worth of a man can be seen from the way he dresses,' his father had said. And those words had stuck, like ticks, to his skin. Minutes later, he hurried into his car. He was going out, but where? Should he go to Rose? No, he had decided to avoid her. Eunice definitely would co-operate but he had only just dropped her off and he had no desire

to go back. She would think he was getting more and more involved with her. There was no male friend he could go to. Except for Mallam Mallam he had kept no close friends among his own sex. He had found out that men were envious of each other. With women he always felt safe. He could at least confide in them occasionally.

Then, like a bolt from the sky, an idea struck him. Why of course, there was Tessy! Perhaps she had only been pulling his leg. He could go and pick her up. He would take her to the Luna Club for a drink and then bring her home. After which he would close that chapter finally. He always found it difficult to maintain any long-term relationships with women, particularly after he had been intimate with them. The only exception had been Rose and that was because even in their moments of passion, Rose had been unyielding, stubborn and above all, herself. He had never been able to hold Rose to ransom. If anything, he had always come out of it the loser. And now she was pregnant and wanted to abort the pregnancy. Against his wishes.

Tessy was stepping out of the Wayo Hotel when he got there. Her shoes crunched on the pebbles. Ogie got out of his car and waited for her to come up.

'I thought you had gone home,' Tessy laughed, openly surprised. 'Did you see the man who came to look for you?'

'No,' Ogie answered. 'What did he look like?' He guessed it must have been Mallam Mallam.

'He said his name was Mallam Mallam.'

'He is a friend of mine,' Ogie told her. 'I guess we will meet later.'

'But really, I thought you had gone home,' Tessy said again and smiled.

Ogie smiled back. 'I did go home,' he said truthfully, 'but I decided to come back for you. What about your boy-friend?'

Tessy who had reached the car now leaned against it, her handbag on the bonnet. 'My boy-friend?' she repeated. 'He's late but I wouldn't mind if you could give

me a lift. That's what you came for, isn't it?'

Ogie laughed more broadly. Tessy, he surmised, would be a hard nut to crack.

'Do you mind going for a drink first?' he asked her on their way back. Tessy did not answer immediately. She was looking at herself in a small mirror which she had taken out of her handbag, and adjusting her eyelashes.

'I am tired,' she told Ogie, 'but if you want to buy me a drink on top of the lift you are giving to me, I wouldn't mind.'

Ogie shook with laughter. 'You shouldn't be working as a receptionist!'

Tessy smiled, her whole face aglow. 'I should be working as what?'

Ogie tapped on the steering, following the sound of music floating in his car. 'You should be working as. . . er. . . as an actress.'

Tessy clapped her hands. 'I, an actress?'

'You should be. Then every day on the screen we would read: guest star – Tessy. And your face would appear on the big wide screen.'

Tessy roared with laughter. 'You do have a lot of imagination!'

Ogie also laughed. Their laughter filled the car with a curious warmth. Death was so far away. Here was life spluttering, splashing. Here was life, vivid, quick and spontaneous.

'What are you thinking about?' Tessy asked, observing that Ogie had gradually fallen silent.

Ogie shook his head. 'I wasn't thinking of anything.' But he was, for the memory of Oloru had come back to him, Oloru alive, not dead. He didn't know Oloru in death. He had known him only in life. Clever and resourceful.

Outside the Luna Club there was an artificial fountain. Its tongues of water rose dome-like, criss-crossed and then crashed back to their origin. At the base of the fountain, it was nothing but foam and bubbles. Huge bubbles as big as swans floated across the water, glittering, brilliant. Ogie was as always, amazed. The

glitter and brilliance of the bubbles moved him. His heart began to swell until like the bubbles, it burst, overflowed. He put his arm around Tessy and reluctantly led her away from the foam and the bubbles, up the hard wooden staircase to the first floor of the Luna Club. He sensed how soft her body was and he was stirred.

The wealth of the Luna Club was impressive. Everywhere, the work of money was evident. Yes, money. They sank on to the rich red sofa. Tessy chatted pleasantly about the atmosphere. 'It's so cosy, so relaxed,' she said.

Ogie smiled. His thoughts were far away, alternating between money and life now. He had pushed Oloru firmly into the background.

Yes, to be poor is a curse, the worst curse, the greatest tragedy that can befall a man, he said to himself now. A man has to have money. Money, the kingmaker and the throne breaker. Money to throw around any time you wanted to. You wanted to go to a hotel and you went. You wanted to eat the best food and you did. You wanted to travel out, to live in a palace, to sleep with the most beautiful women and invariably you did and had all these things because the money was there. Money gave meaning to life. Without money, living was worthless. Without money, a man could never fulfil his life's purpose, create, answer his needs. Once a man had money, he was at the peak of life. He had no illusions about making money now. Not any more.

But what if, like Oloru, a wealthy man was cut down, suddenly, without warning? What then?

Tessy tugged at his sleeve. 'What in heaven's name are you thinking about?'

Ogie passed his hands over his face. 'A friend of mine has just died,' he said in a muted voice.

'Oh! I am sorry!' Tessy said, immediately subdued.

Ogie's mind went back to the question he had been asking in his mind: what would happen if a young and wealthy man died suddenly? A young man like himself? Simply died before he could fulfil his life's purpose? Then he told himself that he had to shake it off, this dark

pondering over the unseen beyond. He had come here to forget it. He wasn't going to let Oloru follow him around like a shadow. He would drink that shadow down, submerge it. He emptied the double brandy he had asked for and ordered another. Tessy watched him. She tugged again at his sleeve. 'Don't get yourself drunk,' she reminded him. 'Remember you are going to drive!'

Ogie stirred himself. 'I am not getting myself drunk,' he smiled moodily at her. 'I won't get drunk. Don't be afraid.'

And he drank on. Tessy could not understand. Perhaps the friend had been a close one?

'Who was he?' she asked.

Ogie looked sideways at her. 'Who was he?' he repeated. 'Oloru is, or was his name.'

'I didn't know you were so close. I didn't even know he was dead!' exclaimed Tessy.

'Did you know him?' Ogie asked, unable to control a small stab of jealousy inside.

'Of course I did,' Tessy answered evenly. 'He used to come here, I mean to our hotel, a lot.'

Similar thoughts were then awakened in Tessy. So Oloru was dead, she mused. Dead and gone, for ever. But then he was rich. Very rich. He had enjoyed himself before going out, into outer space, into the great beyond. She thought of herself, of her parents. They were all poor. At the moment, she only just managed to bring a few naira home and it was on this that her mother depended. What if she too died? Her whole family would be thrown into the darkness. That was the most terrible death – the death of the young breadwinner, not that of an overfed, wealthy man. She had seen such death before. She had seen it happen and afterwards known the results too. No, it was terrible, this cutting off of the only child as it were. It brought confusion and despair.

'I think I should be going home,' she said, rousing Ogie from his stupor. He heard her and smiled blandly. His head ached a little. But he wasn't drunk. He couldn't be drunk. He stood up. His eyes swayed. He steadied himself and made for the toilet. He had to keep his

reason intact, he told himself. He had to get a firm hold on his senses.

Both man and woman sat subdued in the powerful car as it lurched forward, across the evergreen of the reserved area. He had decided he wasn't taking her to his home after all. He wanted to drop her off and go home alone.

And when at last they got to the other city, with its mud, filth, flies and disease, Tessy pointed to a street. 'Behind that pole,' she told Ogie.

Ogie registered the squalor of the surroundings. The open drain filled to the brim with the red water and the dirt, the houses on Tessy's street, small and squalid, plastered mud houses, most of them.

'I am so sorry,' he began, apologising, 'I have not been happy company.'

Tessy smiled. 'Don't say that,' she returned. 'The silence was what I desired most and got.'

'You can't drink shadows down,' Ogie reflected aloud.

Tessy looked at him. 'Won't you come into my room?'

The car had already stopped outside her house. Ogie shook his head. 'Next time,' he promised. 'Right now I must be home. I am sure that my father must be waiting for me with his tongue in his hand.' And before she could reply, he let in the clutch and began drawing away.

His father sent for him as soon as he had parked the car. The death of Oloru seemed to have penetrated the older man as well and to have temporarily broken down the wall between them.

Chief Obala sat huddled up in a chair in the far conrner of the big bedroom.

'Oloru is dead,' he informed Ogie as soon as he entered the room. His voice was tragic, broken. Ogie did not know how to react. Oloru's death may have temporarily set the peace between them, but the past was not forgotten. He had no real idea what special connections had existed between his father and Oloru. One thing he knew, that they had both belonged to the same society. He also knew that Oloru had had a way of winning contracts from his father. He could even assume that the

present contract would eventually have been Oloru's, given time.

Ogie cleared his own voice, to shake it free from the memory of the rift that had grown between them.

'I heard about his death this evening. It's horrible,' he added, with sincere emotion.

Chief Obala looked at his son's face and nodded.

'How did he die?' Ogie asked.

Chief Obala threw up his hands. 'Nobody knows, but there was foul play somewhere.'

'And now that he is. . .'

Chief Obala did not allow his son to complete his statement. 'We shall be going to his wake-keeping.'

Ogie cleared his throat. 'I want to find out', he began, 'what will happen to the contract, now that Oloru is dead?'

Chief Obala looked at his son sharply. 'We don't have to worry about that now.' He was obviously badly shaken. The telephone began to ring but Chief Obala made no move to answer it. Ogie walked past his father and picked up the receiver. He hoped it wasn't Rose or some other woman

The voice at the other end growled at him. It was the administrator and he wanted Chief Eweh Obala.

'The administrator,' Ogie said and held the receiver for his father.

Chief Obala was immediately attentive. His dull eyes twinkled. The droop of his shoulders disappeared as he stood to take the call. They spoke briefly but intensely for a few moments and then Chief Obala replaced the receiver. He remained standing for a while longer, then glared darkly at his son. 'He wants me at his place,' he informed Ogie. 'Tell the driver to bring the car out.'

Ogie went out of the room and then downstairs to find the driver. But he didn't forget that he had heard the words 'estates,' 'houses,' 'holdings' and finally the name, 'Oloru.' And he understood. The administrator held certain property in the name of Oloru. And now that Oloru was gone, something drastic had to be done. The

estates, houses, and other holdings had to be got back. Ogie wondered how.

Still wondering, he went into his room, and lay down on the bed. He felt very lonely as he waited for the dreams to come. Perhaps a man needs some friends after all, he thought. Perhaps deep down within him what a man needs most is some companionship, some friendship. Not money. A man needs friends in death, not money. And in life too. So that friendship gives some meaning to both life and death. Your friends continue where you leave off, your true friends, not the ones you go out drinking and womanising with. These are the temporary friends who hold the estates and the houses in your name while you are alive and the moment you are pronounced dead, begin to make the telephone calls to protect their property. But how does one get the true friends, he asked himself. How does one come by them? He shook his head because he didn't know.

Chapter 20

Rose was sitting behind her desk. It was a Friday morning and she was trying to concentrate.

One week and four days, she thought, and her hands trembled with anger. One week and four days and he has avoided me after sending me that note. One week and four days and in all that makes nearly eight weeks. She held back her tears and her hands trembled. Fortunately she was alone in the office, the messenger was out. But why had Ogie behaved in this way? Why did he avoid her after promising to help her? During the past ten days, she had called at his office several times. She had also tried the telephone. Always, Ogie had been out or gone to a meeting. At least, so she was told. She had even gone to his home twice and each time, she had been told by Anselm that Ogie was out.

Worried and exasperated, she folded her hands across the desk in front of her and rested her head on her hands. She had made a personal attempt to go and see a doctor. The doctor had requested her to bring the man responsible. Or if that was impossible, could she find five hundred naira? 'You know these things are difficult and dangerous and illegal. I have to take all the responsibility,' the doctor had explained slyly.

So she had gone to a second doctor who said, 'Sorry, madam. I know that many doctors do this but to me, it is totally immoral. I am a Christian and I think it is wrong to take life.'

She became angry then. 'And all the thousands of people who died during the doctors' strike?'

'This is not an industrial dispute, madam,' the doctor retorted coldly.

'It is,' she insisted angrily. 'You can tell me you won't do it, but how can you say it's because you are a Christian?' With that she walked out of the man's consulting room, angry at his hypocrisy and inconsis-

tency. Christian, she snorted afterwards, and yet all of you steal medicine and equipment from government hospitals and use them in your private clinics. Christians indeed, and yet you go on strike each month and abandon your patients to die.

There and then, she had made up her mind that Ogie would have to take the full responsibility. She wasn't going to try to contact doctors in their private clinics any more. She would get Ogie by the throat, that is if she ever succeeded in finding him.

Now, in the next room, two girls and a boy were making conversation.

'She is pregnant,' Rose heard Patricia say.

'For how long?' she heard Robinson ask.

'Nobody can say exactly,' the second girl, Philo, said. Rose sat still in her chair, her head erect, her hands which had been folded across her table, now gripping the side supports of her chair. Her nerves melted. 'The bastards,' she cursed. 'They will never mind their own business!' She was glad that Ceci the tall, slim one with the big eyes and the long thin tongue wasn't there. If ever there was a girl with a nose for gossip, that girl was Ceci.

Rose looked down at her stomach. It was still very flat. How then could they have guessed that she was pregnant? On the two occasions she had vomited during office hours, she had locked herself in the toilet and washed the sink out properly. She had also generously sprayed the toilet with the air freshener. How could they have known?

Robinson's voice broke into her tormented thoughts. 'Why is he disowning the baby?' she heard him ask. Rose waited tensely for the answer to that one.

'Nobody can really blame him,' Philo answered. 'Ceci says the girl is a washout. She is an old rocker. She has seen more men than all the girls in this office put together.'

Robinson laughed. 'Including yourself?'

'Robinson, mind yourself,' Philo threatened.

'So no girl in this office is a virgin, heh?'

'Robinson!' This was followed by the sound of a slap. A second later, both Robinson and Patricia burst into Rose's office.

'Save me from her. Save me from her!' Robinson yelled at Rose. Rose smiled and stood up hastily as Robinson ran around her desk and stood in front of her, laughing.

'Patricia!' Rose said sharply. 'The CS will soon be here. What if he finds you like this!'

'You are lucky, you filthy-minded white South African,' Patricia said and stepped back. 'You are lucky to have Rose between us.' With that, she went back to her office, the open registry.

'Thank you, Rose,' Robinson said gratefully. 'That Patricia! She has a temper.'

'Well, watch your tongue.'

'She called me a white South African. Did you hear that?'

'Well, never mind. You aren't one anyway.'

'The white South Africans are pigs, murderers and fascists. And that's what she called me.'

'I said, never mind,' Rose said, impatient that he should be gone. She wanted to telephone Ogie again. 'You started it anyway. I heard you.'

'If ever that. . .'

'Forget it,' Rose said finally.

Robinson looked at Rose, and when he saw how serious she was, he went quietly out of the room. Rose stretched out her hand and pushed the door shut after him. Then she picked up the telephone. She waited for nearly fifteen minutes before the people at the exchange asked her what number she wanted. She waited for several minutes after that, then the reply came back. It was a girl's voice and she said, 'No answer. Line out of order.'

'But I just. . .' Rose began and the line went dead. Very slowly she replaced the receiver.

'Why phone him anyway?' she muttered. 'I should go there again and try to catch him, and by God if I do, oh yes, if I do, he will be sorry for himself.' She picked up

her handbag, and went into the open registry. Patricia looked up at her.

'Where are you off to?' she asked.

'To the market,' Rose said. 'I have nothing at home.'

'That reminds me,' Patricia said. 'I also have nothing at home but I didn't bring any money along with me. What do we tell the boss?'

'Tell him I have gone to the Inland Revenue.'

'And how much are you going to pay us?' Robinson teased.

'I will soon pay you,' Patricia said, and smiled at Rose as she went out.

Outside, the sun was overbearingly hot. The air was on fire and the nostrils burned from inhaling. 'It will rain again,' Rose thought and waited for three truck pushers to pass in front of her before she could cross the road. She watched the truck pushers with a faraway sympathy. Their bodies glistened with sweat. She could guess that their bare backs must be burning. Instinctively, however, she recoiled from them. She knew they could be so mean and wicked when they wanted to, and that was nearly always. But perhaps they had been preconditioned to pettiness and meanness? After all everybody looked down on them, everybody laughed at them. Why couldn't they be mean in return?

Behind her, a voice called. She turned and saw that it was Patricia. In her hand she held an envelope and she waved it now like a flag. Rose guessed it was a letter and hurried back to the office, wondering who had written.

'A letter for you,' Patricia said, and handed it over to her. She saw at once that it was not posted but had come by hand delivery.

'Thank you,' she said to Patricia. 'Who brought it?'

'A messenger on a bicycle.'

'And where is he?'

'Gone. I thought you had already got a taxi. I should have asked him to wait. Is it anything?'

'No,' Rose said. 'I would have liked to thank him.' And she went across the open registry into her office.

She was angry before she even broke the seal of the

envelope. Why should Ogie write to her instead of coming himself? She was tired of these letters. It was Ogie himself whom she wanted. She took out the small paper from the envelope, unfolded it and began to read. She read it three times before placing the letter on her table, face down. She didn't believe Ogie when he said he was sorry for not being available when she wanted him. Neither did she believe his promise to call on her on Sunday to take her to the doctor, with whom, he wrote, he had already 'concluded arrangements.'

'Liar!' she said to herself and took the small blue paper from the table, folded it and put it in her handbag. What was she to do now? Still go out to locate Ogie? She had to. She had to see him, if only because she had recently received another letter from the university confirming that her application for admission was receiving attention. She had no desire to forfeit her education. She couldn't give up now. But perhaps it was her fault for allowing herself to become pregnant. Her head drooped low as if in mourning.

Robinson opened the connecting door and poked his head in. She could hear the voices of the others chatting excitedly.

'Come and see what the papers have reported, Rose,' Robinson said. 'Come and read how all our taxes are used.'

Rose stood up and followed Robinson into the outer office. The government, said the paper, intended to build a presidential palace at a cost of eighty million naira.

Rose whistled. 'The thieves!' she cried.

'Yes, they are thieves!' Robinson said.

'They are worse than armed robbers,' corrected Patricia. 'At least the armed robbers risk their lives to waylay innocent people. These government officials run no risk at all. They just sit in their offices and steal.'

'They are rogues,' Philo said.

'Eighty million naira! My God!'

'How many scholarships, how many jobs, hospitals, schools, roads? My God!'

'The bastards!' Philo cried angrily.

They were all angry that their government should have planned to spend so much money in building a living house for one single person when there were millions of others suffering, millions without jobs, with children who were starving and dying of kwashiorkor.

'I think there should be another coup,' Robinson said.

'I don't like coups,' Philo said.

'Then how do you remove them?' Patricia asked.

'Some other way perhaps.'

'There is no other. . .' Rose began, and was interrupted by a voice that shrilled suddenly from the door.

'Look at what I have got here!' Ceci cried from the door. 'Something to melt your hearts.'

They all stared at Ceci. Her two hands were weighed down by two large rafia baskets. She set both baskets on the floor and looked at the other girls with sultry, insolent eyes.

'Guess what I have here,' she challenged them, and her two lips that were heavy and thick like the peelings from a ripe plantain, dragged themselves apart in a smile. She looked at all of them, from left to right, and they looked back at her. She bent down and began to unfold wraps of cloth, necklaces, ear-rings, shirts, pants and shoes.

'Ceci,' Patricia cried. 'Don't tell us you got these from the hospital!'

Ceci smiled and her insolent eyes widened. 'I know I said I was going to the hospital, but actually I went to my boy-friend's place. Charlie has just returned from London and he brought them for me. The lace here is only twenty-five naira a metre.' She brandished the cloth and the gold in it glittered.

'How much was that necklace?' Philo asked and picked up the necklace, a long chain of glittering diamonds that ended in a golden heart-shape on which was inscribed the single word 'Love'.

'That is one seventy-five naira,' Ceci said and her eyes glittered.

'One hundred and seventy-five naira! Is it so expensive?'

'Look at it,' Ceci said. 'It's all gold and diamond.'

'Women,' Robinson said scornfully. 'We were discussing something serious, and this trader comes in and soon all they are doing is asking how much, why not ten naira less and so forth!'

Rose took the newspaper and went into her office. She began scanning its pages and then suddenly, she stopped short. The photograph of Oloru looked back at her from the obituary page. Rose gasped. So Oloru is dead! Oloru, who was so shrewd and so quick and so alive! Rose shook her head from side to side. She didn't know whether or not to be sad. But how did he die? What could have killed him? After a brief illness, the paper said. A brief illness!

What would happen to all those plans he was hatching with Ogie she wondered. Certainly they would not materialise now. And what had Ogie said? That he was going to make a lot of money. Perhaps he would still make it, but certainly from another man. She didn't feel sorry for Ogie, not any more. To her now, he appeared greedy, like all the rest. He wanted too much money. She told herself that such a man would be prepared to do anything to get money. But, what happiness could a person get from such a life of money-hunting? Nerves, nothing but nerves.

She remembered when Ogie had first returned after being away for nearly four years. Hadn't he promised he would never take any of the percentages? Hadn't he promised he would never be one of them? What was he doing now but scheming with others to steal public money? Certainly, Ogie had changed. He was not exceptional, as he had once assured her he was. Money is the great attraction now, she thought. Everybody wants money. People swear they will be honest when they get into positions of power. And then what happens? Money corrupts their resolve. Money and women. I have no illusions about money though, she thought. Money is important. But then, as Ogie had said a long, long time ago, we all must be hunchbacks to assume that all ways of walking require a drooping of the shoulders, that we

stoop in our consciences. Look at Onise Ine. There is a man who has been alternately wooed and who has been offered money, positions and then imprisoned again and again but who has refused to stoop, who has refused to bend. Onise Ine has been harassed and then offered huge bribes to make him change in his condemnations of our society but he has not changed. He has remained true to his faith in what he calls the coming revolution. Perhaps it is because he is a marxist. Or wasn't that what he was called by all the newspapers, particularly when they wanted to incite public opinion against him? What other words did they use? She turned to the back page of the newspaper. And she found them. Yes, they also called him 'revolutionary idealist,' the 'red danger'. But who in the end is more dangerous? The men who steal tens, hundreds, thousands of millions of naira of the people's money or people who advocate that there should be no stealing, that material possessions should not dictate the ultimate values in society?

I for one, she told herself, do not care too much about money. And I have a passionate hatred for the stealing and the squandering of public money. I want a change in the way things are done here. I want all the people to be happy. Do these things also make me a marxist, a revolutionary idealist, a red danger? Do you become a danger because you want common decency? It is strange, she thought, how those in positions of power change the meanings of words to suit their own purposes.

I want to be a human being, she said to herself now. An educated one. The quality of a person counts. A foolish man and his money are soon parted but education remains, it stays and as long as the person who has it is alive, you cannot take it away. That is the more important thing, she said, the quality of the person, not the amount of money he has. She shrugged her shoulders. Her mind was made up. Maybe another girl with common sense would happily accept what she was throwing away. But she would go to school, she would never have this child. Perhaps, she joked with herself, I could still marry Ogie Obala some years hence, after I

have graduated. Nobody knows. I could finish my education and still marry Ogie Obala or somebody else with less money. It doesn't matter. What matters is that for now, neither Ogie nor a hundred other men are able to bend my will, my decision. I want the child aborted and I want to go to school. And even if I were not going to school, I would still want the child aborted. I wouldn't think of marriage. No, I wouldn't.

She opened the lowest drawer of her table and threw the newspaper in. Then she pushed the drawer back. A pity about Oloru, she thought, a great pity. In fact it is a pity about everything, about everybody, about the world. She still had to see Ogie. It was a pity about that too.

Rose picked up her handbag, and as she passed through the open registry she told Patricia, 'I am going to the market now.' Patricia nodded and Rose went out of the building.

The streets swarmed with people, with men and women and children so many of whom were mad and destitute amidst the filth. Rose looked at the red mud houses with grass roofs, the red roads with the thousand-and-one potholes. She spat into her handkerchief and shook her head, wondering when the change that Onise Ine promised would really come.

Rose Idebale climbed the steps that led to the first floor and then walked the ten yards to Ogie Obala's office. She knocked and went in. Tourishe sat behind her big electric typewriter and then there was another woman she did not know who sat on the settee that was placed far out to the right by Ogie Obala's door.

Tourishe Isiri looked at Rose Idebale and Rose thought she could detect the malice in her voice when she said, 'Mr Obala is not in the office and he may not return to the office for the rest of the day.'

Eunice Agbon, who was sitting on the settee, immediately stood up and came over to where Tourishe sat behind her typewriter.

'Why did you not tell me he may not be coming back?' she asked. 'Why did you tell me to wait?'

Eunice Agbon then turned to Rose Idebale and both looked at each other briefly; Eunice, who was the more experienced woman, saw the whole history plainly written on Rose's face. She could decipher it. And as she did so, a strange compassion, something she had never felt before in all her life, swept through her.

'I have been here for the past thirty minutes,' she said with irritation. And then she made a face at the woman, Tourishe. 'She did not tell me that he would not be coming back.'

Rose picked up the scent, not deliberately, but unconsciously. 'He never stays in the office. Not any more,' she said bitterly.

Eunice nodded in agreement. 'You rarely see him in the office these days,' she said. She was going to add, 'It's the contract,' but then held herself back.

Eunice Agbon brimmed with resentment. She had her own equally intense reasons for feeling bitter towards Ogie. The last few days had shown her the ugly side of the man whom she had begun to feel she could trust and respect. A quiet understanding, an unspoken communion passed between the two women. They were united in their anger against Ogie Obala; both had suffered. But their own desires were equally as opposed. One had wanted a child which she had been bullied into destroying, the other was carrying a child she did not want. So both women regarded each other in silence, and instead of being jealous, a warm and fiery flame was breathing in both.

'I don't live far from here,' Eunice offered, seeking a more intimate relationship with the woman she instinctively knew was her rival.

Rose hesitated before accepting the proffered hand. She, who had been so robust in her appearance, so outspoken and unafraid, was now worn slender and thin with the pressure of circumstances. Perhaps this was a chance to open a new chapter in her life? She had to be careful, though. The friendship between women wasn't quite the same as that which existed between a woman and a man, or between men. Women were too conscious

of each other, too jealous, too immersed in bitter and total opposition towards each other to have or to make any meaningful use of such a relationship, and all the good blood could pass like the current of a stream under the bridge of jealousy and self-interest.

'We could go there and then come back here later,' Eunice suggested, breaking into Rose's thoughts; then, seeing the other woman hesitate, she added, 'or perhaps we could meet again some other time, at my place? Come in the evening. This evening if you want to.'

She took out her card with the printed office and home addresses and handed it over to Rose who did not look at it, but took it and placed it in her handbag.

Chapter 21

It was a Sunday morning and Rose Idebale was sleeping. She dreamed that Ceci was gossiping about her in the office. An argument ensued and they began abusing each other. A man tried to wade into the quarrel but Rose wouldn't have it. She was too angry. She took a few steps back, quickly circled the man and lashed out at Ceci's face.

A searing pain in her hand made her wake up. She cursed, realising that she had hit the wooden edge of her large cabinet bed. How foolish, she thought. And how funny. She wanted to smile at her own foolishness but the pain in her hand turned the smile into a groan. She felt the edge of her hand, towards the little finger. It was rapidly swelling.

She threw the coverlet away from her and got herself to a sitting position. The mirror was directly in front of her. She looked at her plaited hair. It was still intact but her face was ruffled and there were edges beneath her eyes. Her breasts, she saw, were beginning to fill out noticeably; she was almost two months pregnant now. Ogie Obala had chosen this Sunday as the most appropriate day to go and see the doctor at home for the abortion.

Rose shrugged her shoulders. If Ogie kept his promise, she was sure that she would be rid of the psychological stress after the abortion. That was what she wanted. To be free. She struggled out of the bed and reached for the bottle of metholatum that stood by the mirror. She applied this to the edge of her hand and rubbed it in meticulously, taking her time. She felt so lazy, so weak.

She was still applying the metholatum, when a couple of mosquitoes which had feasted on her in the night suddenly dived past her nose. She flung out her right hand viciously. She hated mosquitoes! The twist of her hand knocked the bottle of metholatum and it crashed

against the mirror. Rose watched with horror as the whole mirror came crashing down, all around her.

Very slowly, she picked up a large board she kept under her bed and then began to pound the glass on the floor, livid with rage. It was the knocking on the door that distracted her from her work of fury. Only then did she realise that she was stark naked. The broken glass was all around her, while the mosquitoes, totally unconscious of the wreckage caused on their account, hid in the dark recesses of her wardrobe.

The knocking became more demanding. She could hear Ogie's voice saying, 'Is there nobody in this house or what?'

Standing outside, Ogie Obala heard the pounding going on inside Rose's room with some dismay. Perhaps she was chasing a rat or something, he thought. But when he knocked several times and the pounding inside suddenly ceased, followed by nearly a minute's long silence, Ogie began to have second thoughts about the pounding inside the room. Suddenly, he was jealous. Perhaps there was another man in the room. And the longer the silence persisted, the more his suspicions grew.

The doctor they were going to see had been his classmate and that was why he was confident that the plan would work. Dr Siloko had been quite willing to help. But he had his own reservations.

'You can easily get another child from any other woman,' he had told Ogie the previous day, when they sat in the man's consulting room.

Ogie folded his hands across his breast.

'I want that child,' he replied. 'I don't want her to go through with any abortion.'

'Then why don't you marry her? You say she is good enough, that she is beautiful.'

Ogie unfolded his hands then. 'The problem is more with my father. He doesn't want her. I hope you understand.'

'Of course, of course,' Dr Siloko nodded. 'I do understand. But what are your own feelings towards her?'

Ogie glanced away then from the magazine he was

leafing through. 'I don't want to get married at this time in my life,' he admitted with a smile. 'I want to be free. Later on, when my present commitments have eased, I'll think of getting married. What about you, anyway?'

Dr Siloko retreated, covering his embarrassment with a smile. He wasn't married. 'I am waiting for the right girl to come along,' he laughed.

Ogie laughed too, pleased that he had scored. 'So all you have to do is to tell her that it's too early to have the abortion. That it would be best in two weeks or so. And then, after the two weeks, you'll tell her it's too late. That your analysis had been wrong. You know, cover up the whole thing in medical terms. She'll have no option left. In fact we might go to another doctor next time, so you wouldn't have to apologise to her.'

'You must really want the child very badly,' Dr Siloko commented, thinking of what Ogie Obala had just said. 'But what if she goes to another doctor? Have you thought about that?'

Ogie stretched out his long legs. 'She will, perhaps, but by then it will be too late. From my calculations, that child is nearly two and a half months old already. By the time she goes to another doctor the child could be approaching four months. No doctor would want to take a risk like that . . .'

Now, as he stood outside her door, he thought about the arrangements and smiled uneasily. He was interrupted by the opening of the door. Rose stood there, holding the doorknob, her head outside, the other part of her body concealed inside. Without saying a single word, she went back into the room and seated herself on the bed, wearing only a wrapper which she adjusted more firmly under the arm.

Ogie entered the room silently. He could see the pieces of broken glass scattered all over the floor. He was horrified by the sight.

'Why, have you been chasing a rat?' he asked, taking his seat on the armchair. He felt relieved as the jealousy left his heart.

Rose still did not answer.

'The morning is beautiful and fresh outside,' he added. 'Why don't you open the windows?'

She did not move. Ogie Obala stood up and unlocked one of the windows, and immediately the room was flooded with light. The double armchair, worn out with the rubbing of many backs, now shone. Ogie Obala did not return to his seat. He sat on the edge of the bed beside Rose and tried to turn her round.

'I hope you got my letter,' he said. 'The doctor wanted us to come as early as ten o'clock. It's now nearly nine o'clock.'

For the first time Rose looked Ogie Obala full in the face. She hated him now and she was filled with a strong desire to humiliate him.

'Go outside and let me dress up,' she hissed, dismissing Ogie coldly.

'Outside?' Ogie frowned and then laughed. 'Why outside?'

'I don't want you inside here. Go and wait outside.'

Ogie twisted his mouth. His words were sarcastic. 'What don't you want me to see that I haven't seen before?'

Rose did not answer him. Instead she went to the lower edge of the bed and drew out her slippers and put them on. Then she went to the door and held it open. Ogie shrugged his shoulders, and stood up. He wasn't going to try to humour her any more. He had had enough. What he was going to do he would execute without emotion now, to serve as a punishment, if nothing else.

As soon as Ogie stepped outside, Rose Idebale bolted the door. Then she drew one of the pails of water from under the bed and washed her face in it. After drying her face with the towel, she put on her brassiere. She looked at her stomach. It was beginning to swell a little. But she was no longer alarmed. Today, it would be all over. When she went to work tomorrow nobody would know that she had even been pregnant nor that she had had an abortion only the day before. And then the small

doubt emerged and grew. What if something went wrong?

'I must not be afraid now,' she said. 'I am not unlucky. I shouldn't be afraid.'

She came out of the room and Ogie Obala stood there in the passage, his arms folded.

'Are you ready?' he asked and she did not answer as she locked her door, because somehow she felt sorry for him.

'We can go then?' He moved forward while she followed behind him, thinking that perhaps it was wrong after all to behave towards Ogie Obala the way she was doing because surely it wasn't wrong for a man to want a child? A child that would be his future and everything else?

Then, she tightened her heart against him once more. She would relent only after everything was over and she had nothing to worry about any more.

Chapter 22

Now, on this Sunday evening, many people gathered in Oloru's house to pay their last respects to him.

Chief Ekata was there, dressed in a big, black *agbada*. He looked like a huge sombre hawk, almost like the bird of death itself. And as he circled the bed on which Mr Oloru's body lay, he dabbed at his face with a black handkerchief.

'It's an irreparable loss,' he said to the man who stood beside him. 'So young! So industrious and yet . . .!' He dabbed at his face again and the man behind said to the woman next to him, 'Chief Ekata feels his friend's death so deeply. See how he weeps and yet you people say a man does not cry.'

After rounding the bed, Chief Ekata went outside, where he met Chief Obala and Ogie Obala.

'Good evening, Chief,' he said to the older man and both shook hands. 'It's an irreparable loss,' he added.

Chief Obala nodded and went into the house, while Ogie remained behind.

'I was at the Wayo Hotel waiting for you as arranged,' probed Ogie Obala.

'I am extremely sorry,' replied Chief Ekata. 'It was this. You know that Oloru and I were great friends. As soon as I heard that he had been rushed to hospital, I went there. But it was too late. He was in a state of coma. Ever since, I have helped his wife and his family as much as I could, even neglecting my duties to my own family. Ah, there she is now . . .'Chief Ekata pointed to a young woman dressed in black, who came to the door and looked round.

'I have no doubt she is looking for me,' Chief Ekata said and made towards her. 'I'll be contacting you as soon as I am free.'

Ogie looked after Chief Ekata and from what he could

see, it appeared that Mrs Oloru was indeed looking for Chief Ekata. He watched them disappear together.

His father came out of the house after performing his round and rejoined Ogie.

'Why didn't you come in?' he asked.

'I didn't want to,' Ogie replied.

Chief Eweh Obala shrugged his shoulders. He was going to say something, then he suddenly changed his mind. 'The administrator,' he said to Ogie Obala and pushed him forward.

The administrator was followed on both sides by his aides. Their convoy of cars had stopped just outside the gates. Everywhere, people scattered hastily to make way for the administrator.

The administrator came here on business. He intended to have a serious talk with Oloru's wife and he knew that a woman was most certain to be most generous at her starkest moment of grief. So, at least, Chief Eweh Obala had advised him. And then of course there were his own designs on the woman with whom he had been intimate a few times before.

There were others who had come there for the mere experience of it, those to whom Oloru owed nothing and who owed Oloru nothing either. They came to drink, chat about death and draw some sober conclusions about their own inevitable day of reckoning. Oloru as a man meant nothing to them. Absolutely nothing. It was the event rather than the man himself that attracted them, just as the flame but not the heat attracts the moth. Then there were another two or three men who had their eyes on Oloru's wife. Mrs Oloru was still young and what with the comfort wealth had provided she had managed to remain almost a girl. Her freshness was unsoiled, her skin untarnished. She still had no wrinkles, absolutely nothing to show for the four children she had already flushed out. These men were two or three, unknown to each other, yet already in conflict in their aims. Then there were those whom Oloru had employed. Their future was at stake. What would happen? Would Madam Oloru take over her husband's business and maintain its

fifty-odd staff? These men came more out of fear for their future than out of love for the man.

And then there were the children who knew nothing, but who were dressed in black. Two of them sat silently, many more played about. They didn't care, they were not concerned. For them the black dress was not one of death. They were alive, it was only a dress, just like their Sunday clothes or their school uniform. They couldn't have cared less what colour men chose to mourn death in.

They all gathered there, and hummed and talked and drank, each after his own.

Chapter 23

The messenger came into his office and Ogie Obala stopped in his writing and looked at him.

'Yes, what is it?'

'Oga wanted to see you, sir,'

'When?'

'Just now, sir. I went to his office and he sent me.'

'The chairman?'

'Yes, sir. The chairman.'

'Thank you,' Ogie said, and dismissed the man.

What did his father want him for? He wanted to be left alone. He wanted time to think matters out. He thought about the contract, then about Rose. In spite of all the humiliation he had suffered at her hands, he still loved Rose Idebale. Sometimes it hurt him terribly just to be awake and think about her. And he would ask himself, 'But why should I love her when she doesn't care a hoot for me? Why? Why? Why?' Then he would think, well, perhaps it was for the very reason that she did not love him that he loved her. It must be so, he thought now, it can't be anything else.

Ironically enough, when Eunice had come to him four evenings ago with her suspicions and her 'stomach ache', he was very curt with her.

'Go and find it where you lost it,' he told her.

Eunice didn't like that. She reacted immediately. 'I lost it here,' she replied, 'so I have come to look for it here.'

'Well, then, search for it,' he almost shouted, impatient and angry.

'I will keep the child,' Eunice said, then 'and with time everybody will know its true father.'

'That's your headache,' he replied, pretending indifference.

Eunice stood up then. 'If that's the way you want it, I am going home. I am going to keep the child.'

And the way she said it and smiled, made his heart stand still.

Wait!' he cried. 'Wait and I'll think of something.'

'I don't want an abortion. I want the child,' Eunice said.

'Please sit down. Wait! Why all this hurry? Wait. Let us think about it.'

'There is nothing to think about. I want the child.'

'But can't you see? I mean, I have been very upset all evening. And now this. Okay, okay, you want the child, but not this one. The next one. We will have to remove it. I can't think of marriage now. Honestly I cannot.'

'Who says you should marry me?'

'I am saying it. If you have my child, well . . .' and he threw up his hands. Eunice was so experienced, too experienced for him.

'I don't want to marry you,' she said.

'You may say so now but if you have my child, then we must get married. God knows I am not ready for that now. Come on, Eunice. Let us be reasonable. We will abort this one and keep the next one.'

'Even if he comes next month?'

'I am not saying that. We will be careful.'

It took him a long time to persuade her. She was stubborn in her resolve, and he had resorted to some brutal arguments, made easier for him out of an increasing sense of frustration about his life in general. None of it was working out right. He took her to a friend who gave her the necessary injections. Then, yesterday evening, Eunice came to his house again and said she needed drugs because she had lost quite a lot of blood.

He didn't even get up from the bed on which she had found him sleeping.

'I have no time now,' he said. 'Come again tomorrow.'

Eunice stood up then. She was angry, and dignified in her anger.

'I see,' she said. 'You have got what you wanted and now you can brag. But don't think you are going to get away with it.'

Ogie sat back in his chair and smiled now. Yes, it was strange the way things happened. When you first came across a woman you liked, you did everything to make sure that you had her. Then it was all pleasure, you smiled and laughed and everything was pure happiness. But when something went wrong – an undesired pregnancy, a quarrel, it became nothing but bitterness and hatred.

Another thing, he said to himself. Here are two women. One treats me like dirt and I go all out for her, but the other one is all cream and yet I cannot stand her. It is funny, really. Funny and strange, the way things happen. He stood up and went to his father's office.

Chief Obala glanced up when his son came in, and then looked away. The hostility was still there but there was nothing he could do about it. He had more important things on his mind anyway. The meeting of all the parties interested in the contract was scheduled for the afternoon. In the evening, he would again have to attend Mr Oloru's wake-keeping, and both places required the presence of his son.

'There will be a meeting this afternoon,' Chief Obala said now. The commissioner will be there. Major Alafia will be there. The chief of police, Aikhon, is also expected.'

'When was the meeting arranged?' Ogie asked, the anger, like a cough, clutching at his throat.

It was arranged this morning,' Chief Obala said. 'The vote has been made and we thought it would be better to settle matters quickly. One o'clock at the Wayo Hotel.'

They arrange meetings over my head, Ogie thought. They take decisions over my head and simply inform me after.

'The meeting will discuss the final level of the percentages and my eventual trip to Berne,' Chief Obala added.

'I thought you had already worked that out,' Ogie said. 'Didn't you agree on an equal flate rate?' He felt ashamed. Were they really discussing how to steal public money?

His father avoided his eyes. 'You could say, agreed in principle. But the details have to be worked out.'

'And what about the board that is supposed to meet over who should be awarded the contract? What about the shortlisting I am supposed to do?'

Chief Eweh Obala waved his hands airily. 'The board is not going to meet,' he informed his son. 'It has been replaced by the one we're holding this afternoon. In any case, most of its members are away, so this meeting has been given the power to say who should and who shouldn't be awarded the contract, subject of course to the approval of the administrator.'

Ogie bit his lip. So there would be no board meeting. He had been used from the beginning to the end. He saw that now. Always his father had made the decisions, always his father had done those very things which he Ogie was expected to have done. At the beginning it had been all right. Oh yes, the beginning is always all right, he thought bitterly. Always promising. And now? But I have come a long way now, he said to himself. A long, long way. He did not want to remember what the beginning had been like. Hadn't he said to Rose, 'I will never be one of them. I will never accept the percentages?' And what was he fighting for now? Was it not the percentage? His earlier thoughts flooded back: I am the percentage with a conscience, corruption with a human face.

Hastily he dismissed such thoughts as rubbish, and his mind was as cold and clear as ice. It told him the new truths: corruption never had a human face and never would have; neither did the percentage have a conscience. Corruption is the great leprosy we all suffer from, he said to himself now. And whoever heard of a leprosy with a human face? We are nothing but a nation of lepers, we are the race that has diseased blood, we are the people that have the snakes in their eyes. And as long as society remains what it is, as long as the greed persists we shall continue to have the filth and the chaos and the refuse and the leprosy.

My father asked me what I believed in and I told him

that I believed in keeping my shame locked up in my own cupboard in my own country. I told him that I did not believe in the export of public money, public money that is stolen. I told him that I would want my money here and he laughed and waved the gun at me and then placed it carefully against the wall. And that is what remains he thought. What remains is this business with my father and when it is done, I shall have my own house and my own principles. I know that will not make me free of the leprosy. I shall only be setting my own standards of corruption. And by the same token, I shall have become a realist. A first class realist! A hollow laugh exploded inside Ogie at this thought, and his eyes focused, to find Chief Eweh Obala watching him intently.

'And your trip to Berne?' he asked, all emotion drained from his voice.

Chief Obala waved his hands in the air as if it did not matter what Ogie thought now. 'Oh yes,' he said. 'I will be going to Switzerland to put the money there. The money will be in a bank there.'

'You mean you are carrying cash then?' Ogie asked cautiously. His father looked at him sharply. 'Yes, some of it in cash, most of it in travellers' cheques.'

'I will want my money here,' he said aloud, as if to himself.

His father shook his head and smiled. 'Our money will be in Switzerland, safe, in a bank there.'

Ogie did not reply.

Chief Eweh Obala stood up behind his desk; his chin was still as firm and clear and disciplined as ever. 'It might interest you to know that we have not simply dismissed Oloru's death as arising from natural causes,' he announced. 'Although we cannot prove it, we know that Chief Ekatā is involved somewhere. Oloru was poisoned. If you continue in your friendship with Chief Ekata, then God help you.'

Ogie stood up too and both his fists were clenched tightly. The muscles on his face twitched as he bit hard. But he remained silent as he went out through the door.

I have been used all along, Ogie Obala said to himself with great bitterness. I have been used and manipulated even by my own father. I made all the noises to keep the people from guessing what was really going on. And as for the percentage, my part was built into it from the very beginning. Everything I said or did made no difference, not really. My father wanted my co-operation to secure a larger share of the percentage. He wanted me beside him in order to get more of the money for himself. And when your own parents, your closest friends can use you just so as to make money, then the country is finished, really finished and done with. We are in the drain now, waiting only for the next rains to wash us away. . .But before then, there is this thing that I must do. I have had no choice really in the matter of the percentage but I do have some choice left. I do have some choice with regard to how I spend the money. Except, of course, the money was never really mine and my father merely used me again, there. But I will change that. My name will not be linked with the percentage in vain. I told myself that the decent part of me would not go for nothing, that something else would have to give somewhere. And that means my money will stay here and my father's money will stay here too. I have come only half way in my struggle. But that half way means the money stays here to do at least some good.

His face was set when, a few minutes after twelve, he drove behind his father towards the Wayo Hotel. He had all the papers beside him, in front on the other seat. The tyres of his car spat out a number of loose chippings as he gathered speed.

He suddenly smiled as he thought about the road on which he was driving and his face softened and relaxed. He knew the contractor who had tarred the road. Still more, he knew who had awarded the contract and for how much it had been awarded. And the road had been completed less than a month before. The gravel had already been washed to the side of the road and the tar, it could easily be seen, was peeling off the red dust underneath. All that was needed was just one more

rainfall and all the tar and gravel would be washed down the drains. Then the contract would be awarded all over again, the percentages would be still higher. The road would be tarred and after another few weeks the same cycle would begin all over.

As he drove further along the new road, he could see the jagged outline of some houses in various stages of construction. The sight brought to his mind the case of the lady contractor. He knew her very well because at the time she was awarded part of the three million naira contract to build hostels for the Ogbe College of Technology, she invited him to the party. At the party, she disclosed to Ogie that she hadn't even got a concrete mixer. Could Ogie help her to locate one from some of the numerous contractors working for the Ogbe City Council? And still more, she needed a young but not too nosy engineer. 'You know, one who doesn't get any conscience from seeing one or two things not being done exactly the right way. He will be amply compensated,' she assured Ogie.

Ogie Obala had promised to help but never did. He was happy later on not to have associated himself with her because three months after work had started in earnest, one of the hostels suddenly collapsed. It was discovered that the base was faulty. Meanwhile hundreds of thousands of naira had already gone into the construction work which immediately ground to a halt. The woman contractor, a sister of the administrator, then abandoned the project, 'because of lack of funds'. The hostels still stood as they had been deserted months earlier.

Ogie slowed down as he approached the nursery school which stood beside the road to the Wayo Hotel. The small children, children of wealthy parents, all smartly dressed, were coming out of the school. Ogie blew his horn and children who were on the point of crossing the road hesitated and stopped. Ogie drove on. His father's car was no longer in sight.

At exactly twelve-thirty Ogie arrived at the Wayo Hotel. His father's car was already parked, but Chief

Obala was nowhere to be seen outside. Ogie wound up the car windows slowly and walked into the Wayo Hotel. Tessy the receptionist was there at her desk. He had to stop to greet her.

'Why didn't I see you the other day as you promised?' Tessy asked, a half-smile on her lips.

'We had some labour problems,' Ogie lied smoothly. 'I couldn't leave the office in time.' He did not want to joke now. But she held him with her eyes.

'You mean your workers are also demanding another increase over. . .'

Ogie Obala nodded. 'So I'll be seeing you another time. We are here to discuss those problems now.' Impatiently he tapped the pack of files he carried under his arm.

'Exactly when?' Tessy demanded. Ogie gave up and decided to humour her.

'Any time your boy-friend will let you go,' he answered and looked away from her.

Tessy looked daggers at him. 'What boy-friend?'

'The one who was to pick you up on the day I came,' he reminded her.

'Oh, him! Well, he found out about us and he is angry. So could we. . ?'

'Is he so jealous?' Ogie asked, amused now.

'All men are jealous,' Tessy said, keeping her right hand under her chin; with the left hand she pointed at Ogie, 'including you.'

Ogie laughed. 'I am not jealous.'

'Oh you are. Didn't you hear what I said? All men are jealous. Some pretend not to be but deep in their hearts they are jealous, even more jealous than the women. I'll give you an example. . .'

The swing doors opened and Chief Obala looked out. Ogie excused himself neatly and went away.

The special room at the Wayo Hotel was richly furnished. Inscriptions on the wooden walls spoke about the history of the people. The rug on the floor was thick and soft, the long and large conference table gleamed and shone. The revolving chairs, all of them black, were

big, heavy and soft. Ogie sat on the one nearest the door but his father walked farther up and sat at the other end, as if he needed to regard his son from a safe distance. They were the only two in the room as yet.

'You will sit beside me here,' Chief Obala spoke now across the table. Ogie hesitated, then stood up. At the same time, the heavy door swung open and Chief Aikhon, the chief of police, entered the room.

Chief Obala immediately rose to his feet.

'You look very well,' he complimented the chief of police.

'Thank you very much,' replied the other. 'And how are you?'

'Oh nothing, thanks,' Chief Obala laughed. 'My son, Ogie' and he indicated Ogie to the chief of police.

Ogie politely shook hands with the large man and smiled with his lips only, 'Very pleased to meet you, sir.'

Chief Aikhon slapped Ogie on the back lightly. 'What a young, handsome son you've got, Chief Obala!'

'Oh well,' Chief Eweh Obala began and then forgot himself and allowed himself to be flattered.

'And what do you say he is?'

'Principal secretary.'

'That is next to you.'

'Why, in a way, yes,' Chief Obala laughed loudly. 'Come to think of it, he is always next to me. He is my first son.'

Both men laughed and chatted on for another two minutes until their conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the commissioner.

The commissioner was a small, thin man. But with the profits reaped from his office, his skin glowed softly and what in other circumstances might have turned into a rough and coarse carcass became rather more tender than a baby's sole. They shook hands all round and again Ogie was introduced. 'Contacts', his father had often told him, 'are the most important things in a man's life.'

Then the waiters brought in the wine to increase the pleasure of waiting and to kill the boredom and

monotony of the conversation. The minutes fled by. The clock chimed one o' clock. Major Alafia hadn't turned up and as if by reflex, all of them glanced at their watches and then at the door.

Another fifteen minutes passed. Still Major Alafia hadn't put in an appearance. Ogie Obala was angry. If this business has to be done, he thought, it ought to be done quickly.

'I hope nothing has happened to him,' Chief Obala said dramatically.

'It couldn't have,' Chief Aikhon assured them. 'I was with him just before I came here.'

'Why then is he not here?' the commissioner asked.

'Perhaps he was held up by something,' Chief Aikhon said.

Then they all listened attentively. There were no sounds of approaching footsteps nor of firing guns. They all knew only too well the precarious nature of their government—a coup could always blossom at any moment.

Chief Obala rang the bell on the side of the table. 'I think, gentlemen,' he began, 'we might as well have our lunch before the whole thing goes sour.'

'You are quite right there,' the commissioner agreed.

'Or we could postpone this meeting,' the chief of police suggested.

'No, never!' Chief Obala and the commissioner said in unison. 'If he doesn't come, we will take it that he was indisposed and discuss the issue on his behalf!'

'He might have other views,' the chief of police protested.

'None that I know of,' the commissioner said.

The waiters, about eight of them, came in. Chief Obala gave them instructions and they left.

'I think we might as well start.'

Every head suddenly turned and stared at Ogie Obala who had just spoken.

'Start what?' the chief of police asked, specks of a smile in his eyes.

Ogie did not look at any of them but at the opposite

wall. 'Well, we came here for a purpose, I presume basically not to eat lunch. If the officer refuses to come, then we are still four out of five. We are in the majority. We came here to discuss business. I have the papers here. I suggest that we start with them at once.'

Ogie could see the consternation deepening in their faces. If only I could make it more, he thought.

'I think young Mr Obala is right there,' the commissioner finally agreed.

'But the problem is that the officer alone can reverse whatever decision the four or even one hundred more like us in this room might take. There is no other alternative. We have to wait.'

'Or postpone the meeting,' the chief of police harped on again. Chief Obala shook his head firmly. 'We can't afford to postpone it. The financial year comes round soon. If we don't reach an agreement now, it might be overtaken by events. Don't forget that there are hundreds of millions involved.'

The doors opened and more waiters came in to lay the table and then the food. But Ogie, thoroughly angry, refused to drink. He looked at his wrist watch. It was nearly half past two.

At that very moment, the door was pushed open and Major Alafia came in. And as if drawn by a supernatural force, all of them except Ogie Obala stood up. Even the waiters froze in their work.

'Good afternoon, gentlemen,' the major sang. 'I can see I have kept you waiting!'

The four of them silently regarded him. They were all in varing degrees afraid of him, not as a person really but as a force. They were afraid of what he stood for: the gun. After all, if they were called to wrestling bouts even the dry commissioner was sure he would have disposed of Alafia easily. The major's face was all puffed up. 'Major Chop-chop,' the rank and file called him.

Ogie Obala did not like the man. His arrogance was beyond bearing and his quiet assumption of power was repulsive to him.

Major Alafia took the head of the table. 'We will proceed at once,' he said. 'What are the facts?'

Chief Obala cleared his throat. 'I doubt, gentlemen, if the real worth of the contract is of supreme interest. I think it's the percentage really, how much each will be prepared to take.'

'I think that is a reasonable beginning,' the commissioner agreed.

'No matter the worth of the contract, the percentages will always be more important,' Chief Obala said.

Meanwhile the waiters had piled the table high with meat, jollof rice and fresh fruits. Major Alafia heaped some of the food on to his plate. 'I think the other way round,' he announced, over mouthfuls of jollof rice and chicken. 'If the contract is worth little or nothing in value, the percentages have to be proportionately low, but if . . .' He stopped in his speech to crack a bone. Some of the oil inside the bone splashed out over his face and clothing. But Major Chop-chop took no notice. The other men laid down their cutlery and waited for him to complete his statement. He did, but only after another two minutes. By then, Major Chop-chop had rinsed his mouth with some of the Portuguese wine. Ogie, who had lost his appetite much earlier on, felt even less like continuing with his food.

'What was I saying,' the major prayed for remembrance.

The commissioner promptly answered his prayers. 'You were talking about the percentage and the value of the contract.'

'Oh yes, oh yes,' Major Alafia agreed. 'So I was. But as the chairman there suggests we will forget about the contract's real value for now because it is the amount over that, some three hundred and twenty million I gather, that we are here to deal with. Personally, I am prepared to accept thirty per cent of that amount.'

The others fell silent.

'I was hoping for a flat, not a graded, percentage,' Chief Obala said.

'Because that would be in your interests,' the commissioner accused him.

Chief Obala stared at the commissioner but made no reply.

'I'm prepared to take a twenty-nine per cent cut,' the hitherto silent chief of police spoke up.

It was the turn of the commissioner. 'I will take twenty-nine and a half per cent,' he announced.

Suddenly Major Alafia burst out laughing. The force of the laughter was so much that some of the food he had been chewing flew out of his mouth and scattered everywhere on the table. The commissioner looked at Major Chop-chop with clear distaste. But he did not dare utter a word.

'So you want to take twenty-nine and a half per cent! No, no, no,' the Major laughed. 'That is too greedy of you. We will give you sixteen per cent, less than what you want.'

The commissioner felt so humiliated that his voice trembled. 'But why?' he whispered hoarsely.

'Because that is enough for you. You have been in this business for many years. Since Independence. I even think sixteen per cent is too much. But we will give it to you.'

Chief Obala looked down at the papers in front of him. He wasn't sorry for the commissioner although the greed of the man was bound to affect his own percentage. Clearing his throat, he said 'I will take fifteen per cent.'

'That is, including your son?' the chief of police asked.

Chief Obala stammered. 'Oh . . . em, yes. We always get ours together.'

'Good! Good! Good!' the major chimed. 'Fifteen plus sixteen plus twenty-nine plus thirty make . . . eh . . . how many?'

'That will be ninety per cent,' the chief of police calculated.

'Ninety per cent!' exclaimed the major. 'Then I am going to take forty per cent and you, Chief, can retain your twenty-nine. All that would make one hundred per cent.'

'That is unfair,' Ogie protested, and his eyes watered with anger.

'What is unfair?' Major Chop-chop demanded.

'Your forty per cent. It's too big. That is almost twice as much as what the rest of us here are going to get.'

'And who are you to determine what is fair and what isn't fair?' Major Chop-chop demanded.

Chief Obala quickly stepped on Ogie's shoes under the table, urging him to keep quiet. But Ogie was already too angry to care. 'Why, less than ten minutes ago, you promised that you were going to take only thirty per cent. All of us thought that as a ceiling, it was fair. Now you have suddenly changed your mind.'

'I can change my mind any time I want!' Major Alafia exploded. 'Some of you here do not even deserve what you are being given.'

Chief Obala fiercely tugged at the sleeve of his son.

'You do not deserve the forty per cent,' Ogie cried bluntly, half rising from his seat. But his father pulled him back.

'Well, well, gentlemen,' the chief of police appealed, 'I think we are going too far. I think the major is right in changing his mind. Considering his services, thirty per cent is actually too small.'

'And how much in your opinion', the commissioner ventured 'would be enough?'

Chief Aikhon emptied another glass of wine before he replied. His eyes that were already bulging from too much drink, bulged still more. 'As much as he wants would be enough. He has said forty per cent.'

'And now, gentlemen,' Major Alafia bellowed, 'to other matters. I suggest, no, I strongly recommend, that Chief Obala goes to Berne immediately with the cash to deposit it into our banks there, of course, on the basis of our agreements here.'

'And the actual contract?' Ogie asked. 'Who gets it?'

Major Alafia looked at Ogie Obala; his eyes were drunken and red and dangerous. 'I am sure you can handle that with your father,' he said. 'But remember that on paper the contract will be worth five hundred

million naira. The contractor you select must therefore be extremely reliable and trustworthy, since he will be getting only ten million naira. You must not make a mistake there.'

No other word was spoken on the matter after this, although they all fumed and raged within. However, when they later emerged from the special room into the strong light of day, they were all, except Ogie Obala, smiling and laughing, as if they were one large, united family.

Chapter 24

The die is cast, Ogie Obala thought as he drove back home after the meeting. Fifteen per cent of three hundred and twenty million naira is forty eight million naira. Assuming I accept that he is entitled to some sixty per cent of that, my legitimate share in the money is a little over nineteen million naira. I will round it off and say it is twenty million naira. He owes me twenty million naira and I am going to make sure that the money stays in this country.

I have that business to settle and then there is the business with Rose. I will have to settle that too, he told himself. I have the money now. And it is going to be money and women from now on. All the other women will give back to me what Rose Idebale took from me. And that is what it always is, he reminded himself. You wanted one thing and then got another. The things that you want always seem to elude you. Look at this money now, he thought. I do not have any feelings for it, really. I am not excited by it. I do not want it but yet I have got it. And then there is Rose Idebale whom I want and who tells me to wait outside her door while she gets dressed.

He shook his head in the car from side to side because he did not understand. He remembered the week before he left for his studies abroad when they had both gone to a wake-keeping and because it had been late had had to sleep in Siloko's parents' home. That was more than four years ago, but it did not matter. He remembered the storey building and then the room where both of them had slept. It was Siloko's uncle's consulting room and there was a couch on which the patients were examined standing against the wall, and they had both removed their clothes and climbed on top of the couch and then Rose Idebale had got up in the middle of the night and said she wanted to ease herself. They had gone, naked as they were, out of the room into the open passage that

held the toilet and then the bathroom. And because there was no water in the toilet, Rose Idebale had gone to the bathroom instead and he had held the door half open and watched out for anyone coming. He had stood and watched Rose Idebale urinate on the floor of the bathroom and then they had gone back into the single consulting room and held each other tightly to get some warmth in their bodies and then lain back on the couch and made love. What could have been more intimate than that? He did not want to count the other numerous times, times when they had been indistinguishable from each other in their intimacy, times when in the words of the old song, they had looked in the mirror and got confused because each had thought the eyes of the other were his or hers.

This is the same woman who now orders me out of her room to spite me. But I have got the money now, he thought, money to take from a million other women what Rose Idabale took from me.

Ogie Obala entered Itohan Avenue and as he turned in through the gates of the compound he saw Mallam Mallam's car parked in front of the house. He went indoors and then opened the door to his room. Mallam Mallam was stretched out on the bed, bare from the waist upwards. He woke up from his sleep and put his hands behind his head on the pillows.

'You were a long time gone,' he said to Ogie. 'Was the meeting that long?'

Ogie placed his briefcase at the foot of the bed beside one of Mallam Mallam's spreadeagled legs. 'It was one of your friends, Major Alafia. He kept us waiting.'

'But the meeting went well?'

'Sort of,' Ogie answered, and removed his tie, then his shirt.

'What do you mean by "sort of"?'

'Well, you know,' Ogie Obala sighed and waved his hands evasively in the air. To himself, he said, God damn it. Look at him lying down here on my bed as if nothing is the matter!

'You are some friend,' he said now to Mallam Mallam. 'You appear and then disappear. At your convenience!'

'Stop it,' Mallam Mallam said from where he lay on the bed.

'Well, when are you disappearing again?'

'I say stop it,' Mallam Mallam repeated and sat up on the bed. 'Did you not receive the messages that I left behind? Was it because of your malice that you chose not to respond?'

'I have no malice,' Ogie Obala retorted.

'And I have all the malice,' Mallam Mallam muttered. 'I have all the malice and you have all the virtues.'

'I didn't say that.'

Mallam Mallam remained silent but put on his shirt and buttoned it up and then tucked its ends into his unzipped trousers.

'You do not have to go,' Ogie Obala said.

'Who told you I was going?'

Both men looked at each other and they couldn't help it because the light came into their eyes, and everything was forgotten.

Outside, the sky was bright and warm and the recently clipped mane of grass glistened under the late afternoon sun. The hibiscus flowers spread their large red and sensuous petals, and a few roses also put out to the wind. The tall whispering pines that surrounded the house clapped and clashed with the wind like the clash and clatter of two dry and tightly drawn cymbals. Overhead, the birds flew against the vast sky which now had the strips of silver and gold from the cumulus clouds. They stood under the acacia tree close to the boundary with the other house, the one that had the guard dogs, and Ogie Obala turned to Mallam Mallam and asked, 'Are you not afraid of the future?'

Mallam Mallam laughed immediately. How could he be afraid of the future when he had so much money now? 'No, I am not afraid of the future. But, tell me, why should I be?'

Ogie debated for some fleeting seconds whether or not to explain. Then he said, 'My father thinks that there

might be a revolution, that we stand to lose what we have in this country.'

'A revolution?' echoed the other.

'Yes, a revolution,' Ogie repeated. 'A social revolution.'

'By whom and against whom?' Mallam Mallam asked.

'Well, by the poor and obviously against the rich. My father thinks it is therefore dangerous to invest money in anything concrete.'

Mallam Mallam wanted to laugh but he held the feeling back, stood on it. Ogie looked sideways at his friend to indicate that he was expecting an answer.

Mallam Mallam's words came out slowly. 'I don't think there is going to be any revolution in this country. The poor are afraid, ignorant and unorganised. The rich, even if there are not many, are very sophisticated. See how they stopped that course on Marxism and the Developing World at the university? You cannot even talk of political consciousness in the masses in our country today. And then you have the interests that are divided along tribal lines as well. How then can you talk of a socialist revolution?'

Ogie Obala listened and turned the words over in his mind. 'But there could be a coup,' he insisted.

'Yes,' agreed Mallam Mallam. 'There can be a coup, but by whom and against whom? I tell you that whether a coup comes today or not, the structure of our society, the base, the fundamentals will still remain the same. After all, the majority of army officers who plan and execute the coup all belong to the same class. The civilians they appoint as ministers or secretaries all share the philosophy of that class. The philosophy places emphasis on money, on power, on personal aggrandisement. For example, how much property was declared seized by the last government? Were all the houses of Alhaji Bukuh not declared confiscated? Who today is collecting the rent on these houses? Bukuh himself. And the three million naira that Mr Forcadi was supposed to return to the government?

'These are just a few examples to show you that those in power do not want to see radical changes themselves

because almost all of them were brought up to respect order, tradition and above all to value individual, material well-being. Ideologically they belong to the ruling and therefore the propertied, advantaged class. There will always be coups of course. Nobody denies the possibility of a coup, even today. But one thing is important – a coup is not the same thing as a revolution.'

'Very true,' agreed Ogie. 'But there can be different types of coups. A Portuguese coup, an Ethiopian coup, a Dahomean coup, all talking of "one man, one bread, one man, one house". If that happens, then it matters not whether it is a coup or a revolution . . .' Ogie lapsed into silence gradually. His voice became inaudible. His mind, in spite of what he had been saying, began to grapple with the full implications of Mallam Mallam's statement: how can you talk of a revolution, when political consciousness is lacking?

Mallam Mallam was talking. But the first few words were lost on Ogie Obala.

'. . . So you can invest in concrete, in cement, in matches, in firewood . . .'

'And start a great fire,' Ogie Obala prompted.

'What's wrong with a great fire?' Mallam Mallam queried. 'There's nothing wrong with any properly built fire. It gives flame, it gives light, it heats.'

'And it can burn or scorch like the sun,' Ogie Obala added. 'Any fire, big or small, can burn and cause some people pain.'

Mallam Mallam shook his head slowly. He understood perfectly what the other man was aiming at. 'Let's not deceive ourselves,' he said. 'It took man so many centuries to learn to make a fire; it took him many more to learn to keep a fire going, and finally to stop it. It will take our countrymen many more centuries to learn to start any kind of fire. I am not afraid. I will never be scathed, and when I say "I", I refer also to my pedigree.'

'I am interested in buying a supermarket,' Ogie Obala confessed now to Mallam Mallam. 'But my father won't let me see my way.' He wasn't going to hold back on anything any more.

'How?' Mallam Mallam queried.

'He sits on the money. All money is exported overseas.'

Mallam Mallam thought for some moments.

'Does he never keep anything at home?' he asked.

Ogie Obala remembered the conversation with his father. He would have to keep a large sum of money at home before he travelled this time. And he knew what was in Mallam Mallam's mind. He had been thinking along the same lines himself. He nodded his head in the affirmative. 'Well I don't know but this week I think he will be keeping more than three hundred million naira in raw cash before he travels to Berne.'

Mallam Mallam whistled. 'And you are going to let him take it away this time?'

Ogie did not answer.

'When exactly will the money arrive?' Mallam Mallam asked.

Ogie hesitated again. Mallam Mallam must not know too much. There was too much money involved.

'In about three or four days' time,' he volunteered.

In fact he knew his father was to travel on Thursday morning. That meant the money would have to arrive a day before, on Wednesday night. Not a word was spoken about the real intention, but sure enough, the message was understood. Both knew that they were going to collaborate to make sure that the money, or at least part of it, did not leave the country.

They went back into the house where Mallam Mallam had left his car keys but when they came out again, they found out to their surprise that it had started to rain. The white and blue of the cumulus had given way to small black rain clouds. The morning glories out there on the lawns, the hibiscus flowers, swishing their red lips with the wind, the red and yellow roses filled with all the passion of nature, now bowed down and now lifted their crowns up again, refusing to be beaten. And far off, the mutterings of the sky in dull thunderclaps came again and again, like the sounds of a far-off revolution.

'I am going to see Rose now,' Ogie said, as they went towards their cars. Would you like to come?'

Mallam Mallam shook his head. 'Not immediately,' he said. 'I have an important appointment which I must keep now. Otherwise,' he said on entering his car, 'I am prepared to go with you to the end of the world.'

'When do I see you then?' Ogie asked.

'Tomorrow afternoon at the Luna Club.'

Ogie watched him drive off and then entered his own car and began to debate whether or not he should really go to see Rose. In the end, he changed his mind. He would go and see Eunice instead.

Chapter 25

Rose Idebale came home from work early in the afternoon, locked her door and laid herself on the bed. She slept for a long, long time and when she awoke the shadows in her room had lengthened. She did not want to think of the broken mirror whose pieces were still everywhere on the floor. She stared instead at the ceiling which was becoming black from the smoke of her kerosene cooker. Then she looked outside where it had been raining.

'It is strange . . .' she said to herself, 'strange that a doctor should advise me to be patient when every day is so important.'

Then she thought more closely about yesterday's appointment. Why did Ogie Obala go in first to see Dr Siloko? What did they discuss when she sat outside in the waiting room? Was it possible that Ogie Obala had made a deal with the young doctor?

She felt certain that something had happened when she waited. Then an idea struck her. Why not go to see the woman who had given her her card? They may have been rivals but then the woman had appeared to be much more worldly-wise than herself and would perhaps be able to help her.

She got up slowly and unzipped her handbag, tipping all the contents on to the bed. She pushed the small coins and the pencil she used for her eye-shadow aside. Then, she picked up Ogie's letter, unfolded it and read it. She read it a second time as if she wanted to memorise it forever. Why was he so dishonest? Why did he deceive her so much? She shrugged her shoulders, folded the letter again and tore it from one folded end to the other. Next, she picked up the small card on which the name and the address of the woman was written. She read the name: Eunice Agbon. Then she read the two addresses.

Well, she would go to her house address. She would go out and see her.

She put everything back into the bag, zipped it up, placed it under her arm and stood up. Then she remembered she hadn't eaten anything all day. She looked at the food cupboard and dropped her handbag on the bed. It took her nearly thirty minutes to prepare two eggs, boil some water for tea and eat what she had cooked. She didn't really feel hungry and these last days, she always felt sick.

'I probably won't throw this up anyway,' she thought and took a bitter lemon and cut it into two. She sucked the bitter lemon juice and felt much better. She left the plates and the sucked-out lemon pieces on the small flat centre table. She was in a hurry to be out and gone.

Her mind was almost blank as she walked to the roadside and stood waiting for a taxi. And later, even when she sat in the taxi, she did not want to listen to the lively discussion that went on between the passengers in the car about the administrator who they alleged had bribed each of his legislators with sixty thousand naira and some contracts to get his budget approved without debate because he had included sixty million naira for himself, for his maintenance.

She felt weak and exhausted and wished she could go on travelling and never stop. It annoyed her that the taxi halted now and again to pick up other passengers. She wanted to go alone on an infinite journey that has no end, where an end is only the beginning of another journey. How pleasant it must be, she thought, to go on thus endlessly, in motion, never a-resting, always a-going, moving in one endless motion with time and the universe, never thinking about the pain or joy of an ending or an arrival.

She looked out of the windows of the taxi and then suddenly, something jarred in her dreaming. She saw a small crowd of people. A taxi was standing with people around it. An accident. What if there was an accident, in this endless journey through space into eternity? What then? An arrival? The beginning of another journey?

Or the end of the road? She didn't know. She couldn't say. Those who would have known, like Oloru, never came back.

Rose stepped out of the taxi and looked carefully at the numbers written on the houses. Some of the numbers were missing but she finally saw it and then to reach it, she had to cross the gutter. The smell of the gutter with all its refuse came strongly to her, the gutter that overflowed with water and refuse and sand and dead birds and crushed dogs. Her nausea returned and she spat into the road.

Inside the house, the first door she knocked upon opened and Eunice Agbon stood there, surprised, but pleased to see her.

'I am sorry,' Rose apologised. 'I am sorry that I couldn't come two days ago. I have been overburdened with a series of problems.'

'I have been expecting you,' Eunice Agbon said simply, and smiled and went back into the room. Rose followed her inside the room and sat down. She looked round and saw that the walls were painted blue and that photographs of pop-stars hung from there. Another corner held the wardrobe and the shoes and the large bed occupied quite a substantial part of the room. A hard, red carpet covered the floor and Eunice had a stereo system arranged about the room. Rose was impressed but she said, 'Can't you do something about the smell outside?'

Eunice Agbon laughed and put out her albums on the table. 'I am afraid we can't,' she confessed. 'The street is rather low and it floods easily.'

'So you'll have a lot of mosquitoes,' Rose Idebale observed, remembering her own bitter experiences with mosquitoes. 'I broke my dressing mirror yesterday morning on their account.'

'Really?' the other woman asked. 'How did it happen?' Rose Idebale told her. And at the end, her face grew serious. How could she ever hope to live far away from those problems that pestered her most? She remembered the visit to the doctor and grimaced.

Eunice laughed and misunderstood the expression on her face. 'I have quite a lot of mosquitoes here,' she said. 'And there's nothing I can do about them, just like the flood outside. But tell me, have you seen Ogie Obala since then?'

Rose answered slowly. 'Yesterday morning,' she said. 'I saw him only yesterday morning. He was busy, he said, with the contract.'

The women did not say anything for some time while each thought about the relationship of the other to Ogie Obala. And then it passed and Rose Idebale looked away from the albums and caught the faltering, unprepared gaze of the other woman. It gave her the courage to speak.

'I am in trouble,' she said, dropping the album on her lap. Her heart beat faster, her thoughts raced like an antelope escaping from a bush fire. But her voice was clear and steady. 'I have been pregnant these past three months for Ogie Obala. He tried to deceive me. I didn't want the child! God knows I still do not want the child. But he wants the child and has used every means to make me keep it. I want it removed and I thought, well, I thought perhaps you could help me.'

Her voice, moist with emotion, had risen. The voice and the words affected Eunice Agbon strangely. She bit her lip. She couldn't understand. Here was a woman who didn't want the child she had so desperately wanted. I too was once put in the family way by Ogie Obala, Eunice Agbon thought. I wanted the child. But he wouldn't have any of my dreams. He couldn't be part of it. I must abort it, he insisted. And I did, against my wish. God knows how much I wanted that child! And here is this woman who does not want this child he insists she must have.

She then proceded to tell Rose a part of her own story; both women fell silent under the heavy storm of desire and antidesire. But along this line of total opposition in their desires was a unity, a clear comprehension of each other and this middle-line-comprehension and the unity that concluded it, evoked warmth, sympathy.

However, they were also united by other feelings; a coldness, for example, towards Ogie Obala who was the reason for their coming together. They both hated him, each to a lesser or greater degree. And because neither could be sure of the real extent of this hatred, it spread a thin layer of suspicion over that middle-belt understanding. Did the other, each one thought, behind all the immediate anger and bitterness, still have a certain measure of sympathy for the common enemy?

To them Ogie Obala was dead. They referred to him in their minds as 'was', something of the past, gone out of the present. Whether he would come again into the future, they didn't know. For the moment, however, he was gone, dead and buried. But he might not be safely buried, each suspected. A sudden resurgence of feeling was possible from either of them and then there would be a resurrection and a reckoning with the past.

Eunice Agbon was now thinking to herself: How I wish she would give birth to the child and hand it over to me! Then would I surprise Ogie and even the whole world. I would have given birth to a child without going through that single and intensely pure moment of motherhood, the experience of childbirth. The thought thrilled her. Rose did not want the child, but she did. She could take the unwanted child and make him wanted. She could take the child away. She might even suggest it. But would this other woman agree? Had she not already known the weight of carrying the child? Could she forget them, those nine months of carrying a heavy, long and oblong birthmark? Her face clouded with thought, with desire, with guilt. And as if to cut her off entirely, Rose woke her up from her dreams.

'I came here really,' she repeated with emphasis, 'to see if you could help me to make the contacts. Perhaps,' she hesitated and then she began again, 'perhaps you might know somebody who won't be afraid of removing it.' She did not now want to mention her pregnancy, she was frightened to call the inmate of her gradually extending self a child.

Eunice tried valiantly to swallow her desire, her

thoughts. The temptation had been so strong! In a changed voice, she said, 'I know a man who might be able to help. We could go there right away. We might be lucky to find him at home.'

A warm and immeasurable current of gratitude passed over Rose Idebale. She, once so strong, had been reduced during the past weeks, months to a shadow, a near-nothingness. Now, however, as her battered hopes found a new lease of life, she regained some of her presence of mind and with it some of her vitality.

'I am ready,' she said, and stood up.

Eunice Agbon also stood up. Somehow, she was glad that she was going to help, to do something good for another person who only a few days before had been an unknown rival. Today, however, they were friends; with a little luck they might remain friends for a little longer, and, if people were on their side, they could remain friends for ever.

Rose Idebale unconsciously hoped so. She had seen the great idea, the great desire struggling in the other woman's mind. She was a woman. She understood.

Chapter 26

Eunice Agbon came out of the room and as she stepped outside into the fading light to ride the rising tide of night, she saw a car drawing up. She looked at the car and knew immediately that the occupant of the car would be Ogie Obala. She bit her lip. So much for one man, she thought. He could cause misery, strike grief into the hearts of others and yet get away virtually unscathed. Ogie Obala had got out of the car and was demurely standing there, as if both the darkness and the day belonged to him, as if all the light passed through him before entering into the dark valleys of night.

Rose Idebale who was standing behind Eunice also noticed. She shivered a little from the great well of feeling that suddenly surged up in her. She wanted to rush to that self-confident face and tear it to pieces. She wanted to tear that self-assurance off him, as you might tear a garment from somebody's back. They were so hollow and deceitful, the posture and the face with the dying light of day gathered round them. She could see through it all: a man wakes up and gets dressed, wears beautiful clothes and enters a grand car. People on the streets, whom he passes, think of him with deference. To them he is a man, a real man with all the charm and honour of the human race clustered around his heart, like colour around a flower, or light around the stars. Yet not all the bright stars of heaven are infinitely beautiful. Poetry may celebrate them; reality removes the dream and you discover a waste land of ugly stones. A deep octopusian sea stares back, like the sunwarped flower, sapped of all vitality, all colour, all dream.

To both women, standing on the threshold of a new and deep understanding with the dark shadow of the house behind them, Ogie Obala was like that flower from which all the colour had been bleached.

Standing by the car, Ogie Obala contemplated the

situation. So they had met at last! The cat then was out of the bag. Better then to take the bag home and leave the cat to prowl before it died a natural death. There was nothing that could be done. He smiled to himself cynically. At that moment, the dying light of the sun caught him low on the face and his teeth gleamed.

But really, seeing both women together like two conspirators, filled him with consternation and sapped his self-confidence. The flood of this new alliance seemed to wash away his image, built as it was on the sand. He felt his judgement shattered. Rose and Eunice seemed so different in nature and character; the one resisted him, the other courted him. The one was quiet, simple and unspoiled, the other was mature, experienced, sure of herself and very much used to the ways of the world. Where did the ingredients of any unity or friendship lie between them?

How he wished that Rose Idebale would disappear from his presence, turn into a pillar of salt! Then he thought, he would be free to continue with Eunice Agbon across the wilderness. But he did not imagine for long. He would never be able to go with Eunice Agbon across the whole length and breadth of the wilderness. A vision of the land flowing with milk and honey would be too much for her to resist. For the rest of the journey, he would have to go – alas! – with Rose. But that was all in the future, in his imaginings. For the moment he wanted Rose Idebale out of the way, gone and far away even from the twilight of his memory. He had come to mend fences with Eunice Agbon. Rose Idebale distracted him, confused him.

Rose and Eunice walked up to where he stood beside the car.

'Good evening,' he said to them, more out of civility than from real desire.

The two women did not answer him. They stood there facing him, in such a way that they too gathered some of the halo of the fading light. They were all opposition, their blood boiled and recoiled.

'I can see you are going out,' Ogie Obala said in a

matter-of-fact way. He knew now he shouldn't have come, he should have obeyed his first impulse.

'Oh yes. We are going out.' Rose Idebale answered him and her voice was flat, devoid of all emotion. Eunice Agbon had her arm around her. To Ogie Obala, the arm represented the depth of understanding, the amount of light, understanding light, that had accumulated between both women. He resented the gesture. 'I shouldn't have come,' he said to himself decidedly.

'Can I offer you a lift, then?' he asked in a voice that was so low he himself could hardly hear it.

Rose and Eunice looked at each other and then, out of nowhere, like a thunderclap, the laughter came. They laughed long and loud. Again and again, in peals of laughter that represented hooves and claps of thunder to Ogie, both girls rippled with the water from the stream of tickles. The laughter gushed out like the rains from the sky, they were immersed in it, submerged under it. Then gradually, it ebbed away.

Ogie stood there, numbed by anger. The laughter had scathed him like a fire. But he would not admit defeat.

'Did I say anything funny?' he asked with all the venom he could muster. He realised that he couldn't even say why he had come. Not now. The women knew that he was at their mercy now. Hold a man at arm's length and trust him to go on his knees, roll on the floor, and finally hang himself. They held him at arm's length. He snapped like a dog on a pier, but then he was harmless, powerless really.

Ogie Obala regarded them, fire in his eyes. The thought came to him again: they were so different, these two. Even as they laughed, Ogie had observed the difference, felt it. The one was quiet, deep, the other was loud, ineffectual. Was this very opposition of their natures the unifying force? Were they not united, entertained by each other simply because they were so different from each other? Wasn't there a point beyond which opposition passed into mutual support, beyond which enemies became friends, lovers? What was the

basis of his own desire for Rose Idebale? Was it not because of the blunt contradictions in their natures?

The two women were moving away and as though a mutual system of remote control existed between them, Ogie Obala moved along with them. The women stopped and looked at Ogie Obala questioningly.

'I can give you a lift to wherever you are going,' he insisted.

Eunice Agbon shrugged her shoulders. What did it actually matter, provided that Rose would not refuse? The place was far off, a taxi might be difficult to find. She looked at the other woman. Rose understood the message and gripped her by the wrist. She didn't want any ride with Ogie Obala. She recoiled from it.

Eunice understood the pressure on her wrist, and she said to the man, 'We don't want any lift from you.'

But Ogie Obala was adamant. 'Why not?' he demanded.

'We just don't want to,' Rose replied in a mocking voice.

'But where exactly are you off to?' he insisted. 'I want to know.'

'Hm!' Eunice Agbon exclaimed. 'It's really none of your business, you know.' The cat and mouse game continued for some time. And it wasn't easy to play mouse to two cats, two cold-blooded cats, who were out to disarm the man of his manhood.

Surprisingly, Ogie's unyielding persistence finally paid off. The women wavered in their decision. They decided to ride with him, as would prisoners in the grand carriage of the victor. In the car they did not say anything to each other until they came to the house that Eunice Agbon wanted. Eunice told them to wait in the car while she went to the door. It opened at her knock and she went inside.

Left to themselves, the tape of their mutual animosity started to roll. Ogie Obala understood now why they had come and he would have intervened, come back later and spoken to the doctor had he not been sure that

the mission was doomed to failure – it was certainly too late now.

Rose Idebale withdrew entirely into herself. The problems that she had been pushing into her subconscious mind for the past one and a half hours re-emerged. Her heart began to grind against her chest as the pestle against the mortar. She was afraid. Terrified, not of the future act itself, but of the possible decision. Would the doctor tell them that it was too late, that she had to go through the whole long and agonising process of pregnancy, carrying a child she did not want and never would want? Her mind was in turmoil. It was as if her heart had been torn away from her and was now hanging over a blazing fire.

It is a curious thing, though, this phenomenon, Rose thought. A woman spends a moment's pleasure. And, months afterwards, she is in acute agony trying to undo that minute's irresponsible act. And yet the man goes scot-free. He carries nothing. He deposits and leaves. He even struts before the woman, and, like a cock, crows proudly and loudly. He is unaffected. He carries nothing, nothing within him, except a conscience, which may be lighter than air. And sometimes he even boasts to the poor suffering woman: 'So you cannot find your time? Go and look for it where you lost it.' And he laughs at his own cleverness. But it is a shame really, she concluded, that a man cannot answer for his actions, that he cannot accept responsibility, that he must go on insisting that he is irresponsible and not really a man. And the woman turns round and round, like a witch dancing on a pole. She has to undo that single minute's mixed experience. But why in the first place does she accept it, like fate? Rose asked herself. For the final decision rests with the woman actually. After all, a man will always go on pretending to be an irresponsible child before a woman. So why allow him to satisfy his mean and selfish little appetite? Why not turn him off like a naughty little child: 'Go, you spoilt child. Go, play with your other little toys, but this you shall not have. You are playing with fire. You are likely to burn your fingers.' Weren't

men, like children, afraid of fires? But it doesn't happen so, she thought sadly. Overpowered by desire, by emotion, nagged and worn down by the stubborn persistency of the male dog, the woman yields, succumbs to his larger and ever-inflated ego. And after that, what then? Grief and misery. Nothing holds. Nothing yields. There is a struggle against that minute; a long, long struggle that spreads into months, years and even a lifetime, just for a minute's mixed fulfilment. Better then to stem that tide before it carries the woman too far out to sea, whence it becomes impossible to swim back. Otherwise she would perish, drown, with all the salt around her eyes.

Rose broke off her thoughts when she saw Eunice come out of the house. Eunice came to the car and opened the door. Rose stepped out and stood clear.

'You can go now,' Eunice said to Ogie, curtly dismissing him. 'You offered us a lift. Now we have another standing offer.'

The bitterness came to Ogie Obala now. Here was a woman, who only a week before had clung to him as skin to the body, a woman who had begged him on her knees to let her keep his child. And now she was exalting herself in his impotence. He would never forget this nor forgive her for it. But what did it matter anyway to have done with one relationship when there were so many on hand and so many more yet to come? What was the point in forcing the issue? It was not important, it did not matter at all.

However, something did matter, he said to himself. It wasn't the fact of leaving, of breaking up, of going apart. It was the way in which relationships fell apart and ultimately, what one was leaving behind. Oh yes, that mattered, what one was leaving behind, what one was taking out. If one was leaving something substantial behind and taking very little out, then there was cause for woe, cause for anxiety, anger. What was he leaving behind in the woman Eunice? Nothing, he said. Absolutely nothing. But in the woman Rose, something, a substantial part of him. He leaned back, staring

vacantly in front of him. His bitterness returned. One day he would have his own back. They would kneel down to beg him, the way Eunice had begged him only last week. He, Ogie Obala, who already stood on the threshold, in the dawn of immense, incalculable, endless wealth. It remained only for one single cloud to be shifted and he would burst into flower. He smiled darkly and mysteriously, his lips quivered like petals under raindrops, and watching him, the two women became uneasy.

'I'll be seeing you then,' he said, in an almost sing-song voice; and, like mercury, he slipped away.

Chapter 27

It was Wednesday now and the evening approached. The darkness fell rapidly as if afraid of being cheated by the daylight. The stars were putting out and each second, each minute brought its own star, until the sky carried many clusters of stars like coffee fruits on the branches of a coffee tree. The banana trees that sprouted from the moat waved their leaves like swords in the wind and the wind was cool because it still carried the water from the rain that had just fallen. It blew gently. Atise Street was flooded and the stars shone in the water of the flood as it flowed down the street, to disappear into the moat, not far away.

'I have terrible pains in my stomach now,' Rose Idebale said, and Eunice Agbon who had been sitting on the chair stood up, and folded back the long sleeves of her blouse. She placed the face towel in the small bucket that was half-filled with water. Bringing the towel out again, she squeezed some of the water back into the small blue bucket. She spread the face towel on the other woman's forehead.

'You should lie still,' she said finally to the younger woman. 'And you shouldn't worry. You know it's the malaria and those tablets he gave you have gone to work already. You worry too much. You have no need to be afraid.'

'I am not afraid,' Rose Idebale said from her helplessness on the bed. 'I am not afraid but am I not right to worry?'

'Everything will be all right,' Eunice assured her and then she came back and sat on the only armchair.

'What did they say in the office?'

'Nothing. I gave them the sick leave papers which the doctor signed.'

Rose's eyes dilated with pain and she clutched at her stomach and tried not to think about herself. Eunice

watched her and she knew how bravely Rose was trying to bear the pain.

'Try to sleep. You'll be all right. Just lie still.'

Rose tried to lie still but the pain was too much and she struggled.

'Okay, then take these,' Eunice said, and handed her the two pain-killing tablets. 'Drink these down and you'll feel better.'

'My mouth is so bitter,' Rose said and struggled to get up from the bed. Eunice adjusted the two pillows for her so that she could sit up and swallow the tablets. She took the small face cloth away from her face.

'I am sure you will be all right,' she reassured her.

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes, why not?'

Rose did not say anything now but tried to struggle against the ache in her head and in her stomach, while her body shivered with the fever. Then gradually, sleep enveloped her.

Eunice sat in the armchair and watched Rose as she slept. She was bitter in her mind against all men, she was bitter against Ogie Obala and against Chief Ekata most of all. She thought about her discussion with Rose Idebale yesterday evening as they sat out there on the verandah with the rain pouring and the single rose plant shivering in the wind.

'I think you should leave Chief Ekata,' Rose had said.

She remembered what her answer had been. 'I have thought about it a great deal and I am putting in my letter of resignation at the end of the week.'

Rose had smiled then. 'That's good, very good. But have you thought of other alternatives?'

'Alternatives?'

'Yes. Other places of work.'

'I know a lot of people,' she had said. Oh, yes, she did know a lot of people, thanks to Chief Ekata. She would go to them now. They wouldn't fail to help her. She smiled when she thought of Chief Ekata's possible reaction after she resigned.

'I am sure that he will be greatly shocked,' Rose had said yesterday.

She smiled broadly now. She had neither pity nor sympathy for Chief Ekata. After all, he had merely used her for his own gain.

Her mind went to Ogie Obala. Did she really hate him as much as she had led herself to believe? Was it not a selfishness on her part to have attempted to make him love her at all costs? But then wasn't that the very stuff of which love was made? Being in love means being selfish with regard to the person you love, she thought. And then she shook her head; there was a flaw in her reasoning. Love, she said to herself, is an idealisation of the other and if you idealised, everything was perfect. The other could have no faults and do no wrong. If he refused you, you tried again. You did not hate him because he refused you. You hated the other woman, if there was another woman. You made her the scapegoat but you did not hate him. Hatred is a part of the expectations you fail to realise, she told herself. It arises when your expectations are disappointed and if you have expectations, then you went into the relationship with your eyes open, with an adding and subtracting machine. You went into the relationship for what you could get and if you come out with less than you expected, then you are bitter. You may end up with the hatred but you have to realise then that you probably never had the love in the first place. You had something else. And this nameless something else is what most of us have and experience. We may idealise, but hardly ever beyond ourselves to the next person.

Perhaps this is why when, yesterday, we discussed Ogie Obala, we each of us discovered that we had consciences about the way we treated him that evening. We did not actually voice our opinions on this but it was evident from the way that we talked. 'I doubt if Ogie will ever have the courage to look in, ever again,' I said. But Rose shook her head and said, 'If he's as tough as he pretends to be, he will be here now and again.' I then asked her how we should behave toward him. 'Just . . .'

and Rose kept quiet. Then she added 'Just treat him the way he deserves. If he does come to me, I'll respect his courage no matter what underlies it. I'll treat him plainly, as a friend. Nothing more.' And I disagreed then. I said then that coming back wasn't an act of courage at all, that it represented a display of the man's opportunistic character, of his selfishness. How could you treat a man as a friend after he had ruined your life? How could you be indifferent towards him, I asked.

And Rose looked at me curiously, and I realised that neither one of us was really convinced that Ogie Obala was really guilty or that he had ruined our lives and that perhaps more than either of us, he was taking out much less than he was leaving behind.

Now, she looked at her watch and saw that it was nearly nine o'clock. She had to go home. She would come back later on, no, perhaps in the small hours of the morning, after Oloru's wake-keeping. Yes, when that ended, she would come back to see Rose. It would be around two or three o'clock in the morning, but she couldn't help that. Anyway, she would be able to find out how well Rose had slept. She would know then whether the doctor's method had worked.

She picked up her handbag and stood up. No, I must not disturb her sleep now, she said, and put her hand on the door's handle. She opened the door, then went out.

Chapter 28

Ogie Obala and Mallam Mallam sat at the far end of the huge crowd that had gathered once more for the wake-keeping. They both wore black trousers and dark blue shirts.

'When did you say it would end?' Mallam Mallam asked.

'Tomorrow night. Thursday. On the Friday morning there will be a long procession round the city.'

'What about all the dancing this far?'

'Oloru was a big man,' Ogie Obala said. 'I did not like him, but then that's not important now. He was big and he had many friends.'

'And a beautiful wife,' Mallam Mallam added. Ogie Obala looked in the other man's eyes and saw the desire plainly written there.

'You may have strong competition,' he said simply.

'A woman like that is worth fighting for.' Mallam Mallam was quiet for a while, then, 'I understand he was a member of the society.'

'What society?'

'A Mafia-style organisation. I understand that the progress of any man or woman in Benin depends on membership of this organisation.'

Mallam Mallam leaned forward and with a quick twist of his head whispered sharply in Ogie Obala's ear.

'How did you know?' Ogie Obala asked, surprised.

In answer Mallam Mallam raised his hand and bent his thumb, then he crossed two fingers and made them parallel again.

Ogie Obala shook his head. 'I do not understand.'

'Then you do not belong,' Mallam Mallam said. 'But I understand that they are very powerful. They even pervert the course of justice, make it possible or difficult for a government to govern.'

'I have heard about that,' Ogie Obala admitted.

'Perhaps you ought to write a book about them,' he suggested.

Mallam Mallam waved his hands helplessly. 'If I had the talent,' he confessed, 'the talent and the access, a book about that organisation would make the most revealing reading.'

All this was small talk really and both of them knew it. Ogie Obala looked into the friendly, but agile and mischievous eyes of Mallam Mallam and he could see the dark, serious expression that they shut away. Was it possible that he had any second thoughts, that he could be afraid?

'You are sure then that the money will be at home this night?' Mallam Mallam asked. Ogie Obala saw the dark blanket in the other man's eyes dissolve and his own doubt also went away.

'I heard him making the arrangements myself.'

'And in all, there will be thirty-two boxes?'

'Yes. Each will have one hundred million naira.'

'And we will do it between the hours of two and three?'

'In the darkest possible hour.'

'Just the two of us.'

'Well,' and Ogie Obala stopped and thought of Chief Ekata.

'There is another person then?'

'Yes,' Ogie Obala admitted uncomfortably. 'Do not think that . . .'

'I do not think of anything,' Mallam Mallam said and patted the other man on the arm to show that he was not offended, really. 'It is a woman?'

'No,' Ogie Obala said quickly now, wanting to reveal everything and get done with it. 'I had to tell Chief Ekata,' he explained. 'He is helping me with the purchase of the supermarket and some other property. Yesterday in our discussion, I could not but talk about my plans. He offered to help and I could not refuse him.'

'What time did you tell him then?'

'Three o'clock.'

'So what is the full plan now?' Mallam Mallam asked.

'The plan is going to be as before. I will walk up to his room while he is asleep and remove what I consider to be my fair share of the money.'

'But there will be one hundred million naira in each box,' Mallam Mallam pointed out. 'You can't count the money while he is asleep.'

'No,' Ogie Obala agreed. 'I accept that there is a problem there. But I will not think about it until we have possession of the box.'

'And then?'

Ogie Obala shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. We will wait and see what happens.'

Mallam Mallam was quiet for a while, then, 'You haven't said anything about what I am to do, nor about what Chief Ekata is to do also.'

'Yes,' Ogie Obala agreed. 'Chief Ekata will provide the ladder and you are to stand by to receive the money. In the morning I will take out what I want to spend on the supermarket and Chief Ekata will invest it in the business.'

'And your father, when he makes the discovery in the morning?'

Ogie Obala laughed and rubbed his eyes. 'I am sure he will not call in the police. It would be too embarrassing. Besides, it's public money, hundreds of millions of naira of public money. How could he explain it away?'

The die is really cast now, Ogie Obala thought. What is left now is for us to look at the number on its face. And that we shall know in the morning.

Chapter 29

Chief Eweh Obala sat by the window in his room in the upper part of his house. From there he could watch the movements on the avenue. From the back of the building, he could hear the steps of the nightwatchman crunching the gravel as he went round the house. Chief Obala listened to him for some time and then looked outwards at the starry sky. Tomorrow and the next day, he would be part of that stardust as he carried in his strong cases tons of paper gold. The amount of money was staggering.

All the arrangements had been made. The amount of money was such that it called for extraordinary precautions. Yet, to avoid attention, the money had been shipped to his house without heat, as if those compact, strong boxes contained nothing of value.

This evening, his house was three hundred and twenty million naira richer than yesterday. He could run away, if he so chose, once he got to Berne. But he had his family to consider. Added to this, another man would be waiting for him at the other end. Of course, he could change his flight at the first opportunity. He could change his destination. But if he did, what about the other millions to come? Would his behaviour not resemble that of the greedy farmer who killed the goose that laid the golden eggs? After all, this wasn't the first time he had taken large sums of money out of the country and it surely wouldn't be the last. He was trusted. He had to respect that trust, no, obey it. A man has to be reliable and trustworthy and strong, he thought. A man has to be reliable and trustworthy for his friends and then strong for himself.

I have come a long, long way from the struggling young man barely able to afford his meals to one who can do whatever he wishes so long as that depends upon having the money, he thought. And how I struggled and scratched, and then struggled and scratched even more.

And in all this struggling and scratching, the turning point came when I accepted the rules by which my superiors said the game should be played. I accepted these rules and I was no longer accused of being over-zealous, of being after the next man's job. I accepted the rules and became a realist, and everybody said I was pleasant and hard-working and honest and reliable and strong. You need strength to be able to change, he thought, and the light in his mind went to Ogie Obala.

What had Ogie said? That he felt naked and ashamed, and a weakling. But he is wrong. The nakedness and the shame and the weakness are there before a man changes. Changing from what you are to something you may not want to be requires strength and courage. So we all learn, or at least say to ourselves in the end.

And for all his expressed shame and nakedness and hunchback theories, I am sure that he will be much better than I ever was. Ogie will be much bigger and much better because he will have known the other side. This is just the beginning. And once you begin, you never end. You taste of the fruit of the tree and you want the whole tree. You never stop. That is why he will not stop now but will go on to be much bigger and better than I ever was. And what a fine one he will be too. He will be a fine one because he will be unafraid and strong, and by the time I am finished with him, wise and experienced too. This disaffection of ours is only on the surface really, because we are alike and he has been mine from the day he was born, and I his. Our disaffection is temporary because it springs from a disagreement over procedure. It is now no longer a disagreement over principles. We both know our society for what it is, we have both tasted of its forbidden fruit, and neither of us is ever going to stop now.

I am really satisfied now. I am really satisfied now because on the way here, there were moments when I was afraid and wondered whether I would have to start all over again with Ezekiel, who I know has almost gone from me, or with Oniha, who I know has already broken off and gone from me. Ezekiel took his itch to the

American girl and she scratched it for him so well that he ended up tying himself to her. And Oniha carried a placard asking that his vice-chancellor be dismissed. He was lucky he wasn't shot and that I relented and worked his way back into the school. But these didn't stop him from going on the demonstration with the unions or helping Onise Ine to distribute his leaflets. It would have been really difficult work going over, back to them if I had failed with Ogie. And there were moments even with Ogie when I thought I would fail, and was afraid. The gun probably helped, though. I waved the gun at him and demanded of him what his belief was and he told me that he accepted the principle but disagreed on matters of procedure. I put the gun back, carefully, against the wall, because I did not want him to see the look of victory in my eyes.

He stood up from the raffia chair and went to lie on the bed. He slept and in his dream, his son Oniha held up the big white placard and the letters in red demanded: 'Down with the Ogbe City Council!' Chief Eweh Obala looked at the big Ring Road and it was filled with the big demonstration and he was angry and he came down the stairs and said to Oniha Obala who led the demonstration, 'You should be ashamed of yourself.' He stood on the steps of the council building and his eyes were red as fire.

'It is you who should be ashamed of yourselves,' Oniha Obala said. 'You rob the people blind. You are thieves. You are armed robbers. You are slave traders.'

'You are no longer my son,' Chief Eweh Obala said and his voice was deadly and serious and quiet. 'I disown you as life disowns death. You are now a vagabond, a bastard child.'

'You are traders,' Oniha Obala shouted and waved his black cap in the air. 'You trade in misery. You profit from the misery of the people. You are like the dogs and the vultures. You scavenge in the refuse, in the vomit of the people's misery. You are scavengers.'

The crowd heaved and shouted, 'Scavengers! Scavengers!'

'I warn you,' Chief Eweh Obala cried. 'You will be shot this time!'

'Hear! Hear!' the huge crowd shouted and somebody threw a stone. It was a big stone and it came slowly; Chief Obala saw it and ducked in time and the stone missed him and hit the glass door of the council building . . .

Chief Eweh Obala heard the crash behind him and then, like the broken pieces of glass, his sleep fell to pieces. He jumped out of the huge bed and automatically grabbed the gun that stood at the head of his bed, against the wall.

'Thieves!' the word echoed in Chief Obala's brain. Cautiously, but with a rapid movement, he threw aside the door leading to his study. One look was enough. Even in the half darkness, he could see that one of the boxes was missing. His next impulse was to scream. 'Thief!' But he did not obey the impulse. Instead he rushed to the window and drew the blinds. Sure enough, he could see two figures moving. Chief Obala threw the door of his bedroom open and with the double barrel in his hand, he moved along the dark recesses of his decked house. He could still see the men, three of them now, bent over the weight of the box that they were shifting.

Chief Obala took aim and fired. It was a quiet night and the sound of the gun carried far away. Outside the house, footsteps hurried to and fro. The lights were turned on. Voices called and died, but always there was a movement of feet, like the unending current of the sea.

'Can you see him?'

'Bring the light!'

'Hurry!'

And the feet hurried to and fro. Mallam Mallam and Chief Ekata's feet hurried most of all. At the sound of the gunshot, they hastily flung down the box they were carrying and fled blindly in different directions. The impulse was to get away, leave the scene of tragedy, flee, flee and put as much distance as possible between them and the re-echoing sound of the terrible gun.

The box had landed on the ground with such force

that it burst open. Millions of carefully packed travellers' cheques, ready for export, were scattered broadcast on the grass.

'Ogie! Ogie!' Chief Obala's voice rang out into the night. He cursed. His son was away on this crucial night, on the night when he needed his help most. He proceeded forward, cautiously, gun balanced in hand, as if half expecting the fallen thief to rise with sudden energy and deal him a mortal blow. Voices talked, screamed excitedly all round the grounds. A window opened and shut in the next house. And the servants moved behind their master. And always this movement of feet, hurrying nowhere in complete panic and confusion.

'Can you see him?' Madam Obala asked again.

'I say bring the light! Nearer! Hang it so, high. No, I mean there . . .'

Chief Obala's voice died, it broke off suddenly and without warning. In the shaded light of the kerosene lamp of the dewy night, Chief Obala saw the anguished and now twisted face of his son, lying sideways on the grass. Both mud and grass were clutched in Ogie's hands – the final battle of life against death. The bubbles had fully blown and burst.

Chief Obala's voice rang out eerily into the night. 'Stop! Do not come any further. Take the light away!'

And then a turmoil seized him. His brain vibrated with an awful tremor. He screamed. 'Take the light away!'

And then he was whispering hoarsely to himself.

'A son robbing his own father! A son stealing from his own father!'

The madness gathered momentum. He circled his son frenziedly for a few seconds. The grass around Ogie was all turned up, scattered and dark with blood. Perhaps Ogie might still be alive! The father knelt down beside his son and felt his heart clumsily. It was quite still. But the body hadn't yet gone cold. Some warmth still remained, some blood still flowed freely, but darkly.

Chapter 30

In her small room on Atise Street, Rose Idebale also heard gunshots. But they weren't those which were fired by Chief Obala. In her neighbourhood, the crack of a gun heralded the departure of someone whom she did not know, nor could care about now.

There was sweat on her face as she turned on her bed, rolled on it, this way and that. Her stomach, the lower part, gave her acute pain. She suffered intensely, immensely. Her eyes bulged in their sockets, the saliva came out of her mouth. Yet, she strove for consciousness. She strove to conquer the searing pain. She must not lose sight of her mind. No, she mustn't for, who knew what lay behind the wall of dark unconsciousness? Could it be death? Was she going to die? Were those guns booming for her to come, to pass away into the dark abyss of the unknown?

She clutched at her stomach but it didn't help. It seemed to infuriate, to kindle the flame of pain that perched with the claws of a hawk on her. The bed became too small. It couldn't contain her. Her movements became more violent. She rolled over and fell off the bed to the floor. Her wind was knocked out, she gasped, she clutched at the vacant space in her room. Her face was wet with the sweat and her eyes were dark with the pain. And how weak she felt! And how terrified she was of this her weakness and of the blood that gradually seeped away from her. She had to get up! She had to fight this weakness! She struggled to reach a sitting position but the effort was too much and she fell back on the floor with a sharp groan. But she had to get up! Wasn't this paralysing weakness the prelude to death? And the blood! Yes, the blood. Where did it all come from? She was all blood, she was a daughter of blood, she felt she was suffocating in the thick smell of the blood. She had to get up. She had to sit up at least, and stand up at last.

Gradually with a great concentration of will she brought herself up to a sitting position. It wasn't so bad after all. She could endure the effort of sitting. Only the weakness troubled her, this terrifying weakness, like a dying lamp's feeble rays. And the blood lay all about her, dark and damp and thick to the nose, and blackening now, darkening now. She swooned.

She had to get rid of this blood before daylight broke upon her like a tragedy. Oh! If only Eunice was here! If only Eunice was around! She would have helped, she would have helped her even to eliminate herself. Her heart cried out passionately for Eunice, for her hand, for her presence.

Suddenly she felt defeated. She knew she had lost her will to her weakness. The tears came next, not watery but bloody, dark and damp like the blood about her on the floor. She wept blood in her heart. She wept blood from her eyes.

The knocking on her door brought back some of her consciousness. Her whole self submerged in grief as it responded to that knocking like a call to destiny. She crawled on all fours to the door. The effort was great, for with each movement, the pain ate more and more into her tissues and muscles and vessels. The final movement, the turning of the key back in its lock brought the ultimate triumph of pain. She screamed voicelessly and rolled back on her side into the pool of her own blood.

Later when she awoke, there was a dark tall shadow bending over her, and then she opened her eyes more fully and she saw that it was the woman, Eunice. Eunice Agbon placed her open hand on the other woman's forehead and shook her own head gently, from side to side.

'You are all right now,' she said. 'You will be all right and it does not matter that the child did not come but was stubborn. But he will come. You'll see he will come when you will have regained your strength. You should not be disappointed that you will have to wait some more time before he comes. You will wait and you will regain your strength and you will be strong for yourself

then to have him and he will be all right. You will see that he will be all right in spite of all the drugs that you have taken and all the blood that you have lost . . .' Eunice Agbon continued speaking but the tears were in her eyes and on her cheeks and then falling on the other woman who was lying on the bed, now quietly asleep.

'Sleep is the death we all wake from,' she said to the woman on the bed. 'And you will not die but wake up and be strong and be ready for the baby. But death is the sleep we never wake from and you, Ogie Obala, will not awake from your sleep at the first cry of the baby when he comes . . .'

Eunice Agbon patted the other woman gently on the shoulder and then she went back, away from the bed and sat on the one double armchair and with her open hand, wiped her face clean of the tears. But her face would not clear because the tears continued to come, slow, gentle and warm.