

# 1

“Oh, good. You’re awake now.”

My head felt heavy, but my eyes took in a white ceiling streaked green with water and mold. Where was I? Not in New York, where my bedroom’s white walls were covered with bookshelves and photographs of my son as a baby, a student at Stanford, a smiling bridegroom. Loud voices speaking Yoruba leapt toward me from the darkness outside, pulling me across the Atlantic to the house of my friend Nike in Nigeria. But my room there was yellow. Its window looked out onto a tiled back porch with baskets of yams and mottled oranges by the kitchen door. Was someone calling for help? Giving birth to a baby?

As she walked toward my bed, I recognized Seyi, Nike’s daughter—the yellows and blues of her head tie in a free fall, down to the hem of her batik wrapper. A few feet away, her two friends remained seated on another bed, its thin mattress covered with striped ticking. How long had they been there?

“Yeah, I’m awake,” I said to her. My torso felt sweaty under the stiff sheet, and my fingers found strips of gauze and adhesive tape at my chin and again at the edge of my hairline. My other arm was pinned to the bed by a cast that ran all the way from my knuckles to my armpit. I knew to wiggle my toes to make sure my spine was still intact. “But what’s all this?”

"You got some stitches," Seyi said. "And I guess you broke your arm. You don't remember any of it?"

"Any of what? How did I get here?" Her two friends walked toward us as if they wanted to hear the answer too.

"Folusho put you over his shoulder and carried you. The other car hit your side, not his."

I hadn't seen another car. Maybe I'd closed my eyes as we were heading home along the hilly, potholed road to Nike's house after a four-hour ceremony on the edge of town. I remember walking back to the car, a blanket wrapped around my shoulders, the chilly air still clinging to the red-brown earth. A rooster was summoning the day, but the few vehicles that swooped noisily toward us still had their headlights on. The front seat is the place of honor in Nigeria, so as the guest I got in next to Folusho. Seyi and her older brother sat in the back, eyes closed, heads tilted toward the window behind them. I must have put my hand on the dashboard as the other car—or truck, or whatever it was—came toward us.

I tried to picture chubby Folusho, his gold-rimmed glasses glinting in the middle of his round face, checking my limp body for signs of life, then pulling me carefully out of the wrecked car. When I'd climbed in beside him, I was a bit anxious, though not about his driving skills. I was worried that we would run out of fuel. Fuel is Nigeria's primary resource, but it is kept so scarce that no one ever seems able to buy a full tank, and pushing a car, as we did both coming and going, is almost the normal way to start it.

"Does your mom know there's been . . . an accident?" I asked Seyi. My voice sounded reassuringly familiar.

"No," she said, a look of wariness flitting across her smooth, dark face, a version of her mother's wide-cheeked beauty. "We wanted—I mean, Folusho wants to find out what's happening with the car before we tell her anything."

Nike was away in Nairobi attending an exhibition of her artwork. Her six-foot batik squares, dyed indigo and filled with the sprawling shapes of kings, drummers, and pounders of yams, command the prices that denote a world-class artist. Would she be angry, as her chil-

dren seemed to assume? My father hadn't blamed me when I sent our Pontiac skidding into a lamppost one snowy night in Toronto right after getting my license. But then Daddy always said he hated cars that displayed your wealth—a prejudice that Nike, who'd grown up with no shoes in a tiny village, clearly did not share. Besides the Peugeot we had apparently wrecked, she owned two Mercedes and two bright-yellow vans with the logo of her art school, the Nike Centre for Art and Culture, emblazoned in red and blue on the sides.

"How bad is the damage?" I asked hesitantly.

"Smash-o," said Seyi, hitting a fist against her palm. "Do you want to call my mom when you get back home?"

"No," I reassured her. "But she'll know soon enough that something happened." We all looked at my enormous cast.

"I know. It's just that Folusho feels so bad. I wish Olabayo had driven, but you know he likes to tell his brother what to do. Folusho is . . . uh . . . not so good behind the wheel." You could have warned me, I thought, but there was no use mentioning it now. Seniority in a family is all-important in Nigeria, and rebellion by the children at the bottom is unheard of. Olabayo, the "been-to" oldest brother, was just back from four years of college in the States.

We four had set out around midnight. After parking beside the main road, edged in silent, two-story houses, we continued on foot toward the one still-lit structure. The minister and his small flock had claimed the roofless space within an unfinished house. Inside its cinder-block walls, we were separated from the night sky only by sheets of corrugated tin, supported by poles driven into the bare ground. Loops of electrical wiring carried a current to a long neon tube above the altar and to a naked bulb over our heads. The wooden benches were narrow and without backs. Having left our shoes outside by the door, we wrapped blankets over our clothes and stretched out to wait among the other bodies, apparently sleeping, on the benches' hard surfaces.

I knew that the service itself would not start for at least an hour, and I've learned since then that on any night of the week it is possible to find a small, charismatic Christian church determined to outshout its rivals

through a sputtering PA system. I was apprehensive when I heard that the service might last till dawn, but not wanting to decline the offer of my hosts to show me a part of their complicated culture that most visitors don't see, I readied myself by dousing my body with mosquito repellent.

I had almost fallen asleep despite the unsteadiness of my bench on the uneven ground, when a minister in a yellow robe roused us with a "Praise the Lord! Alleluia!" through a microphone held too close to his mouth. Like figures at the last judgment, the sleepers around me jumped up and shouted back, most of them women in long white robes and ballooning hats made from the same fabric. They began with singing, but soon they threw themselves into frenetic dancing and fast clapping, shouting, shaking, and running around the benches or writhing on the packed dirt floor.

The level of sound rose slowly, and I tried for a while to clap and dance too. The punctuating cries of "*oruko Jesu*" told me that the God being called upon was the one I had known as I was growing up and with whom I was again on speaking terms. An Anglican childhood makes it hard to dance and praise the Lord at the same time, but I felt too self-conscious to be the only person sitting down, so I swayed a bit and moved my arms and feet, hoping that my past would not be too visible.

After a while I decided that no one was watching me, so it was safe to take a break. Coming from New York City, where the bravura of performers beating sticks on plastic tubs competes with the rumble of subways, I would have been happy simply to listen to the powerful drumming. But just as I was getting comfortable, I felt the indignant stare of a woman who in Nigeria would be called old, though she was probably close to my own age.

When she first approached me, I scrambled to my feet as if caught in a posture of disrespect. She nodded, and the minister's voice drew her back into a burst of responsive shouting. I tried for a while to surrender to the apparently boundless energy around me, then danced over to the edge of the makeshift structure and sat down again. Twice more we repeated this speechless call and response, the demand from her fierce

black eyes leaping out and then receding into the hollows of a bony, depleted body, wrapped from armpit to knee in a white cloth.

An hour before the final "alleluia," my mosquito repellent was no longer working, and I was ready to go home. Light was beginning to gather at the horizon beyond our little structure. Why was my sense of "enough" so different from anyone else's? Yet I couldn't help wondering if that woman was sending me a message, a warning of disaster that I might avert by dancing, full-out. Or perhaps she had detected my deepest fear about this place I so wanted to love—that it could kill me and was summoning a spirit to avert its realization. I never saw her again, but whenever I saw danger averted during the rest of my stay in her country, I thought of her and wondered who was at work.

The next morning, Nike's children and their friends in even greater numbers—including Folusho with his worries about what his mother would say—were back at the hospital. I still don't know who was at fault, but the image of this round-faced African carrying me, on foot along the side of the road by the dawn's early light, cast him as my rescuer rather than someone who might have killed me. No one was willing to stop and help him, he said, because people who try to help can find themselves accused or blamed in the legal melee that usually follows such sudden disasters.

My erstwhile family brought me things that hospitals supply in the States: a towel and a facecloth from Nike's linen closet, large and thick the way her Western visitors like them, and several covered, plastic containers filled with rice and beans, chicken, fried plantains, and of course tea bags since they knew I had the strange habit of drinking hot tea every few hours. This required a boiling ring plugged into the outlet behind my bed, but the taste of the final product, sweetened with lumps of sugar and whitened with powdered whole milk from a tin, revived me more than any other form of attention I got over the next two days.

Leading the entourage of visitors was Olabayo, the head of the household in his mother's absence. In this capacity he'd promised to serve as my guide to his country, at least until his friend Funsho (to whom he assumed I was engaged) could take over. Funsho—or Foley,

as most people called him—was at that moment still living in my apartment in New York, completing an unexpected commission for some traditional carving and then planning to come home to Nigeria when it was finished.

It had been my idea to leave New York ahead of him. I'd decided to spend the whole of my sabbatical in his country and to find out, on my own, whether I could really be part of such a radically different culture. When I told my friends about the man I'd met in Africa the previous summer, they advised caution. A younger man was cool—but exactly how much younger? They don't have birth certificates in rural Nigeria, but weren't there other ways I could find this out? And what about past entanglements? Foley's father had had numerous children by eight wives.

"What do people do who have no family to bring them food?" I asked Olabayo when he arrived with my evening meal.

"People like that," he said, "probably don't even get to a hospital."

I think it was the third day when I asked a nurse who was mopping my floor if anyone had said anything about my going home. By then, I was sleeping as much out of boredom as out of tiredness, and though someone from Nike's school sat on the other bed most of the time, we had little to say to each other beyond rough translations of the greetings Nigerians value so highly. I was eager to get back to my room at Nike's house, where I could be alone.

"I think you can go whenever you want," the nurse said without looking up. "I'll ask the head nurse when I finish this."

I didn't hear from her again, so I asked Olabayo when he showed up that afternoon. "They'll be perfectly happy to keep you here," he said. "We pay by the day, you know."

"So d'you think I can leave now?"

"We need to ask someone, but if you feel up to it—"

"Let's pack up and go, then."

When we walked into the crowded waiting room, the eyes of everyone were on me. Most of the faces belonged to mothers wearing bright prints and head ties like Seyi's—almost every mother had a baby tied to

her back, another on the way, and a third child running around or being sharply told in Yoruba to sit still. The two men who were there had the lined faces and missing teeth that signify old age. They sat rigid, hands spread on their knees, their heads lowered, their breathing uneven. As a white person, I was a curiosity, a reaction I was trying to get used to—and figure out: The boy sitting next to his mother did not shout, "Oyibo! Oyibo!" the way children usually do when they see me, but that was the feeling in the room.

"Don't you take her away!" came from the head nurse seated behind a desk in the corner. "She wants to stay with us now, hmm?" She laughed and the other nurses joined in.

I looked at Olabayo and then smiled at her. "What can I do? We have to do what the men say, don't we?"

"Well, you have to come back and see us soon," said another nurse whose voice reminded me of Jamaica. "And don't forget to bring us something."

"What sort of something?" I asked, wondering if this was an expected part of a hospital visit.

"Whatever you like," they answered coyly.

"What sort of thing?" I asked Olabayo as we drove away.

"People here always like money. Especially if they know you're from America," he said, a smile opening below the three tribal marks that crossed each cheek, a sign of his seniority. "Or if they know you've been there, like me."

"Well, I have to make what I've got last for six months." I'd known when I left the States this time that the money I'd brought would be all I would have: a thousand dollars for rent for Nike and fifteen hundred for everything else. It had been strapped to my waist as I walked through customs, and most of it was now safely stowed, I hoped, in the suitcase under my bed. You can't use a credit card in Nigeria, and sending cash is too risky. The banks are unreliable and give a hopelessly low rate of exchange.

"Before we go back to the house," Olabayo said, changing the subject, "I want to take you to the chief of police. You can see the Peugeot too. We may not be able to repair it."

"It's that bad, huh?"

"God was with you," said Olabayo. "Believe me."

I'm not sure why the chief of police had to be seen. He looked about my father's age and was balding under his military hat. His air of pride in his double chin and large stomach—both indicators of prosperity in his country—were features my exercise-conscious father would never have endorsed. Standing in front of his gray cement, two-story office building in the busiest section of Osogbo, surrounded by the limbs and entrails of wrecked cars including our Peugeot—its front gouged and twisted on the passenger side—the chief echoed Olabayo's comment about forces beyond our control.

"I see wrecks every day," he said. "And really, if you were not standing here next to me, I would not believe that the person in the passenger seat of that vehicle could still be alive. Someone must be looking after you, my dear."

"That scares me," I said to Olabayo on the way home.

"You mean, what the chief of police said? How come?"

"This is not my first close call."

"What do you mean?"

"Something like this happened a long time ago. It's just really weird, that's all."

"Lots of weird things happen here," he said, and I could tell he was dropping into a memory of his own. Perhaps someone he knew had not been as lucky as I was. Or perhaps Olabayo himself had been even luckier. Nevertheless, I was glad that he did not press for details. I'm not even sure how much I had told Foley about what had happened to me in the lobby of my building in New York. I've always felt awkward and inauthentic bringing it up, as if I were asking for attention and pity like the panhandlers on the subway who tell you they have AIDS or that they were veterans of the Vietnam war.

But as I sat for the rest of the day on the porch that faced Nike's courtyard—a protected enclave of swept cement and sprawling bougainvillea, its high wall edged in fins of broken glass—or when I lay down for a nap in my yellow room off the kitchen, I wondered if Olabayo and the chief of police could be right. Were there lessons I had not learned from

my first close call and could not learn anywhere but here, in the country of the man I might marry? That question took me back twelve years to the most frightening time in my life.

I was on the uptown train, coming home from a Christmas party in Greenwich Village. It was a week after John Lennon had been killed thirty blocks from where I lived, so perhaps he was on my mind. As the train pulled into my stop at 103rd Street, I noticed a pair of teenage boys who then got off with me. Neither one looked more than fourteen. The taller boy wore a black leather jacket with multiple zippers. His hair was cut flat across the top and sharply angled, a style newly popular with black teenagers. The other one I don't remember, except that he was shorter and wore Army fatigues.

As powdery snow swirled around my feet, I could hear thuds of boots that I knew were theirs. Except for a Korean grocery half a block behind me, the stores on Broadway were all closed, safely hidden behind their solid metal grates. Could it have been my beautiful shearling coat that set me apart as a "have," a person with the resources to stay warm in any weather? My bare hand shook as I pulled my keys out of my pocketbook. Cutting between parked cars, I wanted only to get behind my front door as fast as I could, to put distance between myself and their approaching feet.

When I reached the entrance to my building, I could see inside the lighted lobby, but it was empty. Our doorman had been fired by the building's new owners, who wanted to scare tenants out of the rent-controlled apartments where they'd lived since the forties and fifties. A rent strike that I'd helped to organize was still going on. Just as I was putting my key into the inside door, on the other side of which lay safety, I heard the outer door slam shut behind me. There was no lock on it. The landlord had broken that too.

"Don't scream, lady." The tall one knocked me against the wall while his less imposing friend put a gun to the side of my head. This could have been my last moment alive. And yet the gun looked like a toy, not real at all.

"Don't kill me," I whispered. "Please don't kill me."

Waiting for the sound of the trigger being pulled, I withdrew from my body, felt its temperature falling, one last moment of life followed by another. "I got a gun between my legs," the tall one breathed into my neck, his hands tugging on his zipper. "An' I'm gonna use it." It sounded like a line he'd heard in a movie, one he'd been waiting for a moment like this to use. I stood frozen against the barrel of the real gun, cold against my hairline. The sound of the opening zipper grated against my eardrums like a fingernail being drawn down a blackboard.

Then a hand pushed down on the top of my head and a thick, sour-tasting penis was jammed into my mouth, the gun still against my hairline. The muscles in my legs and back hurt so much I could hardly register what happened next, or how long I held that painful position, half kneeling, half squatting. When the semen spurted into my mouth, I felt the floor disappear under me like a sudden drop in a broken elevator. Then I was on my hands and knees, gagging and spitting onto the filthy tile floor. At the sound of the zipper's closing I looked up at its groaning owner. The tiny microphones of his Walkman were still in his ears.

"C'mon man, let's chill!" The one with the gun grabbed my pocketbook. The two of them made a lurch for the door, and my fingers locked around the handle of my bag. No! No! They weren't going to get that too. Not after what they had done. My life was in that pocketbook and I wanted it—not just my wallet but a book and a beautiful necklace from the friends I had just visited. My fingers gave way, then the rest of me, and my shoulders rolled out over the floor.

As the boy with the gun turned back and fired, the scream I heard seemed to come from far away. I pulled myself up to a sitting position on the marble step in front of the door. The pain was on the right side, not the left. "It's okay," I remember thinking, blood trickling down under my sweater onto my skirt. "It's not my heart." Gravity lifted, letting me fly up for a moment to look from a great height at the black and white pattern of the tiled lobby floor.

Then gravity returned as I tried to stand up, my fingers still gripping my key. Once on the other side of the door, I inched over to the wall and leaned against it, holding my skirt and gagging. For a moment the tiles rocked in front of me as blood ran through my fingers, but I knew that

if I didn't look down, I could walk to the stairwell. Putting my full weight onto the wooden banister, I made my way down the flight of stairs to the super's door and pressed with all my strength against his doorbell. When Eugenio's face appeared I said, "Ring 911. I've been shot. Please hurry."

In the months, and then the years, that have followed that night, I sometimes asked myself the question Ralph Ellison's narrator asks in *Invisible Man*: "What did I do to get so black and blue?" It's true that I'd let the Civil Rights movement pass me by, but for years I'd been a supporter of the Black Panthers, and if those feelings had faded, they had not disappeared. Perhaps it was pay-back time for the way I'd acted toward my mother, courting danger to show her I didn't need the safety of a taxi or a man's protecting arm. But my wish to break rules whenever I see them is a habit I can't break, or don't want to. In any case, it has taken me to Nigeria, where I've learned some things that I wish my mother could have understood.