

INDEPENDENCE DAY

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It is not a good day to tell her. This morning, Mrs. Darego quarreled with her husband, again. They were upstairs in their bedroom on the second floor; I was on the sofa bed in the basement where I slept every night. I heard their voices clear as if I pressed my ear to their door.

“You are damn selfish!”.

“Listen, I work very hard.”

“Well, I am overworked!”

“What are you harassing me for?”

“You wanted help, I got you help. You have your nanny downstairs. Call the girl, tell her to get the kids ready, take the keys to the jeep. All of you, drive to wherever you feel like spending your July Fourth. I’m not going. OK?”

Mrs. Darego must have been the one who slammed the door.

Perhaps, this is why houses like theirs in America are called dream homes. They are not built with unhappy couples in mind; their walls are too thin. I folded up the sofa bed and replaced the cushions, which were in a pile by the concertina-shaped floor lamp. I untied my black satin scarf to let my braids down, slapped lint off my shorts, then listen to a world news broadcast as usual. “It is Independence Day here in America. Hopefully, there will be an update on the demonstrators from my hometown.” I mused to myself.

Forty years it took for our story to make the headlines of the *Times*: “Nigerian Delta Women in Oil Company Stand Off.” The women had occupied Summit Oil’s terminal, the report said. They

were clapping and singing. If their demands were not met, they would strip naked, and this was a shaming gesture, according to local custom.

I did not know of any such custom in my hometown. I only remembered old-fashioned Catholic women who would consider knee-length shorts like mine a taboo. We Kalabaris were an over-dressed people. You had to see our men in traditional attire, with their long tunics, walking-staff and black bowler hats. Women wore bright silk head ties, lace blouses and layers of colorful plaid wrappers down to their ankles. Why would they bare their bodies for a cause? I thought the newspaper report was a hoax, designed to ridicule Africans and trivialize our protest. I wondered who in my hometown had joined the demonstrators, what had happened to my friend Angelina who was one of them, whether Val had since been found, and if Mama then agreed with Papa when he said that on the arrival of the foreigner, the native must learn to sleep with one eye open.

The broadcast had ended without a word about my hometown. In a cowardly way, I felt relieved. I pulled the floor lamp to its proper place, by the wall, pushed the sliding doors open to let warm air in. My goose bumps shrank. Outside, the Daregos' small lawn was bordered by flowers I couldn't name. They were pale compared to hibiscus and bougainvilleas, muted like the rest of the house. Indoors, there were beige walls, bronze carvings, ebony masks, mahogany tables, and batiks, etc. African inspired, I've heard Dr. Darego say often about their choice of decor. I've never seen a house in Africa that resembled theirs, so consciously and deliberately African, so beautifully coordinated. To me it was rather highly westernized.

"Eve?" Mrs. Darego called from upstairs.

"Coming," I said.

Fresh air from outside chases me as I hurry to her kitchen. Living in a basement is like

living in an underground tomb.

When I was a girl, I was in love with every expatriate I came across in my hometown, Catholic priests, especially. I thought they were as pure as God in their whites. I couldn't wait to hop on their laps. I was envious that they seemed partial to boys. My class teacher, Sister, I didn't understand why no man had spoken for her. I would have married her myself. She was as beautiful as the Blessed Mary with her red hair and freckles. She was decent enough to spank with rulers, unlike the tree branches our mothers preferred to use on us. She taught us about Mungo Park, the Scottish surgeon who "discovered" the River Niger. He was killed on his second expedition trying to find the source of the river. He was trapped in the swamps, fell ill with fevers, was ambushed by some natives who stole his equipment and shot at him with bows and arrows. The textbook said he had to jump into the river to save himself, unfortunately he got drowned. I was captivated by the daring spirit of Mungo Park, and had cried every time I remembered the manner of his death.

I thought natives were wicked people, too ugly in the book illustrations. I grew up, and missionaries like Sister left the town. The only expatriates I came across worked for international oil companies—British, Dutch, Canadian, Italian, and American—like the human resource director of Summit Oil who interviewed me for a nursing position at Summit Oil Clinic. He signed the rejection letter addressed to me. Most nurses I graduated with were selling bottled water, bathing soap, tinned milk for a living. Few people in town could afford to buy such provisions. My parents couldn't either. Papa was an electrician; Mama had a Coca-Cola consignment. Still, I was lucky to come to America to work as a live-in nanny.

Mrs. Darego was wearing a flowery housecoat. Her face looked freshly washed. She had the kind of dark skin I admired a lot, almost indigo. That morning she appeared grey under her florescent kitchen lights. She narrowed her eyes as she spoke.

“I’m sorry, Eve,” she said. “It’s me and you today. We’ve got to take the children to the barbecue. Their father doesn’t want to go, and I don’t know what else to do.”

She was going to give me a day off and spend her time shopping for groceries and cooking. I was looking forward to doing nothing useful.

“Shall I get them ready?” I asked.

“Yes, please,” she said. “I’ll pack the cooler and make sandwiches.”

I headed for the children’s room, but she stopped me by the fridge.

“Is everything all right?” she asked.

I smiled to assure her. I guessed she sensed my mood.

I arrived in America in February of 2002. I saw the snow for the first time. To me it looked like granulated sugar, this white sprinkle on trees, streets, buildings and the expressway to the Daregos’ house in New Jersey, so pretty I reached out in their yard for a handful and licked it. I loved the snow more, once I was indoors and warm. Through the sliding door in the basement, I watched the flakes fall. I stepped outside one night to feel them settle on my head and thought the wind was playing a terrible joke on me, the way it cut through my cardigan to my bones. In Nigeria, we had a dry season most of the year, rainy season in summertime, harmattan winds over Christmas and New Year. None compared to the chill of winter. Out there, under the black-blue New Jersey sky, I thought that living in America was exactly what it was to live in a mortuary.

In my first week, I caught flu so severe that I wished for mere malaria instead. I sweated from fevers; headaches pounded my head. Mrs. Darego worried because I had no health insurance. She treated me with lemon drinks and vitamin supplements. I was meant to relieve her, but already I was a burden. I recovered and found I was down to my weight as a teenager. In my spare time, I went for walks to the mall to increase my strength. There, I saw shops for underwear, shops for pets, and thirty types of breakfast cereals; pancakes with blueberries, raisins, honey, nuts, chocolate chips; disinfectants and air fresheners for every germ and odor. Scented toilet paper!

“Where are you from?” Americans often asked. Sometimes they smiled, other times they looked at me with suspicion.

“From Africa,” I ended up saying, because I quickly learned they didn’t know Nigeria.

“Algeria? Liberia?” They asked.

“West Africa,” to make things easier for them.

“Oh, South Africa!”

I met people in New Jersey who had never been to New York all their life. I began to understand their sense of the world.

“Hello, Auntie Eve,” Alali said as I rubbed her back.

“I had a bad dream,” Daniel groans.

They sounded like frogs each time they tried to get out of bed. Daniel was five and Alali, eight. They had their mother’s half-moon eyes. I untangled their legs from their Disney bed sheets and noticed new lumps on their skin from mosquito bites. Fortunately, there was no risk of malaria.

“Bath time,” I said, almost in a door bell *tra-la-la* tune.

When I met them, their expressions were *Who-are-you?* and *What-d’you-want?* Their accents were wanna, gonna, shoulda. “You talk funny,” Alali said, once she was comfortable with me living in the basement. “Are you one of those people who call candy sweets and cookies biscuits?”

“Yeah, are you from Africa?” Daniel junior asked through his missing teeth.

Alali pointed out locations on a table. “Now, my mom is from this little village here in Africa. My dad is from this little village here in Africa. Which village are you from?”

“A town,” I said. Her parents were from cities. Her father grew up in Port Harcourt in the Niger Delta, and her mother was from Lagos, though she was raised in Tanzania and Cuba—her parents were in the diplomatic service.

“I sawed the picture of Africa,” Daniel said. “And the boy had no hair, and his belly was all swelled up, and he lived in a hut, with um, no windows, and I don’t like Africa. Africa women have droopy boobies.”

Alali laughed. “Huh?!”

“My dad’s name is Daniel,” Daniel said, ignoring her. “That’s why I’m called Junior.” He paused as if contemplating a serious political issue.

“And my mom’s name is Pat,” Alali said, pushing her chest forward. “She’s a doctor, but she hasn’t got her papers, so she can’t work yet.” I smiled so she wouldn’t be envious. Between them they would reveal all their family secrets.

Daniel shook his head. “My mom really wants her papers, because my dad is controlling.”

“Come on,” Mrs. Darego said. “Out of the tub, both of you, or someone is going to get smacked today.” She claps her hands as she left the bathroom. She never hit her children. She shouted at them, especially if they were reluctant to get out of the tub. “I’m not joking,” she warned from the corridor.

She was recovering from her call the night before. On a day like this, she has little patience for frivolities

“You heard your mother,” I said. “Or you’ll get into trouble?”

Alali planted a big foam ball on Daniel junior’s head.

“I’m telling ...,” he whined.

“So?” Alali retorted.

Daniel crossed his arms and turned his back on her, gritting her teeth, his jaws more firm. In school people had thought he had “Attention Deficit Disorder.” He wouldn’t listen; they wanted to medicate him. His mother said the teacher who suggested this must be on drugs herself. Cheap ones. Alali continued to gather foam with her bloated hands.

In my hometown we had rainbow colored water. It tasted of the oil that leaked into our well. Bathing water we fetched from a creek. This smelled of dead crayfish. Our rivers were also dead. When rain fell, it rusted rooftops, and shriveled the plants and farm crops. People who drank rainwater swore that it bored permanent holes in their stomachs. Our roads had potholes as big as cauldrons because of the rain. Only in the villages on the outskirts of town did we have one smooth road. The road ran straight from a flow station to Summit Oil’s terminal. The villages had perpetual daylight once the gas flaring started. The flare was where cassava farms used to be.

Summit Oil bulldozed those farms and ran pipelines through them. The land was now sinking. The gas flare was as tall as a giant orange torch in the sky, as loud as a hundred incinerators. It sprayed soot over coconut trees. From the centre of town we could smell burning mixed with petrol. People complained that their throats were as dry as if they swallowed swamp mahogany bark. Elders feared the gas flare was like Hell fire. Children wanted to play. Sometimes they played near the flare. Their mothers cuffed their ears if ever they caught them. We'd all heard the story of one little rascal nicknamed Boy-Boy. Boy-Boy wore glasses that belonged to his dead grandfather. He was always with his home-made catapult trying to kill birds. He burned in a gas flare fire. His family held a funeral for him. They had nothing but his ashes to bury. They buried them in a whitewashed wooden casket.

I helped the children out of the tub after the bath water ran out. Their bodies were warm and slippery. I throw towels over their heads to make them laugh.

“Oh, Auntie Eve,” Alali says, hugging me. “I’m so glad you’re staying. If you left, I would just die.”

She smelled of raspberry bath wash. She hugged me too tight.

“My dear, don’t curse yourself,” I sid into her ear.

She knew her mother was angry with her father again.

During the months I was out of work, I stopped at the Summit Oil Clinic to see my friend, Angelina. She too was a nurse, and she got her job because her aunt was the midwife there. I’d pass the line of patients sitting on benches in the admissions ward. There were the usual malaria cases and children with stomachs bloated from kwashiorkor. There were also patients with

strange growths, chronic respiratory illnesses, terminal diarrhea, weeping sores, inexplicable bleeding. We had too many miscarriages in our town, stillbirths, babies dying in vitro, women dying in labor. People blamed the gas flare. They came to the clinic and sat for hours. The nurses turned them away. There were not enough beds, so patients slept on raffia mats on the floor, including women in labor. New nurses were quick to develop lazy walks. If a patient called out for help, they snapped, “What?!”

An old man who was a regular had come by canoe from a hamlet on the other side of our main creek. He lived in a bamboo hut near the mangroves. In his youth he was a member of the Ekine society, those masqueraders who paid tribute to Ekineba. Folklore said Ekineba was a beautiful Kalabari woman who was kidnapped by water spirits, and she returned to the land to teach the masquerade dance. People said this man was over a hundred years old, and his body was refusing to die. Some claimed his soul was possessed. He would sit on the admissions bench cursing and prophesying disasters. The land was our mother, he said, and we would suffer for allowing foreigners to violate her. One afternoon, I went to the clinic, and he was there again, naked from waist up. The hairs on his chest were white, his skin clinging to his ribs.

“Nurse,” he said, to Angie. “I’m choking here, can’t you see? There is something terrible in the air. Our seasons are not as they were. Our ancestors are spiting at us.” He held his hands towards us. “Deliver me.”

Angie whispered that we should get as far away from him as possible. He stood up.

“You turn your backs on me? Oil is a curse on the land, you hear? You will suffer for your complacency. Your fathers will cut off their penises to feed their sons. Disease will consume your mothers. Daughters will suckle their young with blood. Nurses! Prostitutes in white!” He spat with such force he staggered. Angie and I rushed to his aid. We sat him on the bench.

“He’s senile,” Angie said with a smile. “Honestly, Eve, we all pray that he will die.” The man’s bones were as strong as iron.

“For goodness sake, be quiet,” Mrs. Darego said for the second time during our drive. Daniel and Alali were asking if we were there yet.

“We’ll be there soon,” I said. “Alali, take your hand out of the window.”

It is cool enough for us to drive with the windows down and the sunroof open. The jeep is as big as a hut, with three rows of leather seats and a DVD player. I’ve heard people on television complain that vehicles like these used up too much gas. I wonder why they were built so large, considering Americans have such small families; why they were so sturdy when the streets I see were flat and wide. The critics on television said that people bought them for status. They had no idea what status is. Nigerians, given a chance, would drive jeeps as huge as mansions for “show off”. But at least we have plenty of children to show for ourselves; and, at least, appalling roads suited for the American brands of sturdy and bogus cars.

Unfortunately, no one asked for my opinions. Instead, I ended up arguing with television pundits, after I got tired of the soap operas and their never-ending dilemmas; the talk shows with cheating lovers, cross-dressers and women who were miserable because they couldn’t stick to diets; reality shows; infomercials. Twenty-four hours of programs to entice me into one studio-produced existence or the other. It was a struggle not to click on the television in the basement and be transported into a Hollywood movie. Fuel consumption was not the only indulgence in America, and at least the supply of fuel was limited.

The barbecue we were going to was for a community of Nigerians who lived in New Jersey,

mostly doctors and their families. Mrs. Darego was in a yellow sundress. She wished her stomach were flatter. She had both children by c-section. Today, they were in their usual coordinated Old Navy and Gap clothes. We stopped at a traffic light. This part of New Jersey was all mountains and expressways. She tapped the steering wheel.

“Eve,” she said. “You forgot to give me your passport again.”

“Sorry.” But I didn’t forget.

Her nails were clipped for work. She did not have her wedding band on.

“No, no,” she said. “Don’t worry. I just need to send off your renewal by tomorrow, understand? Immigration is tough these days. Me, myself, when I came, I made the mistake of applying on my husband’s visa. Seven years now, and I’m yet to have a green card. Everything is delayed since September 11.”

She has just started a pediatric residency program and needed me to be at home with her children. She was hoping to have my visa extended. I couldn’t tell her I was looking for a green card sponsor too. I was ready to work as a nurse, but I wondered what she would say to that after flying me over to America!

“I’ll give it to you today,” I said.

Here in the land of free speech, I’ve learned to keep my mouth shut.

“You too talk, Eve,” Mama used to warn me. “You no see your friend Angelina how she quiet so? If Val marry you, make you no carry dat mouth go ‘im house, oh!” My nickname at home was Tower of Babel because my legs grew long before my torso. I was never mouthy; I just wasn’t fluent in silence like most women I knew. I envied them, the way they expressed their opinions and emotions clearly, without opening their mouths. Elderly women, especially, they

terrified me with their shrugs and side glances. I thought they were dishonest. Why couldn't they just say exactly what they were thinking? I felt compelled to explain myself with words. I couldn't trust people to understand me otherwise.

I never told Mama the source of my vexation, though, which was Val. He was my boyfriend from secondary school, tall and fine, and brilliant, except for his pointy ears. The whole town celebrated when Val gained admission to the University of Port Harcourt. He never returned to town after his graduation. He stayed in Port Harcourt and got a job with Summit Oil as a public relations officer. He moved into his uncle's servant quarters, the boys quarters, people called it, to save on rent money. He kept telling me about the man's Spanish styled villa, the man's Benz, the man's golf club membership, yacht and trips to Europe. What was my concern? Was the man willing to hire me as his private nurse? I attended nursing school in Port Harcourt or PH, as people called it, or Garden City. Val was my "shadow" there. We rocked the days of jazz funk, and "disvirgined" each other. I cried when I couldn't find a job and had to return to our boring town. All we had was a bungalow ambitiously called the Grand Hotel, one main road called Mission Way, a market place, Summit Oil Clinic, and one of the oldest Catholic churches in our country. Val never asked me to visit him after I left Port Harcourt, much less talk of marriage. We argued whenever he bothered to come to town to see me. Yes, I provoked him. Sometimes, I wondered why he chose me and not Angelina. They were friends and members of the same church. Angelina was the sort of person who smiled at everyone, and everyone loved her for her dimples. She would have made him a perfect wife: the quiet, graceful sort of woman who was praised for the peace she brought into a man's home. The sort of woman my mouth would not allow me to be.

The barbecue was in a park. People had set up picnics in separate territories the way folks in America socialize within their communities. Our own group settled under a tree. Nigerians don't appreciate the sun beating down on them. Next to us is an African-American family all wearing the same yellow T-shirts saying, "Knight Family Reunion." There is also a Hispanic family, and their music sounds like the music we call highlife at home. I *seesawed* my shoulders to the rhythm of *salsa* and observed our small gathering. We were homogenized in our T-shirts, baseball caps and sneakers. What gave us away as Nigerians was the way we barbecued our hot-dogs and hamburgers. Women were manning the grill. Nigerian men had their limits to being Americanized. Some did not quite master their *wannas*, *gonnas*, *shouldas*. Everyone laughed loudly and talked as if they hadn't been out in years. They were lonely people, I thought to myself.

Friends rarely drop by in the Daregos' house. When they did, they telephoned, first. Dr. Darego once said that the fewer guests he had, the better, anyway: "Nigerians gossip too much and wish bad on others". He complained about Americans the same way, saying they were rude, arrogant and prejudiced. I've heard him call the Indian and Filipino doctors he worked with "a bunch of ass-kissers." My father would have said to him, "Young man, check your own stinky armpits before you walk into a room full of people and begin to complain about foul odors!"

Dr. Darego worked all week and moonlights in his spare time to pay for his dream home. He was too tired for his family. He had no intention of returning to Nigeria. "The place is a jungle," he often said. But did he like America, the land and people? He loved his children, and they were Americans. He loved his dream home in America, but America the place is nothing more than a giant mall and workplace to him.

Will living here be different for me? Sometimes a shop assistant followed me in a store, and I was often tempted to turn and scream, “If not for the havoc your people have wreaked in my country, would I be here taking shit from you?!” Then, on a day like this, I thought of the *guerrilla politico* in my country, petroleum hawkers, who desecrated the land and treated the people of the Niger Delta like some nameless waste matter. I looked around the park, saw trees I couldn’t name, clear skies; smelled the clean air in New Jersey that was supposedly polluted, and thought to myself, “Well, Gawd bless America.”

Alali is teaching Daniel junior the pledge. “I pledge allegiance,” she said with her hand over her heart. “To the flag, of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands. One nation under God, indivisible...”

“I’m bored,” Daniel said and ran off.

He had two other boys of his age to play with. Alali watched her new friend who looked like a giant *Bratz* doll. Such a pout on this new friend, and she seemed to know all the hip-hop dances. She dipped, rolled her head and pumped her skinny arms. Her jeans were riding low, her navel was exposed, and her fingernails were sparkly blue. I knew Alali would *demand* a bottle of that as soon as we got home: “Aw, I wanna have nail polish!” Her mother would certainly say no. Mrs. Darego believed girls should not be little women.

There was a girl who lived on my street back in my town; her name was Amen. Amen was Teacher’s daughter. She was sixteen and in a secondary school. She bought Coca-Cola from Mama and looked like a bottle of it: small, shapely, slim and dark. Amen liked to style her friends’ hair. She wanted to be a hairdresser. Her father was against that. He asked me to

encourage her to apply to nursing school. Amen said, “But look at you, Eve, since you graduated, you have no job.”

I used to watch her whenever she passed in front of our house. She wore jeans and funky fake imported T-shirts: Calvin Klein, Fruit of the Loom. She giggled and showed-off her pretty dark gums. Towards the end of her school year, I noticed how Amen started walking on her own. She relaxed her hair and started wearing it in a tight ponytail. She shaved her eyebrows and painted her nails bright pink.

“Something is going on with Amen,” Mama said after she’d sold her a bottle of Coca-Cola. “She’s just growing up,” I kept saying. I thought Mama was being critical like other women in town. “No,” she insisted. “Something is going on with Amen, I tell you. She is looking too advanced.” We argued over this. I told Mama she should leave the girl alone. Did she expect her to be sweet sixteen forever?

Then one day I passed Amen on our street. She turned her face away from me and started to cross over to the other side. “Amen, you can’t greet somebody?” I asked, jokingly. Perhaps she was expecting another lecture from me about nursing school. She eyed me. “You yourself, can’t you greet somebody?” I stood there with my mouth open as Amen strutted off.

Mama was the one who told me. Amen ran away from home and her father thought that she’d been kidnapped or murdered. He rushed to the police headquarters in Port Harcourt to file a missing person’s report. There, he learned that Amen was one of the girls arrested by the Naval Police off Bonny Island, where the Liquefied Natural Gas project was based. Amen had become a resident of Better Life Brothel in Port Harcourt. Amen’s father came back to town without her.

Teacher was a skinny man and he stood with his hands behind his back. His shoes had holes, and yet people called him a dignified scholar because he spoke big English. Whenever

someone asked, “Teacher, where is Amen?” he answered, “Amen? Amen expired. Most unfortunate. Ah, yes, it was unanticipated. A great loss to our family. A tragedy of calamitous proportions.”

Amen should have gone to nursing school. She ended up hanging around the port, edging local customers, looking like smoked fish. Prostitutes with college education had better chances of finding expatriate customers who would keep them.

Mrs. Darego had her sunglasses on. I could tell her eyes were wandering.

“You’re upset about something,” I said.

“Me?” she asked. “I’m just thinking. Why?”

“You’re not mixing much.”

She raised her brows. “Me? I came because of the children. They needed to play. I wanted them to meet other Nigerians. In this country it’s so easy to forget your identity.”

I’ve been to birthday parties with both children, and at other places like Macdonald’s, Kid’s Zone and Chuck-e-Cheeses, places with contraptions to distract them. They had soccer practices, ballet lessons, and karate lessons after school. Their mother said they had no time to play.

I dusted my sandals. “Everyone is so excited to be here.”

She shrugged. “These people, they are my husband’s friends, not mine. Most of them I would never have met in Nigeria.”

I could jolly well say the same thing about her too! She was someone I would never have met in Nigeria, a diplomat’s daughter. I could imagine that back home, for the amount she was paying me, she would have hired a house girl for each child, a cook, a *washer-man* for her

laundry, a driver to take her to work. Here, she worried about who would look after her children while she was in a hospital taking care of other people's children.

Mrs. Darego was a "butter-eater." I knew this because she eyed her husband when he crunched on chicken bones. He ground them to the marrow, flexed his jaws, spat the pulp on his plate. She watched him as if she would like to punch him in the mouth. Dr. Darego wouldn't clear the table, load the dishwasher, cook, or bathe his children. One day she joked that he should add these initials to his medical qualifications: B.U.S.H.M.A.N..

"Do you have picnics for October 1st?" I asked.

"It's too cold in the fall," she said.

October 1st is our country's Independence Day. It is hard to imagine America as a former British colony. That is, a country like mine, broken down and forever recovering from the devastations of military coups.

She took off her sunglasses. "Eve, I want to tell you something personal. Please, and I don't want you to tell anyone else."

Everyone found out what happened between Val and I; that Val had a woman in the city, a woman who was pregnant for him, a woman who was older than him. At first he claimed it was a vicious rumor spread by those who resented his success. I forced him to confess, slapped his head as if he were my son. "Tell me the truth! Tell me the truth!" Then I cursed him and cursed the woman. I stopped short of cursing their child. Val lowered his head until I finished shouting. He was probably thinking, someone please get this lunatic away from me.

I could not leave home for a while after we broke up. Whenever I did, people stopped me to give advice. "Go there and fight her, Eve." "Sit on his doorstep and refuse to leave." Cook him

a good meal, one old woman said. There were people who blamed me for breaking up with Val. He was intelligent so his head had to have been turned by this other woman. And I, to let a man like him go, a man with a job in an oil company, something had to be wrong with me.

When I heard about the interview for the nanny job, I saw it as a way to escape our scandal. I went to the man who was hiring. He was Dr. Darego's granduncle, the head of their family who lived in our town, but he had no money, and no one really respected him. He sat in his cement compound, on a varnished cane chair, cooled his face with a raffia fan. Behind him was his bungalow with a rusty corrugated iron roof. The man was almost blind. He kept calling me Helen. "Are you spoken for, Helen?" "Do you have a clean reputation, Helen?" He said he chose me because I didn't look like someone who would run wild in America or chase after men. I told him I was very grateful for his commendation. Some of my colleagues said it was below my qualifications to apply for such a job, a mere house girl. I knew they were jealous. Angie hugged me, and then she burst out crying in the clinic. She said she could never leave her mother.

Angie was her mother's only child. The rest died as babies. Her father was killed in a motor accident on Mission Way. Her mother was always in church saying novenas. People said she was paying for the sins of her fathers.

I couldn't imagine such a burdensome love between mother and daughter. I was Mama's last born, her only daughter. Mama said, "Go. You're unhappy living here anyway. Everyone knows how Val disgraced you, and they won't employ you at the Summit Oil Clinic. Nanny is not what we sent you to school to study, but it's not as if you're going to Heaven and you can't come back."

But really, there was a time I thought going to America was as fantastic as going to

Heaven. When I was a child and I used to sing that song, “Come and see /American wonder. Come and see /American wonder.” When I fell in love with Michael Jackson. I was twelve and walking around town saying I was going to be Mrs. Michael Jackson, and Mama would tell people, “Leave her alone. The Jackson family is coming to ask for her hand soon.” I had my white church glove, I had a poster of Michael with his glittery glove. I wrote to Neverland. The post office clerks used to laugh at me. I thought they were all mistaken. But accepting the job was a question of common sense. Dr. Darego offered me ten times the salary I would earn working as a nurse. Nothing else mattered, not missing my family, or standing in line at the American embassy in Lagos, being ordered to step forward, step back, answer only when I was spoken to. Certainly not being held up by a gap-toothed Nigeria airport official who was looking for a bribe: “Where you get dis? Dis passport is fake!” Least of all being inspected and questioned at Immigrations and Customs at Newark Airport. “How long are you staying?” “May I check your baggage, ma’am?”

“I’m moving into hospital accommodation,” Mrs. Darego said. “Yes. I’ve been thinking about it for a while. My commute is long. I’m in the hospital most of the time. Would you mind being alone in the house with the children and their father?”

I said I was not sure. Her voice is insistent.

“It will only be for the next six months. I have to. I mean, you’re not going to be with us forever. I supported my husband when he was in residency. I stayed with the children, but now I’m Dr. Darego, too. He has to learn how to support me, see?”

I saw.

“Do you think you can manage?”

“I’ll try.”

She taps my shoulder. “What you’ve done for my family, I cannot tell you. The children are so fond of you. It puts my mind at ease when I’m at work.”

“Please,” I wanted to say, “Don’t sweet-talk me today.”

One evening, I took a shower after the children went to bed. Mrs. Darego was on call and Dr. Darego was out. I was sitting on the sofa in the basement with nothing but a towel wrapped around my body. I was rubbing Vaseline on my elbows and knees. The kitchen door opened, and I heard footsteps on the stairs to the basement. I stood up and held my towel tight. It was Dr. Darego. He had shoulders like a football player, and his head was shaved. At first I was angry he didn’t seem embarrassed. Bastard, I thought in fluent silence, and my expression must have given me away. He walked down the stairs without saying a word, searched behind the sofa bed and found a magazine. He rolled the magazine up like a baton and walked back up the stairs. As if I wasn’t there. He lost favor with me after that, even though he never did it again.

“You yourself,” Mrs. Darego said. “You seem quiet today.”

“My mind is at home.”

“The demonstrations?”

“Yes.”

“Have you heard from your people?”

“No.”

She patted my back. “Don’t worry, at least women are involved this time. The world is focused on their cause. No one can harm them with this much media attention.”

“I hope not.”

“Definitely not,” she said. “And it is good that women are involved this time. Women, we are always the first affected and the last heard.”

Who knew the women’s union would start with Madam Queen? Madam Queen, the drunk who talked too much. I used to pass her house on my way home from school. She was one of those we called half-castes. Madam Queen’s mother was Kalabari and Italian. Madam Queen herself, her father was German. She was the colour of beach sand and over six feet tall. She couldn’t find shoes to fit, so she wore men’s sneakers. Divorced and no children, and she drank like a man. People said that had to come from her foreign blood. I was always a little scared of her. She had bluish eyes, black hair down her back. In the afternoons, she sat on her veranda with her wrapper pulled up to her knees. Her varicose veins were thick. She couldn’t bear the heat. Sometimes a few women gathered in her compound like disciples.

Madam Queen told folklore, and I found such stories boring, so I never really stopped to listen. The first time I did, I was coming back from school and heard her booming voice: “Hurrah! Congratulations! We celebrate when someone we know gets a job at Summit Oil Clinic. We hope they will bring us into the fold. We forget about what the company is doing to our land. Kalabari people, we are not like that. We come together. We don’t allow foreigners to rule us by dividing us, or we are no better than those who sold their own for bounty when the Niger Delta was the Slave Coast...”

I thought she had to be drunk to talk like that. I stayed to hear more.

“The oil companies,” she said, “they drill our father’s farms and they don’t give we, their children, jobs. We eat okra, cassava, grown in other parts of the country. We use their yam,

plantain and palm oil to cook our *onunu*. There are no fish in our rivers, no bush rats left in our forest. We don't use natural gas in our homes and yet we have gas flares in our backyards. We can't find kerosene to buy and we have pipelines full of the products running through our land. Some of us don't have electricity. Some of us don't even have candles to burn. Are you listening, women?"

"Young men are kidnapping expatriate employees and demanding ransoms. They are locked up. We call them thugs. Young girls are turning to prostitution to service expatriate employees. They are locked up too. We shun them. We say they bring AIDS. Meanwhile, the oil companies spill oil on our land, leak oil into our rivers. They won't clean up their mess. All they do is pay small fines, if they pay at all. Our community leaders write petition letters to their directors and they don't give us the courtesy of replying. When they do, they call us liars. We protest because they continue to breach regulations and they call security forces to deal with us. Women, listen to me. I'm telling you this, as we speak we are dying. We are dying of our polluted air, we are dying of our polluted water. We are dying from oil we do not benefit from. Must we continue to stand by in silence and wait for men to fight our battles?"

I went home feeling like I had fallen under her spell. Superstitious people said Madam Queen had such a sweet mouth that she could hypnotize her audience. At home I saw Mama and Papa sitting under the framed poster of Jesus Christ nailed to a wooden cross, his eyes raised heavenward. Around the frame Mama had stuck photos of my brothers, Solomon, Benjamin and Ezekiel, to protect them because they had left home. Papa was in his cane chair, taking a pinch from his snuffbox. Mama was sitting on the chair next to his. She wore her hair in a neat plait. She thought untidy hair was a sign of inner turmoil.

"I listened to Madam Queen today," I said.

Mama frowned. "Queen?"

"Yes," I said, "She spoke against the oil companies."

"That old drunk?" Mama said.

Papa raised his pinch of snuff. "Yes, indeed, Queen does that. She speaks the truth about the foreigners on our land. She has their blood and she detests them. She is fearless, that woman." He sniffed and sneezed. "Just like a man."

Mama pouted. "That's why she can't keep a man. Please, Eve, don't listen to Madam Queen again. She is trying to get people killed. Remember what happened to the Ogoni people?"

Papa and his pronouncements. My brothers laughed at him behind his back. He was short with a nervous twitch from the Civil War, where he narrowly escaped a detonating land mine, but no one dared challenge him.

Mama, whose idea of a major fight with Papa was to make his *onunu* extra lumpy, so that he might ask, "Ah? My wife, your *onunu* is not smooth today. What have I done to deserve this?"

They actually argued that day. Papa gave his usual proverb about natives sleeping with one eye open. Mama said she would rather trust a foreigner than an Igbo, knowing fully well Papa's mother was Igbo.

"My good customer Mr. Obrigado," she said. "He's never done any wrong to me. He's perfectly charming."

She didn't know his real name. He was a journalist with the biggest nose I'd ever seen on a white man. Sometimes he said "obrigado."

"Foreigners," Papa muttered. "They can't keep their hands off our women."

"Obrigado doesn't stray," Mama protested.

"He strays to our town centre," Papa said. "He's lucky no one hijacks him yet. He should

Speak to the Americans at Summit Oil and find out why they keep away from us.”

“Obrigado comes here to take photographs,” Mama said.

“What for?” Papa asked. “How would he like it if a group of us went to his country to take photographs?”

“Obrigado thinks it’s unfair that our government attacks us,” Mama said. “He thinks our government should do more to protect our land.”

“Obrigado should clear off our land!” Papa shouted. “Is he deaf and blind?! Isn’t it the oil companies who arm our government? Now, every useless man in uniform has the gall to attack us! I must not see that foolish fellow in your shop again!”

Yes, I heard about the Ogoni people, how they protested against Shell. Security forces came and shot at them, burned down their homes, beat up, raped and killed their women and children. Ken Saro-Wiwa and others who led the movement were tried under a secret military tribunal and hanged in Port Harcourt. I was in nursing school when General Sani Abacha detained oil and gas union officials after the strikes. In Port Harcourt people queued for days to fill their car tanks. Students from Val’s university marched to the governor’s house and threw petrol bombs through his windows. “Kill-and-Go” Police (Anti-riot mobile Police squad) came and opened fire on them. Eight were struck, five were killed. One had a bullet through his forehead. The governor shut down the university and our nursing school for public safety. Val and I returned to town. No kerosene to buy was all we heard. Women from the gas flare village tapped a burst pipeline one morning. There was an explosion. The women, all seventy-three of them, were roasted alive! The villagers refused to accept the mass grave Summit Oil offered. They blocked access to the flow station in protest. Summit Oil called in soldiers. The soldiers threw tear gas at the protesters, butted their heads with rifles, kicked a pregnant woman in her

belly until she mis-carried, beat up one old man until he was comatose. The government said the reports were grossly exaggerated, the dead people were illegal scavengers and lawless rioters, ordered a dusk-to-dawn curfew. I had never demonstrated in my life. Why would I?

“We should go home soon,” Mrs. Darego said.

It is getting cloudy. The sun had disappeared and there was a cool breeze. I called out to the children, “Alali! Daniel! Time to go!”

“Aw, man,” Alali said and stamped her foot in subtle protest.

“I don’t wanna go,” Daniel whines.

They never wanted to. The word “go” sounded as terrible as “death” to them.

“Not now,” I said. “Soon, I repeat, s-o-o-n.”

A white man and his son were flying their multi-colored kite. The son laughed excitedly and twirls.

We arrived home early in the evening. Alali and Junior had to stop their Harry Potter DVD, and as we drove into the garage, they complained that they were bored.

“I work all night,” their mother said, yanking her car key out. “I go to a... a picnic on my day off because of you. You can’t even say thank you, and now you’re bored because you can’t see the end of Harry Potter? Get out of my car. Get Out”

Her voice was too low to trust that she would not smack them. I made them apologize. They scampered out. Their pupils dilated from a DVD overdose.

Dr. Darego opened the door. “Hey,” he said. “What’s going on here?”

Alali jumped on him. “Daddy! To a park! You should have come!”

“Hi, Dad,” Daniel said and hugged his knees. Mrs. Darego and I walked past carrying the empty cooler and tray. She was still not speaking to her husband. I avoided looking at him; I didn’t want any trouble. We reached her kitchen and she said, “Eve, please don’t forget your passport.”

We heard Dr. Darego laughing with the children. Sometimes I believed every child needed two mothers: one who gives birth, and another who easily forgives fickleness.

The sliding doors in the basement were shut. I searched my suitcase for my passport and found Angie’s letter first. I’ve read it many times before:

Dearest Eve,

I hope this meets you in good spirits, if so splendid. We miss you terribly here. Your parents send their greetings. My mother sends her greetings. We are all fine, but unfortunately I don’t have good news for you.

You won’t believe, Val was sacked from his job shortly after you left. That woman he thought was carrying his baby was well known for targeting men at Summit Oil and feeding them the same story about being pregnant. She was going with Val’s direct boss, a married man. The man found out about Val and wrote him such a bad appraisal that Summit Oil sacked Val. He came back in town.

He was bitter, Eve. He talked about revenge. He said Summit Oil’s terminal is like Hollywood. They have a clinic, cafeteria, video games, watch television from overseas. He said that not one senior staff in Summit Oil headquarters is from the Niger Delta and from day one he was treated as an outsider. Now, he’s missing. The police have charged him as an accessory in a kidnap case involving an expatriate employee. They arrested

him and no one knows where he is. We are all waiting for news. I hope you've forgiven him. He made a mistake and he's paid a huge price.

I go to meetings at Madam Queen's house regularly now. I've even recruited my mother because of what happened to Val. Madam Queen says we will get him released. She may drink but the woman is a force. She says we should not be afraid. She is rallying as many of us as she can to join other women of the Delta to demonstrate at the Summit Oil's terminal. We will block their airstrip, jetty, helicopter pad and storage depot. We will demand that they give us electricity, clean water, better roads, schools, clinics, jobs. Pregnant women, too, and mothers with babies on their backs. She said Summit Oil may send the security forces to stop us, but we will not be stopped. We will carry nothing but palm leaves in our hands and respond to their threats with songs.

Eve, you can't come back. There is nothing here for you. You must take your nursing exams while you're there. I hear they need nurses over there in America. You can always come home to visit. A nurse here told me of her friend called Charity. Call Charity. Her number is...

Charity lived in the Mississippi Delta. I called her the day I received Angie's letter. "Who sent you to me?" she demanded. She was angry that I had her telephone number. Then she said parts of the Mississippi Delta were as bad as Niger Delta, but there was a strong possibility of finding work there and getting a sponsor. She advised that I kept my plans secret from Mrs. Darego meanwhile. "Who knows? You know how women can be? She might frustrate your career to further hers. Study in private, take the exams. Once you find work, take off without giving her notice." I said I couldn't do that.

"Why not?" she asked. "Did she feel sorry for you when her husband brought you here to

work illegally? Are they paying you minimum wage? Are they declaring your wages in their taxes? Do you realize you can have them jailed for breaking federal laws and sue them?" I told her that wasn't my intention, to ruin the Daregos' lives; all I wanted was to find a legitimate way of staying in America and earn enough to continue sending money home. She said, "Ah, well, you will soon learn how things work over here. We Africans, we only get attention when we need help, when we have no hope, and oh yes, most especially when we are naked."

"Eve?" Mrs. Darego called from upstairs.

"One moment," I said, reaching for my passport.

"Come here! Please! Now!"

I dropped my passport. She was never rude or impatient with me. I found her standing by the computer desk in the family room, under the mud cloth painting of two gazelles. She handed me a photograph printed from the Internet.

"Aren't these the demonstrators from your hometown?"

The photograph was clear, although greenish. I recognized Madam Queen, Angelina's mother, Angelina with her big dimples, and "Mama!" I shouted. Her beautiful, troublesome face staring at me. "What was she doing there?"

"Your mother is one of them?" Mrs. Darego asked.

I nodded. "Amen's mother is there, Val's mother and his older sister Sokari who counseled me. Never lose hope in men, she said".

Mrs. Darego hugged me. "They've brought Summit Oil's operations to a standstill! Can you imagine? Can you? The company is negotiating with them. See."

The women were dressed in traditional attire: lace blouses, plaid wrappers and head ties.

They were waving palm leaves. Mrs. Darego laughed. Her body felt warm. Why was I afraid? I thought. We held each other for a while, and then I pulled back and affirmed the union of the women.

“I have something to tell you, but you may not want to hear it.”

“Eve,” she said. “What can be worse than me abandoning my children to you?”

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