

Praise for *Everything Good Will Come*

“*Everything Good Will Come* is like listening to an old friend recounting and bringing up-to-date and to life the happenings in our beloved city of Lagos. From Ikoyi bordering the Marina, to the south nearing Yoruba towns, every part is reawakened and alive: red, throbbing, like the heartbeat of a healthy newborn.

I was sorry when I came to the end.”

Buchi Emecheta

“There is wit, intelligence and a delicious irreverence in this book. But it is Sefi Atta’s courage in choosing to look at her fictional world through fiercely feminist lenses that I most admired.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

“Sefi Atta’s first novel is a beautifully paced stroll in the shoes of a woman growing up in a country struggling to find its post-Independence identity... The main characters are well realized, and the supporting cast—campaigning journalist, put-upon mother-in-law, co-wives in a polygamous marriage, stropky secretary—avoid caricature. The relaxed tempo of the narrative allows for proper character development. *Everything Good Will Come* depicts the struggles women face in a conservative society. This is convincing; more remarkable is what the novel has to say about the need to speak out when all around is falling apart.”

The Times Literary Supplement

“*Everything Good Will Come* is an original, witty coming-of-age tale: *Tom Sawyer* meets *Jane Eyre*, with Nigerian girls. Reading *Everything Good*... you can feel the dust and the sun... an iridescent introduction to a fascinating nation.”

The Observer

“A literary masterpiece... *Everything Good Will Come* put me into a spell from the first page to the very last... It portrays the complicated society and history of Nigeria through brilliant prose.”

World Literature Today

“Skillful... impressive debut novel... Thematically, Atta’s work is wide-ranging and yet powerfully focused, the different areas of concern drawn together so that they inform each other... Again and again her writing tugs at the heart, at the conscience. At the same time, reflecting the resilience of the Logosians whose lives she explores, humour is almost constant, effervescent, most often with a satirical slant... There are no delusions in Atta’s novel, no romanticisation or overstating of a case. Her work stands as a paean to her central character’s strengths and her determination to combat oppression.”

The Sunday Independent

“Atta’s distinctive coming-of-age novel... will appeal to all readers interested in contemporary women’s stories and/or African culture. Recommended.”

Choice

“This lively first novel breaks new ground with a close-up, honest story of a contemporary Yoruba woman’s coming-of-age in Lagos. Nigerian-born author Atta now lives in the U.S., and she offers a hilarious if angry take on the Western view of dark, noble, savage Africa ‘with snakes and vines and ooga-booga dialect’. Yet with all the fast talk, this is a heartfelt drama of family, friendship, and community, especially among women. Enitan Taiwo always knows how privileged she is in her lawyer father’s home. She sees the poverty and knows about the brutal military dictatorship. But it is not until politics invades her own family that she defies her kind husband and moves from bystander to activist. Never reverential, Enitan’s first-person narrative reveals the dynamic diversity within the city, the differences across class, generation, gender, faith, language, tradition, and individual character. Differences, yes, but sometimes connections, too.”

Booklist

“[A] book of spirit and an inspiration for anyone who has ever been in opposition to societal or cultural norms.”

Bloomsbury Review

Sefi Atta
EVERYTHING
GOOD WILL COME

myriad **m**⁸

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*For my dearest, Gboyega,
and our sweetest, Temi*

Also by Sefi Atta

News From Home

Swallow

A Bit of Difference

Sefi Atta: Selected Plays

Bead Collector

1971

From the beginning I believed whatever I was told, downright lies even, about how best to behave, although I had my own inclinations. At an age when other Nigerian girls were masters at ten-ten, the game in which we stamped our feet in rhythm and tried to outwit partners with sudden knee jerks, my favorite moments were spent sitting on a jetty pre000g to fish. My worst was to hear my mother's shout from her kitchen window: "Enitan, come and help in here."

I'd run back to the house. We lived by Lagos Lagoon. Our yard stretched over an acre and was surrounded by a high wooden fence that could drive splinters into careless fingers. I played, carelessly, on the West side because the East side bordered the mangroves of Ikoyi Park and I'd once seen a water snake slither past. Hot, hot were the days as I remember them, with runny-egg sunshine and brief breezes. The early afternoons were for eat and sleep breaks: eat a heavy lunch, sleep like a drunk. The late afternoons, after homework, I spent on our jetty, a short wooden promenade I could walk in three steps, if I took long enough strides to strain the muscles between my thighs.

I would sit on its cockle-plastered edge and wait for the water to lap at my feet, fling my fishing rod, which was made from tree branch, string, and a cork from one of my father's discarded wine bottles. Sometimes fishermen came close, rowing in a rhythm that pleased me more than chewing on fried tripe; their skins charred, almost gray from sun-dried sea salt. They spoke in the warble of island people, yodeling across their canoes. I was never tempted to jump into the lagoon as they did. It gave off the smell of raw fish and was the kind of dirty brown I knew would taste like vinegar. Plus, everyone knew about the currents that could drag a person away. Bodies usually showed up days later, bloated, stiff and rotten. True.

It wasn't that I had big dreams of catching fish. They wriggled too much and I couldn't imagine watching another living being suffocate. But my parents had occupied everywhere else with their fallings out; their trespasses unforgivable. Walls could not save me from the shouting. A pillow, if I stuffed my head under it, could not save me. My hands could not, if I clamped them over my ears and stuffed my head under a pillow. So there it was, the jetty, my protectorate, until the day my mother decided it was to be demolished.

The priest in her church had a vision of fishermen breaking into our house: They would come at night, *labalaba*. They would come unarmed, *yimiyimi*. They would steal valuables, *tolotolo*.

The very next day, three workmen replaced our jetty with a barbed wire fence and my mother kept watch over them; the same way she watched our neighbors; the same way she checked our windows for evil spirits outside at night; the same way she glared at our front door long after my father had walked out. I knew he would be furious. He was away on a law conference and when he returned and saw her new fence, he ran outside shouting like a crazed man. Nothing, nothing, would stop my mother, he said, until she'd destroyed everything in our house, because of that church of hers. What kind of woman was she? What kind of selfish, uncaring, woman was she?

He enjoyed that view. Warm, breezy evenings on the veranda overlooking it is how I remember him, easy as the cane chair in which he sat. He was usually there in the dry season, which lasted most of the year; scarcely in the chilly harmattan, which straddled Christmas and New Year, and never in the swampy rainy season that made our veranda floor slippery over the summer vacation. I would sit on the steps and watch him and his two friends: Uncle Alex, a sculptor, who smoked a pipe that smelled like melted coconut, and

Uncle Fatai, who made me laugh because his name fitted his roly-poly face. He too was a lawyer like my father and they had all been at Cambridge together. Three musketeers in the heart of darkness, they called themselves there; they stuck together and hardly anyone spoke to them. Sometimes they frightened me with their stories of western Nigeria (which my father called the Wild West), where people threw car tires over other people and set them on fire because they belonged to different political factions. Uncle Alex blamed the British for the fighting: "Them and their bloody empire. Come here and divide our country like one of their bloody tea cakes. Driving on the left side of the bloody road..."

The day the Civil War broke out, he delivered the news. Uncle Fatai arrived soon afterward and they bent heads as if in prayer to listen to the radio. Through the years, from their arguments about federalists, secessionists, and bloody British, I'd amassed as much knowledge about the events in my country as any seven-year-old could. I knew that our first Prime Minister was killed by a Major General, that the Major General was soon killed, and that we had another Major General heading our country. For a while the palaver had stopped, and now it seemed the Biafrans were trying to split our country in two.

Uncle Fatai broke the silence. "Hope our boys finish them off."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Uncle Alex asked.

"They want a fight," Uncle Fatai said. "We'll give them a fight."

Uncle Alex prodded his chest, almost toppling him over. "Can you fight? Can you?" My father tried to intervene but he warned, "Keep out of this, Sunny."

My father eventually asked Uncle Alex to leave. He patted my head as he left and we never saw him in our house again.

Over the next months, I would listen to radio bulletins on

how our troops were faring against the Biafrans. I would hear the slogan: “To keep Nigeria one is a task that must be done.” My father would ask me to hide under my bed whenever we had bomb raid alerts. Sometimes I heard him talking about Uncle Alex; how he’d known beforehand there was going to be a civil war; how he’d joined the Biafrans and died fighting for them even though he hated guns.

I loved my uncle Alex; thought that if I had to marry a man, it would be a man like him, an artist, who cared too much or not at all.

He gave my father the nickname Sunny, though my father’s real name was Bandele Sunday Taiwo. Now, everyone called my father Sunny, like they called my mother Mama Enitan, after me, though her real name was Arin. I was their first child, their only child now, since my brother died. He lived his life between sickle cell crises. My mother joined a church to cure him, renounced Anglicanism and herself, it seemed, because one day, my brother had another crisis and she took him there for healing. He died, three years old. I was five.

In my mother’s church they wore white gowns. They walked around on bare feet, and danced to drums. They were baptized in a stream of holy water and drank from it to cleanse their spirits. They believed in spirits; evil ones sent by other people to wreak havoc, and reborn spirits, which would not stay long on earth. Their incantations, tireless worship and praise. I could bear even the sight of my mother throwing her hands up and acting as I’d never seen her act in an Anglican church. But I was sure that if the priest came before me and rolled his eyeballs back as he did when he was about to have a vision, that would be the end of me.

He had a bump on his forehead, an expression as if he were sniffing something bad. He pronounced his visions between chants that sounded like the Yoruba words for butterfly, dung

beetle, and turkey: *labalaba, yimiyimi, tolotolo*. He smelled of incense. The day he stood before me, I kept my eyes on the hem of his cassock. I was a reborn spirit, he said, like my brother, and my mother would have to bring me for cleansing. I was too young, she said. My time would soon come, he said. Turkey, turkey, turkey.

The rest of the day I walked around with the dignity of the aged and troubled, held my stomach in until I developed cramps. Death would hurt, I knew, and I did not want to see my brother like that, as a ghost. My father only had to ask how I was feeling, when I collapsed before him. “I’m going to die,” I said.

He asked for an explanation.

“You’re not going back there again,” he said.

Sundays after that, I spent at home. My mother would go off to church, and my father would leave the house, too. Then Bisi, our house girl, would sneak next door to see Akanni, the driver who blared his juju music, or he’d come to see her and they would both go off to the servants’ quarters, leaving me with Baba, our gardener, who worked on Sundays.

At least, during the Civil War, Bisi would sometimes invite me over to hear Akanni’s stories about the war front far away. How Biafran soldiers stepped on land mines that blew up their legs like crushed tomatoes; how Biafran children ate lizard flesh to stay alive. The Black Scorpion was one of Nigeria’s hero soldiers. He wore a string of charms around his neck and bullets ricocheted off his chest. I was old enough to listen to such tales without being frightened, but was still too young to be anything but thrilled by them. When the war ended three years later, I missed them.

Television in those days didn’t come on until six o’clock in the evening. The first hour was news and I never watched the news, except that special day when the Apollo landed on the

moon. After that, children in school said you could get Apollo, a form of conjunctivitis, by staring at an eclipse too long. Tarzan, Zorro, Little John, and the entire Cartwright family on *Bonanza* were there, with their sweet and righteous retaliations, to tell me any other fact I needed to know about the world. And oblivious to any biased messages I was receiving, I sympathized with Tarzan (those awful natives!), thought Indians were terrible people and memorized the happy jingles of foreign multinational companies: “Mobil keeps your engine—Beep, beep, king of the road.” If Alfred Hitchcock came on, I knew it was time to go to bed. Or if it was Doris Day. I couldn’t bear her song, “Que Sera.”

I approached adolescence with an extraordinary number of body aches, finished my final year of primary school, and began the long wait for secondary school. Secondary school didn’t start until early October, so the summer vacation stretched longer than normal. The rains poured, dried up, and each day passed like the one before unless something special happened, like the afternoon Baba found iguana eggs, or the morning a rabid dog bit our night watchman, or the evening Bisi and Akanni fought. I heard them shouting and rushed to the servants’ quarters to watch.

Akanni must have thought he was Muhammad Ali. He was shadow boxing around Bisi. “What’s my name? What’s my name?” Bisi lunged forward and slapped his face. He reached for her collar and ripped her blouse. “My bress? My bress?” She spat in his face and grabbed the gold chain around his neck. They both crashed into the dust and didn’t stop kicking till Baba lay flat out on the ground. “No more,” he said. “No more, I beg of you.”

Most days were not that exciting. And I was beginning to get bored of the wait when, two weeks to the end of the vacation, everything changed. It was the third Sunday of

September 1971, late in the afternoon. I was playing with my catapult when I mistakenly struck Baba as he was trimming the lawn. He chased after me with his machete and I ran into the barbed wire fence, snagging my sleeve. Yoruba tradition has us believe that Nature heralds the beginning of a person’s transition: to life, adulthood, and death. A rooster’s crow, sudden rainfall, a full moon, seasonal changes. I had no such salutations as I remember it.

“Serves you right,” came a girl’s voice.

A nose appeared between the wide gap in the fence, followed by a brown eye. I freed my sleeve from the barbed wire fence and rubbed my elbow.

“For running around like that,” she said. “With no head or tail. It serves you right that you got chooked.”

She looked nothing like the Bakare children who lived next door. I’d seen them through the wide gap in our fence and they were as dark as me; younger, too. Their father had two wives who organized outdoor cooking jamborees. They always looked pregnant, and so did he in his flowing robes. He was known as Engineer Bakare. He was Uncle Fatai’s friend and Uncle Fatai called him Alhaji Bakare, because he’d been on pilgrimage to Mecca. To us he was Chief Bakare. He threw a huge party after his chieftancy ceremony last year and no one could sleep that night for the sound of his juju band badabooming through our walls. Typical Lagos people, my father said. They made merry till they dropped, or until their neighbors did.

“I’m Sheri,” she said, as if I’d asked for her name.

“I’ve never seen you before,” I said.

“So?”

She had a sharp mouth, I thought, as she burst into giggles.

“Can I come to your house?” she asked.

I glanced around the yard, because my mother didn't want me playing with the Bakare children.

"Come."

I was bored. I waited by the barbed wire fence, forgot about my torn sleeve, even about Baba who had chased me. He, apparently, had forgotten me too, because he was cutting grass by the other fence. Minutes later, she walked in. Just as I thought, she was a half-caste. She wore a pink skirt and her white top ended just above her navel. With her short afro, her face looked like a sunflower. I noticed she wore

"How old are you?" I accused.

"Eleven," she said.

"Me too."

"Eh? Small girl like you?" she said.

At least I was a decent eleven-year-old. She barely reached my shoulders, even in her high heel shoes. I told her my birthday was next January, but she said I was still her junior. Her birthday was two months earlier, in November. "I'm older, I'm senior. Don't you know? That's how it is. My younger brothers and sisters call me Sister Sheri at home."

"I don't believe you."

"It's true," she said.

Breeze rustled through the hibiscus patch. She eyed me up and down.

"Did you see the executions on television last night?"

"What executions?"

"The armed robbers."

"No."

I was not allowed to watch; my father was against capital punishment.

She smiled. "Ah, it was good. They shot them on the beach. Tied them, covered their eyes. One, two, three."

"Dead?"

"Pafuka," she said and dropped her head to one side. I imagined the scene on the beach where public executions were held. The photographs usually showed up in the newspapers a day later.

"Where is your mother from?" I asked.

"England."

"Does she live there?"

"She's dead."

She spoke as if telling the time: three o'clock sharp, four o'clock dead. Didn't she care? I felt ashamed about my brother's death, as if I had a bad leg that people could tease me about.

"Yei," she exclaimed. She'd spotted a circus of flying fish on the lagoon. I, too, watched them flipping over and diving in. They rarely surfaced from the water. They disappeared and the water was still again.

"Do you have brothers and sisters?" she asked.

"Nope."

"You must be spoiled rotten."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. Yes, you are. I can see it in your face."

She spun around and began to boast. She was the oldest of the Bakare children. She had seven brothers and sisters. She would be starting boarding school in two weeks, in another city, and she...

"I got into Royal College," I said, to shut her up.

"Eyack! It's all girls!"

"It's still the best school in Lagos."

"All girls is boring."

"Depends how you look at it," I said, quoting my father.

Through the fence we heard Akanni's juju music. Sheri stuck her bottom out and began to wriggle. She dived lower and wormed up.

“You like juju music?” I asked.

“Yep. Me and my grandma, we dance to it.”

“You dance with your grandma?”

“I live with her.”

The only grandparent I’d known was my father’s mother, who was now dead, and she scared me because of the grayish-white films across her pupils. My mother said she got them from her wickedness. The music stopped.

“These flowers are nice,” Sheri said, contemplating them as she might an array of chocolates. She plucked one of them and planted it behind her ear.

“Is it pretty?”

I nodded. She looked for more and began to pick them one by one. Soon she had five hibiscus in her hair. She picked her sixth as we heard a cry from across the yard. Baba was charging toward us with his machete in the air. “You! Get away from there!”

Sheri caught sight of him and screamed. We ran round the side of the house and hobbled over the gravel on the “Who was that?” Sheri asked, rubbing her chest.

I took short breaths. “Our gardener.”

“I’m afraid of him.”

“Baba can’t do anything. He likes to scare people.”

She sucked her teeth. “Look at his legs crooked as crab’s, his lips red as a monkey’s bottom.”

We rolled around the gravel. The hibiscus toppled out of Sheri’s afro and she kicked her legs about, relishing her laughter and prolonging mine. She recovered first and wiped her eyes with her fingers.

“Do you have a best friend?” she asked.

“No.”

“Then, I will be your best friend.” She patted her chest. “Every day, until we go to school.”

“I can only play on Sundays,” I said.

My mother would drive her out if she ever saw her.

She shrugged. “Next Sunday then. Come to my house if you like.”

“All right,” I said.

Who would know? She was funny, and she was also rude, but that was probably because she had no home training.

She yelled from our gates. “I’ll call you *aburo*, little sister, from now on. And I’ll beat you at ten-ten, wait and see.”

It’s a stupid game, I was about to say, but she’d disappeared behind the cement column. Didn’t anyone tell her she couldn’t wear high heels? Lipstick? Any of that? Where was her respect for an old man like Baba? She was the spoiled one. Sharp mouth and all.

Baba was raking the grass when I returned to the back yard.

“I’m going to tell your mother about her,” he said.

I stamped my foot in frustration. “But she’s my friend.”

“How can she be your friend? You’ve just met her, and your mother does not know her.”

“She doesn’t have to know her.”

I’d known him all my life. How could he tell? He made a face as if the memory of Sheri had left a bad taste in his mouth. “Your mother will not like that one.”

“Please, don’t tell. Please.”

I knelt and pressed my palms together. It was my best trick ever to wear him out.

“All right,” he said. “But I must not see you or her anywhere near those flowers again.”

“Never,” I said, scrambling to my feet. “See? I’m going inside. You won’t find me near them.”

I walked backward into the house. Baba’s legs really were like crab’s, I thought, scurrying through the living room. Then

I bumped my shin on the corner of a chair and hopped the rest of the way to my bedroom. God was already punishing me.

My suitcase was under my bed. It was a fake leather one, large enough to accommodate me if I curled up tight, but now it was full. I dragged it out. I had two weeks to go before leaving home, and had started packing the contents a month early: a mosquito net, bed sheets, flip-flops, a flashlight. The props for my make-believe television adverts: bathing soap, toothpaste, a bag of sanitary towels. I wondered what I would do with those.

As I stood before my mirror, I traced the grooves around my plaits. Sheri's afro was so fluffy, it moved as she talked. I grabbed a comb from my table and began to undo my plaits. My arms ached by the time I finished and my hair flopped over my face. From my top drawer, I took a red marker and painted my lips. At least my cheeks were smooth, unlike hers. She had a spray of rashes and was so fair-skinned. People her color got called "Yellow Pawpaw" or "Yellow Banana" in school.

In school you were teased for being yellow or fat; for being Moslem or for being dumb; for stuttering or wearing a bra and for being Igbo, because it meant that you were Biafran or knew people who were. I was painting my finger nails with the marker pen, recalling other teasable offenses, when my mother walked in. She was wearing her white church gown.

"You're here?" she said.

"Yes," I said.

In her church gowns I always thought my mother resembled a column. She stood tall and squared her shoulders, even as a child, she said. She would not play rough, or slump around, so why did I? Her question often prompted me to walk with my back straight until I forgot.

"I thought you would be outside," she said.

I patted my hair down. Her own hair was in two neat

cornrows and she narrowed her eyes as if there were sunlight in my room.

"Ah-ah? What is this? You're wearing lipstick?"

I placed my pen down, more embarrassed than scared.

She beckoned. "Let me see."

Her voice softened when she saw the red ink. "You shouldn't be coloring your mouth at your age. I see you're also packing your suitcase again. Maybe you're ready to leave this house."

My gaze reached the ceiling.

"Where is your father?"

"I don't know."

"Did he say when he will be back?"

"No."

She surveyed the rest of my room. "Clean this place up."

"Yes, Mummy."

"And come and help me in the kitchen afterward. I want to speak to you later on tonight. Make sure you wash your mouth before you come."

I pretended to be preoccupied with the contents of my dressing table until she left. Using a pair of scissors, I scraped the red ink from my nails. What did she want to speak to me about? Baba couldn't have told.

My mother never had a conversation with me; she talked and knew that I was listening. I always was. The mere sound of her footsteps made me breathe faster. She hardly raised a hand to me, unlike most mothers I knew, who beat their children with tree branches, but she didn't have to. I'd been caned before, for daydreaming in class, with the side of a ruler, on my knuckles, and wondered if it wasn't an easier punishment than having my mother look at me as if she'd caught me playing with my own poop. Her looks were hard to forget. At least caning welts eventually disappeared.

Holy people had to be unhappy or strict, or a mixture of both, I'd decided. My mother and her church friends, their priest with his expression as if he was sniffing something bad. There wasn't a choir mistress I'd seen with a friendly face, and even in our old Anglican church people had generally looked miserable as they prayed. I'd come to terms with these people as I'd come to terms with my own natural sinfulness. How many mornings had I got up vowing to be holy, only to succumb to happiness by midday, laughing and running helter-skelter? I wanted to be holy; I just couldn't remember.

I was frying plantains in the kitchen with my mother that evening, when oil popped from the frying pan and struck my wrist.

"Watch what you're doing," she said.

"Sorry," Bisi said, peeping up from the pots she was washing.

Bisi often said sorry for no reason. I lifted the fried plantains from the pan and smacked them down with my spatula. Oil spitting, chopping knives. Onions. Kitchen work was ugly. When I was older I would starve myself so I wouldn't have to cook. That was my main plan.

A noise outside startled me. It was my father coming through the back door.

"I knock on my front door these days and no one will answer," he muttered.

The door creaked open and snapped shut behind him. Bisi rushed to take his briefcase and he shooed her away. I smiled at my father. He was always miserable after work, especially when he returned from court. He was skinny with a voice that cracked and I pitied him whenever he complained: "I'm working all day, to put clothes on your back, food in your stomach, pay your school fees. All I ask is for peace when I get home. Instead you give me *wahala*. Daddy can I buy ice-cream. Daddy can I buy Enid Blyton. Daddy my jeans are

torn. Daddy, Daddy, Daddy. You want me dead?"

He loosened his tie. "I see your mother is making you understudy her again."

I took another plantain and sliced its belly open, hoping for more of his sympathy. My mother shook a pot of stew on the stove and lifted its lid to inspect the contents.

"It won't harm her to be in here," she said.

I eased the plantain out and began to slice it into circles. My father opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of beer. Again Bisi rushed to his aid, and this time he allowed her to open the bottle.

"You should tell her young girls don't do this anymore," he said.

"Who said?" my mother asked.

"And if she asks where you learned such nonsense, tell her from your father and he's for the liberation of women."

He stood at attention and saluted. My father was not a serious man, I thought.

"All women except your wife," my mother said.

Bisi handed him his glass of beer. I thought he hadn't heard because he began to drink. He lowered the glass. "I've never asked you to be in here cooking for me."

"Ah, well," she said, wiping her hands with a dish cloth. "But you never ask me not to either?"

He nodded in agreement. "It is hard to compete with your quest for martyrdom."

My mother made a show of inspecting the fried plantains. She pointed to the pan and I emptied too many plantain pieces into it. The oil hissed and fumes filled the air.

Whenever my father spoke good English like that, I knew he was angry. I didn't understand what he meant most times. This time, he placed his empty glass on the table and grabbed his briefcase.

“Don’t wait up for me.”

My mother followed him. As they left the kitchen, I crept to the door to spy on them. Bisi turned off the tap to hear their conversation and I rounded on her with all the rage a whisper could manage: “Stop listening to people’s private conversations! You’re always listening to people’s private conversations!”

She snapped her fingers at me, and I snapped mine back and edged toward the door hinge.

My parent’s quarrels were becoming more senseless; not more frequent or more loud. One wrong word from my father could bring on my mother’s rage. He was a wicked man. He had always been a wicked man. She would shout Bible passages at him. He would remain calm. At times like this, I could pity my mother, if only for my father’s expression. It was the same as the boys in school who lifted your skirt and ran. They looked just as confused once the teacher got hold of their ears.

My mother rapped the dining table. “Sunny, whatever you’re doing out there, God is watching you. You can walk out of that door, but you cannot escape His judgment.”

My father fixed his gaze on the table. “I can’t speak for Him, but I remember He will not be mocked. You want to use the Bible as a shield against everyone? Use it. One day we will both meet our maker. I will tell him all I have done. Then you can tell him what you have done.”

He walked away in the direction of their bedroom. My mother returned to the kitchen. I thought she might scold me after she found my plantains burning, but she didn’t. I hurried over and flipped them.

A frown may have chewed her face up, but one time my mother had smiled. I’d seen black and white photographs of her, her hair pressed and curled and her eyebrows penciled into arches. She was a chartered secretary and my father was in his final

year of university when they met. Many men tried to chase her. Many, he said, until he wrote her one love letter. One, he boasted, and the rest didn’t stand a chance. “Your mother was the best dancer around. The best dressed girl ever. The tiniest waist, I’m telling you. The tiniest. I could get my hand around it, like this, before you came along and spoiled it.”

He would simulate how he struggled to hug her. My mother was not as big as he claimed. She was plump, in the way mothers were plump; her arms shook like jelly. My father no longer told the joke and I was left to imagine that it was true that she had once showed him affection. If she didn’t anymore it was because it was there in the Bible: God got jealous.

After dinner I went to their bedroom to wait. I still had no idea what my mother wanted to speak to me about. My father had left the air-conditioner on and it blew remnants of mosquito repellent and cologne into my face. Their mosquito net hung over me and I inspected my shin which had developed a bump since my collision with the sofa.

My mother walked in. Already I felt like crying. Could Baba have told? If so, he was responsible for the trouble I was in.

My mother sat opposite me. “Do you remember, when you used to come to church with me, that some of the sisters would miss church for a week?”

“Yes, Mummy.”

“Do you know why they missed church?”

“No.”

“Because they were unclean,” she said.

Immediately I looked at the air-conditioner. My mother began to speak in Yoruba. She told me the most awful thing about blood and babies and why it was a secret.

“I will not marry,” I said.

“You will,” she said.

“I will not have children.”

“Yes, you will. All women want children.”

Sex was a filthy act, she said, and I must always wash myself afterward. Tears filled my eyes. The prospect of dying young seemed better now.

“Why are you crying?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Come here,” she said. “I have prayed for you and nothing bad will come your way.”

She patted my back. I wanted to ask, what if the bleeding started during morning assembly? What if I needed to pee during sex? Before this, I’d had blurred images of a man lying on top of a woman. Now that the images had been brought into focus, I was no longer sure of what came in and went out of where. My mother grabbed my shoulders and stood me up.

“What are you thinking?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Go and wash your face,” she said tapping me toward the door.

In the bathroom mirror I checked my face for changes. I tugged at the skin below my eyes, stretched my lips, stuck my tongue out. Nothing.

There was a time I couldn’t wait to be grown because of my mother’s wardrobe. She had buckled, strapped, and beaded shoes. I would slip my feet into them, hoping for the gap behind my heels to close, and run my hands through her dresses and wrappers of silver and gold embroidery. Caftans were fashionable, though they really were a slimmer version of the *agbadas* women in our country had been wearing for years. I liked one red velvet caftan she had in particular, with small circular mirrors that sparkled like chandeliers. The first time my mother wore it was on my father’s birthday. I was heady that night from the smell of tobacco, whiskey, perfume, and curry. I carried a small silver tray of meat balls on sticks and

served it to guests. I was wearing a pink polyester babushka. Uncle Alex had just shown me how to light a pipe. My mother was late getting changed because she was busy cooking. When she walked into the living room, everyone cheered. My father accepted congratulations for spoiling his wife. “My money goes to her,” he said.

On nights like this I watched my mother style her hair from start to finish. She straightened it with a hot comb that crackled through her hair and sent up pomade fumes. She complained about the process. It took too long and hurt her arms. Sometimes, the hot comb burnt her scalp. She preferred to wear her hair in two cornrows, and on the days my brother fell ill, her hair could be just as it was when she woke up. “It’s my house,” she would say. “If anybody doesn’t like it they can leave.”

It was easy to tell she wanted to embarrass my father. People thought a child couldn’t understand, but I’d quarreled with friends in school before, and I wouldn’t speak to them until they apologized, or at least until I’d forgotten that they hadn’t. I understood, well enough to protect my parent’s vision of my innocence. My mother needed quiet, my father would say. “I know,” I would say. My father was always out, my mother would complain. I wouldn’t say a word.

All week I looked forward to going to Sheri’s house. Sometimes I went to the hibiscus patch, hoping she would appear. I never stayed there long enough. I’d forgotten about sex, even about the bump on my shin which had flattened to a purple bruise. This week, my parents were arguing about particulars.

My father had lost his driver’s license and car insurance certificate. He said my mother had hidden them. “I did not hide your particulars,” she said. He asked if I’d seen them. I had not seen his particulars, I said. I finally joined in his search for the lost particulars and was beginning to imagine I was responsible

for them when he found them. “Where I already looked,” he said. “See?”

I was tired of them. Sunday morning, after my parents left, I visited the house next door for the first time—against my mother’s orders, but it was worth knowing a girl my age in the neighborhood. The place was full of boys, four who lived across the road. They laughed whenever they saw me and pretended to vomit. Next to them was an English boy who played fetch games with his Alsatian, Ranger. Sometimes he had rowdy bicycle races with the four across the road; other times he sent Ranger after them when they teased him for being white and unable to stomach hot peppers: “*Oyinbo* pepper, if you eat-ee pepper, you go yellow more-more!” Two boys lived further down the road and their mother had filled half the teeth of my classmates. They were much older.

With boys there always had to be noise and trouble. They caught frogs and grasshoppers, threw stones at windows, set off fireworks. There was Bisi at home, who really was a girl, because she was not old enough to be married, but she was just as rough. She watched whenever Baba beheaded chickens for cooking, flattened the daddy-long-legs in my bathtub with slaps. She threatened me most days, with snapped fingers. Then she pretended in front of my mother, shaking and speaking in a high voice. I kicked a stone thinking of her. She was a pretender.

Most houses on our quiet residential road were similar to ours, with servants’ quarters and lawns. We didn’t have the uniformity of nearby government neighborhoods, built by the Public Works Department. Our house was a bungalow covered in golden trumpets and bougainvillea. The Bakare’s was an enormous one-story with aquamarine glass shutters, so square-shaped, I thought it resembled a castle. Except for a low hedge of dried up pitanga cherries lining the driveway and a mango tree by the house, the entire yard was cement.

I walked down the driveway, conscious of my shoes crunching the gravel. One half-eaten mango on the tree caught my eye. Birds must have nibbled it and now ants were finishing it up. The way they scrambled over the orange flesh reminded me of a beggar I’d seen outside my mother’s church, except his sore was pink and pus oozed out. No one would go near him, not even to give him money which they threw on a dirty potato sack before him.

A young woman with two pert facial marks on her cheeks answered the door.

“Yesch?”

“Is Sheri in?” I asked.

“Is schleeping.”

In the living room, the curtains were drawn and the furniture sat around like mute shadows. The Bakares had the same chairs as most people I knew, fake Louis XIV, my father called them. There wasn’t a sound and it was eleven o’clock in the morning. At first I thought the ‘sch’ woman was going to turn me away, then she stepped aside. I followed her up the narrow wooden stairway, through a quiet corridor, past two doors until we reached a third. “Scheree?” she called out.

Someone whined. I knew it was Sheri. She opened her door wearing a yellow night gown. The ‘sch’ woman dragged her feet down the corridor.

“Why are you still sleeping?” I asked Sheri.

In my house that would be considered laziness. She’d been out last night, at her uncle’s fortieth birthday. She danced throughout. Her voice did not yet sound like hers. There were clothes on the floor: white lace blouses, colorful wrappers, and head ties. She’d been sleeping on a cloth spread over a bare mattress, and another cloth was what she used to cover herself at night. A picture of apples and pears hung above her bed and on her bedside table was a framed photograph of a woman in

traditional dress. In the corner, some dusty shoes spilled out of a wooden cupboard. The door dropped from a broken hinge and the mirror inside was stained brown. A table fan perched on a desk worried the clothes on the floor from time to time.

“Is this your room?” I asked.

“Anyone’s,” she said, clearing her throat noisily. She drew the curtains and sunlight flooded the room. She pointed to a wad of notes stashed by the photograph: the total amount she received for dancing.

“I got the most in the family,” she said.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

She scratched her hair. “My stepmothers are sleeping. My brothers and sisters are still sleeping. My father, I don’t know where he is.”

She reached for her behind.

I screwed up my nose. “I think you’d better have a bath.”

One o’clock and the entire house was awake. Sheri’s stepmothers had prepared *akara*, fried bean cakes, for everyone to eat. We knelt before them to say good morning, they patted our heads in appreciation. “Both knees,” one of them ordered. I found myself looking at two women who resembled each other, pretty with watery eyes and chiffon scarves wrapped around their heads. I noted the gold tooth in the smile of the one who had ordered me to kneel.

In the veranda, the other children sat on chairs with bowls of *akara* on their laps. The girls wore dresses; the boys were in short-sleeved shirts and shorts. Sheri had changed into a tangerine-colored maxi length dress and was strutting around ordering them to be quiet. “Stop fighting.” “Gani, will you sit down?” “Didn’t I tell you to wash your hands?” “Kudi? What is wrong with you this morning?” She separated a squabble here, wiped a dripping nose. I watched in amazement as they

called her Sister Sheri. The women were called Mama Gani and Mama Kudi after their firstborns.

“How many children will you have?” Sheri asked, thrusting a baby boy into my arms. I kept my mouth still for fear of dropping him. He wriggled and felt as fragile as a crystal glass.

“One,” I said.

“Why not half, if you like?” Sheri asked.

I was not offended. Her rudeness had been curtailed by nature. Whenever she sucked her teeth, her lips didn’t quite curl, and her dirty looks flashed through lashes as thick as moth wings. She knew all the rude sayings: mouth like a duck, dumb as a zero with a dot in it. If I said “so?” she said, “Sew your button on your shirt.” When I asked “why?” she answered, “Z your head to Zambia.” But she was far too funny to be successfully surly. Her full name was Sherifat, but she didn’t like it. “Am not fat,” she explained, as we sat down to eat. I had already had breakfast, but seeing the *akara* made me hungry. I took a bite and the peppers inside made my eyes water. My legs trembled in appreciation. “When we finish,” Sheri said. “I will take you to the balcony upstairs.” She chewed with her mouth open and had enough on her plate to fill a man.

The balcony upstairs resembled an empty swimming pool. Past rains had left mildew in its corners. It was higher than my house and standing there, we could see the whole of her yard and mine. I pointed out the plants in my yard as Sheri walked toward the view of the lagoon.

“It leads to the Atlantic,” she said.

“I know,” I said, trying not to lose my concentration. “Bougainvillea, golden trumpets...”

“You know where that leads?”

“Yes. Almond tree, banana tree...”

“Paris,” she said.

I gave up counting plants. Downstairs, two of the children ran through the washing lines. They were playing a Civil War game: Halt. Who goes there? Advance to be recognized. Boom! You're dead.

"I want to go to Paris," Sheri said.

"How will you get there?"

"My jet plane," she said.

I laughed. "How will you get a jet plane?"

"I'll be an actress," she said, turning to me. In the sunlight, her pupils were like the underside of mushrooms.

"Actor-ess," I said.

"Yes, and when I arrive, I'll be wearing a red negligée."

"Em, Paris is cold."

"Eh?"

"Paris is cold. My father told me. It's cold and it rains."

"I'll have a fur coat, then."

"What else?" I asked.

"High, high heels."

"And?"

"Dark sunglasses."

"What kind?"

"Cressun Door," she said, smiling.

I shut my eyes, imagining. "You'll need fans. All actresses have fans."

"Oh, they'll be there," she said. "And they'll be running around, shouting, 'Sheri. *Voulez-vous. Bonsoir. Mercredi.*' But I won't mind them."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll get into my car and drive away fast."

I opened my eyes. "What kind of car?"

"Sports," she said.

I sighed. "I want to be something like... like president."

"Eh? Women are not presidents."

"Why not?"

"Our men won't stand for it. Who will cook for your husband?"

"He will cook for himself."

"What if he refuses?"

"I'll drive him away."

"You can't," she said.

"Yes I can. Who wants to marry him anyway?"

"What if they kill you in a coup?"

"I'll kill them back."

"What kind of dream is that?"

"Mine." I smirked.

"Oh, women aren't presidents," she said.

Someone downstairs was calling her. We looked over the balcony to see Akanni. He was wearing heart-shaped sunshades, like mirrors.

"What?" Sheri answered.

Akanni looked up. "Isn't that my good friend, Enitan, from next door?"

"None of your business," Sheri said. "Now, what do you want from me?"

I smiled at Akanni. His sunshades were funny and his war stories were fantastic.

"My good friend," he said to me in Yoruba. "At least you're nice to me, unlike this trouble maker, Sheri. Where is my money, Sheri?"

"I don't have your money," she said.

"You promised we would share the proceeds from last night. I stayed up till five this morning, now you're trying to cheat me. Country is hard for a poor man, you know."

"Who asked you?"

Akanni snapped his fingers. "Next time you'll see who will drive you around."

“Fine,” Sheri said, then she turned to me. “Oaf. Look at his face, flat as a church clock. Come on, let’s go back inside. The sun is beating my head.”

“Now?” I asked.

She pressed her hair down. “Can’t you see I’m a half-caste?”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or feel sorry for her.

“I don’t mind,” she said. “Only my ears I mind and I cover them up, because they’re big like theirs.”

“Whose?” I asked.

“White people’s,” she said. “Now, come on.”

I followed her. She did have huge ears and her afro did not hide them.

“You know that foolish Akanni?” she asked as we ran down the stairs.

“He comes to our house.”

“To do what?”

“Visit our house girl, Bisi.”

Sheri began to laugh. “He’s doing her!”

I covered my mouth.

“Sex,” she said. “Banana into tomato. Don’t you know about it?”

My hand dropped.

“Oh, close your mouth before a fly enters,” she said.

I ran to catch up with her.

“My grandma told me,” she said.

We were sitting on her bed. Sheri tucked her tangerine dress between her legs. I wondered if she knew more than me.

“When you...” I asked. “I mean, with your husband. Where does it go? Because I don’t...” I was pointing everywhere, even at the ceiling.

Sheri’s eyes were wide. “You haven’t seen it? I’ve seen mine. Many times.” She stood up and retrieved a cracked mirror

from a drawer. “Look and see.”

“I can’t.”

“Look,” she said, handing me the mirror.

“Lock the door.”

“Okay,” she said, heading there.

I dragged my panties down, placed the mirror between my legs. It looked like a big, fat slug. I squealed as Sheri began to laugh. We heard loud knocks on the door and I almost dropped the mirror. “Who’s that?” I whispered.

“Me,” she said.

I hobbled to her bed. “You horrible...”

She rocked back and forth. “You’re so funny, *aburo!*”

“You horrible girl,” I hissed.

She stopped laughing. “Why?”

“I don’t think it’s funny. What did you do that for?”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, sorry is not enough.”

I pulled my panties up, wondering whether I was angry with her, or what I’d seen between my legs. Sheri barricaded the door. “You’re not going anywhere.”

At first I thought I’d push her aside and walk out, but the sight of her standing there like a star tickled me.

“All right,” I said. “But this is your last chance, Sherifat, I’m warning you.”

“Am not fat,” she yelled.

I laughed until I thought my heart would pop. That was her insecurity: her full name, and her big ears.

“Don’t go,” she said. “I like you. You’re very English. You know, high faluting.”

The woman in the photograph by her bedside table was her grandmother.

“Alhaja,” Sheri said. “She’s beautiful.”

Alhaja had an enormous gap between her front teeth and her cheeks were so plump her eyes were barely visible. There were many Alhajas in Lagos. This one wasn't the first woman to go on *hajj* to Mecca, but for women like her, who were powerful within their families and communities, the title became their name.

Sheri did not know her own mother. She died when Sheri was a baby and Alhaja raised her from then on, even after her father remarried. She pressed the picture to her chest and told me of her life in downtown Lagos. She lived in a house opposite her Alhaja's fabric store. She went to a school where children didn't care to speak English. After school, she helped Alhaja in her store and knew how to measure cloth. I listened, mindful that my life didn't extend beyond Ikoyi Park. What would it be like to know downtown as Sheri did, haggle with customers, buy fried yams and roasted plantains from street hawkers, curse Area Boys and taxi cabs who drove too close to the curb.

My only trips downtown were to visit the large foreign-owned stores, like Kelwarams and Leventis, or the crowded markets with my mother. The streets were crammed with vehicles, and there were too many people: people buying food from street hawkers, bumping shoulders, quarreling and crossing streets. Sometimes masqueraders came out for Christmas or for some other festival, dancing in their raffia gowns and ghoulish masks. Sheri knew them all: the ones who stood on stilts, the ones who looked like stretched out accordions and flattened to pancakes. It was juju, she said, but she was not scared. Not even of the *eyo* who dressed in white sheets like spirits of the day and whipped women who didn't cover their heads.

Sheri was a Moslem and she didn't know much about Christianity, except that there was a book in the Bible and if you read it, you could go mad. I asked why Moslems didn't eat pork. "It's a filthy beast," she said, scratching her hair. I told

her about my own life, how my brother died and my mother was strict.

"That church sounds scary," she said.

"I'm telling you, if my mother ever catches you in our house, she'll send you home."

"Why?"

I pointed at her pink mouth. "It's bad, you know."

She sucked her teeth. "It's not bad. Anyway, you think my father allows me to wear lipstick? I wait until he's gone out and put it on."

"What happens when he comes back?"

"I rub it off. Simple. You want some?"

I didn't hesitate. As I rubbed the lipstick on my lips I mumbled, "Your stepmothers, won't they tell?"

"I kneel for them, help them in the kitchen. They won't tell."

"What about the one with the gold tooth?"

"She's wicked, but she's nice."

I showed her my lips. "Does it fit?"

"It fits," she said. "And guess what?"

"What?"

"You've just kissed me."

I slapped my forehead. She was forward, this girl, and the way she acted with the other children. She really didn't do much, except to make sure she was noticed. I was impressed by the way she'd conned Akanni into staying up late for her uncle's party. Sheri got away with whatever she did and said. Even when she insulted someone, her stepmothers would barely scold her. "Ah, this one. She's such a terrible one."

They summoned her to act as a disc jockey. She changed the records as if she was handling dirty plates: The Beatles, Sunny Adé, Jackson Five, James Brown. Most of the records were scratched. Akanni arrived during, "Say it loud, I'm black and

proud.” He skidded from one end of the room to the other and fell on the floor overcome as the real James Brown. We placed a hand towel on his back and coaxed him up. By the time “If I had the wings of a dove” came on, I was singing out loud myself, and was almost tearful from the words.

As a parting gift Sheri gave me a romance novel titled *Jacaranda Cove*. The picture was barely visible and most of the pages were dog-eared. “Take this and read,” she said. I slipped it under my arm and wiped my lips clean. My one thought was to return home before my mother arrived. I’d disobeyed her too much. If she found out, I would be punished for life.

Our house seemed darker when I arrived, though the curtains in the living room were not drawn. My father once explained the darkness was due to the position of the windows to the sun. Our living room reminded me of an empty hotel lounge. The curtains were made of a gold damask, and the chairs were a deep red velvet. A piano stood by the sliding doors to the veranda.

The house was designed by two Englishmen with the help of an architect my father knew. They lived together for years, and everyone knew about them, he said. Then they moved to Nairobi and he bought the house from them. The two men living together; the Bakare house full of children; grandparents, parents, teachers, now Akanni, and of all people, Bisi. The whole world was full of sex, I thought, running away from my footsteps. In my bedroom, I read the first page of Sheri’s book, then the last. It described a man and woman kissing and how their hearts beat faster. I read it again and searched the book for more passages like that, then I marked each of them to read later.

My father arrived soon afterward and challenged me to a game of *ayo*. He always won, but today he explained the secret

of the game. “You’d better listen, because I’m tired of defeating you. First, you choose which bowl you want to land in. Then you choose which bowl will get you there.”

He shook the beads in his fist and plopped them, one by one, into the six bowls carved into the wooden slate. I’d always thought the trick was to pick the fullest bowl.

“Work it out backward?” I asked.

“Exactly,” he said, scooping beads from the bowl.

“Daddy,” I said. “I wasn’t watching.”

He slapped the table. “Next time you will.”

“Cheater.”

We were on our fifth round when my mother returned from church. I waved to her as she walked through the front door. I didn’t get up to greet her as I normally would. I was winning the game and thought that if I moved, I would lose my good fortune.

“Heh, heh, I’m beating you,” I said, wriggling in my chair.

“Only because I let you,” my father said.

I scooped the beads from a bowl and raised my hand. My mother walked through the veranda door.

“Enitan? Who gave this to you?”

She grabbed my ear and shoved Sheri’s book under my nose.

“Who? Answer me now.”

“For God’s sake,” my father said.

Her fingers were like iron clamps. The *ayo* beads tumbled out of my hand, down to the floor. Sheri from next door, I said. My mother pulled me to my feet by my ear as I explained. Sheri handed it to me through the fence. The wide gap in the fence. Yes, it was wide enough. I had not read the book.

“Let me see,” my father said.

My mother flung the book on the table. “I go to her suitcase, find this... this... If I ever catch you talking to that girl again, there will be trouble in this house, you hear me?”

She released my ear. I dropped back into my seat. My ear was hot, and heavy.

My father slammed the book down. “What is this? She can’t make friends anymore?”

My mother rounded on him. “You continue to divide this child and me.”

“You’re her mother, not her juror.”

“I am not raising a delinquent. You look for evil and you will find it.”

My father shook his head. “Arin, you can quote the whole Bible if you want.”

“I am not here to discuss myself.”

“Sleep in that church of yours.”

“I am not here to discuss myself.”

“It will not give you peace of mind.”

“Get up when I’m talking to you, Enitan,” my mother said.

“Up. Up.”

“Sit,” my father said.

“Up,” my mother said.

“Sit,” my father said.

My mother patted her chest. “She will listen to me.”

I shut my eyes and imagined I was on the balcony with Sheri. We were laughing and the sun had warmed my ear. Their voices faded. I heard only one voice; it was my father’s. “Don’t mind her,” he said. “It’s that church of hers. They’ve turned her head.”

He shook my shoulders. I kept my eyes shut. I was tired, enough to sleep.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s play.”

“No,” I said.

“You’re leading.”

“I don’t care.”

Soon I heard his footsteps on the veranda. I stayed there until my ear stopped throbbing.

I spoke to neither parent for the rest of that evening. My father knocked on my door before I went to bed.

“You’re still sulking?” he asked.

“I’m not sulking,” I said.

“When I was a boy, I had no room to lock myself in.”

“You had no door.”

“Yes, I did. What are you saying?”

“You lived in a village.”

“Town,” he said.

I shrugged. It was village life outside Lagos, where he grew up. He got up early in the mornings to fetch water from a well, walked to school and studied by oil lamp. My father said his growth was stunted because food never got to him. If a Baptist priest hadn’t converted his mother to Christianity and taken him as a ward, I would never have been born thinking the world owed me something.

He pointed. “Is this the famous suitcase?”

He was pretending that nothing had happened.

“Yes.”

“I have something for it.”

He retrieved a rectangular case from his pocket and handed it to me.

“A pen?”

“Yours.”

It was a fat navy pen. I pulled the cap off.

“Thank you, Daddy.”

My father reached into his pocket again. He pulled a watch out and dangled it. I collapsed. It was a Timex. My father promised he would never buy me another watch again, after I broke the first and lost the second. This one had a round face the width of my wrist. Red straps. I rocked it.

“Thank you,” I said, strapping it on.

He was sitting on my bed. Both feet were on it, and he still

had his socks on. I sat on the floor by them. He rubbed my shoulder.

“Looking forward to going to school?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t be sad when you get there.”

“I’ll make friends.”

“Friends who make you laugh.”

I thought of Sheri. I would have to avoid girls like her in school, otherwise I might end up expelled.

“Anyone who bullies you, beat them up,” my father said.

I rolled my eyes. Who could I fight?

“And join the debating society, not the girl guides. Girl guides are nothing but kitchen martyrs in the making.”

“What is that?”

“What you don’t want to be. You want to be a lawyer?”

Going to work was too remote to contemplate.

He laughed. “Tell me now, so I can take back my gifts.”

“I’m too young to know.”

“Too young indeed. Who will run my practice when I’m gone. And another thing, these romance books you’re reading. No chasing boys when you get there.”

“I don’t like boys.”

“Good,” he said. “Because you’re not going there to study boy-ology.”

“Daddy,” I said.

He was the one I would miss. The one I would write to. I settled to write a poem after he left, using words that rhymed with sad: bad, dad, glad, had. I was on my third verse when I heard raps on my window. I peeped outside to find Sheri standing with a sheet of paper in her hand. Her face appeared like a tiny moon. She was crouching.

“Open up,” she said.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered.

“I came to get your school address.”

Wasn’t she afraid? It was as dark as indigo outside.

“On your own?”

“With Akanni. He’s in your quarters, with his girlfriend.”

She pulled a pencil from her pocket. She was like an imp who had come to tempt me. I couldn’t get rid of her.

“Eni-Tan,” she spelled.

“Yes,” I said.

“Your school address,” she said. “Or are you deaf?”