TOADS OF WAR

Eddie Iroh



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To my brother, Joe,
of whom it would be unfair to say
that he fell by the wayside.
He fell right at the end.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A relatively small volume like this has somehow managed to appropriate a disproportionate amount of the precious time of a number of friends of mine. Much as it would be proper to acknowledge the help of these very kind people, no tribute could compensate them adequately for their patience, sacrifice and unfailing good humour at all times including the most inconvenient hours.

In writing this second volume of a trilogy I have drawn great inspiration from the Odunke Community of Artistes, whose lyrical insight into the civil war period remains a very significant creative appraisal of this tragic interlude. I express my utmost gratitude to them for permission to adapt their dance-drama, *Veneration to Udo*, for this novel as well as the use of their various poems.

I am extremely grateful to my friend Chris Offodile who read the first draft of the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. I am equally indebted to Dan P. Young, very good friend, very good linguist and proofreader extraordinary, who patiently went through the final typescript for me. I owe more than the usual thanks to Nina Mba whose suggestions on the structure of the story proved extremely thoughtful. Special thanks belong to my friend Alexandra Trouton who, rather inadvertently, provided the title of this novel. I hold none of them responsible for any flaws that might have escaped their careful scrutiny.

Finally, but by no means least, comes one person without whom the sun might have set on this novel; my able, dedicated and long-suffering secretary, Henrietta Umunna, who used up all her leisure time typing and re-typing my scandalously dreadful hand-drafts. To her and all, I owe a debt of thanks and gratitude.

The characters in this story, while created from the real and tragic events during the final phase of the Nigeria–Biafra civil war, are purely imaginary and any resemblance to actual people is purely coincidental.

AND SO IT WAS
that we who were afield when
the blazing sun set at midday
were abandoned naked in the black
while kinsmen couched clothed dogs
in cushioned kennels . . .

– Felix Okeke-Ezigbo
*Rejection**

* Completed on page 143

PROLOGUE: THE BEGINNING OF THE END

24 December 1968

THE SKY no longer growled and made cloudy faces. The air was no longer clean and fresh. It was dry, dusty and stuffy enough to bruise the nostrils. Early in the mornings though, before the sun peered from behind a mask of smoky-grey cloud, the air tantalized the nostrils with brief, cool, and crisp gusts. For most of the day, however, breathing was a beastly nuisance.

So was the sun. At noon it beat down with humid fury, whipping the temperature up to a firm and unwavering 100° that climbed down to no less than a grudging 70° at night.

Dusty breeze swept across the bushes with the fierceness of a Saharan gale, provoking anguished crackles and grim smirks from dried and withered twigs.

Christmas was only a day away.

But the merciless weather was all the reminder there was of the approaching festive season. There were not the usual arches of pleated palm fronds and green branches adorning doorways. The merry seasonal throb of drums and gongs and the ecstatic yodelling of excited children and their masquerades had been silenced by the whine of air-raid sirens, the terrifying flash of MiG jet fighters, the ear-splitting sputter of anti-aircraft guns and cannons and the crashing explosion of bombs and rockets.

On the uncomfortably close battle-fronts the insistent clatter of berserk guns, the venomous thunder of artillery and mortar bombs and the piercing shriek of nerves in pain were an unlikely simulation of yule sound.

It was hard to believe that it was Christmas Eve.

But the gloom and grimness existed not in the quarters of a few people – the war racketeers and profiteers, the disaster millionaires, the big shots, the toads of war, civilian and military, who fought their own war by proxy. Fresh crates of assorted liquor, precious salt, canned food

and cigarettes had long since arrived for their yuletide delectation.

Nor was there a dull moment in their life style. Vigorous entertaining went on all day and a new complacency rose like Christmas fireworks.

The boys were at the battle-fronts, doing the fighting, the killing – and the dying. You had to kill your enemy or be killed by him, they had drummed into the boys' ears. The more enemy you killed the less you had to face. Victory consisted in consistently liquidating as many of your enemy as you could set your eyes on. An eminent Russian strategist had said something like that. The enemy deserved no mercy. To spare him meant to barter your life for his own.

If the big shots were not big fighters, at least they were good indoctrinators. They were heroes in the war of words and on the air-waves. They were brilliant fighters-by-proxy.

Soon the war would be won.

By the boys.

It was going to be a merry Christmas, after all.

The air offensive worsened on the next morning. It was the largest number of aircraft sighted over the area on any one mission. Umuahia, the military–political citadel, was the main target. Two MiG 17 fighters and one Illyushin 8 bomber suddenly glistened out of the blazing sky, sweeping in arrow-point formation.

The suddenness of the onslaught caught the anti-aircraft crews and the air-raid wardens with their hands limp. It was two full minutes, six bombs, three rockets and countless cannon before they took in the full impact of the furious blitz.

From the southern tip of the town one battery of heavy machine guns, apparently all there was, opened with frantic, furious chatter, hurling a few dozen futile shells way beneath the diving and swerving machines. The aircraft glided on, wickedly, glistening their contempt.

One fighter dived out of a cover of cloud, followed closely by the bomber: it swept down on an uncovered stand-by power plant between the complex of buildings that housed makeshift offices. The humming plant went dead under a barrage of cannon. The bomber followed, diving heedlessly, almost as low as the fighter, and released a fearsome load that just missed the plant but not the near-by highway, bequeathing a crater twelve feet wide and deep enough to bury a car in.

Behind a pile of dried wood and planks, adjacent to the target, two men who were taking cover were roasted in the instant inferno.

Across the main highway a short stubby man in a red car was caught

in the middle of the road as the MiG returned to take a decisive swipe at the power plant. The stubby man braked in confusion and terror, leapt out of the car, took a look at the roaring sky above him and decided to dash into the bush in search of cover. But he had only enough time to glimpse the fighter wheeling round to pounce on its stubborn target when it opened up all guns, sweeping a wide area around and beyond the plant with a fine broom of cannon fire in a furious bid for a *coup de grâce.* The orange flame leaping out of the aircraft's turrets was still visible to the terrified man as he slumped beside his car with a hole in his chest.

Though terror-stricken they were, the men under cover of nearby culverts and stairways were stung by the anguished groan of the cannon-stricken man. Several of them leapt out from under cover to help the fallen one. Hurriedly they grabbed his hands and feet and tried to carry him quickly across the road to some cover before they tried to tend his wound.

They, too, were too late.

The second fighter-plane, appearing a few seconds after the first, swept the same trail blazed by its predecessor. In one spluttering second it levelled the rescuers in the middle of the road and punched the final nail on the first victim's head.

For thirty minutes the jets weaved back and forth, diving in and bobbing out of the skies, leaving in their wake a deafening medley of bombs, rockets and cannon fire.

South of the city, the casualty ward of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital had grown from one tiny room to encompass a large hall and its adjoining corridors, in under one hour.

A handful of doctors, including a young Swiss missionary volunteer, and a dozen female nurses, grimly picked and chose from the growing number of largely hopeless cases, trying to give urgent attention to those who were more likely to benefit from it. But many of the victims seemed to have died, or were dying, before they reached the ward.

On a blood-stained stretcher near the entrance a little girl, no more than five years old, still bore a wide-eyed look of surprise and a hole in the neck as she lay cold. The tiny shrapnel that ripped out her life still clung to the congealed blood beside her fatal wound. On either side of her were the adult corpses of her father and mother.

In the middle of the hall a plump, middle-aged woman, her face smeared with blood and anguish, slumped on the floor and waved the bloody stump of a missing arm, muttering something incoherent to the young Swiss doctor. The doctor nodded compassionately and patted her trembling shoulder.

Slowly the doctor shook his head and took the hypodermic syringe extended by the nurse at his elbow. He inserted it under the top skin of the woman's other arm. He had barely pushed in the needle when the second wave of jets descended on the city.

The anti-aircraft squad was not caught completely off-guard this time around. But the noisy clatter was in inverse proportion to the guns' fire-power. The planes left the bullets flailing feebly: David was going at Goliath with an upper-cut.

The young doctor tried to ignore the roar of the aircraft, the sputter of the guns and the crashing of bombs. He reaffirmed his hold on the woman's arm and realized his own hands were trembling, tottering between despair and determination.

And now the aircraft seemed to be roaring directly over the roof of the hall. Almost instantly two cannons glanced off the thick brick walls; another punched through the pan roof and crashed into the concrete floor. At last the young doctor broke and leapt under cover of a wooden bench.

Underneath a thick wooden slab presently serving as a theatre table, a foreign news reporter lay flat on his stomach. He wiped a blot of blood from his notebook and continued to scribble furiously. 'Body count 37 dead, 45 wounded; maybe more,' he wrote.

The wave swept by.

The white doctor hurried out from underneath the bench. The front and arms of his white overall wore a deep crimson pattern. Anxiously he rushed over to his patient. But the middle-aged woman was now limp beneath the bench on which her hand had been resting. The young Swiss picked up the lifeless arm, gently pulled out the syringe, and slowly rested the arm across the woman's stomach.

'Dead,' he said in a choked voice.

Peering down from behind the doctor's shoulder, the news reporter, notebook and pencil in hand, flipped over a page and searched his notes. He cancelled the 37 and wrote 38.

Soon the hall was piling even higher with bodies.

By the New Year the sinews of the city had been torn out by the daily assault. So had the people's morale, despite strident exhortations to stand firm! Fight to the last man!

Soon Umuahia was a disembowelled city whose final collapse was inevitable. And when the collapse came the city yielded unstubbornly.

It was the seventh major city to fall on its face, irretrievably, in eighteen months of war.

But there was a saving grace.

Just as Umuahia was crumbling, Owerri, for several months in the hands of the Federals, was being recaptured after a long, tense siege. It

was the first and, eventually, the only city recaptured from the Federals throughout the war.

Among the thousands of Biafrans who made haste to make new homes and begin a new life in Owerri were two remarkably disparate breeds of men.

The one was middle-aged, privileged and powerful. He lacked nothing, wanted nothing – not even an end to the war. An end to the war would mean the termination of his influence and affluence, of a charming life-style that had overwhelmed his wildest fantasy. He had an abundance of the most important items, the lack of which had driven others to fervent prayers for an end to the sufferings: food in his store and money in his pocket.

When he returned to Owerri after the recapture, he did not need to search for a new home. A renovated bungalow, duly furnished to his high taste, was assigned to him. He was a happy and contented man without any guilty conscience about his conspicuous state of general well-being. And because he was always happy there was no time, or room, to reflect on the one event that should have given him cause for qualms. . . .

The other one was young, deprived and deformed. He was unemployed and, for now, unemployable. His new home was a cubby-hole of a room in the dreariest part of town where mansions were thatch-roofed huts with red mud walls.

To the naked eye his outward deportment insisted, rather emphatically, that he was a gentle, courteous, even friendly young man with malice towards no one. His fine looks, a source of exultant pride to his mother when he was a little boy, had grown with him, and faithfully complemented the impression his demeanour created.

But there was a second, deeper side to the young man which the naked eye did not discern.

Alone in his rat-hole, or in the company of the few close friends that knew his sad history, he would take off the sweet, silky veneer that covered his inner side. Then you could see the bitterness, the vengeance, breathing through his skin.

But no eye, except his, saw the clue that confirmed his other self more convincingly still than his private mood, and deepened the mystery about his mission. It was what he regarded as his most precious possession, a property he would give his life to safeguard until it had served its purpose, his purpose.

It was a loaded French MAAB automatic pistol with a spare clip of ammunition. . . .

1 MAKE LOVE, NOT WAR

INSIDE THE BUILDINGS in the vast compound, the air was languid. Outside, the night fumed with heat. In any dry season Owerri, a small, land-locked town of rolling green acres, could easily put a baker's oven out of business.

It is a very small town by all standards, or it used to be. At one time its most prominent landmark was the old, grey, high-walled prison building. But now I could see that Owerri had become a big city, with more than five times its pre-war population of traders, hawkers, hustlers and craftsmen. Its shell-torn and bullet-pocked walls had been patched up with thatch and mud and made habitable for the thousands of refugees who flooded into Owerri after its recapture. Even the bombed-out power station was ticking over once more, providing electric power, if only in epileptic fits.

Before its fall, the town could offer reasonable relaxation. There was the relatively posh motel on the golf course, the sleazy Stanza that catered to the palm wine drinkers and provided the services of weather-beaten prostitutes – old, cheap mammy-wagons that cost only three bob a ride. And there were several new bars and clubs run by the refugees who returned after the massacres in the North.

But it seemed to me now that the town's main recreation centre was the Women's Hostel of the new teachers' college, a vast, over-populated camp for refugees with long legs.

This night, as on other nights since I arrived here, there were more cars parked outside the Women's Hostel than in the local motor-park on a busy Christmas Eve.

Through the unofficial car park, Meju and I groped our way. It was not easy finding our path even in the familiar surroundings. The night was dark as a bunker and the air-raid blackout was faultless.

Not to my surprise, I struck my knee against the bumper of a black saloon married into the pitch night and gave a yelp of pain.

'Do you know, Mej,' I began as I retrieved my slipper after the minor

collision, 'do you know that if Nigeria hadn't attacked us, there'd still have been a war in this country?'

'How do you mean?' Meju must have scowled in the darkness.

'A full-scale shooting war, man,' I insisted without much elaboration.

'Caused by who, then?' queried the groping silhouette a few feet ahead of me.

'Caused by the eternal triangle,' I replied through my teeth.

'Which eternal triangle?' The silhouette sounded irritable.

'Which else?' I snapped back, unreasonably angered by my friend's incomprehension. 'There's only one eternal triangle, isn't there? I don't know how else to tell you. I try not to use obscene words. I still see the padre occasionally,' I mumbled in a kinder tone.

'Don't start anything you can't finish, my friend,' Mej advised, not in a very kind tone. 'I keep telling you, you're impossible to converse with,' he added, quickening his stride as he cleared the last row of cars and stepped on to the open lawn.

'That's what you always say,' I grumbled, 'but do you realize that this so-called new nation is one big whore-house?'

'There you go again!' Meju groaned loudly. 'I suppose your problem comes from reading those American books of yours. . . . What the devil do you mean by war house?' Mej thundered angrily, obviously irritated by what he considered my conundrums.

'Whore-house, I said!' I could hear my voice knifing through the silent night. 'W-H-O-R-E-house! Just look at the number of able-bodied men who are bashing about in the women's rooms. . . .' I jabbed angrily over my shoulder in the direction of the massed cars. 'You'd think the whole car-owning population of Biafra was living there!' I jabbed again in the darkness.

'Oh, well . . .,' sighed my friend helplessly, as anger caused me to abandon the irritating riddles. 'Try to keep your shirt on, brother. It is their contribution to the war effort.'

'The hell it is!' Anger choked me.

'You don't happen to have a sister living in there, do you?' Meju asked in a flat tone. 'Otherwise, I don't see why you should cause yourself so much heat on an already hot night. I have given up bothering my head. I did so a long while ago. Everyone has, anyway. For all the damn I give, the Big Shots can have an orgy right here in the open field in broad daylight and ball themselves to death! They should have only the Russian MiGs to worry about.'

'Well, I'm afraid you've given up too soon. Much too soon. And that, my dear Mej, is the trouble. Everyone has given up. Yet there are harder times ahead.'

'So what do we do then, my patriotic friend?' Meju's sarcasm bit my ear-drums.

'I don't know. . . . I just know this much: that if we used our heads half as much as we used our groins, we would not have a war still on our hands nearly three years after it began,' I said with undisguised bitterness.

'I still give up,' Meju said obstinately. 'Listen, what's the use you and me worrying?' he asked, and went on: 'Just two of us, standing vertically in the middle of a hot night wondering how to save a country that belongs to twelve million people, while the Big Shots are horizontal, having the ball of their lives before the sun sets?' He slowed his pace to allow me to come abreast. 'No use, man. No use. My pass ends at midnight. In the morning I get back to the front, just because there's nowhere else to go to. When the vandals get me, I get liberated. Good night.' He patted my good shoulder briefly and quickened his stride again.

'But it's not enough to just fight the enemy now, Meju.' I must have sounded idealistically silly, but I persisted. 'There's more fighting to be done right here at home than up the front. You can't run away from it.'

'What do you expect me to do then? Turn my Madsen rifle on the Women's Hostel and blast every man's balls? Whatever happened to the National Orientation Committee?'

'Maybe not; not that kind of fighting. But we can't just turn our backs, head for the fronts and damn the rear. Maybe we can think out something together. Two heads, they say, are better than one.'

'Yeah,' Meju's head nodded in the darkness. The silhouette paused sombrely at the entrance to the Men's Hostel. 'Yeah,' he repeated. There was a distinct sneer in the simple affirmation. 'The hell they are. Two heads are better than one, all right. So much better that every four years several million heads in America get together to elect one head as better than the rest! Why, I suppose Biafra has *two* heads of state!' he sneered and moved to go.

I paused a little longer, a foot on the stairway.

I watched his figure disappear into the darkness and wished I had said what he had just said. The young fellow was as sore as I was, all right.

But was I really sore for the same reason as Meju was?

Having openly admitted to an envious admiration for Meju's statement, I must confess that, now he had vanished into the bowels of the dark hostel, I admired it more for its sarcastic wit than its patriotic sentiments.

I do not need deeper reflection to admit that I had given up too; certainly much earlier than Meju. While he returns to the battle-front

tomorrow morning '*just because there's nowhere else to go to . . .*' I will stay rooted in this town.

And don't you suppose that I am here to seek further participation in the war effort . . . which is less than Mej can say for himself! For some sad reason I cannot participate further; and even if I could, I would not; not the way I feel now.

Perhaps I am wrong; perhaps I spoke hastily. . . . I am in this town to fight a war. Yes, a *war*. But not Mej's kind of war. Mine is a private war. *My* private war.

If I sound mysteriously bitter, I would excuse myself on the grounds that I have an incontestable reason to support it.

At least my friend Mej has his two hands, his father and mother. . . .

I have lost both my mother and my right hand in this war. . . . And not for unavoidable reasons. . . .

2 SUICIDE SQUAD

IT SEEMED as if Sergeant Meju and the signal were engaged in a silent, fateful race. And as it turned out, the sergeant reached the 'S' Brigade Tactical Headquarters thirteen minutes after the signal landed on the division commander's desk.

Meju reported to his battalion's commanding officer, who had forgotten that the sergeant was due to resume duty that morning.

'Morn, sah!' Meju's heels thudded into the carpet of dust and dried grass.

The C.O. was studying a dog-eared map of the silent front spread over a rickety school bench outside the old primary school building that now served as his brigade's tactical headquarters.

He lifted his face from the map and a surprised look replaced his studious mien.

'What are you doing here, Meju?' The query was friendly. The sergeant was one of the C.O.'s favourite N.C.O.s. 'You were supposed to be on pass.'

'Yessah, but it expired at midnight, sah.'

'Of course. That's right. I remember now,' the C.O. nodded, inwardly seriously doubting that he remembered. 'Things have been so quiet in the past week one hardly knows there's a war on.'

'That's good news, sah,' Meju mumbled.

In a few minutes the C.O. would have sooner bitten off his tongue. And Sergeant Meju would wish his pass had not expired at midnight.

In the dull, grey, quiet morning the distant groan of a Land Rover grinding over tough terrain could be heard in the silent school premises.

Both Captain Martin Chieze, the C.O., and Sergeant Meju stretched and strained to find out who was calling this early. And soon they could see the green Land Rover nosing up the uneven bush track. The lone red star emblem in place of a licence plate confirmed beyond question that it was their division's command car.

The captain quickly picked up his swagger stick from the top of the map, put it under his left arm, and stepped out from behind the map-topped bench. His brows furrowed as his eyes remained glued to the approaching vehicle. His mind raced over all available possibilities to divine what calamity would bring the commander of the division trundling down to a practically dead battle-front at first light on a Monday morning.

The division commander's very many, very fine and admirable qualities were known to Chieze first-hand. As a colonel, officer and gentleman, he was a soldier's soldier, an officer's officer. He was a man of enormous strength and ability, and ruthless skill – an invaluable quality for fighting this brand of war. He loved the battle-front and seemed to thrive on its harsh, often tragic, conditions. His countless nicknames bespoke the terror he generated in the enemy, as well as in those of his troops who flagged in battle. Still, he was one of the last of a breed of leaders of whom it would be accurate to say that they commanded both the troops and their respect.

But one of the colonel's qualities, Martin Chieze warned himself, was not to make sudden descents on the fronts . . . just to cheer up the troops.

It was Meju, no less amazed than the C.O. by the unexpected visit, who shook himself free from their silent wonderment to open the door as the command car drew up in front of them.

The commander was of a scandalously unsoldierly slight build that gave false testimony to his legendary strength in battle. Even at seven o'clock in the morning he was wearing battle-fatigues, a steel hat and the face of an avenging devil.

He acknowledged the salutes impatiently, briskly dismissed the sergeant, and promptly went into a huddle with Martin Chieze.

'There is a grave emergency, Martin,' the colonel began without preamble as soon as Meju was out of ear-shot. He sighed. 'A very grave one, indeed,' he emphasized, as if his dawn descent was not enough foretoken of an emergency. He strode pensively over the patch of grass and sat heavily on the bench, shoving the map to one side.

'Sit down here,' he invited the captain, indicating room on the long bench.

Martin Chieze made to decline the offer; in emergencies he listened better standing. But standing before the slight, smallish colonel, now even more outrageously small from his sitting position, gave a disrespectful impression of looking down on his superior officer. Martin Chieze sneaked in noiselessly beside the commander, folded his arms over his trim middle, cocked his head in rapt attention, and soon was listening, and shuddering, to a most terrifying disclosure. . . .

The fateful signal had arrived at the Division Headquarters at 6.00 that morning by special courier from Government Lodge. The Intercept Unit of the Biafran Directorate of Military Intelligence had begun monitoring it at about midnight. The unit had quickly cross-checked its intrinsic details with data available to them to make sure this was not a diversionary tactic. It had seemed like it. Anything so ambitious could only be diversionary. Or disastrous.

What emerged was an ominous possibility that it was not a faked diversion. Intercept had quickly passed the message on, duly marked OP IMMEDIATE, to the chief of defence Operations who equally quickly woke up the general without losing a precious minute.

The import of the situation was clearly etched into every word and line of the signal by the carefully elaborate analysis and forecasts carried out by Intercept Unit after it had obtained the communication.

Hamman's Brigade, the intercepted message began, had apparently vowed to blot out, with its own blood, the shame of its classically decisive routing in the siege of Owerri. The remnants of the shattered brigade that had been encircled in Owerri by the Biafrans had regrouped at Avu, a small deserted village north-west of Owerri, under the command of the highest surviving officer in the brigade – a Captain Aliu Pam.

Apparently of their own suicidal volition, the survivors of the long, tragic siege, thirty-odd soldiers, had formed themselves into a suicide squad and sworn, by the grave of their beloved Major Hamman, for whom they had even posted an elegy all over Owerri before they were routed from the town, that they would avenge his death and their loss of the vital city – or die in the bid.

The Hamman squad, the signal disclosed, planned to do this by penetrating the defence perimeter of the newly recaptured city, disguised as Biafran soldiers.

Their mission, a horrendously ambitious one, was to assassinate the

General. Only the General's death would compensate for the death of their beloved Major Hamman. Nothing less.

Clearly, the message implied, the squad did not intend to take the General prisoner as the desperate men had forsworn their chances of escaping from Owerri.

The Intercept Unit, a legendarily efficient intelligence arm that had achieved similarly uncanny feats in the past, had followed with fateful clarity an hour-long exchange of radio signals between the squad and their Division Headquarters.

The squad had, apparently, initiated the plan, radioing their headquarters at 12 midnight with an outline of their patriotic, retributive resolution. H.Q., horrified, had radioed back to know how in blazing hell they expected to execute such an ambitious escapade. The squad had gone into unusual detail for a radio message.

The electronic dialogue had flowed verbatim into the viaduct of the Biafrans' secret listening device. The acutely sensitive equipment was part of a highly sophisticated mobile communications network 'donated' by a French 'philanthropist' who was believed to be a top agent of the French espionage agency, S.D.E.C.E. The midnight *coup* was not the first occasion it had provided the beleaguered Biafrans with an early warning of approaching danger.

As those in the know had feared, the General had not even considered the contingency option of evacuating to one of his highly secure, highly remote hideouts. His defiant reaction had thoroughly dismayed those of his lieutenants responsible for his personal security.

Get the commander of 'S' Division immediately to take every necessary step to forestall the brazen intruders decisively, he had ordered.

The operative word was *decisively*.

3 ASSAULT SQUAD

SO THE DECISION had been made, Captain Martin Chieze discovered. Hit the enemy squad and hit it *decisively*. He recalled someone else saying that military skill consisted of deciding quickly what had to be done and getting someone else to do the job. From what his division commander was saying, it looked to Martin Chieze that he, the captain, was the *someone else*, though the colonel was not putting it in so many words.

The recent lull had not succeeded in lulling Chieze and his battalion into a false sense of peace, or even truce. Rather he had felt that it had been too long, too good a lull, to be true. There had to be a sting in the tail. It could not have been more dramatic, more of an emergency. A suicide squad, hell-bent, all guns blazing, heading for State House with the singular aim of assassinating the General. Nothing less.

Chieze lifted his chin from his chest and glanced sideways at the colonel. He had talked grimly for twenty minutes, giving the details of his plans for a counter-attack. But now in their silence both men seemed to speak their common concern: no one had any idea of the day or time of the planned raid; not even the careful analysis and forecasts of Intercept Unit had pretended to be prescient in this regard.

'It just shows that the vandals are not as stupid as we deceive ourselves that they are, sir,' Martin Chieze was thinking aloud. 'Even though they appear to have disclosed more than they should in a radio signal, they have carefully left out the most decisive bit of information, the time of attack.'

'Still,' the colonel began, 'we have to stop them! Even if we have to ring the town round with armed men!'

The captain gave him a questioning look.

The colonel shifted again, shrugged and mumbled something inaudible. He meant to say that he realized that he had spoken with greater defiance than realism. There were hardly enough armed men under his command to ring round an ant-hill. Desertion by both officers and men had become a scandalous threat more menacing than the enemy's expected final offensive. Here he was in a brigade planning with the commander of a battalion, not the brigade commander. His other two brigade commanders had vanished, pleading unprovable illnesses.

If the colonel was here it was not because he liked Captain Chieze and called him by his first name, which he did, or that this was his division's crack unit, which it was not; it was simply the only battalion that could boast a fully armed company. The crack 'S' Brigade, the forerunner unit that could be called the father of 'S' Division, a lightning outfit that struck with the venom of a python, was no longer the *special* that the 'S' stood for. It was now a shadow of its former élite self, totally lacking in cohesion and discipline. Like the rest of the armed services. Yes, the 'S' now stood for *shadow.*

When the colonel spoke up he was uncharacteristically defensive. 'What I mean is, well, in a manner of speaking. . . . I don't really mean that we have that number of armed men, you know. . . .'

'I understand what you mean, sir,' the C.O. hastened gallantly to the rescue.

'And you understand of course that whatever we can muster depends largely on your battalion.' The colonel had taken advantage of Chieze's magnanimity to put forward the most difficult part of his plan. But his carefully worded statement was clearly not an order. You do not order a man into suicide.

Chieze's equally carefully phrased misgivings could not be interpreted as dissent, either.

'Well, sir, under normal conditions my unit would volunteer to the last man . . . but now. . . .'

'Yes . . .?'

'But now, sir, this is a tired and demoralized battalion. They are demoralized by the situation at the rear, by the desertion of commanders and officers in our sister units. Major Mere and Major Ukatta are already behaving as if the war had been won. This is the bitter truth of the matter, sir. . . .'

The colonel knew the truth before Chieze spoke.

'I realize that, Martin. But this is an emergency. Think of it that way. How many men do you think you can muster?'

'How many men do you wish to deploy for the action, sir?'

'Let me see . . . our reckoning, my reckoning, is that Hamman's suicide squad consists of no more than thirty survivors of the siege. But to allow for the unpredictable, I am conceding that they may have as many as fifty. Let's say I will take them on two-to-one.'

The captain nodded thoughtfully.

'Do you think we can get a hundred volunteers from you?' The commander posed the query that Chieze dreaded.

'I'm afraid I can't say for sure, sir. Things are not what they used to be.'

'Suppose we get less than a hundred from you . . .?'

'I haven't really thought about the next alternative, sir,' Chieze confessed truthfully.

'Well?'

'Well, now that you mention it, sir, I do *hope* we get up to a hundred volunteers,' Chieze said, aware that he had not exactly answered the question.

'You are quibbling, Martin,' the colonel was sharp. He was not going to put on his tough commander's hat, he had long ago decided, not in this exercise. But. . . . 'In that case then,' he continued, 'you and I shall be constrained to *order* troops into the assault squad, but you know that the best potential suicide is a volunteer one.'

The captain made to avoid the colonel's eyes. Chieze was a shy, tall and lanky career officer whose rise from second-lieutenant to captain in

less than three years was as much a result of the dearth of officers of command calibre as his undoubted ability in field-craft and courage.

In the few months since the colonel, personally commanding the siege of Owerri, created a corridor through Avu to let out the remnants of the trapped Federal forces and end the bloody siege, the two had been full of respect for each other. The siege had brought them together for the first time. The tough battle for the recapture of the town brought out the best and the worst in them. It was a fierce encounter with a besieged and desperate enemy force in which its commander, Major Hamman, had lost his life.

Chieze soon realized he had no reason to avoid the colonel's eyes. They had not said anything to each other that they did not know already. Moreover, the colonel was in fact staring pensively into the bush in front of them, like a fortune-teller in the act of divination.

In the end they did not get up to a hundred volunteers. Perhaps if they had disclosed to the men that the mission was to safeguard the person of the General, they would have got twice the number they required. But the colonel had decided that tact and discretion were as important a weapon in this exercise as strength and number. For this reason he had also limited his source of recruitment to one unit. Even then he had decided against telling them their objective until the last minute. If news of the expected strike, and its target, should filter through to the civilian population, a pandemonium worse than re-evacuation would overawe the newly recaptured city.

A total of seventy-five soldiers had volunteered from the battalion. 'C' Company had the largest number of volunteers at thirty-five. But Captain Chieze did not fail to note that this number did not include the company's O.C., Sergeant Meju.

The colonel finally decided that if he was going to *order* the remaining twenty-five, he had better order the men of *his* Headquarters' Company, most of whom belonged to his personal bodyguard detail anyway. But that still left the assault squad two men short.

'When does the squad go into action, sir?' Chieze asked the commander.

'Tonight,' he replied, explaining: 'I don't expect that a small squad like Hamman will want to strike any time before darkness.'

'Who will be commanding it, sir?'

'I will.'

'I beg your pardon, sir?' Chieze was not sure he heard right.

'I shall command the assault squad personally, Martin. It appears to

me that the humanitarian gesture of creating a corridor for the survivors to escape was a mistake.'

Chieze's nod carried poor conviction.

'So, I feel personally responsible for the potential threat to the General's life.'

'I don't see how, sir.'

'Well, in any case, I don't like any unfinished business. The ending of the siege seems to have lacked a finishing touch. I would like to add the finishing touch myself.' The grin was more of a grimace.

'In that case, sir,' Chieze's voice was clear and measured, 'I would like to join you. I had not realized the squad was going to have the honour of being led by no less than the commander himself.'

The colonel left with orders that the ninety-nine men, including himself and Chieze, assemble at the 'S' Division's Tactical Headquarters at 1900 hours.

When the news got around the battalion later that morning that Captain Chieze had volunteered along with seventy-five of his men for the assault squad, the colonel got his hundredth volunteer.

His name was Sergeant Willi Meju.

4 THREE DOORS AND A FIRE ESCAPE

THE TWO GIRLS looked alike. Like twin sisters. The one, Ihuoma, sat on a narrow mat on the floor, a small wooden-backed mirror between her bare thighs.

The other was Kechi. Ke, her friends called her, after a long-gone American Peace Corps girl of social fame called Kay. She was perched on a high stool behind Ihuoma. Her long, slim fingers were nimbly twisting yards of thin, shiny black thread around Ihuoma's finely combed hair, working it into long, slim plaits.

The two always killed time chatting, plaiting each other's hair in turns, whenever their men-friends were not visiting in the evenings. This evening they seemed to have run out of topics for gossip: men, money, clothes, cosmetics. They had been through the now beaten tracks and silence seemed to swallow up their room, though other rooms in the hostel buzzed with low talk and muffled laughter. Only Kechi's fingers continued to talk a silent language of their own.

From across the road, over the old Shell-BP quarters, they could

hear the power plant stutter, falter. The lights in the rooms flickered in unison, paled off and came on brighter almost immediately.

Suddenly the fingers stopped working, talking. Kechi seemed to go limp on her high stool, her fingers still clutching a half-plaited tendril of her friend's rich hair. Her thoughts began to drift and then raced in one great rush like oil poured down a fast-flowing river, draining her of presence of mind.

Ihuoma reckoned that her friend needed a replenishment of thread and extended a fresh length over her ear to Kechi. But Kechi's riveted eyes did not see the thread or Ihuoma's hand suspended in mid-air.

Her thoughts raced on and soon settled on the forthcoming event, the fund-raising fashion ball. She thought about the *big do*. It was a *big do*, all right. Anything that got a hundred people together in a social atmosphere qualified as a *big do* nowadays.

She thought about her new dress, the dance, the competition, the joy of triumph. Her mind's eye saw a picture of herself framed in that latest creation of the resourceful world of fashion: the A-line mini.

With a dress like that on her figure – a shapely, busty figure that dressmakers loved to hang new creations on – she thought she stood more than one jump ahead of other contestants.

A fashion queen in war time – wow! She thrilled silently. That must be the first of the kind, she thought.

Now stop being presumptuous, she suddenly checked herself. For one thing, Chim, her man-friend, had only said he would *try* to get the material for her new dress when next he went to Lisbon. *Try* was the word. And *when*? It could be any time, including the day *after* the fashion ball.

So, there you are, old girl, she told herself. It wasn't a firm promise, if you knew men. Or knew Chim. For one thing, men had a self-serving penchant for saying they would when actually they meant they couldn't be bothered. Men were cunning bastards who knew the master-key that unlocked a woman's heart and thighs; namely, promises. Especially false promises.

For another, Kechi went on, granting she had the new dress, Owerri was alive with pretty young women who swung along with the restless pendulum of the world of fashion outside their enclave, the stranglehold of war notwithstanding.

So, Kechi concluded, she needed to worry more about her rivals than about Chim not getting her the material from Lisbon. She was not one of those who could pluck their apples from only one farm; who put all their eggs in one basket. She had an idol, a writer, who said that when one door shut, another opened – depending of course on how you designed

your house and ordered your life. Hers, she knew, was well designed and ordered.

Many of her friends in this very hostel, she knew, had always been wise to have three doors open. Just in case two were slammed shut simultaneously. And if the third should follow suit, well . . . there was always the fire-escape.

As long as men like what I have, she told herself, I don't mind trading it for what I want.

Hers was a well-ventilated life.

Her reverie over, Kechi came to with a jerk. She noticed Ihuoma's hand still holding out the thread to her, and shook her head.

'No. Hold on a second. I don't need a new thread yet.' She said it as if the silent interlude had not occurred.

'Then what have you been doing?' Ihuoma's displeasure was scarcely veiled.

'Oh, nothing. Just thinking.'

'You must be heading for hypertension or a Nobel Prize for Thought. You ought to make it at this rate.'

Kechi gave a weak laugh as her fingers resumed their twisting and turning around her friend's hair, working faster and more deftly, her optimistic dreams seeming to propel her wrists. In a short while the plaiting was over.

Ihuoma rose from the mat, held the mirror to her head, extended it over her shoulders, and surveyed her friend's craftswomanship. A bright smile of satisfaction was still drawing the bow of her lips as she bent down, gathered the tiny pieces of hair and thread, rolled up the mat and left for her own cubicle next door.

5 THE REVEREND DAUGHTER

IT WAS just a little past 6.30 p.m. and already dark as a cave. Perhaps night always came quickly in war time, Kechi thought. That's O.K., she told herself. Early nights were good for lovers. Most of them seemed to pray to the god of darkness – what else was there to do, anyway, Kechi wondered. Just eat when you could afford it; dance on some evenings, and make love most nights.

Fair enough, after you have spent the whole day dodging bombs and rockets.

But also, she went on to herself, there was something, there had to be something, wrong with this sort of love. It wasn't *that* kind of love, the right kind. It was love born of frustration and desperation. Love that began in boredom and ended in the bedroom.

But it was the only way, the only love, now. A girl had got to live; to look like a girl. War or no war. Give what you have. Get what you want. The spirit of give and take was still alive, wasn't it?

Fair enough.

Or damn it.

She began to spruce up for the Saturday night out.

Not many years ago Catherine Kechinyere Ugboma, whose first attraction in life had been the convent, would have died in her sleep if she had dreamt of herself thinking like a mortal sinner, as her devout mother would have put it. Or talking like a lewd, lascivious lackey of Lucifer, as her alliterative and even more devout headmistress, the Reverend Mother Mary Labore, would have described it.

The last child and only girl in a family of four, Kechi Ugboma could justly claim a good education for a woman at a time when it was not the tradition to give women too much education. Men believed it went to their heads.

She had trembled with genuine disbelief when she realized, the morning after her last paper in the Higher School Certificate examination, that she had spent all of fourteen years at study from infant school through to the upper sixth form. She had prayed intensely in the chapel that morning that she would not have to repeat anything, do a fifteenth year, add another year to the already staggering total. It would be a catastrophe that would delay her admission into the convent for another year.

When her results later showed that she had made three good grades at the principal level, Kechi had screamed up her whole neighbourhood. But not before she had returned to the school chapel to give thanks before a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and of course accept the good wishes of Mother Labore.

Kechi had felt the thanksgiving before the Blessed Virgin as a supremely appropriate gesture in more ways than one. For although she would not venture a comparison with the Blessed Mother, she was proudly aware that of the twenty-six girls who went through the upper sixth form with her, she was the only one who collected her result still a virgin. At the age of eighteen at that time in the swinging, sexy, sixties, it was a unique achievement which, in Mother Labore's chaste view,

surpassed her academic success. It was a precious possession she had vowed to Mother Labore to preserve, to guard forcefully, whatever happened.

Mother Labore had been personally exultant that her sometimes stern and unsubtle evangelizing had borne at least one fruit in the fertile and responsive, if worrisomely attractive, eighteen-year-old Catherine. That she was one out of a school population of seven hundred had not dismayed her. God was willing to save Sodom and Gomorrah for the sake of ONE chaste person.

Mother Labore had spotted Kechi's basic traces of a good Christian home-training from the minute she entered Form One, and had spared no effort to help her along the straight and narrow path of a wicked world. The little girl's spiritual and moral education had become the preoccupation of Mother Labore, who would not deny that she probably gave her better tutorials on the consequences of flouting the Ten Commandments than on the essential comedy of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night.*

Not that Mother Labore was a poor teacher of English literature, a subject she always managed to find time from her administrative chores to handle. But many a student would remember Mother Labore for her stern, stentorian character that became a mark of the institution. They would remember Mother Labore for a rigid school schedule that totally ignored recreation and exeats. The days seemed to consist of chapel, classes, meals, prep., meals, more prep. There were no free days; only what she called free compound which restricted movement to the enclosed premises of the school.

Mother Labore's students began each day in the chapel. 'You must speak to God before you talk to anyone else,' she exhorted. You did not dare argue with Mother. Though sixty-five years old, an age that her menacing gait refused to admit, the Irish nun was awesomely huge for a woman. She was as physically formidable as she was morally upright, some would say uptight. Though she was never known to have struck anybody, to have Mother Labore walking towards you in an angry mood was to witness the wrath of God in person. Possibly Mother Labore never struck anyone because she had a more efficacious weapon – her tongue, which she wielded with the abrasive dexterity of a horsewhip hand.

'Nonsense, child!' was the suffix to her every statement.

'Ngozi,' she once called up a Form Five student, 'I remember I asked you to re-write your comprehension exercise yesterday.'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Can I have it, then?'

'Mother, I am sorry. . . . I remembered it very late last night. . . . I have begun it, but I have not finished it. . . .' Ngozi was understandably trembling, stammering.

'You remembered it very late!' Mother Labore's voice was a cannon boom. 'I am pleased you remembered it *at all*. I keep telling you . . . it's your frequent flirting with the boys of Holy Ghost College that wipes your memory traces clean. Not that they were indelibly cast in the first place. . . . Nonsense, child!'

To be in Mother Labore's bad books was to live in absolute misery. And many girls did live a miserable life. But Catherine Kechi Ugboma remained Mother Labore's model of an excellent student, a good girl, a good Catholic girl. She had assiduously groomed her for the convent, and she had given Mother no reason at all to worry. Catherine Ugboma never had a single report laid against her in five years at the school; had never had to do a single minute's punishment. She was the model student in every way. Mother was proud of her, proud of her own efforts in shaping her, steering her away from the wicked wolves of the world.

Then, one morning, Kechi Ugboma walked into the headmistress's office: an austere, cheerless room that held the vision of a prison punishment cell for those numerous girls that often came under the whiplash of the Irish nun's acid tongue.

'Catherine, my child,' the uncharacteristically soothing, motherly voice was reserved exclusively for Kechi Ugboma. 'You look absolutely gloomy this bright morning. What is the matter?'

Kechi gave no reply.

That was unusual. That's not like my child Catherine, Mother Labore briskly surmised. Her usual Catherine was a cheerful, responsive and articulate young girl.

'Now, you sit down, my child, and tell me what is wrong. Something must be wrong. Is it your examination? You have no need to worry. You are doing very well, and I have assured you of a place for your higher school, and in the convent afterwards. What else can be the matter, my child Catherine?'

'Mother, it's not my exams. . . .' Tears suddenly choked the girl. 'It is . . . it is . . . the convent, Mother. . . .'

Mother Labore was startled by the unexpected reply. 'What's the problem about the convent, Catherine?' she asked anxiously.

'My father has refused to let me go to the convent!' She blurted the words as tears overwhelmed her. There was genuine anguish in her cry of disappointment.

Mother Labore felt like crying too. For herself, and for the most promising prospective aspirant she had groomed over these years. Now

from the jaws of the victory she had won for the congregation, for God, Mr Ugboma, a good and literate Catholic, no less, would throw this superb specimen of chastity to the wayward world of wicked wolves. What a tragedy!

Mother Labore rose from behind her busy desk, straightened her gleaming white habit and came to stand behind the sobbing girl, to give her succour at this sad moment.

'Do not cry, my child Catherine. Do not let me see a tear in your eyes,' she admonished with motherly gentleness. She patted Kechi's shoulder and felt her responding to her words. 'Now tell me, what does your mother say, my child?' She put both hands on the girl's shoulders, leaning over to look at her face.

'Mother agrees that I should go to the convent. She has always been happy about it.' Kechi wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her pinafore.

'Then you must not cry. There is some hope!' Mother Labore exclaimed. 'Perhaps I should talk to your father myself. Look, I will go over this evening after siesta. We may yet convince him; with the help of your mother; with the help of God!'

'Mother, I don't know. . . . Mother, I don't know if we can change his mind . . . his reason is that I am the only girl in the family!' She sounded choked again.

Even Mother Labore had to groan resignedly. She had lived with Ibos long enough to know that Mr Ugboma's reason was easily the most insurmountable cultural obstacle she could stumble upon. In this tradition-ridden tribe, the only girl, or boy, in a family was a precious jewel, proudly possessed, jealously guarded.

For the next two years of higher school, Mother Labore had been content only to tend the virgin plant she had cultivated.

'Remember, my child Catherine . . . do not do it, even think of it, until the night after your wedding.' It was Kechi's last day at school.

'Yes, Mother.'

'And do not marry a non-Catholic, of course!'

'Never, Mother.'

'Not even if your father insists.'

'Never, Mother.'

'You must never kiss a man, or let a man kiss you, Catherine.'

'Never, Mother.'

'Don't let anyone tell you that it is a very harmless thing to do.'

'I will not, Mother.'

'That is utter nonsense, my child Catherine.'

'I agree, Mother.'

'There will be a great deal of temptation for you, my child Catherine.

You are a pretty girl, remember. But in times of temptation don't forget to pick up your rosary and pray to our Blessed Mother.'

'I shall not forget, Mother.'

'If you have any problems, don't hesitate to write to me, even if I am on holiday in Ireland – you've got the address.'

'I have it, Mother.'

'I will always pray for you, my child.'

'Thank you, Mother.'

'Catherine. . . .'

'Yes, Mother?'

'Have you thought of what you would like to do, now that you are no longer going into the convent?'

The girl lowered her face thoughtfully and realized for the first time that she had not. The convent had been her first and sole ambition.

'You can go to university, you know. Your grades are very good, and you are a bright girl, my child. I shall of course give you an excellent reference.'

'Mother. . . .'

'Yes, my child?'

'I do not want to go to university!'

Mother Labore stopped abruptly in front of a blossoming red hibiscus and fiddled with her veil. It did not escape her that for the half-hour she had been talking and pacing her lawn with the girl this was the first negative response she had got from her. Besides, there was something, an undertone of defiance, that carried beyond the simple rejection.

'Why not, my child Catherine? Why will you not go to university?' It was a very gentle, very soothing tone that sought to elicit, rather than rebuke.

'Because, Mother, that is what my father wants!'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, Mother. He would rather have me go to university than to the convent. If he will not let me go to the convent, then I will not let him send me to the university!'

Mother Labore paused for a long while. Before she spoke she raised her face to the heavens. 'In that case, my child Catherine, do *not* go to university!' Mother Labore spun round fiercely, took a few angry steps and halted for Catherine to catch up with her.

The huge nun's anger at the misguided Mr Ugboma was expended in the few quick strides, and she returned to the matter of Kechi's future in a totally mellow mood.

'Still, my child Catherine, you must think of what you would like to do

in future. You must not be idle. The devil works tirelessly to provide work for the idle person.'

'Yes, Mother. . . . Mother!'

'Yes, my child?' The sharpness of the call caused Mother Labore to halt anxiously.

'I think I know what I would like to do!' Kechi's voice carried a girlish, almost childish delight.

'What is it, my child?'

'Mother, I think I would like to be an air hostess!'

'You mean an air stewardess . . . hostess doesn't sound quite nice. . . .'

'Yes, Mother, air stewardess.'

Mother Labore thought for a moment. She saw nothing wrong with that. Air stewardesses were trained to look after people, especially children and old travellers. They were nurses, housewives and housekeepers rolled into one. Besides, they probably never stopped long enough in one place to fall prey to wicked wolves.

'Well, my child, that sounds not too bad, you know. Really. I will pray for you.'

'I am glad that you like the idea, Mother. I was not quite sure I would like it until you approved.'

'Good girl.'

'Thank you, Mother.'

'Well, my child Catherine. I've got to go for my siesta now.'

'Yes, Mother. I will write to you.'

'God bless you, Catherine. Good-bye.'

'And God bless you, too, Mother.'

As Kechi Ugboma was leaving the school for the very last time after counselling with Reverend Mother Labore, she came by a group of fifth and lower sixth form girls loitering by the gate. Their oafish giggles seemed to rise to a derisive cackle as she passed them and waited for the day-watch to let her through the gate. Out on the street she stood, her two suitcases by her, while she waited for the regular bicycle taxi that would take her to the motor-park.

The oafs were still giggling, cackling for her attention. . . .

'Well, there goes the Reverend Daughter Labore for the last time!' one of the girls was saying. The others giggled their agreement.

Kechi Ugboma was not annoyed by the remark. She acknowledged it with an inward smile. It was the valedictory accolade from her peers. She would do everything to preserve it.

Everything.

6 THE AIRLINE HOSTESS

KECHI UGBOMA was now a young, ripe woman of twenty-four years of age. She was of middle height, not having grown much taller than she was at eighteen, but she stood tall. Her complexion was not distinctive. The smooth caramel skin was more the result of the enterprise of the European cosmetic industry than of heredity.

Her vibrant, voluptuous figure had won her admiration and compliments from the time she was a teenage student. This had horrified and disgusted Mother Labore's favourite girl. But later, outside the school and the protective, morally water-tight wings of Mother Labore, Kechi Ugboma had realized for the first time that she was a woman, and a beautiful one, because so many men had not let her forget it.

The first man who took her to bed, and took away her virginity, had told her that she was 'an absolute vision'; that the good God must have taken a full day's rest to restore His perspective before He sculpted her body. Even then, at the embryonic stage in the making of the new Kechi, it had sounded more like flattery than sincere compliment. But gradually she had become aware of herself, of her assets. She spent more time before the mirror, seeking for confirmation and, for Mother Labore's sake, half-hoping there would be none. But the mirror did not lie. She could see it all, the well-chiselled face, the long, dark, luxuriantly shiny hair that fell in delicately plaited tendrils over both ears. . . .

Kechi had not become an air hostess as soon or as easily as she had hoped after she left school and Mother Labore. The thunderous row following her refusal to go to university had continued to sputter until she was nineteen.

It was soon after her birthday that her father grudgingly yielded to his wife Esther's quiet but insistent persuasion to let the young girl go to Lagos and join her elder brother, who could easily help her get employment.

'She's a full-grown woman now, you know,' she had reminded her adamant husband one night. 'A full-grown woman is like a ripe fruit, ready to be plucked. It is too tempting. You and I cannot sit here forever, driving away the young men of this land like flies hovering over a ripe mango.'

'Let her be a ripe fruit!' the old man had barked at his wife. 'I won't let them pluck her for sure. Not while I am alive and can wield a stick!'

'Then she can only go on to over-ripen, and rot away,' the wife said quietly.

'Let her rot away, then!' the husband thundered in reply.

'You mean let your *only* daughter rot away?'

Lagos had been a marvel to the young Kechi. The tall buildings, the busy, bustling streets, the flowing *bubas*, the people; the lagoon from which the city got its name from the Portuguese, the sandy, brilliant expanse of Bar Beach in the foreground of the blue, snarling, seemingly endless Atlantic ocean. The city captivated her.

She wrote to Mother Labore and told her about her trip, the exciting capital, the lights that swam and glittered at night, the strange people in flowing robes.

Mother Labore's reply reminded her that Lagos, like all capital cities, was a city of sin; that bright lights were the stars of hell. She gave Kechi the names of some Irish Sisters in the Lagos convent whom she should call on, keep their company and go to in moments of need. 'Don't go to any man's house for help, my child Catherine,' Mother Labore had warned her. 'Men are evil.'

That men were evil was something Kechi found out soon enough. Her elder brother had given her a number of addresses of offices to apply to for temporary employment while they waited for a chance to apply for her air hostess job. Kechi had received replies to three of her applications. Each had sounded promising. She was hopeful. But by the time she had attended all three interviews it was clear to Kechi that her prospective employers did not want her services in the office. Interviews, she discovered, were not conducted in board-rooms but in bedrooms.

The question she had got had been unfailingly stereotyped:

'When will you be free to come out with me?'

The letters of appointment she received were also similar: a piece of paper bearing the address of a rendezvous. One prospective employer had gone farther than the others by attempting to deploy her right there in his office ... on a huge couch that turned into a bed with a simple manipulation.

Her first adventures in job-seeking had soundly revolted Kechi. She had gone home sick and disgusted by men. Mother Labore was right. She would sit at home and wait for the airways to advertise. The airways was a huge state corporation, with a large number of decent expatriate executives on the management, Mother Labore's friend, Sister Theodora, had told her. They should be much more self-respecting at interviews.

When the opportunity for the airways appeared, it had not been on the pages of the *Daily Times*. Her brother's friend, Matthew, knew someone who knew someone who was a training executive with the airways. The training man was an expatriate, Matthew told her. But the one who knew him, the middleman, was not, he didn't even work with the airways. Yes, she was told, he was a very decent man who went to church once every day and twice on Sundays. He would gladly, and decently, put Kechi in touch with the expatriate.

The middleman had turned out to be only marginally more decent than Kechi's former prospective employers. Where they had been crude and hasty, he had been nice, gentle and patient. Where they had baited her with the attraction of employment, the middleman had employed compliments and flattery.

At least, Kechi had thought once, he was a bachelor, young and good-looking. And the airways job was her real dream. She would give anything for it. . . .

Anything?

To be sure, the middleman had taken her to the training man, who had seemed enthusiastic about her prospects. Her education was better than that of girls they had employed in the past. She was attractive, very attractive. She had a lot going for her chances. He was sure there would be a chance in a week or so to send her before the board, to a real board-meeting in a board-room, for interview.

As they were driving back to town she learnt of all the hopeful signs from the middleman, who had had a last chat with his friend. Kechi had been exultant.

'And who did you tell him I was?'

'Oh, I told him you were the girl I hoped to marry.'

Kechi was shocked. Marriage was something she and Mother Labore had thought about only in very unreal, very vague terms. It held no substance whatsoever for her. It was a strange word.

'I hope you did not mean it.' She sounded frightened by the word, even more so by the vague prospect.

'I am not sure, Kechi.' For one uncertain moment he had removed his attention from the crowded, noisy street to look at her face. 'Don't you realize it will be difficult not to mean it, Kechi?' He restored his attention to his driving.

The girl made no reply.

'Don't you know, Kechi, that you're an absolute vision?'

When, a week after, he had taken her to bed for the first time in her life, she had tried her best to shut off Mother Labore's reproachful face that kept scowling over the middleman's shoulder.

At the end, in pain and tears, she had consoled herself that it was for the dearest dream of her life.

She was going to be an air hostess.

Kechi Ugboma had not married the middleman and had not particularly wished to. But she did become an air hostess. The airline gave her good training in Europe, as well as a *been-to* style of walking. Between flights, she patronized the big shopping centres from Rome to New York. She acquired a lofty taste, too, and soon could hold her champagne with the gracefulness of her Parisian peers. In many other ways, especially in the way most important to a woman, it was a rewarding experience.

By the time the crisis grounded the high-flying bird and she came home like her other frightened tribespeople, she had acquired a wardrobe that was the envy of even army officers' girl-friends.

But in the two years since the war began, Kechi Ugboma had gone down a steep, long way. The war and three hasty evacuations took their toll on her rich wardrobe and reduced her personal belongings to a lone, forlorn suitcase. Her war-time job in the Housing Directorate paid less than a quarter of her salary and allowances as a top air hostess. Her once glamorous life seemed a distant, hazy dream without colour, dominated by the dreaded four-letter word W-A-N-T.

Kechi dressed up quickly in a light-blue print cotton blouse and short blue skirt. The thighs showing beneath the hemline were not quite as soft and creamy as they had been two years before, but they were still better than most for miles around. She looked at her face in the hand-mirror, rubbed off an excess of make-up from her lower lip and smiled a wan smile of helpless satisfaction.

Picking up her black handbag, she slipped on her black, flat-heeled shoes and switched off her light as she locked her door. Walking noiselessly on her flat soles, she went to Ihuoma's cubicle next door.

'Ihu, baby,' she began sweetly, 'here's my key. I'm going off to see Charlie. Then we're off to dinner at some friend's place. O.K.?'

'Right, madam,' said the other girl cheerily. 'O.K. . . . *for you*,' she added with a trace of envy.

'But if Chim should turn up,' Kechi continued, 'tell him something. Any good fib you can think up. Like I've gone to Emekuku to see my sister who is down with infective hepatitis, or something, O.K., baby?'

'Well, I'm always your odd-job maid, your cover-up girl, aren't I, Ke girl?' Ihuoma's gentle query betrayed a mild touch of pique.

'Come on, Ihu love, be a sport,' Kechi tried to appease her friend.

'Sport be hanged!' Ihuoma exploded sharply.

'O.K. then, forget the whole thing, will you?' Kechi decided rather helplessly. 'Chim can go fry. Just keep the key for me, will you?'

Whenever Kechi handed her the key, Ihuoma knew it was a signal that her friend would not be back before morning.

Well, that is her business, she decided. And, when you come to think of it, life is hard and threatens to become harder every day, she went on. If she herself had as many men-friends as she needed to keep afloat, Ihuoma thought, she probably wouldn't spend many nights in her cubicle either. Home is where the next meal is. She turned to make her bed.

Chima Duke came before Ihuoma could fall asleep. He drove up to the Women's Hostel in his creamy-white Peugeot 404 saloon. He nosed it between two other cars in front of the building and switched off its ignition with slow deliberation.

Taking the stairs one at a time he found Kechi's door locked. He had not been there a moment when Ihuoma, holding a Dutch-print wrapper loosely above her prominent breasts, came out of her room as Duke's footfalls stopped just short of her door.

'Hello, Chim,' she greeted him. 'I knew it was you. Come in and sit down.'

'Hello, Ihu. Thanks. Did I wake you up? Sorry,' he apologized, and walked into the unlit room.

'It's all right. I wasn't sleeping, actually. Just lonely,' she added quickly, stepping in behind him and snapping on the light switch. The light was a dull, flickering amber.

'Sorry, no chair,' she gestured futilely, her breasts trembling in sympathy. 'Sit on the bed.' Duke did. Ihuoma sat beside him. A solid apple of lust rose to block Chima Duke's throat as his eyes fell on the soft ridge above the top of the young woman's night wrappers.

'Where's Ke?' he managed in a choked voice.

'Oh, she's gone off to Emekuku to see her sister,' she began smoothly.

'How long ago?'

'About an hour or so, I think.'

'Sister?' Duke muttered the word like an obscenity.

'Yes, her younger sister.'

'Sister indeed!' Duke sneered. 'I bet you that sister of hers wears Biafran army uniform and carries a swagger stick.'

'No, Chim. Nothing of the sort. Honest,' Ihuoma went on glibly, 'Ke's younger sister is down at the Mount Carmel Hospital with hepatitis. I swear.'

Chima Duke rose slowly, his belly big as a pot. He stood in the middle of the room, twiddling his car key around his right forefinger after the manner of car owners wishing to draw attention to their status symbol.

'O.K., then,' he said in a tone of reluctant finality, 'tell Ke I was here. Tell her I'm off to Lisbon on Tuesday night. I believe there're a few things she wants me to pick up for her.'

'Right, Chim. Will do.'

Ihuoma made to rise from the bed, one hand holding the wrappers loosely around her breasts. Lucky hell-cat Kechi Ugboma is, Ihuoma thought with a touch of envy. She never can lose, can she . . .?

'I'll see her tomorrow morning, about ten, if her young sister doesn't develop abdominal hernia by then,' Chim said scathingly.

'Sure. She'll be back early morning,' Ihuoma assured him.

'See you tomorrow, then. Maybe I could buy you something too. A hair thread, anything important, from Lisbon.' The offer was made baitingly, temptingly, irresistibly.

'That would be great, Chim. It'd be wonderful,' Ihuoma enthused, as she rose from the edge of the bed.

'Good.' Chima suddenly turned to face her. 'As a matter of fact, Ihuoma, you could get more. Anything you want. You're a nice girl. . . .' He had gathered her in a sudden swoop and was kissing her hungrily, lustfully, before she could answer. The unresisting girl was desperately hanging on to him, hanging on to her hair thread from Lisbon. . . .

7 MUSIC WHILE THEY FIGHT

I HAD GONE to Major Mere's house at 7 p.m.

Let me amend that presumptuous statement: I had gone to Major Mere's *boys' quarters* at 7 p.m. (Who am I, a disabled army lieutenant, to go to an able-bodied major's house at dinner time?)

I had gone to see Lance-Corporal Okere. Okere is Major Mere's orderly. He used to be my batman when I was able, and commanding a combat battalion, and it was in fact I who promoted him to the rank of lance-corporal.

Okere still says 'sir' to me, a gesture of respect that I find most embarrassing. I've prayed him to spare me, but he won't listen. I guess it's because Okere has a damned good heart. Otherwise he would have known differently: that in this brand-new country of ours, 'sir' is the man

who contributes directly or indirectly to your daily bread. Which I don't as far as he is concerned. Not any more, at least. If anything, I should say 'sir' to Okere. And I would do it without loss of pride. For Okere has become my bread-winner; he has been feeding me in the three weeks I have been meeting him since I was discharged from hospital. Which is why I'm here at this time.

As I said, O.K. Jazz, as we call him in tribute to the lethal rhythm which he played with automatic rifles, has a damned great soul. It is a magnificent relief to find that at this time of everyone-to-himself-devil-take-the-last-man, there's a soul like Lance-Corporal Okere's, I can tell you.

He has no reason – I mean, I am no kinsman of his – to share the crumbs from his master's table with me the way he has done for the past three weeks. But that's what he has done!

These crumbs, hefty crumbs from an army brigade commander's table, could have yielded a fortune for Okere in the black market if he had had the sense to sell them to the eager food racketeers around. But he never even tried. He was happy sharing them with me.

So, as I often had in the past three weeks, I came to his room in the boys' quarters at 7 p.m., supper time.

But Okere was not in his room when I opened the door, which was odd, because he was always there at 7 p.m. This appalling discovery filled me with sudden fear and sadness. For if he was gone, re-deployed to the front line, put away in the guardroom, or some disastrous fate like that, then I had had it. Not only for tonight but for the rest of my life. I know of no welfare scheme for disabled soldiers. And mother is long dead.

I checked the other rooms in the quarters, but no one seemed to be about to tell me my friend's whereabouts. Good God! I've had it, I thought in panic.

Overtaken by despair, I ventured to the front yard, the exclusive, well-kept turf of Major Mere's. It was a vast, neat, green compound that surrounded the white bungalow from which Major Mere virtually commanded his front-line brigade.

The army cook at the water tap at the corner of the white building recognized me. For he quickly terminated his hand-washing, turned round to face me, his arms stiff at his sides, shoulders thrown back. I acknowledged the salute diffidently.

'Carry on, soldier,' I mumbled. He must have been from my former battalion to be able to recognize me as an officer. (Not many one-armed soldiers get much recognition these days, I can tell you. Thus, in time, you get to lose yourself so much that when you're recognized you need a few seconds to remember who you are, or were.)

'Where's Lance-Corporal Okere?' I asked anxiously.

'The *kopru*, sah?' he repeated in his own terms.

'Yes, yes,' I said impatiently. 'He's not in his room.'

'Yessah,' he agreed, ' 'e dey for owside, sah,' he informed me, and went on, ' 'e busy small, sah. *Oga* dey give patti dis night.'

'A party?' I almost exclaimed.

'Yessah.'

'Can you tell Lance-Corporal Okere, then, that I'm here, please?'

'Ofcoss, sah.'

A party. Or, rather, *another* party. It was not quite a week since the Merry Major Mere had had one of his frequent festivities. The last one, vicious rumour said, was to celebrate his reconciliation with his estranged girl-friend. I suppose this one is to mark the end of the first week of their renewed love-making.

Any reason for a party.

Or no reason at all.

You've got to get rid of the surplus foodstuff from the relief centres. And the liquor flown in every night from Lisbon. And the excess fat.

Anyway, so that's why Okere was not in his room. It meant big bread was being baked for the night . . . and there'd be bigger crumbs for us.

Forget the starving masses, the fighting troops, my new, complacent conscience admonished me. The war can go on, if this is the way wars are fought, it insisted. You didn't know what you were missing, fighting like an enraged maniac. Good for you, you had to lose an arm to know it, it jeered at me.

The cook returned presently to tell me that Okere had asked me to join him out on the veranda.

'Are you sure that's what he said,' I inquired sceptically.

'Yessah,' the stiff little man before me nodded firmly in the faint light from the kitchen window.

'Isn't the major in? Is your *oga* not in the house?' I asked for reassurance.

'*Oga* dey for 'ouse wi' some frens,' I was told.

'O.K. Thank you.'

'Tank, sah.'

I trod softly to the front of the house. I saw Okere. He was dressed in neat, creased, mess-room khaki uniform and was sitting on the dwarf wall of the veranda.

'Come over, sir,' Okere beamed and beckoned to me. 'I forgot to tell you in the afternoon we're having another party tonight.'

That's right; you got it right, O.K. Jazz, I thought. *Another* party. I went over and sat beside him on the dwarf wall.

'Another party is a good expression,' I told Okere.

'We shan't be long here,' he informed me, ignoring my backhanded compliment. 'We retire to my room as soon as everybody has come.'

'And reappear later to clean the tables,' I added, as I adjusted the sling around my amputated arm.

'No. Not until morning, sir,' Okere shook his head from side to side in a gentle, emphatic sort of way. '*Oga* says this one will last all night. And if it's all night, it's all right by me.'

'With apologies to James Brown,' I reminded him.

'I've his copyright, sir,' he shot back.

'Listen, Lance-Corporal O.K. Jazz,' I began, rather harshly. 'My name is Kalu Udim. Kal to my friends, all right?' I glared at him. 'So don't you "sir" me any more! For the umpteenth time, don't! There are plenty of people for you to "sir". At least there will be tonight.'

'All right. I shan't forget again to call you Kal, sir.'

I had to laugh. Okere is a good lad. And an intelligent one. I remember he was in the fifth form when the war broke out. If he had long legs, I guess he would have got himself a commission. But Okere's legs were too short, too damned short to get him anywhere further than the bottom of the ranks. And, do you know, Okere never bothered about those illiterate but long-legged officers who ordered him around.

'Don't laugh,' Okere said earnestly. 'Frankly, I would feel heavy in the tongue calling you by your first name. You were my commanding officer. You're still an officer of the Biafran army, in spite of your disability. Above all, sir, you're a couple of years older than me. And that, sir, carries a lot of weight where I come from.'

'Even in war time?'

'Even in this war time, sir.'

I had to give in to this fine kid.

And I gave in just in time to behold the couple walking hand in hand up the driveway. I had been so engrossed in the exchange with Okere that I hadn't heard their car pull in, or their doors banged shut. Yes, engrossed I had been; in this little, good-hearted innocent kid who still acknowledged such now valueless values as respect for age and acceptance of seniority, even redundant, one-armed seniority. How he could do this at a time when the reign of conscription and the power of his fellow teenage boys was at its zenith, only God knew.

Conscription . . . ah, that reminds me . . . that was how I got into the army and into this misery . . . but that's another story. Later, maybe. . . .

Did I say I beheld the couple? Wrong.

I beheld the gentleman officer first. For I knew him: Major Chilaka Ukatta, otherwise known, God knows why, as 'Charlie' or 'U.K.

Charlie' to his girl-friends and the combat troops. He was my course-mate at the School of Infantry. We had passed out together, were commissioned together. He was commanding 'Zulu' Battalion in our sister 'S' Brigade when I was wounded. I should guess he had heard about my injury at the time. Anyway, U.K. Charlie knows me. Or he used to. I wouldn't say we were friends, but neither were we foes.

Now, as he walked up the path, his right forefinger locked around his woman's as if it were a rifle trigger, he threw me the most casual of glances, took his face away in a hurry and took it back to his woman.

I could have sworn U.K. Charlie recognized me. But don't blame him for not acknowledging it. He's now a major, remember? And I'm still a lieutenant, a one-armed one, and a nuisance around these exclusive preserves.

But in a second, Major Ukatta was constrained to look at me again. For when he turned his face back to his woman her eyes weren't there. They were fixed on me, intent and penetrating, I felt.

I met her stare and gave her a wink, just to make mischief, and because I felt she might be taking pity on me for my amputated arm. I loathe people pitying me . . . makes me self-conscious, which makes me bitter. . . .

Major Ukatta must be a deadly jealous sort, for he gave the girl's arm a brief but vicious tug, and she took her eyes from me swiftly, like one bitten.

Okere stood up and gave a smart salute as the couple walked up to the door. Ukatta condescended with a stiff nod. As they walked past us and headed for the party, I could catch droplets of U.K. Charlie's spiky interrogation of the girl. I bet you he wanted me to catch them, for he wasn't whispering. . . .

'. . . know him?'

'Who . . .?'

'. . . wounded chap.'

'No . . . why . . . ask?'

'I saw . . . you . . . a wink.'

'Did he?'

'Didn't he? . . . 'n't take your eyes off him!'

'I was . . . his arm.'

'. . . pity? . . . dangerous . . . many a love-affair begins from pity. . . .' The rest was drowned in Major Mere's stereo boom.

'Do you know that girl, sir?' Okere asked me suddenly, resuming his seat beside me

'Which girl?' I pretended.

'The one Major Ukatta was twirling around his finger like a car key.'

'No, I don't. Why?'

'Well, I think she looked at you like she was trying to remember where she met you, or something.'

'I think she was looking at my arm.'

'Unless your arm was in your face, sir,' Okere said without disrespect. 'It was not that kind of look. I noticed it. Even the major did, too.'

'Did he?' I asked.

'Didn't he?' Okere replied, cleverly letting me know that he, too, had heard the couple's bickering.

'What kind of look was it, then?' I asked.

'The major's?'

'The girl's, you idle soldier.'

'Oh, I don't know. A hot look, I would say.'

'I can't feel the burn,' I said, rubbing my good hand over my face.

'Well, I can. I think she means something. By the way, she moves freely in high circles. She is the type who can be invited to State House parties. A V.I.G. – Very Important Girl.'

'Is she?' I was not particularly curious, but, 'What's her name?' I asked Okere. 'You seem to know her well.'

'She is Kechi Ugboma, a former air hostess now with the Housing Directorate. Lives in the Women's Hostel across the road.'

'Does she? Good for her,' I said with renewed lack of interest.

'And for you; if her stare means what it says . . . ah, here comes Essy.' Okere changed the subject of gossip without warning. He stood up to usher in a fresh couple.

The girl was dressed in an expensive, obviously new, outfit. She even wore lipstick, which in itself spoke a lot about her status in the Biafra of 1969. If she can afford lipstick then you can reckon that she can pay the price of a fighter aircraft.

His brief chore done, Okere came back to the short wall.

'Your Essy girl must have wealthy people who shop for her in Lisbon,' I insinuated.

'Yes,' Okere agreed. 'And not-too-wealthy ones, too. Essy is the city bus. Everybody enters her. Shilling a ride. The boys have awarded her a D.F.C.,' Okere explained at length.

'A D.F.C.? Hmmmm. . . . Is she an air hostess, too?' I tried a poor pun.

'No, she's not. She doesn't work. She doesn't have to. Her D.F.C. stands for Distinguished Fucking Cross.'

A burst of laughter from Mere's house, which was itself drowned by a distant, but distinct artillery boom from the not-too-distant battle-front, submerged young Okere's brazen utterance.

8 THE NIGHT VIGIL

'ETERNAL VIGILANCE is the price of liberty! So, Biafrans, do not go to sleep!'

Everyone in the one-hundred-man assault squad, from the colonel down to the teenage recruit, remembered the endless exhortation that had punctuated every official radio broadcast for nearly thirty months. And for nearly one week since the squad was formed, there had been virtually no sleep for the volunteers. Those who slept did so with one eye open.

And so, as the merry-makers were congregating at Major Mere's house for the all-night party, the potential suicides were assembling for another all-night vigil. This was the night the colonel had chosen to disclose to them the actual object of their mission.

He had waited five wakeful, watchful nights for the enemy squad to make its first move, to accidentally telegraph its punch again as it had done with its carelessly detailed radio signal. In the meantime he had instituted a tight vigil, reinforced his normal reconnaissance patrol, and kept an open line through to Intercept Unit who had also redoubled their efforts.

The commander knew the axes that were thoroughly clear of enemy forces – none. But he certainly did not expect a north-westerly strike, the last redoubt of the Hamman troops. What he expected was that the squad would straggle down to an active flank, disguise themselves as Biafran troops regrouping after a night attack, and infiltrate the city in small pockets. Having been bottled up in Owerri for many months, they would know every guarded strategic point in the town and could very easily choose a vulnerably soft point as a rendezvous and attack State House in the deep of the night.

The renewed artillery bombardment from the various axes in the north-east, the colonel had judged, was almost certainly a diversionary tactic by the main Federal forces aimed at co-ordinating the infiltrators' entry into the city.

He was worried that his patrols had turned up no significant intelligence in five days, but that only confirmed his suspicion that the squad would avoid moving as an identifiable group. They would break up into small pockets . . . if they hadn't done so already.

A simple, rather simplistic move would have been, of course, to ring the assault squad in bunkers around State House, wait for the suicide

squad to crawl up, and leap upon it in the darkness and wipe it out. But that was too simple. Besides, it risked the chance of a lone, desperate bidder getting away into the General's bunker, which the attackers would know well from their previous occupation . . . it also risked another, more undesirable factor: bringing the war into the heart of the resettled city, to the fragile civilian population.

But this Saturday night, the colonel believed, the strike could not be far away. Week-ends were usually relaxed on the battle-fronts, as if in recognition of the fact that even the Almighty, who could do everything, rested on the seventh day. The enemy would count on the usual break in hostilities to lull them into a relaxation of vigilance.

At the moment Major Mere and his girl-friend were opening the dance floor to the rhythm of an obscure Otis Redding number, now made vibrantly popular by a local group, The Hykkers, his division commander was opening his address to the assault squad. . . .

'So we will do unto the enemy what he is thinking of doing to our Commander-in-Chief,' he declared after disclosing their mission. 'We shall kill every member of the squad!'

If the men were horrified by their mission, not one of them showed it. Though Sergeant Meju, at the end of the front row, had quietly crossed himself, the men had somehow accepted that since the colonel himself came down last Monday morning to ask for volunteers for an undisclosed mission, they were not going to be asked to sling their rifles over their shoulders and serve drinks at a victory celebration.

The colonel's voice carried in the silent, enclosed surroundings of the brigade's armoury which he had chosen as venue for the night's meeting.

'We do know for sure what the vandals intend to strike. But we do not know where they intend to strike from or when. I know that does not make our job any easier. I know we shall be looking for a black goat in the darkness. But,' he cleared his throat for emphasis, 'we have something the enemy does not know.'

There was an unbreached, unbreachable silence as the colonel began the details of his counter-plan. . . .

Over at Major Mere's house in the city he and his guests were also huddled, promiscuously, in the middle of his living-room, where the action was, for them, swaying to the soft but breachful sound of Wilson Pickett. . . [3]

9 THE MORNING AFTER

MAJOR MERE'S PARTY ended rather early at 5 a.m.

Usually on a week-end it would have gone on till 7 a.m. Sunday morning. Even then, the bitter-enders would toss a coin – heads, they go to church; tails, back to the party for breakfast. Very often tails won.

Something must have been amiss today. It couldn't possibly be that they had run out of liquor – Uli airstrip wasn't closed yet, was it? Nor could it be that the constantly booming artillery had struck the merry-makers with a sudden realization of impending doom – they couldn't hear the doom for the stereo boom anyway.

Still, saturated with the merriment, Kechi Ugboma left with Chilaka Ukatta and slept with him for what was left of the darkness.

When Ukatta drove her home to the Women's Hostel at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday, Kechi was not left empty-handed for her half-night's labour. She was weighed down with assorted food-stuffs . . . the almighty salt, stockfish, canned beef, rice and beans in cellophane bags . . . all of them items pilfered by Ukatta from the relief rations allotted to his starving brigade.

Ukatta waved a cheery see-you-later and turned tail.

'Wow, that's quite a load you've got there,' Ihuoma cried, as soon as her friend came up to ask for her key. 'Say, guess who was here?'

'Chima Duke, of course, who else?' Kechi replied without excitement. 'What did you say to him?' she asked her friend, a stern and suspicious note creeping into her tone.

'What you asked me to say to him, what else?' Ihuoma swung out of her bed. Duke, she recalled with discomfort, had left that bed barely seven hours ago, at 2 a.m. to be precise. She hoped there was no tell-tale evidence of their recent nocturnal affair. 'I did your dirty job for you, lover-girl,' she said, without looking at her friend, and with more truth than she realized.

They were now going to Kechi's own door.

'I don't know about dirty jobs,' Kechi snapped, shoving her booty into her room after Ihuoma had unlocked the door for her. 'But thanks, all the same.'

'I doubt that he bought that sick-sister story, though,' Ihuoma said to her friend. 'He says to you to wait for him about ten this morning, that is, hoping your sister doesn't develop abdominal hernia.' She quoted with ease, inwardly relishing her friend's temporary discomfiture.

'How dare Chima Duke be so bloody rude!' Kechi exploded, pushing her loot roughly into a corner of her room. Ihuoma sat on the edge of her friend's bed and looked out of the window.

'And before you fly off the handle, Ke, Chim is flying to Lisbon on Tuesday. So you can forget your Charlie boy and everybody else, and wait for Chim – with open arms . . . and open legs.'

Kechi's mood melted instantly at the mention of Chim's trip. She smiled a slow, sly smile, like a snake thinking of a juicy chick.

'Wow! Isn't that great!' a now exultant Kechi exclaimed noisily, breaching the silence of the still-drowsy hostel.

'Ssssh!' Ihuoma glared at her, a reproachful finger across her lips. 'Easy, young lady. You'll startle the dozens of men who are still trying to shove their members into their pants.'

'Chim is going to Lisbon at last . . .!' Kechi exclaimed again, a little less noisily. 'About time, too . . .!'

'Yes, you can bet on your A-line dress now,' Ihuoma yawned, rubbing her eyes with the back of one hand and cupping her yawn with the other. Kechi put away her handbag and sat down on the bed beside her friend. Through the open window both girls saw a middle-aged man enter his car to return to his own home and family at last. But not before he had blown a long and noisy kiss to someone over at a window in the hostel.

They wondered what fib he would tell to his wife when he got home . . . that he had waited all night at Uli airstrip for some essential goods expected to arrive on the late flights . . . or something.

'How was your party?' Ihuoma asked, changing the subject.

'It was O.K. The usual Mere crowd, you know. It wasn't bad.' She bent to unbuckle her shoes.

Yes, it wasn't bad at all. For the mention of the party reminded Kechi of the handsome young amputee she had seen at Major Mere's door earlier in the long night. She thought he had something which, though it no longer qualified a man for a girl's affection nowadays, was very striking. He was young and handsome, with a babyish face and that sort of warm appeal.

It was a long time since she had had a boy-friend who was handsome, companionable and presentable, Kechi thought. To hell with his amputated hand, she told herself. He probably couldn't be more attractive if he had ten hands.

She was going to keep an eye out for him. Now that that fat, old, rotund pot of money was going to get out of her way and her bed for a

few days, she would have time enough to find out more about the handsome amputee, without any pot-bellied daddy hovering in her shadow.

If it came to it, she would condescend to walk up to Major Mere's orderly and ask him the whereabouts of his amputee mate.

Gosh, she thought with a girlish thrill, he looked so bloody nice, didn't he? So personable; so lovable. He would complete her circle . . . the rich, the big, the powerful and the ugly, the disabled, poor and handsome.

There was reason for double elation: the prospects of a new boyfriend . . . and her A-line from Duke.

10 THE DUKE

MISTER CHIMA DUKE was a short, very fat man of middle age and revoltingly prominent features. His head was as big as a palm-wine gourd. His stomach protruded like that of a pregnant woman on the eve of labour. He had huge, thick-set arms and legs that allowed him only a waddle when he walked. His plump face was perpetually greasy from fat and sweat. A short, ill-kept goatee below his thick lips certainly did not improve things for Chima Duke's looks.

Duke did not deceive himself that he was the sort of man women rushed to embrace with open arms. He would recall with a smile that before the war thrust prosperity upon him as the associate director of the Price Control Directorate, he had been the butt of most high-society party jokes. Though he was married with three children, he had been forcibly separated from his family for over twenty months. They had been cut off behind the lines when the enemy forces took his home-town earlier in the war. Among his friends, only a few intimates knew the secret of his status of married bachelor. The popular impression which had made the rounds of his detractors then was that women were too choosy to marry a man who was so unremittingly ugly. Some had christened him the Gargoyle. Others nicknamed him the Gorilla.

But that was before Duke's full power and affluence ripened with the lengthening months of the war. Now everybody called him the Duke. Now he moved in new circles, high circles, an exclusive, well-off, complacent cabal to whom 'happily married' was a vulgar phrase that threatened their incontinent life-style. He realized, to his endless amusement, that when you had a good job, especially one that enabled you to fly in and out of the beleaguered enclave, a lot of loose money, including the

coveted foreign exchange, your physical features took a back seat in a woman's view. Then, he would muse, the delightful ladies of the land looked not at your pot-belly but at the bulge of your wallet.

Duke had met Kechi Ugboma one morning at his Price Control Directorate. She had called to collect her office's salt ration for the week.

Kechi had, of course, discovered long ago that common salt was not *common* any longer. It had become the scarcest, costliest commodity in the land. It had become costly to life, too, next to guns and bomb raids. Hundreds of adventurers, known in war-time jargon as attack-traders, had lost their lives trying to sneak behind the enemy's desperately guarded lines to procure the lucrative commodity from enemy-held territory.

Salt was now almighty.

As proof of the almightiness of salt, Chima Duke had decreed that no single cup-ration should be issued without his personal approval and supervision. He had been in his office that morning when Kechi Ugboma called. He had been struck by the effusive, robust femininity and beauty of the former air hostess. Crudely, almost uncouthly, Duke had opened with a time-tested, unfailingly effective tempter:

'Say, why don't you let me buy you a tin of salt in Lisbon next week?' He seemed to initial the authorization sheet with sympathetic reluctance. 'You can't get enough from this ration to last you a full meal, surely?'

'Of course not, but what can we do? Get what we can and hope for this damned war to end.' The quiet despair in her voice had not been lost to the practised seducer.

The Duke had quickly diagnosed a good symptom. He had immediately given Kechi a preliminary treatment: a dose of greasy, leering smile. Drawing her aside he had whispered lecherously, 'Some nice girls get *all* they want while still hoping for the war to end, baby, eh?'

Kechi had given the man a close look. His face was oily with sweat and fat and his cheeks were as fat as his stomach. She tried quickly to isolate the repugnant character from the attractive offer, and failed.

Her failure was Chima Duke's success.

Not that Chima Duke's method had ever failed. Not in the few months since Biafra was reduced to one major town.

Over the days, however, Duke had got to thinking that Kechi Ugboma was not just another fish caught in his irresistible net of food, wine, cosmetics and clothes. She was someone special. In want and hardship, like most other people, she still retained strong traces of a quiet dignity

that kept her apart from the common run of needy girls. She might bend low to pick up the crumbs and enticements that fell from the big, privileged hands. But, somehow, Kechi managed to keep her chin up.

Duke went out of his way to give his wealthy-bachelor flat a thorough scrubbing. For if he could say so, without risking an attempt at bigamy, he would admit that he loved Kechi Ugboma perhaps as much as his legally married wife, Usen.

An insistent, uncongenial suspicion that the girl could barely conceal her indifference was squelched by wishful conviction. Her frequent symptoms of deep disgust he treated with studied neglect, reassuring himself with what little demonstration of affection he could elicit from her through regular gifts of the absolute necessities that none but the few like him now had access to.

The longer the war lasted, he calculated with callous ease, the harder the pinch of hardship . . . and the more Kechi would depend on him.

For all I care, Chima Duke told himself, *the war can continue.*

From the minute Chima Duke returned to the Women's Hostel that Sunday morning, everything went like clock-work. Kechi was all smiles for him, all charm and, at times, something akin to affection. Disarmed by the unusual warmth, Duke did not even remember to ask about the progress of his lover's ailing sister.

The following morning Kechi woke up at Chima Duke's side, a badly rumpled night wrapper around her middle. Released from the all-night, animal grip of Chima Duke, a grip to which she tried, without success, to concede some physical enjoyment, Kechi now felt wretched.

She ran a hand over her hair. The thread around the plaits had gone loose in places. Violent, lecherous bastard, she cursed silently as she sat up and began to repair the loose ends. She consoled herself that most women, wives included, probably felt wretched the morning after, anyway. So why torment yourself with painful post-mortems on sex?

Her plaits re-done, she swung off Chima's big, luxurious bed and found her slippers. She had a long shower, scrubbing hard to clean herself of Chima Duke. After, she made up her face, dressed up and went into Duke's well-appointed sitting-room for breakfast.

The opulence of Chima Duke's living-quarters always struck Kechi anew each time she entered the house. The exterior gleamed with emulsion. The interior was plush. The luxury of it all, highlighted by the grey dreariness and drabness all around the town, never seemed to dim with time and familiarity. For some reason she hoped this would be the last time she would enter the man's house. . . .

11 THE DUKE AT HOME

CHIMA DUKE SAT in a rich settee flicking through a week-old edition of *The Times* of London. A fresh packet of luxury-length Portuguese cigarettes lay on the coffee table, as stood a bottle of brandy full to the neck.

He folded the paper quickly and put it aside as she entered the room.

'There you are,' he said cheerily. 'Come over and have a tot before Sampson is ready.' He motioned her over to the chair opposite his. He liked to sit apart and admire her exquisitely shapely thighs. She obeyed reluctantly but declined the offer of an early-morning drink. 'It's Monday morning, and I've got to go to work, remember?' She sounded a trifle reproachful.

'You don't have to go to work today, my dear,' he told her with a confident grin. 'I've already sent Sampson across with a note to your director that you're in bed with a slight fever. That's why Sampson is late cooking breakfast.'

'You have *what*?' Kechi was startled.

'Yes,' he nodded, still grinning.

'And who did you say you were, my uncle Raphael?' she asked sarcastically.

'I didn't have to do it clumsily, a bit more clever, you could say.'

'Oh yeah? How clever?'

'Oh, just a little girl's neat handwritten note, signed "Ihuoma, roommate". How's that?' Duke asked in a self-congratulatory tone. He seemed not to have sensed the young woman's incipient revolt.

'Lousy. Absolutely disgusting. Now I think I need that brandy!'

'Hey, what's the matter with you? I don't see what's wrong with not going to work for one day. Your Head of State is probably still in Freddie's caravan with one of his concubines. Come off it.' He waved her aside. 'That's no way to run a war.'

Filled with contempt, Kechi poured out a fair shot of the liquor and took a liberal sip. She took a stick of cigarette and Chima hastened to light it for her with his gold lighter.

Blowing out smoke in angry bursts, she found an old American *Time* magazine and began leafing through it, silently searching for those familiar airline advertisements that always filled her with pleasant nostalgia. A few pages later, her free hand hovered over the page that proclaimed in bold blue print: 'FLY the Difference. . . . KLM, the airlines' airline.'

Kechi's eyes rested unblinkingly on the colour photograph of a tall air stewardess in a blue suit over a white and blue patterned long-sleeved blouse, eagerly helping a pair of aged women passengers with tangled luggage problems.

Slowly, Kechi closed the magazine. She put a warm, protective hand over it, took a more liberal sip of her drink, drew on her cigarette, threw her head back on the upholstery and blew out the smoke in slow, deliberate rings. Perhaps the smoke got in her eyes; Kechi Ugboma's eyes were glistening.

For minutes the two went on smoking and sipping in silence, until Sampson, the houseboy, called 'Massah' to announce that 'breakfass' was ready. Kechi stealthily dried her eyes with her sleeve.

Breakfast consisted of a lavish helping of toast, butter, fried plantain, omelette and ham, and coffee, with tinned (not powdered) milk.

'You don't seem to be hungry, Ke, do you?'

'I'm O.K.'

'Well, eat like you are O.K.,' Duke said coaxingly. 'I have told you times without number: feel at home here, feel as free as you want to be.'

'Thank you,' she replied formally.

After a few minutes of loud silence, she asked, 'What time do you fly tomorrow?'

'I leave for the airstrip after tea-time and get there about six,' he answered through a gross mouthful of eggs and plantain. He swallowed noisily and added: 'I don't know exactly when the plane leaves. The time varies.'

'And when do you get back?'

'Oh, two-three days. In time for the Cradlers' League ball if that's what you're thinking about.' He swallowed again, grinned and picked up his coffee.

'The dance doesn't come up till next Saturday, so that's O.K.'

Duke nodded and began to light his Portuguese cigarette.

Chima Duke duly flew at 1.30 Wednesday morning. And as soon as he was gone, Kechi Ugboma reactivated her three-open-doors policy and began to enjoy her well-ventilated life without undue interference.

Less than twenty-four hours after Duke was gone, she located Kalu Udim.

12 IMPERSONALITY CULT

YOU MAY ACCUSE ME of impersonality cult – telling you tales about everyone and everything else, without a word about myself. Forgive me. I meant no discourtesy, and I have nothing to hide . . . far from it.

I am Kalu Udim. I was born with a wooden ladle in my mouth. I am an only child, now orphaned. I'm also what my doctor charitably calls a mild epileptic. Poor, kindly Doctor Omenka. As far as I'm concerned epilepsy is epilepsy. Period. At 25 years of age, I am no longer afraid of bitter truths.

Yes, some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouth; others have a silver ladle. I was much luckier: I didn't get a wooden spoon, I got something bigger – a wooden ladle.

Some people, too, revolt against affluence and a surfeit of everything that, they claim, de-humanizes man.

Others wage a life-long battle against poverty.

I didn't do either. I reconciled myself to poverty. I learnt to live with it.

I took the helplessly philosophical view that it was not of my father's making. I mean, he didn't see brighter light.

He once told me, as I was preparing to enter secondary school, that when the coin was tossed between him and his younger brother to choose which of them would benefit from primary education with the meagre resources available to Grandad, Father sort of said to my uncle: tails you win, heads I lose! He just tossed up the chance of a lifetime like that: because, according to him, he hated the thought of disinheriting himself from Grandad's 'considerable wealth in livestock and economic trees' by following the white man and mucking about with chalk and slate.

I should blame him for not seeing beyond the top of a dwarf palm-tree, but I don't. He acted according to his own lights, *then.*

I bet if the coin were to be re-tossed today, he would hasten to say to Uncle: Heads I win, tails you lose!

After sixteen months of the war and one year of active service, I am, at twenty-five, already an ex-serviceman, a war veteran, with an amputated right arm for a medal.

You may soon say that I'm a disgruntled veteran. Maybe. But then I was, at best, a reluctant soldier. I had reason to be. I have never believed I have the stuff heroes are made of. Few epileptics have.

Don't get me wrong, though. It is not that I was without patriotic feelings on the events of the past three years. I would be a log of wood not to share my people's feeling of grievous injury.

I mean, look at my country as I knew it – nearly 400,000 square miles of incongruity and contradiction born in 1900. To the insider who had probably not travelled beyond the next village's palm-wine hut, it was a prosperous giant. It mattered not to him that the giant was led by corrupt, callous Lilliputian politicians. We lived by the Bible to the letter: fat men grew fatter sucking the blood of lean men. Lean men dried up and snapped like twigs. The little that small men had was taken away and added to the much that big men hoarded. A police superintendent could ask for one hundred pounds as a bribe from an apprentice driver seeking to obtain a driving licence to get a hundred-pounds-per-annum job. Elsewhere, public leaders made deals in daylight and got kick-backs in the night. *Ten per cent*, I often thought in disgust, should have been the title of the national anthem. For it was a sacred way of life. As were tribalism, nepotism and all the divisive 'isms' that polluted the sacred springs of public life. It was enough to imbue any young person with a deep and abiding loathing for his country.

Then came the military *coup* of January 1966 by a group of dedicated young majors. It was my second term in the university. We all cheered and hailed, for we smelt clean, fresh air that soon filled our lungs, cleansed our poisoned systems and purged our jaundiced perspectives. I knew that as a student on a government scholarship I risked my privileges should the *coup* collapse. But I did not care. I jubilated.

Then came the counter-*coup*. The clouds began to thicken again, this time with a misty hue of the blood that was to flow freely in military barracks and open streets.

Then the massacres, during which my people were machine-gunned out of the Federation in a brilliantly bloody spectacle that left the tactical imprint of Sandhurst training. My uncle was killed. His wife was eviscerated, her eyes gouged out and her husband's penis cut off and stuck between her teeth for good measure.

Gruesome enough to give me *patriotic* feelings for my country, wasn't it?

Then along came Biafra. Yes, *our* Biafra. The haven for a persecuted people; the answer to Nigeria and massacres; the bold response to cyclic decades of pogrom. I recall a verse by a classmate of mine that poignantly captured the mood of campus youth at the time – the rejection of the old system and optimism for the new order. . . .

We mount the precipice of life
And come down with a bang! or a boom!
The resurrection is ended
And we begin life anew.

The senses come to a staggering pause
The nerves jab, jerk . . . vibrate once;
The body is dead;
The soul has risen.

We shall rise and stare heavenwards,
Clamber up the narrow three-rung ladder;
Regeneration shall continue
And new stocks from there issue. . . .[1]

There was no shortage of rallying slogans for the new nation:
Equality
Social Justice
Brother's Keeper.
Beautiful phrases all, aren't they?

But was Biafra as beautiful as these slogans? In terms of social justice, was she an answer to Nigeria?

We saw a new ruling class, a new élite, emerge. It was a wicked, heartless, despicably squalid cabal that was ruled by the power of money and scarce commodities. Even our leader had a powerful girl-friend who was nicknamed *Her* Excellency the Head of State.

My disillusionment notwithstanding, I still had some sort of patriotic feelings. My idea of country and nation transcends the transient human, with his whims, faults and foibles.

But you shouldn't forget that, apart from my health condition, I'm an only child. Mother never spared me from constant reminders of that fact.

'You're all I've got, you know,' she would say with tears in her voice.

'A woman with an only child is like a person with one eye, you know,' she would tell me at other times, the tears still dripping from her voice.

I knew. And always tried to remember whenever I was away from Mother. If I eventually ended up in the last place Mother wanted me – the army – it was not because I was suddenly overcome by a patriotism greater than my love and respect for Mother.

[1] Joshua Uzoigwe, *Drying Lake, Rising Spring.*

No. I loved Mother dearly . . . she was all I had, too. Father died when I was in my third year in the secondary school that he had blistered his palms to put me into, to give me something he never had. Next to this was my health condition. I always believed that a hero was the man who knew the borderline between bravery and suicide.

I ended up in the army because someone wanted me in there. Someone who wanted to assuage his feeling of injury – actual or imagined, only God knows. Someone wanted me to taste the vinegar of the power he suddenly found himself wielding over my fate.

Maybe I should have warned you that in the past two years God's supreme power over our destiny had been supplanted temporally by a powerful minority of mortals to whom we practically owed our very existence. I, unwitting fool, fell foul of one of these great new potentates before I was able to absorb, in my naïve incredulity, the full extent of their newly acquired influence.

He was my former civilian boss. I have bothered not to remember his name – for now.

The last time I made inquiries about him, I was told he had flown off to Europe on some mission. They always went on foreign missions, these powerful men of sudden influence and privilege, these fat toads of war.

Too old to fight.

Young enough to shuttle across the globe on foreign missions.

They fought by proxy – let the young ones do the fighting on their behalf.

We young ones are the cannon fodder, aren't we? Wars are always made by the old men – on our behalf.

Too young to vote.

Old enough to fight. And die. Or be maimed for life. Like me.

If you remember, I don't like to mention my disability . . . it makes me bitter.

It's not the injury itself that makes me bitter. I mean, I have reconciled myself to it; trained myself by self-therapy for this one-handed existence.

I can now extract my cheap cigarette and light it with my left hand. I had of course long perfected the act of eating with the same hand; and putting on my clothes, too. I have even learnt the most important exercise to me yet . . . to use my pistol with my left hand. . . .

It's not these minor adjustments at all.

It is the less minor matter – the cause of my injury, the circumstances – that makes me sore as hell.

And that is my former civilian boss, the foreign missioner.

So, if you'll permit me, I'd rather not talk about him, now. . . .

But damn it. Why should I shelve the unpleasant for now? Why? Cowardice? After all, it's because of him, in search of him, that I came to live in this town. Not because of Okere and the food he kindly gives me. (I had met him only by kind accident.)

In any case a certain Miss Kechi Ugboma, who, curiously, thinks she is irretrievably in love with a disabled epileptic, is bound to ask me sooner rather than later. And I can't go on hiding the truth for too long. Why must I tell one person before the rest of you? Damn it . . .!

13 BRAZEN INSUBORDINATION

AS I LOOK ahead of me now, blowing the shit-smelling smoke of my cheap cigarette bought at exorbitant price, I can see it all clearly on the daylight screen of my mind.

I had been posted to the Price Control Directorate in Aba soon after the fall of Enugu. By this time the fervour of volunteering to 'fight the vandals to a finish' had been dampened by the cold blood that flowed freely at the various battle-fronts. Overnight conscription had replaced volunteer enlistment and the eager, potential volunteers of a fortnight ago were duckers and dodgers in the backyards and back-alleys of the urban centres and the byways and pathways of the rural villages.

At twenty-three, I was a prime target for the conscription squad. But I am an epileptic, though a mild one, my kindly doctor insists. He therefore gave me a medical certificate stating my condition, and even got me a chit from the Defence Headquarters exempting me from military service on account of my health.

The Price Control Directorate was set up in the face of the blockade to order from abroad and distribute locally, on a ration basis, such essential but scarce commodities as salt and protein food. My service at the Price Control Directorate was therefore classified as 'Essential Duty', carrying with it immunity from active service. With my health condition, an essential duty assignment, and the appropriate documentary evidence, my security was triply assured. Or so I thought. . . . Until that morning when it ended with the suddenness of a dry-season rainfall. . . .

My big boss had come into his office late as usual. No one in the directorate was in a position to mind that his stomach was protruding larger than

ever before; that he looked more like a toad today than yesterday; or that he was belching when everyone else was yawning.

While he was God-knows-where, however, an urgent telex message had come in from Libreville, Gabon. Using what I foolishly thought was the elementary initiative expected of a mail clerk confronted with an urgent telex message in the absence of the big boss, I opened the flimsy pink envelope and read the three-line message:

'RE URGENT ORDER THREE DOZEN SACKS
SALT ARRIVING TONIGHT FLIGHT STOP
ARRANGE IMMEDIATE CLEARANCE.'

It was from one of our suppliers in Europe.

The transport situation being quite unpredictable, I thought I had better do something. I got some unofficious men in the Transport Directorate to make a lorry roadworthy for the night trip to the airstrip. Arranging transport at the directorate across the field could take the best part of the day – and it was already half-past eleven. A spare part may be needed and might have to be looked for as far afield as Nnewi or Nkwerre. Time, I thought, was not on our side.

That, I had thought with still-born satisfaction, should please the big boss. Prompt action on his behalf on an urgent matter while he was away.

How damned wrong I was.

For when the boss arrived, belched his way past the puny mortals in the main office, into his office, and saw the opened telex message on his desk, I thought I heard him hit the ceiling. In any case, he exploded like a hand-grenade. Not even the footnote which I had confidently scribbled stating the preliminary steps I had taken could mollify him.

To my profound amazement, the boss was quivering and stuttering with rage. A puny, minor official like me had the impudence to open and read what he quickly reclassified as 'a highly confidential cable' from a 'foreign government'!

He accused me of everything short of sabotage, which carried the death penalty. I had usurped his prerogative, he charged, as I stood before him, soundly flabbergasted. It was arrogant and presumptuous. Presumptuous, that's what it was, he re-exploded, like a two-stage rocket.

Youthful impertinence, presumptuous disregard for authority, norms and procedure, my boss angrily diagnosed, were the bane of my generation. An arrogant generation. A generation of pretenders to the throne, who wanted to wear the crown before the king was dead. A generation

of irresponsible brats and upstarts, that's what mine was. Toying around with affairs of state as if it was a cheap piece of equipment in a college laboratory.

I stood still in the face of his verbal onslaught and held my peace for as long as propriety and respect called for.

But only that long. For the pretence of this vain man accusing me of presumption throughly riled me.

I *knew* my boss was mad for no other reason than that I had failed to wait for his leisurely pleasure to open an urgent cable, fussily, *bossily* give me instructions, before I did exactly the same thing I had done without supervision. His reaction was totally incomprehensible to me in a war situation of emergency and total mobilization. It was totally confusing to me in the context of the structure of the directorates which were specifically set up to shred the yards of red tape spawned by the bureaucratic ministerial departments. Mr Boss's incomprehensible pique thoroughly sickened me.

And, I, too, exploded.

Mr Boss implied that I should use my head only for carrying water and wood. Rubbish. And I told him exactly so.

I'm prepared to take a hiding and do my penance when I have done wrong, even if innocently. I might have done wrong by not waiting to massage the ego and vanity of my leisurely boss; usurped his prerogative like the inconsequential brat that I was; undermined his authority and exposed his truancy by acting *promptly* in a matter that required *prompt* action.

But I knew I had not taken any action to undermine him or to subtly underline his leisureliness, though I knew he was happiest in his job when he had to hop on to an aircraft and head for the quiet serenity of any of the European capitals, away from the nuisance of war and the smell of death. That was his privilege, and I was not quarrelling about it. But I had no doubt whatsoever that if I had waited till the boss belched his way into the office at 1.30 p.m., there would not have been enough time left to arrange a vehicle to do the Uli run. And that salt was badly needed somewhere, I can tell you.

The ground felt firm under my feet and I stood on it. I was prepared to face a tribunal for my action if it pleased Mr Boss to institute one. But his final reaction was totally unexpected. Shaking under the rage aggravated by my lack of repentance, Mr Boss blurted finally:

'For your brazen insubordination, Mr Udim, you'll have to go into the army and learn some discipline. I'll see to it!' he vowed.

At first I was terrified. Then I thought he was joking. He had to be. The thought restored my calm. And the existence of my exemption

documents which he knew about reassured my confidence that Mr Boss was exercising one of his other prerogatives which I had not usurped – bluffing.

I laughed at the boss. A kind of last laugh.

He seemed, however, to read my mind and the confidence in my laughter, even its secret, solid source. For he quickly wiped the remnants of my laughter off my teeth with a shattering declaration of intent.

'You may laugh, now, Udim, but you won't laugh for long,' he foamed at the mouth. 'Forget about your medical certificate. I shall get you into the Biafran army even if you carry a medical certificate of exemption from the World Health Organization!' The wicked determination behind the vow was no laughing matter.

As I entered the main office where every one of my colleagues sat in silent sympathy, I began to sob quietly.

I can feel the tears coming back now, hot and scalding.

Excuse me please, while I sneeze. . . .

14 ONE-ARMED BANDIT

MAJOR CHILAKA UKATTA, alias U.K. Charlie, drove up to the Women's Hostel in a mist of dust that bespoke his mood. The time was 6 p.m. and light was fast fading. He noted absently that the usual line of cars was beginning to form for the evening's recreation. He joined the queue.

If he could, he would have taken the steps four at a time, for in such a furious hurry was he.

Kechi Ugboma, who could by now read Charlie's footsteps, and his mood by them, opened her door even before Charlie could knock.

'Hi, Charlie-boy,' she greeted with a reluctant smile, for she was readying herself to go to the motel on the golf course where she had a dinner date (at her own expense, thank you) with her new friend, Kalu Udim.

Charlie-boy stomped roughly past his mistress without a word. His eyes were as wide as twin bowls, flaming bowls, and his nostrils were twitching. He was still dressed in sweat-soaked battle-dress, which suggested that he had come straight from the nearby battle-front where a quiet state of alert was declared over the week-end. He took off his peaked cloth cap with the rising sun emblem on it, and slammed it down on the lady's dressing-table with such force that it seemed to have been

impaled. Three steps later he grabbed Kechi by the arm, his grip vicious as metal clamps, and swung her round, facing him. His eyes seemed to pierce her face and his breath emitted fumes of crude 'Kinkana' gin that must have been drunk by the glassful.

'Tell me, Kechi, what have you been up to with that one-armed bandit?' He seemed to be talking through his flaming eyes, for they seemed wider than his unmoving mouth.

Kechi Ugboma was horrified not so much by the sparking eyes as by the cruel description of her new boy-friend.

'How dare you call Kal a one-armed bandit!' she blurted before she could check herself. 'And will you let go of my arm before I scream rape!'

'Does that answer my question, you two-timing bitch?' he asked her. The sputum that followed the last word proved he was speaking with his mouth, if through clenched teeth; but the eyes were no narrower.

'Is that why you left the battle-front to drive down to Owerri? And you're hurting me, you brute! Let go of my arm, Chilaka Ukatta!'

'Remember what I told you the other night at Major Mere's party?' His teeth gritted viciously.

'I don't care a damn what you told me at Major Mere's party! Just let go of my arm. You are a devil and a brute!' Kechi countered with a defiance uncommon in her relationship with Major Ukatta. 'I'm sick and fed up with the likes of you who want me to be their private property. I really am!' There was a trickle of tears in her voice. 'Now leave me alone and get out of my house. Get out!' she tried vainly to free herself from the major's sandpaper-palmed grip.

Ukatta glared into her misty eyes, and she removed her face violently.

'Listen, Kechi,' Ukatta's voice was a wicked whisper. 'I'm certainly going to get out of your house. You don't expect me to stick around and rub shoulders with infinitely junior officers, do you? By God, I'll get out – and I'll stay out!' Ukatta paused briefly and lowered his voice to an even more vicious whisper. 'But let me tell you something you seem to have forgotten. If I get out, Kechi, everything I brought with me gets out with me! Everything right down to your plates and cutlery.'

With that announcement, U.K. Charlie stomped out of the room, mumbling something about what he would do to the bandit's other arm if he caught up with him.

Kechi listened for a while, half-hoping that she would not hear Charlie-boy's car starting. When it did, she sat on her bed and began to tremble with violent sobs.

Nearly an hour later, when she had wept to her heart's content, she wiped her eyes and began to contemplate the prospects of life without Charlie-boy, one of her greatest providers.

Not without some discomfort, Kechi Ugboma admitted to herself that every damn thing in her room, from furniture to cutlery, was provided for her by Charlie-boy. He might have appropriated them from the army stores, or diverted them from his unit's camp headquarters – no matter; a girl had got to live. She could, of course, call Charlie's bluff and and damn the consequence; she was still desired by many rich men who were eager to over-provide. And there was of course the over-eager-to-please Chima Duke, fat, gross and disgusting though he might be. The Duke would go to any length of Europe to obtain her needs if that would ensure of him of a little more, just a little more, affection from her.

But Kechi acknowledged with ease that she did not want new male substitutes. Nor did she fancy falling into the yawning net of that fat, greasy, gross sugar-daddy, Duke, enslaving herself any further than she had already. If she did, she would be a permanently ripe prey for the old wolf that never grew old.

Venturing further, Kechi contemplated that she could dump Charlie-boy and his belongings, stick to her Kalu Udim, and proudly buy a mat and lie on the floor like those other less-sought-after girls who have no one to provide for them. She could even swallow her pride and buy a bamboo bed and lie on it with a straight face – and a straight back. (And starve? She had gone from grace to grass enough as it was . . . could she . . .?)

She thought that she could of course jettison her idealistic, and in the circumstances unrealistic, view of love and romance and Kalu Udim along with it, and stick to her Charlie-boy and her comfortable furniture.

Love and romance could come after the war was over. Charlie had provided her with relief food in sufficient enough quantity to spare some for her friends and relations over the past six months. He had never raised a row over the Duke, because Charlie accepted that he was not in a position to provide her with other items like clothes and cosmetics, which Chima Duke had easy access to. Division of labour, sort of.

Finally, she could go back to Charlie, apologize for her stupid outburst, and deny categorically that she had had anything to do with Kalu Udim. Only sympathy for his disabled state. That would not stop her from seeing Kal, of course. It only meant she would have to be more careful, more discreet. Plus doing quiet penance for denying him at the first crow.

She realized that in that case she would be risking Kal's life, as she was certain Ukatta's legendary temper would overcome him if he dis-

covered that he was still being two-timed. Or, rather, three-timed. Even in her outburst, she had stopped just short of admitting anything. So it should be easy for Charlie to believe her. With a little teardrop in her eyes, he would.

Kechi looked at her wrist-watch; it was 7.30 p.m. She realized that she had kept Kalu Udim waiting at the motel for the past thirty minutes. She rose to repair her face, hurrying to do the task she usually did leisurely, and muttering to herself: 'I must get out of here before Charlie sends his batmen round to strip my room.'

She picked up her handbag and locked her door. In the kitchen at the end of the hallway she found her friend Ihuoma, who had come in a few minutes previously, preparing to cook herself some supper. Kechi handed Ihuoma her key. It was the traditional signal that she wouldn't be back until the next morning.

Kechi walked for about ten minutes until she got to a crossroads. It was indeed *the* crossroads. To her left the road led to the row of bungalows where Ukatta and his fellow army officers lived. To the right, the road led to the Golf Course Motel where she knew Kalu Udim must be waiting.

Kechi paused.

She thought for a brief moment about one door closing and another opening. She thought about fire-escapes, too. . . .

She turned left and began to walk fast.

15 A SPADE IS A SHOVEL

IT IS NOW 9.30 p.m., the waiter tells me (I don't have a watch, thank you), and I reckon I have been waiting here for Miss Kechi Ugboma for about two and a half hours.

The Golf Course Motel is not a bad place to wait for someone, I must admit. They still serve fried chicken, fried snails and condiments – including salt. But they are not serving it free of charge. You must have good money in your pocket if you want to kill time that way. So I've been eating with my eyes for the past two and a half hours. Which is not entirely bad. For, as the sheep said to the lambs, if you can't eat, at least you can look. So I've betaken me to the wisdom of the sheep. But I have

tried not to gape, you know, following the hand's journey from plate to mouth like a watery-mouthed dog.

I will admit that I don't mind being stood up once in a while; though, like most men, I don't particularly enjoy it. I haven't been stood up for some time now, so I can take this for a change. But I do very much mind missing my meal at Okere's for the *promise* of a dinner that never was.

It had been all her idea that she and I go to the motel this evening for a meal. Before I could protest my impecuniosity, she had assured me that she would pay the bill and that she could comfortably afford it, and would I please swallow my male pride and come out and enjoy myself. I did swallow my male pride. It is easy enough for me to swallow what is left of it nowadays.

Well, I couldn't jolly well say, damn it, no thanks, could I? I mean, I never deceive myself. I'm not one of those chaps who keep shaking their heads when they really mean 'no, but could my ego be massaged with a little more persuasion?' When I mean yes, I say so. I call a spade a bloody shovel. And promptly too.

Well, maybe I'm not quite so smart after all. Perhaps if I had yielded a little less eagerly, she would have kept our date. Maybe she guessed, and rightly too, that I was going to be a parasite. Few people can afford to accommodate parasites nowadays. I haven't even heard of anyone offering to donate blood to the blood-bank any more. Few people have enough of anything, including blood. And even the few that have wouldn't accommodate parasites. Female parasites maybe, but certainly not *male* ones.

Besides, Kechi has known me for scarcely forty-eight hours. I had gone to Meju's cousin at the Men's Hostel on Wednesday to pick up the latest gossip from my former unit, as transmitted by Mej through his batman, who came to town every day to bring him proper food from home, when I saw her coming out of the Women's Hostel. It was not evening yet and the usual rows of cars that made my eyes smart had not started to besiege the block. So it was easy enough for me to look in her direction. She had remembered me from Mere's party; and there was of course my amputated hand to promote sympathetic discussion. So it was easy for her to initiate small-talk, beginning with the usual:

'Hello, how's your hand?'

'It's re-growing,' I had answered blandly.

Silly question; silly answer.

And forty-eight hours, you'll agree, is not enough time to develop such a strong attachment to a disabled layabout as not to stand him up. So, I was not particularly irked or even surprised at Kechi's no-show. Only regretful at missing the bird-in-hand in pursuit of a promised two.

Quickly I pushed all that thought behind me, adjusted my arm-sling and left the carefree, well-fed groups that surrounded the half a dozen tables in the motel dining-room. I did not look back.

Outside, it was dark as a bunker. The night was airless and the earth seemed to be belching heat. I groped my way to the main street, turned left and began to walk the long road to Okere's quarters.

I could hear the faint boom of artillery in the distant, sleepless battle-fronts around Owerri, and the fainter rattle of small-arms fire. I felt a mild wave of reluctant nostalgia. The Biafran battle-front is not a particularly unpleasant place for a young man, I was thinking. Not if he is also able-bodied, adventurous, and sufficiently possessed of a suicide streak. I grinned at my own cynicism and quickened my step, remembering the monster of hunger that still waited in ambush for me.

I hoped Okere was in. I prayed he was in. It didn't matter if he had gone to sleep, or that there was no food. Just let me find him in his quarters, God, I prayed silently. He would take care of the situation. I know Okere.

Far to my left, a night owl hooted in the distant bush, its sinister jeer carried to my ears on the swift wings of the night's silence. Instinctively, I stuck out my tongue and sneered back in the direction of the hooting in angry reprisal. I'm not exactly superstitious, but Mother, I recalled, always insisted that an owl hooting was a bad omen. And Mother was seldom wrong in such matters of lore. I quickened my strides, propelled by the despair instilled by the owl's omen. Soon I was slowing my steps on the verges of the Merry Major's well-kept lawns. But the gleaming bungalow seemed smothered in a blanket of darkness.

Strange.

Very strange.

Major Mere's house always conjured up in my mind the image of the 'little house of no regret', where lights always shone, bathing the green lawns, even when the surrounding buildings were plunged in an air-raid blackout. You would sooner remember the day Nebuchadnezzar used a crocodile nacet blade than recall the night Merry Major Mere's house was not thoroughly lit. And swinging. I had sometimes wondered whether he was not in cahoots with Nigerian air force fighter pilots. The house wouldn't of course, condescend to the palm-frond camouflages that marred the oil-paint glitter of the neighbouring bungalows in the former Shell-BP yard.

Very odd tonight, if you see what I mean.

I did not see the little man emerge from the darkness. He must have had a cat's eyes and paws to isolate me in the pitch surroundings and

walk up to me without a sound. It was the same nice little fellow at the water-tap the other night.

'Where's Lance-Corporal Okere?' I asked, waving aside his stiff attention and the rest of the protocol.

The little man stammered, stuttered, and finally told me that *kopru* was not in.

Yes, I could see he was not in but where was he?

He had gone with the major to the front this afternoon.

The major to the front line!

Major Mere to the battle-front! All hell must have frozen into an iceberg to warrant that kind of extremely drastic measure. The Merry Major at his battle-front at last! I was profoundly scandalized!

And when did he say he would come back?

The little fellow did not know that one. But his guess cut my intestines in half. They might be away for some time, he guessed. I wished he hadn't. But he had heard that the enemy was pushing hard for a final offensive.

The *final, final* . . . I thought, momentarily forgetting the peril of starvation that threatened me. There had been so many *final* pushes, *final* offensives, and *specials* by the enemy in the past I could now hardly contain my cynicism.

Christmas *special.*

Kinshasa *special.*

New Year *final.*

Final solution.

This one had to be the *final, final* push. Or they might need to think up a *final, final, final.* . . .

But it seemed to me that nobody in the hierarchy here was being as cynical about it. How else could you explain the absolutely scandalous fact that our precious Major Mere, who possessed the unique ability to command his front-line troops from the comfort of his well-appointed house, was now constrained to risk his priceless life by visiting the front lines?

It's all my fault, I thought, as I walked away, without even saying thank you to the little fellow. (Come to think of it, *what* should I thank him for?) I thought that, if I hadn't been too eager to accept Kechi Ugboma's invitation to wine and dine, Okere would have left me some food at least for the night before he departed with the major.

I was of course in a right royal frame of mind to pick up that greatest possession of mine, my MAAB automatic pistol, fish out the man who

had really brought me wandering into this friendless town, squeeze a bullet into his heart and one into my mouth. The difference between the consequence of such an action and the indefinite days of hunger ahead seemed marginal to me.

But, then, I would have to go to Europe to search out the man I'm looking for.

It must have been well past midnight when I reached my house. I opened my box of a room and went in. Luckily, I had had the wisdom to leave a half-smoked cigarette on the window-sill earlier in the evening, just in case. It had been the last of a packet that I had managed to make last me a week. I lit it slowly, smoked it even more slowly, cherishing and relishing every lungful.

Later when I tried to sleep, I kept seeing images of my former boss. It was not exactly sleep-inducing.

16 BROTHER'S KEEPER

I DID NOT RISE EARLY, even when the sunlight prompted me with its rays of gold-coloured light streaming through the wide crack in my window. I had no reason to rise early. Lying there on my grass mattress and bamboo bed, my neck aching from the lack of a pillow, the dried blades of grass pricking my body, I felt like I was lying on a bed of nails.

Staying in bed was not without its compensations. I would have to acquire X-ray eyes to espy the unmiserable people who would be lugging relief rice and stockfish under the noses of the likes of me. 'What the eyes do not see, the mouth does not water for,' so Mother used to say.

But, then, I couldn't sleep for eternity. I must have slept for well over ten hours already, and that's more than enough for an adult, even a hungry one. Besides, the thoughts on my mind were hardly anaesthetic.

But staying awake and counting and re-counting the rafters of the roof above my room tempts me into the not-quite-cheerful task of continuing the tale of the man in pursuit of whom I came to Owerri, the only town left in Biafran hands. Still, I shall restrain the temptation to continue the account before my ex-boss returns from wherever he has shuttled off to. That way it will fall into proper perspective. As Mother once said, 'If you tell your side of a story in the absence of the other party, you will be bound to re-tell it when he is present.' Which can be a bit of a bore. Mother, I keep telling you, was a wise old lady. The few occasions I

had flouted her maxims, perhaps unconsciously to test their validity for the kick of it, I had come out with my fingers scalded. Fortunately it had never been in serious matters.

The idea hit me like a sniper's bullet just as I was striving to push the poisoning thought of my former boss out of my mind. Why not go to the relief centre today? After all, the centres were set up to help the needy and destitute. And am I not both, plus?

I got up quickly like a pauper who had suddenly remembered that someone owed him money. With my good hand I grabbed my frayed trousers and struggled into them with Olympic speed. I did not bother to take a bath – with my one hand bathing always took me a long time, a leisure I could ill-afford in the pressing circumstances.

I pocketed my key and stepped on to the street. The sun was breathing down furiously and I felt faint under the sudden heat. But the thought of the relief food I was going to beg from the centre gave me instant strength.

The least crowded centre, I had been told, was the Roman Catholic Relief Centre at Mount Carmel Mission, Emekuku. That was some six to seven miles from here. Quite a distance to walk on an empty stomach on a hot day, you'll agree. I could of course risk the long queue that usually besieged the other centres inside the city rather than walk six long miles to Emekuku. But I judged that I would sooner faint trekking to Emekuku than be trampled under foot by the multitude that was reputed to hold siege to the township food centres every day. Also, it's a long time since I had a fit, and if one was due now, I would rather it didn't occur among so many people.

I set off for Emekuku with a sizable white cotton sack under my bad arm.

Past the township proper, the black steaming road snaked ahead of me uninvitingly. The farther I walked down the road the hotter it seemed to become and the more I sweated, draining myself of my precious reserve of energy. But it didn't seem to matter when I considered the food that awaited me at the end of the long trek.

A few vehicles passed me, bathing me in dust. They were mainly military lorries, commandeered vehicles carrying relief food and stores, and a small number of private cars that managed to escape the long arms of the requisitioning squads. I didn't wave down the troop-carrying lorries. I considered that the mission of these able-bodied suicides was far more important than mine. I shouldn't interfere with it. You wouldn't say I'm unpatriotic, would you?

When I got to Egbu, some three miles from Owerri and half-way to my destination, my legs seemed unable to carry me any further. They felt like rubber and my insides shook like a leaf on a tree. I was as thirsty as a desert camel.

Ahead of me, two soldiers on crutches were resting what was left of their limbs in some shade under the umbrella of a vast tree. I joined them, exchanged weary greetings, and wiped my face with my sleeve. A fateful breeze began to blow and I gave thanks to God. One of the soldiers was smoking the butt of a cigarette, 'khaki head' soldiers call it in the front line. His shirt was as tattered as his comrade's. There was little to choose between the two of them. Each had had his left leg amputated from above the knee. They seemed like twin brothers in misery.

The one dragged futilely on the cork tip of the cigarette, felt contented with the tiny puff of smoke that the butt yielded, and passed it to his comrade. His comrade adjusted his crutches before he took the butt and, I believe, in the interim, lost whatever chance he had of getting the last tiny puff out of the butt. For a tiny freckle of fire fell off the butt of the cigarette and it died, of prolonged exhaustion, it seemed to me.

The comrade looked at the dead butt with sadness in his eyes, gnashed his teeth regretfully and tossed it away solemnly. I shared his grief and quiet sadness; for I, too, was dying for a smoke.

Engrossed in the matter of the dead cigarette, I did not notice the girl join us in the shade. I doubt that my companions did, either. But feeling that touch of the invisible hand that tells you when someone has been staring at you without your knowing it, I turned to see our latest companion. She quickly removed her eyes, but not quickly enough for me not to notice that she had been feeding her eyes on my bad arm, probably after having stared for an equal length of time at the missing legs of my companions. A macabre congregation, she must have concluded.

She was attractive and looked well-fed. She wore good clothes and even had lipstick on; which spoke eloquently of her state and connections at this tail-end of Biafra. She had a shopping-bag hanging from the end of her arm, and an expectant look on her face. Probably waiting for some boy-friend to drive her to the market, I thought. This type didn't need to go to the relief centre for her supplies. They would have them delivered to her doorstep in an army Land Rover. Which is why it was odd that she should be waiting on our side of the road. I concluded that she could only be taking advantage of the shade.

The faint sound of a car did not particularly fill me with hope until it drew nearer and I saw that it was *not* a military vehicle. The blue Peugeot 404 saloon speeding up towards us was a private car. I had no doubt

whatsoever that I could use a ride for the remaining three miles to Emekuku. I began to wave the car down with all the strength I could put into my good arm and all the pleading I could put into my mien. I waved and waved. I waved even more frantically when I began to feel strained. Drawing nearer to the road, I noticed that the car was empty but for the bulky man behind the wheel. I waved like a desperate maniac.

I waved so frantically my sling slid off my bad arm, but I continued waving. By the time the car was fifty yards from where we stood, my companions on crutches had joined me. One raised one of his crutches in the air to dramatize his and our desperation.

The girl did not even look in the direction of the approaching car. She had by now even moved a few yards to the left of us. She must be going in the opposite direction to the town market, I was certain now. I began a long sigh of relief as the blue car began to climb into low gear; and soon it began to stop. But it did not stop quite where we were standing. It purred throatily past us and screeched to a halt a few yards from us; nearer the girl than us.

We hobbled hopefully towards the car. My friends, being on crutches, were much slower and I was reluctant to appear to be taking advantage of them by running towards our potential benefactor. So with painful patience, I trotted behind them.

The man behind the steering-wheel was leaning over his vacant front passenger seat and chatting cheerily to the girl when we drew up to the car. I saw the girl nod her head, the man lean back and open the front door for the girl. She sat down and put her shopping-bag between her knees.

One of my companions leaned on the window of the car for support and began to beg for a lift for all of us as soon as the man turned his face after settling in his female beneficiary.

'Please sir, can you . . .?'

The scowl on the man's face must have cut the words from my companion's lips.

'What's that?' The man fired without waiting. 'Do you know where I'm going to?' The face that was beaming broadly to the girl a few seconds ago now looked as friendly as a hangman's.

I was still contemplating the hostility on the chameleonic face when the engine suddenly revved and, without warning, the car shot forward. My companion, who had gone lax on his crutches while reposing all his weight, and hope, on the car, was thrown with the sudden surge.

He fell violently sideways on the hard, hot tarmac, his crutches flung aside. There was blood on his face. His comrade was also, though less

violently, thrown for I had just enough presence of mind to grab his arm with my good one and steady him.

The fallen soldier turned on his back; I saw tears in his eyes and realized there were some in my own eyes, too. I don't know how I mustered the strength, but I found myself putting my good arm behind his neck and successfully bringing him to a sitting position on the scalding tarmac.

'Tell me, where are you two going?' I asked. It was the first time we had spoken to one another since our brief exchange of greetings some thirty minutes before.

'We're trying to get back to the military hospital at Enyiogugu.' It was the comrade who answered. I could see the fallen soldier was in no sentiment to speak a word even if he wanted to. Enyiogugu was about nine miles from where we were. Much farther than I was having a hell of a time trying to go to on my two feet. But even if they were going to Emekuku like myself, what could I do to help them?

I explained my circumstances and mission to them and told them that reluctantly I would have to jog along. They understood.

The fallen one would not move out or be moved out of the heat back to the shade. Nor would he be consoled; he sat there, shaking his head slowly from side to side, tears burning tracks down his cheeks. I could almost read the thoughts going through his tortured mind. . . .

I adjusted my sling at last and faced the long road ahead. I did not give myself time to be horrified by the recent incident. Nor to reminisce on the beautiful platitudes proclaimed at Ahiara a few months ago.[2]

All I knew was that I wouldn't dare stop a car on this journey, even if I was fainting and one was desperate to give me a lift. . . .

2 'Ahiara Declaration' was the document issued after a Biafran Consultative Assembly session at Ahiara, 20 miles south of Owerri, on 1st June, 1969, laying down the social and political ideology of Biafra. Among these principles was that 'every Biafran is his brother's keeper'.

17 TO THEM THAT HAVE

I WAS THOROUGHLY EXHAUSTED and wobbly when I reached Emekuku. But no matter; the relief centre was open.

Did I say the centre was *open*? Sorry, wrong choice of word. The relief centre was awake. Wide awake and bustling. The cries and screams of scores of hungry little children tied to their mothers' backs resounded like a universal boiling kettle, filling the humid air, my ears and, I believe, the ears of the Reverend Father in charge of the centre. Mothers jostled one another, mindless of the tiny tots strapped to their backs. Amputees and other disabled soldiers littered the front lawns like withered, unsold vegetables returned from the market.

The Reverend Father's huge grey mansion housed the relief store which was on the ground floor. Next to the store was the chapel, from whose open door you could see twin burning candles flanking the blessed sacrament.

Over the heads of the women, I fixed my eyes briefly on the altar, bowed my head and made the sign of the cross. Silently I prayed to the body of Christ to come to the aid of us, the needy and hungry, and suffer us not to leave this sacred food centre still hungry.

No sooner had I ended my prayer than it was answered. Two tough-looking youths, well-fed and robust like inflated Michelin tyres, bounced out of the big building, long whips in hand, and began to flay away at the gathered seekers with what looked like customary gusto. I could hear the whips whistling in the air as they missed one helpless head and landed with an ugly crack on another luckless one.

The surging crowd scattered in terrified frenzy. Screams and cries filled my ears as I took many hurried steps backwards behind the yelling women and screaming children.

I was too desperate then to be horrified. I learnt later in the day that the two robust whip-hands were Father Nwobi's younger brothers. And that Father Nwobi ran the Emekuku relief centre like a family affair.

With the crowd pushed back, albeit resisting outright dispersal with a quiet obstinacy, the Reverend Father emerged from the relief store escorting two guests.

Father Nwobi couldn't have been a day older than thirty-one years. He was of middle height and slowly but steadily going to fat. His oval face radiated a charm and smile that belonged to a lion-handler. I fixed a hopeful smile on my potential benefactor's face, and noticed that his

eyes avoided the masses. He seemed to stare studiedly at his knees even when he was talking to his guests. There was a puzzling air of nonchalance about him and, considering the misery that literally beseieged his food centre, I found this rather disconcerting.

I was too taken in by the reverend gentleman's appearance to notice who his guests were. And when I did my jaw threatened to drop to the ground. Looking exotic in the gloomy surroundings of the relief centre were Miss Kechi Ugboma and Major Chilaka Ukatta. The major was not in uniform, but close at his heels was his batman, his rifle slung over his shoulder to make way for a massive sack of foodstuff in each hand.

I recovered my jaw quickly and felt my good hand rubbing my chin, perhaps to reassure myself that I was still in one piece.

'Well, well, well,' I muttered to myself.

The two inflated tyres presently bounced out from nowhere and donned their oppressor's look once more. One offered to help the suffering batman with his heavy luggage of food. The other cleared a path through the crowd (an efficient job he made of it, too), for the major and his girl to reach their car.

As Kechi and her party drew nearer, I weaved my way sideways, keeping out of her view, until I disappeared among my likes. I did not look up until I heard the major's car start up and push off. Then I weaved my way out again and waited in ambush for the priest now returning to the building.

A lot of people were also apparently waiting in ambush for Father Nwobi. And you could thus trust the two inflated tyres to bounce out, happily whipping away. But I had to talk to the priest then or never. It was past 3 p.m. and the centre would close any minute.

Now or never, I instructed myself.

Quickly, I rolled up my white cotton sack and hid it under the armpit of my bad arm, beneath my shirt, to disguise the object of my mission. I could have come here for confession, couldn't I?

I was by Father Nwobi's side, talking and walking into the building with him, before his guard-brothers could stop me.

'Father,' I began solemnly. 'I want to have a word with you. I have come all the way from Owerri. . . .'

'You make it sound like a long distance. Owerri is only six miles away,' was the first thing Father Nwobi reminded me. Across the field was parked his still brand-new Volkswagen Beetle and I realized how near indeed Owerri was to Emekuku.

'Yes, Father,' I agreed. 'But I came on foot.'

'Most people go on foot nowadays, my friend. All these people here came on foot.'

'Of course, Father,' I agreed again.

But quite a few people don't have to, do they?

'Yes, Father. But I'm desperately in need of your help.'

'Everybody is desperately in need of my help, my friend. I can almost predict the story I'm going to hear from every Tom, Dick and Harry who comes here.'

No doubt about that; and he's well equipped with ready-made answers.

If Father Nwobi was angry, he did not sound so. He continued in a falsely affable manner, fielding back every word with practised nonchalance.

We were by the door of the relief store now. Before we got there Father Nwobi had casually plucked two red roses from his lush garden. Now he slowed down at the door, a gesture aimed, I believe, at discouraging me from going further into the sacred food-house. He stopped finally, facing me, twirling the twin rose flowers in his hand.

Over his shoulders I could see that the relief store door was ajar. Cartons, sacks, cans and crates of assorted foodstuffs were piled ceiling-high and spilling on to the floor.

Near the door of the relief store, just inside the room, two young girls were waiting to be attended by Father Nwobi. They smiled as they saw him. He must have left them waiting while he saw the major and Kechi to their car.

The reverend gentleman turned, smiled back at the girls and gave them a rose each. They sniffed at them and giggled. He returned to announce to me:

'I'm sorry, my friend. There's nothing I can do for you. We have little food left in our store.'

'But excuse me, Father,' I began desperately.

'Look, I haven't much time. No relief today and that's all.'

Before he disappeared into the room, he called over one of the guards and instructed him to disperse the crowd finally.

'All of them,' he emphasized, making sure I got the message. 'Tell them we have closed for today.' His brother nodded and smiled; the smile of a happy oppressor.

Before the inflated tyre began to jostle me away, I had a brief moment to look again at the crammed relief store, at Father Nwobi now beaming at the girls. And at the altar of the chapel next to the food store.

18 MANNA FROM THE ROADSIDE

I BEGAN THE weary trek back to Owerri before any brute could lay a stick on me. I did not give myself time to think. Thinking now would sap me of the energy which I could ill-afford. Short of begging Father Nwobi on bended knees, I was satisfied that I had done everything I could to get something out of him. Perhaps if he had given me a chance I wouldn't have been too proud to go down on my knees. But he hadn't.

I found a water-tap near the cathedral, washed my hand and drank several palmfuls of the water now made lukewarm by the day's heat.

With no objective in view now, I could trek as slowly as my weariness permitted me. The heat had subsided and only the slanting rays of the now setting sun bothered me. But even that I was able to check to some extent by spreading my empty, once hopeful, cotton sack over my head like an old lady's shawl.

Providence must have had a hand in it, for the very last person I expected to see that afternoon was Esther. I had known Esther at Umuahia, just after the collapse of Aba. Her cousin, Agbalia Nze, was my trench-mate and friend. We had made a habit of going to her room at Umuahia once every week for a really good meal.

'If you don't want to starve in Biafra, stay close to the girls,' Agbalia and I used to remind ourselves in those days.

Shortly before Umuahia collapsed, Agbalia had been killed in one of the ding-dong encounters that characterized our southern front, and I had been wounded soon after. That was about the last time I saw Esther.

Until this afternoon. Of all afternoons. I was not quite a mile from the relief centre when someone rushed out from a roadside stall and smothered me in hugs and kisses. I took quite some time extricating myself.

'Esther!' I screamed in a voice that possessed a power I thought I couldn't have mustered just then.

'Kal!' She bent down to retrieve my fallen sack.

After brief exchanges and solemn reminiscences of her late cousin, she asked to know my mission. I told her in brief.

'You must follow me home and eat something.'

Good old Esther!

'I live around the corner and I'm just getting some vegetables.'

I was still contemplating this manna from the roadside when she collected her vegetables, paid the old lady at the stall and said:

'Come, Kal, let's go!' in a voice that still held her excitement at seeing me, albeit minus one arm, once again.

While Esther prepared the food, I lay on her comfortable bed and rested my bones. And we chatted endlessly. I learnt from her that the affable Father Nwobi was a very remarkable reverend gentleman whose priestly vows could not have included celibacy.

'Father Nwobi is not a priest, Kal. Just dresses like one. He's a very virile man, too. And I'm sure he was glad of the day he was put in charge of a relief centre.'

'I can well guess that,' I muttered.

'If you hope to get something out of him next time,' Esther went on, 'I suggest you plait your hair, borrow some girl's dress – and get hold of a real big sack. His brothers will see you in through the back door, pronto.'

She was cutting the vegetables and her tone and mien were not as jovial as the words sounded.

'That sounds a bright idea, Esther,' I told her seriously. 'I could have tried it tomorrow, but. . . .'

'But what? Your looks are not bad.'

'Thanks, but I fear Father Nwobi might not be used to seeing amputated girls.'

'Oh yes, that's the snag. . . . Alas!'

'But tell me, Esther, how can a man do this kind of thing at a time like this?'

'Do what kind of thing, Kal?'

I knew she understood what I meant. But I went on to elaborate.

'How can Father Nwobi sleep peacefully after seeing the hungry people he's supposed to feed starving on his very food-smothered premises? Just what does he think God will say about it?'

'How does God come into it, Kal? You forget one thing. Most men now *think* with their reproductive organs. Yes, they do.'

I hadn't a word to top that one.

19 SQUAD v. SQUAD

CAPTAIN ALIU PAM, the leader of the Hamman suicide squad, did not make his move that week-end. He knew only too well that in warfare no plan is presumed to be totally safe from the enemy's knowledge. And a squad named in memory of their late able brigade commander, Major

Hamman, was not going to commit the cardinal military blunder of ignoring this caution. Major Hamman would squirm in his grave if they did.

Always believing that 'the rebels are too cunning by nature', that what they lacked in fire-power and field-craft they made up for in craftiness, Aliu Pam's tactical approach was a simple, psychological one. Thus he had radioed his Divisional headquarters to order that after the usual week-end lull, which would be preceded and followed by the normal artillery bombardment from the main Federal axis, the blitz should be halted at midnight on Tuesday. A post-week-end lull would be unprecedented. And that, Aliu Pam calculated, should fox the foxy rebels if they were not in the dark about his bid.

On Tuesday night, three hours before the bombardment was to end, Captain Aliu Pam set off through the bush with his suicide squad. Ammunition belts hung from their necks, huge knapsacks loaded with food rations and other supplies gave each man a hunch-back whilst an unlikely belt of hand-grenades lent the men's waists a menacing bulge.

It was not often that a Nigerian military unit was outnumbered by their Biafran enemy forces. Aliu Pam's squad had only five men more than the thirty that Biafran Intercept had reported last week – five wounded soldiers who were far too ill and weak to fight. Pam had taken them along less for their lives than from fear that they might fall into the hands of an enemy patrol and crack up under the Biafrans' notoriously torturous interrogation. But his thirty able-bodied, siege-hardened combatants were equipped with enough supplies for twice their number.

It was a little after midnight when the suicide squad made contact with their comrades. The front Pam chose was Nekede, a cluster of hamlets and farmhouses some ten miles south-west of Owerri town. Noted for its intensive agriculture and food output that supported a large majority of the province, the Federal forces there had survived months of consistent assault from the Biafran 'S' Division units engaging them, making Nekede the scene of a ceaseless tussle that continued to engage the concern of the Biafrans long after Owerri was officially declared a recaptured town.

But, after a long while, Nekede had become another ding-dong battle-front on which no one gave an inch or gained one. In time everyone came to take Nekede for granted. The front that everyone forgot soon became a joke. It began to be said that commanders got anxious about Nekede only when there was no fighting going on there.

*

'Captain Pam?' the Federal brigade major sought confirmation as Aliu Pam was led to the shack that served as his field office on the Nekede front.

'Yes, sir!' Aliu Pam saluted.

'I have been expecting you.'

'Thank you, sir!'

'But that's not to say that I've been looking forward to seeing you, captain, so you've very little to thank me for.'

'I'm sorry you feel that way, sir.'

'Indeed you ought to be sorry, captain. Especially for yourself and your men. I think you're all being very foolish, not heroic.'

The brigade major, a slim-built, tall, tough, Sandhurst-trained career soldier who had seen a few harmattans in battle, believed as a matter of practical policy that there was no bravery or heroism in death, especially avoidable death. He felt that Captain Aliu Pam ought to have his view, for what it was worth to him and his squad, at this stage.

Captain Pam, obviously unmoved by the major's philosophy, said nothing. The B.M. seemed to read the captain's mind, for he added:

'I'm not attempting to change your mind for you, captain, because I can see it's too late. Even Divisional H.Q. is already sold on your foolish gamble, so it's no longer a matter for discussion, but action. However, I want you to have the benefit of a last word from someone who does not share your sentiment. Victory in this war is for the living, not the dead. But having said that. . . .'

The major rose from behind his improvised desk and walked over to an old cupboard standing at the end of the small room and unlocked it. Burrowing into it, he pulled out a pile of Biafran army uniforms with such distaste for both the gear and its purpose that Captain Aliu Pam could not help noticing. The uniforms were held together in a neat bunch with a faded khaki belt. From the top shelf of the cupboard the brigade major brought out another pile, this time of the peaked khaki caps with the rising sun emblem that was the trade-mark of the Biafran army. He dumped the lot on his desk.

'There are thirty-five of you, I believe?' the B.M. asked.

'No, sir. Thirty. The other five are badly wounded men,' Aliu Pam replied, still stiff at attention.

'Still, you can have all the uniforms. I don't need the extras.' The B.M. pointed to the field-green piles as he rounded the table to return to his chair. 'I don't expect you know that under the Geneva Convention it is illegal to wear the enemy's uniform in battle. It renders you liable to treatment as a spy rather than as a prisoner of war if you are captured. But never mind. H.Q. should know better, yet they are not bothering, so

why should you?' He sat down heavily and his rickety chair creaked and grated the mud floor.

Aliu Pam moved for the first time since he had entered the room. He gathered the gear under one arm leaving the other free for his final salute.

'I should be issuing you weapons and ammunition,' the B.M. was saying, 'but I can see you are literally dressed to kill . . . or be killed. So, good luck to you, Captain Pam. I've never met any officer in this war who needed it more than you do right now. . . . Sergeant Ibrahim!'

'Sah!' the orderly answered from outside the shack.

'Take this officer to S.O. II!'

'Yessah!'

'Thank you very much, sir . . .!' But Aliu Pam could see the B.M. was not paying him any further attention.

The brigade Staff Officer II in charge of Intelligence felt no different from the brigade major about the squad's mission. But he said a little more.

'I wonder what makes you and your boys think that the elimination of rebel leader Ojukwu will make any difference to the rebels' resistance?'

Aliu maintained the silence that had served him well through the B.M.'s verbal onslaught.

'Even though both they and us can feel that Federal victory is in sight, a new rebel leader will emerge after Ojukwu, if only for a while before we finish them off. General Philip Effiong can take over, General Alex Madiebo is an Ibo, so is Colonel Joe Achuzia. So what are you trying to prove? Why do you want to waste your lives when we can win without you risking anything, Captain Pam?'

Still Aliu Pam made no reply.

The S.O. II recalled his grizzled old father's wise saying that a dying dog cannot smell a bone. Captain Pam was a dying dog, he concluded. The only pity was that he was taking twenty-nine fine, able-bodied young men along with him.

'As a fellow officer and one in charge of Intelligence for this axis, captain, I happen to know that the rebels will give everything they have to protect Ojukwu's life. But I do look forward to the miracle of your success,' the S.O. concluded and changed the subject without effort: 'Now then, we have worked out a route and a few other things for you. . . .'

The S.O. took out a rough-drawn map of Nekede axis and rose from his chair.

'There is a farmhouse right behind the rebels' forward lines.' The Intelligence man pointed with his swagger stick. 'Our patrol will take you

right through to the farmhouse; between it and Owerri town there will be no more than three check-points manned by the rebels. Language will be your primary problem. Stick to English or, where you sense that the rebels are not literate, pidgin English.

'The rebels have soldiers from all the non-Ibo-speaking areas of the former Eastern Nigeria, so you should not be unduly conspicuous. However you are, with immediate effect, Warrant Officer Emmanuel Fubara, native of Abonema, living in Port Harcourt before the war. Your unit is "B" Company, Dragon Battalion, Ohaji axis. Dragon Battalion is a special strike force formed by resistance youths from the riverine provinces after the fall of Port Harcourt. You got it all?'

'All correct, sir.' Aliu Pam nodded.

'Any questions?'

'No questions, sir. Just a request: can you keep the action going on this front for another two to three hours?'

'No problem about that. There is never a dull moment on the Nekede front.'

'Thank you, sir.'

'Finally, captain, the rebels' password for the day is *football*.'

'Thank you, sir. That is very useful information indeed.' Pam saluted.

'Good luck, Captain Pam.'

When the artillery bombardment stopped at midnight on Tuesday, Captain Martin Chieze and his divisional commander were not surprised. It simply confirmed the accuracy of Intercept Unit's report of Captain Aliu Pam requesting his own Divisional H.Q. to halt all artillery action at midnight. It had been Intercept's first message since the initial plan was intercepted over a week ago. But, again, the message had contained no clue as to *where* and/or *when*. Especially *where*.

When he addressed the assault squad at the week-end, the divisional commander had reckoned with the possibility that he would never know *where* the suicide squad was going to strike from, and had thus trusted his own intuition, aided by the earlier message, that the attackers would choose to sneak in from an active location, in small pockets, disguised as Biafran soldiers. Technically, he knew, all the fronts around Owerri were active locations. To man all of them effectively would require the redeployment of the entire divisional forces. But, he knew, some locations were *more* active than the others. And the Ohaji/Nekede axis was one of the most active locations.

Thus the plan he disclosed to the troops last week-end in the armoury had called for the splitting of the assault squad into four unequal groups.

Twenty-five men were to man the main checkpoint guarding the north-westerly Avu axis, even though the suicides were not expected to strike from there. Another twenty-five were to secure the main Federal forces' axis north-east of Owerri. Three men, plus the colonel and Captain Martin Chieze were to man the colonel's new tactical field-post to be set up on the premises of Emmanuel College in the southern outskirts of the city.

The larger group of forty-five men were assigned to the suspicious, strategic Nekede route. This group was to be led by Captain Martin Chieze's personal choice, Sergeant Willi Meju.

To reinforce his strategy the colonel had taken two further steps. He declared a general state of alert in his divisional command area, and from the Chief of Defence Operations he obtained a loan of the special French communication gear used by the General's State House guards detail for co-ordinating the general's movements and security. All the three units of the assault squad were issued with the sets and ordered to keep in minute-by-minute contact with the colonel's new field-post.

With three soldiers monitoring the reports from the assault units, both Captain Chieze and his colonel had moved two camp-beds into Emmanuel College during the week-end making it not only their improvised command post, but also their temporary home. And when the Intercept Unit's message woke them up from an uneasy sleep this Tuesday just before midnight, the colonel, though disappointed by the absence of the vital info, showed no sign of his dismay.

He passed the slip of paper back to Chieze and ordered simply:

'Get all the units on the wire, Martin. Tell them the password has changed from *football* to *challenge cup*.'

But by the time the Federal brigade's own intercept unit had unscrambled Martin Chieze's signal to the assault units and passed it down the line to the Staff Officer (II) at the Nekede base, Captain Aliu Pam and his squad were well inside Biafran territory.

The old farmhouse was built of bamboos beneath a thatch roof. But it was ideal for Aliu Pam's purpose. It was surrounded by a vast cassava farm in the middle of nowhere, though the leader of the patrol that escorted them through the safe reconnaissance route had informed Pam that the Biafrans' main pathway was less than a quarter of a mile away. From where they were Pam and his men could hear the sound of war; music to a soldier's ears.

The Federal forces were engaging the rebels thoroughly and truly. That was all he and his men needed from their comrades; not unpersuasive sermons from the brigade major aimed at dissuading

them. The B.M., Pam concluded, did not – could not – understand their loyalty to Major Hamman. Their former commander would have understood, bless his soul. Hamman was that sort of man, leader, lover of his troops, dedicated to them. The B.M. was not like Major Hamman. The B.M. had been out of touch with command and the realities of the active trenches for a while. He had commanded a desk for too long.

Aliu Pam did not, however, find the B.M.'s sermons totally useless. His mention of the implication of their wearing rebel uniforms had reawakened him to the risk. Pam was not quite sure that he took any particular interest in knowing anything about the Geneva Convention. Maybe he did; he could not remember. Not many people in this war remembered, or wanted to remember, a lot about any conventions. He recalled he was issued a tiny pocket book that had something to do with a code of conduct for the Federal forces. But he had not bothered to read it before he lost it a few days after. The battle-front was not an ideal place for preserving documents.

But the change Aliu Pam made in his plans was motivated less by respect for the Geneva Convention than by the practical need for success in his bid. He accepted that no useful purpose would be served by him and his men being arrested and shot out of hand as spies, without a chance to approach State House. So . . .?

Aliu Pam had a solution. Rather than penetrate Owerri in small pockets, wearing Biafran uniforms, he would have twenty-five of his men dressed in their Federal field-green camouflage uniforms. The other four, led by himself, would wear the loathsome rebel uniforms, peaked cap and all, and act as Biafran escorts to twenty-five Nigerian prisoners of war captured by the Biafrans. Hopefully they would get a vehicle assigned to them at some point along the route, to take the prisoners to Owerri. His squad knew Owerri and its environs well.

The four escorts he was to lead were carefully chosen. They all spoke passably unaccented pidgin English and were warned to stick to it should there be occasion for them to say something. All four were, like Captain Pam, without the tribal marks that easily distinguished most Nigerian soldiers from the north and west of the country.

By two o'clock on Wednesday morning the suicide squad was trekking through the vast cassava farms. It was pitch dark, though lightning was painting abstract patterns on the sky. To give themselves more practice in their new lingua franca, their key to the city, the escorts tried to chat casually. But it was not easy to make small-talk about death. The tension that enfolded them was as thick as the darkness.

The twenty-five prisoners of war were getting accustomed to their own role. They had been stripped of their weapons and extra ammunition, which were now adding immeasurably to the burdens of the five escorts. Their hands were clasped behind their bowed heads and their gait was wobbly.

Sergeant Meju's unit of forty-five men had been split by the sergeant into three equal sub-units; each manned one of the three main check-points between Nekede and the outskirts of Owerri town. Meju put himself in charge of the rear-most check-point, a kind of last line of defence, and kept in touch with the other two by walkie-talkie.

Willi Meju, known popularly as Sergeant Meju to the troops, or Mej to his friends because he disliked his first name from the day he read in a war thriller that it was the name of a notorious Nazi SS officer, was very huge and tall even for his twenty-five years. Tough as troops believed a sergeant should be, Meju was an unusually well-educated and articulate N.C.O. who was really officer material but was happy with his estate because he had joined the army, he said, 'to fight the vandals, not to achieve rank and status'.

Though Meju would say that he had volunteered for this particular mission rather belatedly, his reluctance had melted as soon as the colonel had disclosed the object of their mission. For Sergeant Meju still believed in the General, if not the system that he was presiding over. It was still easy to isolate the man from the system. The General was not the system, though part and even the apex of it. But he could not describe the General as one of the toads of war that the long conflict had produced. And, however you look at it, Meju thought, you cannot expect one man to police the system effectively. The system, the nation, the cause, was no longer what he believed it to be, no doubt, but there had to be recognition that the General gave of his best, selflessly, transparently.

The week before his last visit to Owerri, his friend Kalu Udim had shown him a poem written by a mutual mate of theirs from the Nsukka University days. It was a lovely piece, touched with tears from the soul. He agreed with both Kal and the poem . . . they might have raised an ivory Salem on quicksand layered with their wholesome blood and splintered bones. But he, Meju, did not believe that the crumbling tower should be allowed to collapse on the General's head.

So, right after the colonel's briefing, Meju had begun to feel glad that he volunteered.

*

The Hamman suicide squad reached the first check-point on the Nekede front in just under one hour. In the pitch darkness they could just about make out the huge wooden pole that barred the narrow bush-path. Two soldiers were smoking quietly on the side of the road under the cover of palm fronds that provided a stall for the guards. But another two had seen the train of prisoners of war and had sprung to their feet, rifles at the ready. A third one, the leader of the detail, emerged from the darkness flashing a torchlight.

The soldier with the torchlight, a corporal, reached for a pistol in his waistband, cocked it deftly, and asked the usual questions:

'Who goes there?'

'A friend,' Aliu Pam answered in a very calm tone.

'Advance, friend, to be identified!'

Captain Aliu Pam stepped up to the crossbar.

'What's the password for today, friend?'

'Football,' Pam supplied.

Football . . .? Football . . .? Football match? Football cup? The corporal turned it over in his mind. What was the new password now . . .? He was not quite sure any more. The usually slow parachute of his brain was opening even more slowly tonight.

It was one of his comrades who drew near to him and whispered the new password into his ear.

'The password for tonight has changed, how come you don't know it?' the corporal asked at last.

'Well, don't blame me, I was escorting these vandal prisoners all the way from Ohaji, and I had no way of knowing.' Pam sounded calm and collected.

The mention of prisoners caused the corporal to flash his light farther behind Aliu Pam. He exclaimed at the truth that the darkness had hidden from him.

Pam saw several more troops emerge from the bush, rifles and a few torchlights at the ready. He, too, marvelled. Pam mentally took census of the enemy unit around the check-point. With the aid of light from the torchlights Pam counted fifteen. Three-to-one against him – before he could arm the prisoners. Two-to-one in his favour if he could deploy the prisoners as rapidly as he had provided for. He quickly decided against the gamble.

The corporal returned to him presently.

'Well, old boy, congratulations! Twenty-five vandals and all their weapons in one operation!' The corporal was exultant.

'That is hoping I don't shoot half of them before we reach Owerri. We

have already had to shoot five who gave us too much trouble.' Aliu Pam announced the false news with a convincing grimace.

'You must remember that the new password is *challenge cup*,' the corporal kindly informed a grateful Aliu Pam.

'Thank you very much. We have to be going now.'

'You can stay the night with us if you like, you know. The check-points are very hot tonight. We are waiting for some vandal troops.' The corporal was making a fine job of his task of volunteering information.

'No, I have to take the prisoners to Owerri before dawn. That is the order from my C.O.,' Pam declared. 'What I wish really is that we could get a vehicle. I have been trekking with my boys for nearly four hours.'

'The only check-point that keeps a vehicle is the last one, Check-point Three. We can radio them if you like,' the corporal offered.

'No, no. Not from here. Maybe from the next check-point. If the vandals should intercept your signal from here, we are still within their striking range.' The suggestion had momentarily horrified Aliu Pam. He was still some seven miles from Owerri, and that was farther than the rèarmost Biafran trenches behind them at Nekede.

'O.K. then. Raise the bar!' the corporal ordered, snapping off his torchlight. 'And stand down!' His men lowered their rifles to return to their various positions in the nearby bush.

It did not occur to the corporal that he had not asked the leader of the escort his name or rank. And the vague accent in his speech he had glibly assigned to the fact that he was probably from Ogoja, one of the non-Ibo-speaking provinces in the north of Biafra.

The second check-point was more thorough, if less suspicious, because Pam gave the correct password for the night. Also the exchange after the normal security preamble was in pidgin English in which Pam was unaccentedly fluent. It was here that the leader of the Hamman squad felt safe enough to ask the guards to radio for transport. He was less than five miles from Owerri and could feel the tension that crept in as their objective loomed into view.

Sergeant Meju had no suspicions whatsoever when the signals man in his rearmost check-point informed him that Check-point Two were calling for transport to evacuate vandal prisoners of war captured at the Ohaji axis. The only suspicion Meju could have felt was that the colonel had done a double on the assault squad . . . that he might have indeed sent a *real* assault squad to deal with the suicide squad while they themselves guarded the rear as a reserve unit.

The Land Rover standing under a clump of trees was the only one available to the whole assault squad and had been left in his care as part of the last-line tactic. Check-point Two had not said *how* many prisoners there were, just 'many'. If there were that many, maybe he would need more than a Land Rover.

In any case, Sergeant Meju picked up his rifle, torchlight and three of his men, plus the driver of the Land Rover, and left for Check-point Two. Anything could happen on the bush track between his own Check-point Three and Check-point Two.

Before he left, he gave orders to his signals man to inform his C.O., Chieze, and the colonel, about the report from Check-point Two and his own movements as a result.

The twin headlights of the Land Rover tunnelling through the massive mountain of darkness filled Aliu Pam with a mixture of apprehension and satisfaction.

Sergeant Meju stepped down from the passenger cabin and picked up his torchlight from the floor.

The corporal in charge of the squad at Check-point Two came up to him even before he could round the nose of the car to reach the crossbar. A cluster of steel-helmeted silhouettes told Meju where the prisoners of war were on the other side of the crossbar.

'Leave the headlamps on, Ikem,' Meju called over his shoulder to the driver of the Land Rover who had just killed the twin beams. The lamps tore through the darkness once more, revealing all the secrets of the night within its range, as Meju reached the crossbar.

The colonel had not expected to sleep much when he turned in at around midnight and was half-awake when Martin Chieze woke him up with news of the signal from Sergeant Meju's Check-point Three. The colonel was suddenly agitated.

'They did not say how many prisoners there were?'

'Afraid not, sir.' Martin shook his head.

'And they have already passed through Check-point One?'

'That's right, sir.'

'My God!'

'Do you suspect this might be the Hamman squad, sir?' Chieze asked in a tone that bore his surprise at the colonel's reaction.

'I do not suspect any such thing, Martin. I *know*!'

Martin Chieze looked at the colonel. The man must have gone para-

noid, he thought. Prisoners of war are prisoners of war; a suicide squad is a suicide squad. Chieze did not see how the twain could meet, mix, merge, pass through a Biafran check-point, the proverbial needle's eye, escorted by *whom*? Vandals who could pass themselves off as Biafrans? Impossible!

But the colonel was already strapping on his steel helmet.

'Let's go, Martin. But first, quickly, get our signals boys to radio Check-point One and ask them to split into three. Five men are to man the check-point itself; five to be posted in ambush half-way between Check-points One and Two, and the last five to advance rapidly on Two. All correct?'

'Perfectly, sir.'

'Then you join me in the car without delay.'

'Yes, sir.'

Sergeant Meju's suspicion was aroused for the first time by the number thirty. There were thirty-odd men in all, prisoners and escorts counted. That bothered him more than just a little. The colonel had told them last week that the Hamman squad was believed to consist of thirty survivors of the siege. The coincidence could prove to be uncanny.

With only the crossbar between them, the light from the Land Rover bathing them, Meju could see Aliu Pam at the head of the party quite clearly.

'What's your name, sir?' he asked Pam formally.

'Emmanuel Fubara.' Aliu Pam sounded casual and tired.

'Your rank, sir?'

'Warrant officer, II.'

'Your unit, sir?'

' "B" Company, Dragoon Battalion, Ohaji axis. We were there even before the recapture of Owerri.'

The information about the location was correct and the unit was known to Meju by reputation. Still, he wanted to be absolutely sure; there was a state of alert, and the number thirty still bothered him, suspicion pricking him intermittently.

'Fubara. . . . Are you from Port Harcourt area?'

'Yes, I lived in Port Harcourt, but I was born in Abonema,' Aliu Pam answered smoothly.

'You don't speak Ibo, do you? Forgive me, sir, but we are in a state of alert here, and being nearer Owerri than the other check-points we try to be a little more careful.'

'No, no. I am not complaining,' Aliu Pam assured Meju. 'Just that we

are wasting time here. You can tie our hands and feet, if you like, since it appears to be a mistake to take vandal prisoners. But please get us out of here. I . . . we have been trekking since nine o'clock this evening. Now I don't know the difference between us, the escorts, and the vandal prisoners.'

The long speech helped Aliu Pam to shed much of the tension that was building up inside him as a result of the longish interrogation. Now he felt relieved. Following his earlier directives, his fellow escorts bearing the squad's weapons had at each point stood side-by-side and close enough to the prisoners of war to enable almost all the twenty-five men to reach for a rifle and shoot their way through if it came to it. Aliu Pam hoped it would not come to that at this particular check-point. The last check-point, maybe.

Sergeant Meju was just about to concur with Warrant Officer Fubara's views when a last-minute thought occurred to him.

'Is any of the other escorts an Ibo?' he asked Pam.

'Not really . . . there are not many Ibos in Dragon. It was a unit formed by resistance fighters from the Rivers area after the fall of Port Harcourt.' Pam hoped he sounded convincing here.

Still, that startled Sergeant Meju. That was unusual. No unit commander worth his rank would do that. They always included an Ibo for this very purpose. The intermittent pricking of suspicion became an insistent gnawing.

Even the check-point guards seemed to sense the approaching flash-point, and began to stiffen, becoming more conscious of their rifles, their mission.

'Tell me, sir.' Meju fixed the warrant officer with an unwavering glare that would have rated him a reprimand at any other time. 'You know the password for the day?'

'Challenge cup,' Pam answered smoothly.

'Who won the Challenge Cup in 1958?'

Sergeant Meju saw Aliu Pam's jaw drop instinctively, distinctly. The coin dropped, too.

'Who won the Challenge Cup in 1958, *sir*?' Meju pressed on, sarcastically emphasizing the last word.

'I don't remember now, I think. . . .' Pam's discomfort could not be disguised.

'You couldn't forget it, *sir*, if you ever lived in Port Harcourt.' Meju's eyes were now fixed on Pam's right hand which held a cluster of Cetme rifles by the barrels, like the rest of his fellow escorts. Thus Meju was able to forewarn himself, in that vital split second. His own rifle had been poised, pointing at Pam all along.

'You vandal bastard!' Meju cursed, dropping his torchlight and beating Captain Aliu Pam to the draw as he emptied a full burst into Pam's chest at point-blank range. 'Fire!' Meju screamed almost simultaneously with his own action.

Though Captain Aliu Pam never had a chance to fire even a shot, the suicide squad was not caught completely by surprise, for they had followed the dialogue between Meju and Pam very closely and shared their leader's tense apprehension when the Challenge Cup suddenly turned into a stumbling-block on their route to Owerri. Prisoners and escorts swiftly welded themselves once again into the fighting, snarling suicide squad that they were meant to be.

The fighting was still in full swing when the colonel's command car flashed in the distance. The headlamps of Meju's Land Rover having been shot out by the Federal fusillade that followed Meju's action, the colonel's approaching headlights provided a new floodlighting that brightly washed the bitter battle scene, illuminating fresh targets, endangering new lives, as the guns barked and men screamed.

When the smoke cleared minutes later, not one member of the Hamman suicide squad was alive. They all lay dead, shredded and hardly recognizable. What chance some of them had of escaping was stolen by the arrival of the colonel and Captain Chieze, who promptly joined the battle, and the subsequent arrival of the small squad from Check-point One.

Even in that grim atmosphere, someone was heard to ask: 'But who won the Challenge Cup in 1958?'

'The Port Harcourt Red Devils did.' It was the colonel himself, a former Port Harcourt resident, who answered the question.

All went quiet again.

Among the thirteen Biafrans killed or, as he would have put it, *liberated* in the encounter, was Sergeant Willi Meju.

A few days after the unsuccessful bid, the Federal forces' final concerted push for Owerri and what was left of Biafra began in earnest on all fronts.

20 DEATH BY SLOW INSTALMENTS

I HAVE A cheque book, to be sure. It is an improvised cheque book from the Co-operative Bank of Biafra. It is made from lined exercise sheets trimmed to the size of a normal cheque book. Each sheet carries a two-penny stamp.

I know that if I filled one up and managed to get through the long queues at the bank, it would be honoured. If I had money in that bank, that is. But I haven't. I'm worth nil pounds, shillings and pence at my bank. So my half-used cheque book is now no more than a memento from the days when I was worth a few pounds. Then my allotment was paid into the bank while I was at the front, enabling Mother to have something to live on. What was left of the allotment after my injury I had taken out long ago.

Although hunger bites my stomach today, I have the consolation of having eaten well yesterday. Esther had cooked very delicious vegetable soup with half-dried fish, and made me a mound of *garri* which I shamelessly demolished, knowing that I needed to eat enough to last me till the next lucky day.

So when I woke up this morning, I gave no further thought to food. I decided to just let the world go on; pass me by if it pleased.

But I thought a lot about my former boss. And about Kechi Ugboma. It's funny that I should always think about the two different people together. I was positive they knew not each other, and she really was not relevant to my miserable existence. So I've made up my mind not to see her for as long as I can help it. That shouldn't be difficult. She doesn't know where I live, and unless I go to the hostels, she has little chance of seeing me and putting on that stupid glad-to-see-you smile of hers. Our paths do not normally cross. We are birds of unidentical plumage, perching on different heights of branches; she above and me well below. . . . I'm not ashamed to admit it. Which made it all the more strange that she should have fancied me at all.

It was past midday on Wednesday. Any hope of getting food for today was sliding with the sun. Hunger pinched my stomach more fiercely as the glassfuls of water I had been living on rippled in my stomach like a tiny stream.

That was when tragedy chose to strike a double blow.

I heard the tragic news that my very good friend, Meju, had been killed in action at the 'S' Division front in an attack last night.

No one seems to have the details of the action. Everything seems to be shrouded in secrecy. All I know is that it happened at the Nekede front, which is in itself another mystery because Nekede is not Meju's area of operation.

I remember Mej's last words to me that night at the hostel: 'When the vandals get me, I get liberated.' Well, Mej, a fine young man full of admirable qualities, is gone. He is now another number. What will his number be? The thousandth? The ten-thousandth? The millionth?

Yes, Mej has been *liberated.*

And when I staggered to Major Mere's house, more in hope of confounding the bad news than in confirming it, I was told, in addition, that Okere had been deployed to the front line – permanently!

I have lost a dear friend in Mej.

And another dear friend and source of sustenance in O.K. Jazz. The whole chain of tragedy seemed to me like the beginning of my own death by slow instalments.

For nearly two days I walked about in a daze caused by grief and hunger at Mej's death and Okere's deployment. In this state of semi-consciousness. I even forget about the task of keeping track of my former boss – a major task indeed, since I regard him as my chief oppressor and the object of my mission here.

I also achieved the minor feat of forgetting about Kechi Ugboma. To deny her the opportunity of seeing me, I varied my route and time for visiting Mej's cousin, Ndibe, at the adjacent Men's Hostel. So, in this hour of Ndibe's bereavement, I took to visiting him in the late hours of the night when I knew Kechi would either be playing hostess to her several male admirers or playing honoured guest in one of their own exclusive quarters.

I drew great succour myself from Ndibe's stout heart. He seemed to bear Mej's death with iron stoicism. This night he even asked me how I had been making out.

'So so,' I told him.

'So so, is but so so, if I remember my Shakespeare well,' he murmured, rose and went to his table. From the corner of the table, beneath a pile of junk, he drew out a cheque book, not unlike my worthless one, and began to write. He finished in a moment, tore out the sheet and handed it to me.

I looked at the tiny sheet of paper. A staggering fifty pounds, all right.

My hand trembled with a mixture of shock and raw emotion. I tried to open my mouth to thank him but no word came out. I mean, not even when I was a combat officer did I get such a fantastic lump-sum at one time.

Apparently understanding my discomfiture, he waved away my attempts at utterance.

'That's from Meju's allotment, Kal,' Ndi told me. 'I know he would not mind. You were his best friend.' He patted my back and returned to his seat on the edge of the bed. I folded the precious chit and put it carefully in my breast pocket.

Ndi's uncommon generosity did not end with the cheque. He called in his houseboy and ordered him to prepare a meal, even at that late hour, 'for Meju's friend'.

He even bought me a stick of cigarette that cost five shillings, my first in three days. . . .

I was not as happy as you might imagine.

I cried bitterly when I got to my room.

As I said earlier, if you had money in the bank and a cheque book in your hand and wanted money quickly, you might as well forget it. For, on the best of days, you could sooner pass yourself through the eye of a needle than get through the mass of men and women to the chap behind the counter.

So the next day, with a cheque for fifty pounds in my hand, I was no better off than I was the day before. The queue outside the bank was daunting even for the most determined needy. It spilled out to the front pavement and snaked on for several yards into the highway. It was worse today, perhaps, because it was the week-end.

Above the massed crowd was a bomber's sky. I took one look at the crowd and the sky above, and thought better about my determination.

There were of course several alternative ways of getting ready cash when the bank was inaccessible. That is if you were desperate enough to want to forget the morality of it all and give a helping hand to the war-profiteers.

You could easily go to the bank manager – after working hours.

You could establish a working-relationship with the war merchants or hoarders.

You could take a trip to the storekeeper of the nearest relief centre.

All of them, kindly brother's-keepers in their own right, sleep on piles of cash every night.

But none, I'm sorry to disappoint you, will take less than fifty per cent of your cheque's face value.

This business was kindly and innocuously known as the cheque exchange.

Having split most of my war days between the front-line trench and the hospital bed, I knew none among these categories of moneymongers. (Would I go to them if I did? I hadn't thought about it. But I was yet to be convinced that one pebble of morality would benefit the nation like a ripple in a pool.)

By the end of the day, bereft of ideas on how to convert my cheque into cash, I tucked it away and stayed with it. And my hunger. I thought that if I woke up tomorrow morning and came face to face with the man I was looking for, I might not even need the money. Or continue to feel hungry afterwards.

Consoled by the thought, I went to the tap inside the yard, reinforced myself with three glasses of water for the night, and went into my room to sleep the sleep of the dead.

21 THE WAR CAN CONTINUE

IT WAS FRIDAY MORNING.

Kechi Ugboma woke up reluctantly and was saddened by the thought of going to work. Week-ends should begin on Fridays, she thought. Like in Europe.

She had had a good night. The making-up with Major Chilaka Ukatta had been sweet, like most reunions. But she had decided that it had to end, once again. The fund-raising ball was the next day, Saturday. Chima Duke would return from Europe late that evening. Time to open another door. Or the fire-escape.

She bathed and breakfasted leisurely and it was half-past ten when she arrived at the Housing Directorate offices. Her boss, a fat and affable nincompoop who had not enough ideas about real estate to run a hillside hamlet, beamed Kechi a welcoming smile that belonged to punctual staff. They had enjoyed a fleeting affair that occurred from the collapsible seat of his car to the men's toilet and thus his connivance at Kechi's frequent lapses and female foibles had long been assured.

The letter that waited for Kechi on her desk must have been sent in by the courier bag, for it bore the stamp of the Biafran diplomatic mission in Lisbon.

She tore it open anxiously and read the few lines. *'Darling,'* she read and winced at the word of endearment.

I gather from sources here that the fund-raising ball has been postponed for another week following the latest vandal attack. This is just as well, as business in hand compels me to spend another few days here.

Don't worry about your dress (sorry, dresses – I'm getting quite a few). I'm taking the liberty of having them made here – bust 38", isn't it? – to save you time and anxiety. I'm told they look lovely. So don't be surprised if you walk off with the prize! Take care. . . .

All love and cheers.

Chim.

Kechi folded the letter and frowned. This Chima Duke of a man must be a real wizard, she thought. Living right here in Owerri, she was learning from a man far away in Lisbon that a dance scheduled to take place under her very nose had been postponed! She marvelled at the man's connections. Wasn't the man a secret agent? she asked herself. She concluded that she would not be one bit surprised if the man returned next week to give her a step-by-step account of her movements while he was in Europe.

So the dance had been postponed because of the Wednesday morning attack, Kechi pondered. Well, she shouldn't be ashamed that she was in the dark. Even last night she had met Major Mere who had returned from the front because of the dance. But she would have to cross-check that Duke hadn't been misinformed. Very unlikely though, she told herself. The Duke seemed to have the whole town effectively monitored.

On her return from the office in the afternoon, Kechi discovered that the Duke had *not* been misinformed. Her friend and neighbour, Ihuoma, had a girl-friend, Lovett, who belonged to the Cradlers' League. Lovett had told Ihuoma at the office that the fund-raising ball had been put off for another week, as a tribute to those killed in the suicide raid.

Kechi's final disappointment was only relieved by the thought of the dresses that Duke would be bringing for her.

The suddenly blank week-end ahead brought Kechi Ugboma to thinking about Kalu Udim. 'Poor little darling,' she cried aloud. She had not had time to sort out in her mind her feelings for him since she stood him

up at the motel a few days ago. But she was not in any doubt that she wanted to see him again.

But how?

Where?

She had no idea where he lived, if he lived in the town at all. And Major Okere's boy, who probably would know, was now at the front. She had not seen Udim walking to the Men's Hostel lately as was his wont in the past. And she knew not whom he usually visited there.

Rotten situation, Kechi concluded.

She changed into a wrapper and white blouse and went to her window overlooking the lawns, in some unconscious hope that Udim might just be passing by this evening.

The unmistakable green military car arrived just then, at seven o'clock.

Major Chilaka Ukatta entered the room without knocking. He went up to the girl leaning out of the window and grabbed her bottom, leant forward and kissed the back of her neck. She smelt the acrid fumes of alcohol and cigarettes.

'Waiting for your lover-boy, eh?' he asked half-jokingly.

'Certainly not waiting for you,' she replied without humour in her voice. 'You were supposed to be back at the front this morning. Really, you guys ought to get on with this goddamn war and have the whole business over with,' she blurted in a rare demonstration of anger.

'And you girls ought to let us get on with it, baby,' Ukatta replied without care. 'How can we get on with the business of killing the vandals when we don't know what you'll be up to in the next minute?'

'Sometimes I do really wonder what's going on in Biafra, Ke, my dear.' It was Ihuoma, Kechi's neighbour. No one had noticed her walk in on her bare feet. Major Ukatta turned to see the intruder.

'A little bit of fighting and a little bit of fucking, that's what, baby,' he replied with a straight face. 'We have just killed sixty of their best troops. The man who blows the horn also sneezes,' he added.

'More sneezing than horn-blowing, it seems to me, Charlie-boy, if I can ignore your language,' Ihuoma shot back.

'You're not in your goddamn army camp, you know, Charlie-boy!' Kechi reminded the major reproachfully. 'And we're still ladies.'

'And I'm a gentleman and an officer, ha! ha!'

Some gentleman! Some officer! Ihuoma thought, detesting the man.

'Say, Ke baby, let's go,' Charlie-boy ordered.

'Go *where*, for Christ's sake?'

'To Major Mere's, where else? He's having a party to console us for

the postponement of tomorrow's dance. Come on; everybody is there already.'

'And celebrate the death of his own men who died in the raid?' Ihuoma asked coldly.

'Well, I don't feel like a party,' Kechi protested.

'You don't look like one, either. Just get ready and *enjoy* a party.'

'Look, Charlie, I really don't want to go to any party. And stop your stupid witticisms. Just now I'm thinking that there's a war on.'

'Precisely the right frame of mind for a party, baby. Heard of W.C.C.? It means the War Can Continue, not World Council of Churches. Let's go!'

Kechi turned from the window for the first time and looked at Ukatta for several seconds. She shook her head quietly from side to side. Not in defiance but in surrender. Kechi Ugboma always loved a party. Ukatta went to her suitcase and began to pick out a dress for her.

'Give me your key when you're ready to go, Ke,' Ihuoma said with a mighty insinuation and left the room without asking for the sugar she had come to borrow from her neighbour.

As the army major had said to her girl-friend, 'the war can continue'. That's a very quotable piece, Ihuoma was thinking as she entered her own cubicle.

22 CHEQUE EXCHANGE

O.K. JAZZ RETURNED from the front today.

Correction: O.K. Jazz *deserted* the front today.

He arrived at my house just before 7 p.m., looking tattered and even hungrier than I was. Less than a week at the war front had reduced him to a skeleton of his usual robust and cheerful self.

We spent a few minutes exchanging mutual misery.

'You look terribly emaciated, Kal, sir,' the skeleton said to me.

'And you don't look any better, O.K. Jazz,' I replied.

'Well, I have been redeployed to the front, sir.'

'And I have been deployed to the rear. And don't call me "sir" again!'

'Sorry, Kal, sir. . . . I mean, sorry, sir.'

'Can I offer you a glass of water?'

'That'd be a bonus, sir.'

'Oh, hell!'

'And you can get a wash as well. Water is one commodity that has remained cheap in Biafra.'

'Not in the front line, sir. It is as scarce as salt. And the streams around have been poisoned by the vandals, sir.'

'Kalu!'

'Sorry, Kal.' His look was pained and I regretted that I had shouted. Never shout at a hungry man. It knocks the breath out of him.

While Okere bathed, I did something I had sworn I would never do: beg. Begging for food to give to Okere was the least I could do for him.

I went to a neighbour's wife who sold *garri* and begged her to loan me a cup of the yellow dust. I showed her my open cheque and solemnly promised to redeem the loan in cash or in kind, when I cashed my cheque next Monday. She agreed.

I poured the yellow substance into a deep enamel dish, poured two glasses of water into it while Okere towelled his body dry, and watched it swell to the level of the water. I drained out some of the water, getting rid of the chaff floating above the *garri*, and emptied another glass of water into the dish. There was no sugar or salt to add taste, but no matter. Dinner for two was ready.

I was windy with hunger. But I let Okere get the first shot, for I was no stranger to the food situation on the battle-fronts. He devoured much of the *garri* like a wolf, but there was enough left for me to eat when he had had his fill.

In truth, it was O.K. Jazz who brought the main meal of the night. He had saved a full stick of cigarette from the front, albeit crumpled and wet with sweat from behind his ear. We quickly smoothed it out and dried it by the kitchen fire. We chatted contentedly as we smoked it, passing it from one to the other between drags like we did on the fronts.

'And what drove my able corporal from the battle-front? Famine or the enemy?'

'Both,' he puffed.

'In order of priority?'

'The latter. I've learnt to live with hunger. Whenever I feel the pinch of hunger, I take retrospective recourse to the good days at the boys' quarters. Besides, there's always raw cassava in the near-by farms if you are not too fastidious. But not so with an enemy on the offensive. With your commanders in the rear.'

'Then it's getting worse out there?'

'It's getting *worser*, as a mate of mine put it.'

'The commanders are away, you say?'

'They are all in Owerri. Led by Major Mere himself. He left last Thursday to attend the Cradlers' League dance. But as you probably

know the dance has been postponed. So I guess he's staying the week-end to give a couple of parties, as usual.'

'To celebrate the non-event, perhaps?'

'That's right. Any excuse for a party.'

'That's the spirit. The Biafran spirit. Music while *they* fight.'

'Beat that, sir.'

'Goddammit!

I stood up, went across the tiny room and put off the switch.

'Let's sleep the sleep of the well-fed, O.K. Jazz, before I get hungry again.'

Okere and I spent all of the week-end lying on our stomachs. But the thought of Monday's dawn, as it crept inexorably through that crack in my window, scared me. Here's Okere, who ran to me because he had nowhere else to run to, and I could not offer him one square meal! I knew he understood my state, but that did not assuage my acute feeling of impotence. Nor did the fifty pounds' worth of paper under my pillow. It was still just that – a piece of paper.

I thought of going early to the bank to join the queue. But I knew that Monday mornings at the bank were as bad as week-ends and, however early I went, I would still be standing under the bomber's sky at midday. Queues outside banks and relief centres start forming at 4 a.m. and it was, I guessed, already half-past six by now.

In the event of an air raid, a disabled man like me was sure dust for the stampeding feet. Not that I was afraid to die. But I would prefer not to be trampled under the feet of people running for *their* own lives. Besides, I would be happier to die *after* I had had a brief word with my ex-boss. Question of preferences and priorities, if you think of it.

I rose from my bed of thorns and shook up O.K. Jazz.

'Let's plan our day,' I told him as he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

'Tell me the objective and we can work out the tactics,' he said, now wide awake and cheerful as of old.

'You forgot about strategy,' I reminded him.

'Same thing as objective, isn't it, sir?'

'All right,' I said, preferring to let the truth come out later. 'I guess I'm losing my grip. Comes from staying in the rear for too long.' I slipped on my arm-sling.

'Never mind, sir. Your fellow officers are not too far away.' Pity O.K. Jazz should spoil the truthful statement with a 'sir'. I agreed with him, nonetheless.

'Oh, yes. Most reassuring situation. Safety in numbers.'

O.K. hopped out of bed with great agility unexpected in a hungry man, did a few skips, twisted his trunk a couple of times and sat back beside me on the edge of the bed.

'Right. Number one gun ready, sir!' he bellowed.

'The objective or strategy, whichever applies, is to mobilize our meagre forces to counter enemy threat in the stomach sector of the body. Simple!' I declared.

'O.K., sir. That is the objective. Our strategy should be to inflict debilitating injury on enemy at source without waiting for a confrontation on own territory. For tactics, I suggest we employ the tested and true ambush.'

'Sounds like guerrilla theory to me.' I scratched my head.

'You forget we have been fed Mao Tse-tung and Che Guevera for food at the fronts,' Okere reminded me.

'And, as usual, the strategy sounds simpler than the tactics.'

'Precisely. But that will change the minute my commander tells me what resources are at his disposal. Then I can start deployment with immediate effect.'

I drew the cheque from under my pillow and placed it in his palm with considerable flourish. 'You've been sleeping on fifty quid for the past forty-eight hours!'

The poor fellow nearly fell over. He might have eaten bowls of rich food in Major Mere's house, but I could swear from the look on his face that it must have been a pretty long time since he saw so much money – even on a chit of paper.

'Don't panic. I didn't sign it. . . . I don't have a penny anywhere. But I own it – if we can convert it. Sizable enough force for an ambuscade?'

O.K. Jazz scratched his chin. 'More than considerable,' he mumbled. 'Enough to hold the enemy at bay for a couple of days, and possibly cripple him until fresh reinforcements come in to finish him off.'

Are you disgusted by our childish use of military terminology? Bear with us. It provided me with a subterfuge for not telling my refugee in cold terms that I had not a grain of food to offer him – only a chit with fifty pounds written on it.

Besides, right now, hunger was really the enemy-in-chief.

O.K. Jazz had some rather optimistic ideas about how to convert the chit into currency. Certainly not at a bank, though. He was able-bodied enough to rough it out in the queues, no doubt. But he was a deserter, and if the patrols on straggler-drives missed him, he was too able-bodied to escape the more thorough conscription squads. So he suggested that if

we waited till late afternoon when both harassment squads might have laid off for the day, we could walk down to the town market and try our luck with the rich traders who speculated on certified cheques.

With the summit conference ended on that hopeful note, we turned back to the bed and slept on our stomachs and waited for late afternoon.

We did manage to get to the market late in the afternoon without any harassment for Okere. And I could say we were lucky. The middle-aged merchant who finally exchanged our cheque did not take *more* than fifty per cent. Everyone else before him had asked for more.

Did my benefactor know how high the price of help had risen lately?

You can see that my ex-boss has more and more to pay for. And it will not be too long before he does.

23 MY UNINVITED GUEST

IF MISS KECHI UGBOMA had called at my house two days before today, I wouldn't have been writing this episode. Simply because I would have refused to see her. I would have done that because I still had my money then.

But she did not call two days ago.

She called today, exactly one full day after the last penny of the twenty-five pounds we got from my fifty-pound cheque ran out.

Is she a mind-reader? Did she guess my vulnerable state of renewed despair? Was it her acute feminine intuition that told her? I'll never know.

Yes, the twenty-five pounds lasted only two days, Monday and Tuesday. A pot of soup, a dozen cups of *garri* (one pound per cup, thank you), four sticks of cigarettes, and that was it. When we had lapped up the last spoonful of the soup yesterday, Okere and I had no illusions about the bleak days ahead.

After giving the whole business some grave thought this morning, Okere, in a move that I considered an act of self-immolation, decided to risk a trip to the Madonna College, Etiti, some twenty-eight miles away, where his former principal, the Rev. Father Etche, was running a relief depot. I do hope poor Okere escapes the conscription and straggler-drive squads.

He had not been gone six hours when Kechi Ugboma arrived at my

door. I was getting ready for a walk and a spot of reflection when my rickety door rattled softly with a weak, unmistakably feminine, knock.

I said 'Come in', and before I could reprimand myself for not asking who it was first, Miss Kechi Ugboma had descended upon me. She was stupefyingly elegant – and pretty. She wore a low-cut print cotton dress and a little-girl-lost look.

I stood in the middle of my dusty room looking at her, profoundly speechless. I mean, she was the last person I expected to find me in this slum hideout. Moreover, standing there at the door, she really didn't belong to these surroundings, she was sharply incongruous.

I still had not found speech when the little-girl-lost walked diffidently across the floor and planted a wet kiss full on my gaping mouth. I licked my lips and fumbled for words. Words to tell her to go away, get out of my dingy sty and go over to the floodlit quarters where she belonged. But her first words surprised and almost disarmed me.

'Kal, are you a Christian?'

No response from me.

'I mean do you know the Lord's Prayer?'

'What the goddamned hell has the Lord's Prayer got to do with it?'

'Answer me, it's rather important.'

'The Lord's Prayer, you mean?' I asked innocently. She was gazing straight into my eyes, almost into my soul.

'No, silly. *What* I'm going to say.'

'Wouldn't you say it if I didn't know the Lord's Prayer?'

'It would make it more relevant, more meaningful, if you like, if you did.'

'Yeah. I guess I do know the Lord's Prayer. Or at least I used to,' I conceded to her grudgingly. Best to find out this important thing she had to say.

'Well, I want to refer to the bit about "forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us . . .". You see, Kal,' she put back her hands around my neck, 'I'm sorry. Very sorry. I'm still crazy about you. I love you. Forgive me.' She gave me another liquid kiss and I think she sobbed some more.

But I was not interested in her bit of the Lord's Prayer. I mean, what was there to forgive? She did me no wrong. I didn't belong to her world, her crowd, did I? Why should a brief flirtatious infatuation with a disabled layabout constitute a trespass against the aforementioned layabout?

The one who should be dispensing forgiveness to her right now is her smart, well-off social peer, Major Chilaka Ukatta, alias U.K. Charlie. She had picked me up briefly and dropped me just as quickly, and that

seemed the natural thing to do. Who wanted a 'poor relation' on her hands nowadays?

I was indeed more enchanted by other aspects of the Lord's Prayer. And I said so.

'I don't understand,' I protested. 'Actually, I'm more interested in the bit about "give us this day our daily bread . . .".'

She replied with prolonged sobbing but, I guessed, not out of sympathy for my own prayer. Still, I patted her shoulder with my good hand. Like most men I do not like to see a woman cry. Not on account of me, anyway.

'All right, Kechi,' I said, striving for a compromise, 'let's forget whatever it is that's bothering you. But honestly I don't see what there is to be sorry about.'

A silent interlude happened, during which Kechi dried her eyes and tried to put some cheer on her face. Though not before she had grumbled that I didn't say anything about *forgiving*, only forgetting.

Doesn't she possess the spirit of compromise? And would Mr Boss claim any right to forgiveness from me when his turn came?

Talk about giving a woman an inch and she appropriating a mile.

The dilatory compromise I thought I had won soon proved illusory. I had tried to mollify Kechi as a first step towards getting her off my back, on her way to where she properly belonged. I had no intention of fraternizing with her to the extent of resuming the old relationship that once threatened to blossom. For me it was already dead and cremated; at least so I thought.

But soon Kechi Ugboma was talking about *us*, about the things we would do together. I was of course not interested in this piece of consolidatory tactics. Not until she mentioned the new play.

'I hear it's pretty good and deals with the situation in the country now.' She sounded like a P.R. woman for the producers, but I was already keen. Ordinarily I am a sucker for good theatre. And, good or not, any play at this time would be a great treat to watch.

I promptly jettisoned every chip on my shoulder and all devilish machinations on my mind and said sure, I'd love to watch a play right now. Any play. 'But . . . ,' I began as an afterthought.

'I can pay for the tickets, Kal,' she offered quickly, silencing any incipient protest with a long kiss. 'I've some money.'

Little did I imagine that by the end of the play that night, Kechi Ugboma and I would be knee-deep in a resurrected and now intimate friendship that I had thought impossible for me, in recent times. . . .

24 A CALL FOR CLEANSING

THE PLAY WAS STAGED in the big assembly hall of the teachers' college. The hall was full of people when Kechi and I arrived.

Kechi had slipped two quid into my hand before we got to the box office, and a few kind people, deferring to the 'wounded soldier', had made way for me to collect our tickets in record time.

We managed to find two seats mid-way down the rows, not too far from the stage, and not too near.

The title of the play, the slip of paper in my hand said, was *Veneration to Udo.*[3]

The curtain rose fifteen minutes after we took our seats. It was a moving opening that presaged the great experience we were in for, for the night.

The stage was unlit. Night sounds and solemn music set the mood. Light came slowly on a backdrop of sombre colour. In silhouette against this were weird shapes. The general effect was that of desolation and sorrow. The music swelled, then faded as the spotlight picked out a chorus of five women lamenting the absence of the moon, the celestial symbol of *Udo* . . . peace. . . .

The moon,
Where is the moon?
Where is the sickle eye, harbinger of peace?
Where is the crescent flower
That calls us to Udo's square?
Where, daughters of the Four Ebe, where?

Is it not past the seventh week?
Is it not past twenty days and eight?

[3] Udo is the Ibo folk goddess of peace.

Veneration to Udo is a ritualistic dance drama in four movements written and produced at the tail-end of Biafra by the Ọdunke Community of Artistes. With a courage uncommon at the time, the play boldly attacked the decadence and perversion of the new nation, indicting the messiahs, the prodigals, the toads of war, the greedy disaster millionaires who festered in the misery of war.

For an uncertain spell after the first performance it was strongly rumoured that the producers and cast were about to be arrested for daring to scrutinize society so brazenly.

Yet we have not perceived the sign;
The sky still keeps shut its sickle eye. . .

The hardship and misery of the war. . .

O you women of Ugbua,
What sorrows have we not borne,
What tribulations?
What ill has not befallen us,
What disaster?
And now,
As if the leper has not enough,
Smallpox is added to his tragic stock.
Night, night, night has descended on our lives;
The rain taps its mournful retreat.
But what offence did we commit?
You go to the market and there are
More people than goods. You have
Money but things are very dear.
Yet we try to subsist. . . .
We drift on in our shrivelled frame
Shedding more flesh each nightfall. . .

The perversion that the war has brought upon the people. . .

Talking of scarcity, have you heard
What they are saying about Okeke?
It is said that he stole two cobs of maize
From his neighbour's uko.
The corn reserved for next year's planting!
SACRILEGE!
Have we not heard enough?
Have we not had enough?
Night falls on night;
The darkness thickens.
Yesterday, the stealing of the communal goat;
Today, the stealing of yams and cassava
In the soil;
Tomorrow who knows what sacrilege will enter
Our ears.
You have not heard what I heard this morning.
Can you believe it . . .? Our people,

Can you believe that our sons, our sons
Fighting in other lands,
Now kill the sacred python?
Not just killing. . . .
They kill and eat! (The women stop their ears.)

And finally the women lament the bleakness and desolation of the war that the stage initially portrayed. . . .

The silent odour of death
Pervades our blighted homes;
Dilapidated walls, empty barns,
Deserted homesteads, empty squares
Overgrown with tall grass,
Cold hearths, vacant-eyed children.
Triumphant vultures, waiting on the death-bed.
Mothers we,
Scratching the hard soil
Hoe in hand, ear on the road,
Our sons are away
And we know not if they will ever return
From the fight. . . .
Death is on the withered tree
Sharpening his talons. (A faint dirge is hummed.)
(Blackout.)

I can tell you it was a moving first movement.

But the second movement was not cheerful either. Three men, or rather two men and a young boy, did their own lament. The men, palm-wine cup in one hand and snuff box in the other, ground their teeth, shook their heads in utter dismay as they bemoaned the evil symptoms that the absence of the harbinger of peace had wrought on the community, especially the sacrilegious act of stealing yams; green yams at that, that were still two moons to the harvest season. . . .

It is a sacrilege, my son. It has been unheard of in our land. To us, yam is a sacred crop, because it shows the extent of a man's wealth, and it also provides food for a man and his family. If you take away these, you are making the man an animal.
This is why the theft of yams in our land is a sacrilege.

Stealing yam from the farm! Forcibly tearing out mother earth's entrails without sacrifice or appeasement to her!

Stealing mother earth's fruit!

Any wonder that the moon refused to appear? But unlike the women, the men, like most elders in the community, knew the perpetrators of this sacrilege. . . .

Can't they be found out?

Hmmmmmm, my son. Our fathers say that when an elder commits an offence, cane finishes in the bush. It is the opinion of our elders that we should let sleeping dogs lie.

The war has turned our customs upside-down . . . maybe it is the hunger. . . .

Thus, the moon, the beautiful harbinger of peace and plenty that would have been sweeping our village with its cool, silvery rays at this time, seems to be angry with us too.

In the midst of this sober, sombre reflection, the aggrieved moon belatedly, almost reluctantly, appears. Its appearance is announced by Eze-Udo, the chief priest of Udo, a gaunt, elderly man with white in his beard and hair.

In the third movement, the moon having appeared, Udo's shrine is quickly readied for the moon sacrifice.

The sacrificial dance is playing and gifts are laid beside the acolyte. The once dreary and bleak village square bustles with a gaiety that belonged to the pre-war days.

Soon the sacrifice begins.

The acolyte prances about, dances to a frenzy, swoops towards the shrine.

He is felled.

The sacrifice has been rejected!

A dirge rises.

The villagers disperse, severally, sadly.

In the fourth and final movement, two elders are sent to a diviner to find out why Udo refused the sacrifice. . . .

Welcome.

Udo was to eat yesterday.
That is so.
And she refused.
In the midst of famine, she refused food. . . .
And you were asked to come to me
And find out what she eats that makes her too
Well-fed to eat your food?
Or whether she is ill or dead.
The moon dead?
(The diviner is incredulous.)
No! Udo is alive as ever.
Her reason is another question.
Then why has she refused our food?
(Diviner cajoles with music. . . . The voice of Udo is heard distinctly in the form of a distant rush. . . .)

Wash your hands! Wash your hands!
I can smell dirt.
Dirt between thighs.
Dirt between shanks.
(Diviner cajoles some more. Everywhere is quiet. Suddenly a deep voice is heard. . . .)

Listen to me.
Listen to the vibrations of life. Listen; listen
To me.
I'm Udo! Peace.
The goddess of fruitful calm.
I've been wronged. I have been rejected.
I have been neglected.
I ministered to
You in pain.
You in fear.
You hopeless.
You – tangled.
You – groping.
You – dying.
Asked you only to revere, minister and learn me
And my ways.
Instead you challenged me to a bout. . . .
Too much largesse, no doubt.
Ignorant humans!

Listen to the vibrations of life. . . .
Listen to the vibrations of life. . . .
Listen to the vibrations of life. . . .
Listen! Listen. . . . Listen! (The voice trails off. . . . Silence follows. . . .)

Ask her what she wants us to do!
What to do? Hmm!
This is not a matter for just you and you and I.
This is not a matter of how much and what can I pay!
This is not the time for giblets and cooked blood
And hot wine.
This is not the time for day-old chicks and white
Cockerels.
But what? What?
(The voice comes again, deeper this time and full of echo. . . .)

NCHEGHARI!!! (REPENTANCE! !)
Yes, Ncheghari
To the eagle
Scratching the earth. . . .
Look up
And sail to the sun;
To the prodigal
Muzzling husks. . . .
Rise up and carve pork;
To the greedy-growling
Pursuing his tail. . . .
Discard lust of self and
Propagate
Universal love

NCHEGHARI!!!
To all messiahs of meanness,
To all who fashion the instruments of terror
And to all who walk by night.
Yes, Ncheghari.
That enlarges the heart of all those with
Tight hands.

NCHEGHARI!!!
That should make you,

Whose signature is a rubber stamp of death.
THINK: THINK of the mystery of the firefly.
LISTEN! LISTEN to the gnats at night
And smell beyond the bad breath
To the innocence of that small man
Who probably will not grow fat.

NCHEGHARI!!!
That should make you, the HAUGHTY,
Listen and dance to the tune
Of the still lowly voice; cry
CHEGHARIA! (REPENT!)
CHEGHARIA!
CHEGHARIA!
(Voice trails off. . . . Silence. . . . The light fades to a dull brown.)

On my right side sat a fat, grossly opulent man who, before the opening of this dramatic indictment, had been wearing a stainless-steel smile. When the hall lights suddenly came on, exposing all of us, accused and victims alike, to its piercing glare, I took another look at my corpulent neighbour. He wore the face of a man who had been stabbed in the chest. I could afford to smile at his visible metamorphosis.

The play had indeed not been a worthless exercise; far from it, I concluded. Everyone was walking out of the hall as if from a funeral parlour. As I walked with Kechi into the cold, bereaved, silent night, I was glad that it was she who had taken me to the play; not the other way round. And somehow I wished she had brought her other good friend, Major Ukatta, along. I also wished my ex-boss had been in the audience.

25 VILLAIN OR VICTIM

I WAS an unreluctant victim of Kechi's power and passion which erupted the night following the play.

Unreluctant, I stress, because, in spite of myself, I was not averse to her suggestion that she accompany me to my sty after the disquieting play, knowing full well what this proposition could lead to.

'It's pretty late already, Kal, and a long way to walk alone.' Wouldn't you agree that sounded mighty thoughtful of her?

But before I tell you something about our sex life that was to begin that night, let me recapitulate briefly on my previous experience in this business, just to put everything in proper perspective.

I am incurably chary about women – I would not call myself an accomplished chaser of women. Far from it. Without any attempt at backhanded bravado, I would state that I never go out of my way to chase girls. I always meet them by some accident. And accidents, you'll agree, are both unwelcome and irregular in their occurrence.

Moreover, I still cherish the bitter memories of my only serious love affair, with Akuoma. I had met her a few months before the war – through a mutual acquaintance. For days Akuoma dillied and dallied like most women are privileged to and, when at last she uncorked her bottled-up affection and passion, I was almost climbing down from the apex.

I rallied, however, and thus began a most satisfying relationship. *My* most satisfying relationship ever.

At first I had succumbed to the immodest belief that Aku's love for me was a result of her having fallen victim to the flattering illusion that I was good-looking, charming and mild-mannered – a kind of gentleman's gentleman. But soon I was to discover that Aku loved me for the *wrong* reason – a sexual one – namely, my ability to hold myself in check while she moaned, wriggled and writhed in passion – she always took a long, pleasurably tortuous route coming.

All along, however, to my innocent ignorance, Aku had been planning to join her fiancé in America – while professing her sweet, undying love for me. Later, rather than sooner, I knew better, and asked.

'Forget about my going abroad, Kal. All I need now is you,' I would be told. Sometimes there was an ominously vague variation to the staple reply:

'Forget about tomorrow, Kal. Let's live for today.'

Would you do that? Forget about tomorrow, I mean?

Well, I did. Believe it or not.

Then one day, without warning, tomorrow became today, and Aku waved me a hasty, heartless good-bye, and hopped on to the aircraft to her fiancé. I was left with a broken heart. So, you see, I have a hell of a good reason to be chary. Once bitten, thrice chary.

My sexual relationship with Kechi Ugboma began that night, and was disturbingly like my relationship with Akuoma. Our love-making was a kind of sweet war, with both of us using ourselves like a battering ram against each other's gate until we collapsed in a pool of our own sweat.

And, understandably, somewhere at the back of my mind lurked the fear that once again I had become the victim of love for the wrong reason.

However, sometime between midnight and early morning, as her head rested on my chest and my good hand stroked her plaited hair, Kechi said to me:

'Kal, I want you to know something. . . .'

'What?' I asked.

'I want you to know that I love you.'

'Thanks!' I could hardly contain my scepticism.

'I mean love you in the truest sense of that maligned word.' She swallowed hard. 'It might sound an unrealistic thing to say nowadays, and after the way I behaved to you it should sound false, but I want you to believe it. I guess my problem has been perhaps that I'm mixed up. But I would say that normally confusion is not one of my many vices. Let's say it's the war. . . .'

She broke off abruptly and began to cover my hairless chest with little love-bites, presumably to stop herself from crying at that unholy hour of the night.

Later she told me, in a low tone broken by sobs, about her background, about Mother Labore. I learnt how she had lost everything after the war began. How she had found herself the unwilling prey of the men who now had everything that a woman needed. And how she had come to find her original attachment to the old feminine values unrealistic.

'I promised Mother Labore that I would be a good girl. That was the least I could do after I missed the congregation. That was my word. And it was my bond. But soon I found out that bonds were made to be broken. A girl has got to live, Kal. I had to live, and not on one quarter of my pre-war earnings.' She paused for breath and added in an even lower tone of voice: 'Coffin-making, which is the only lucrative and respectable business going now, is not exactly a job for women.'

I listened to Kechi in silence, only occasionally patting her heaving shoulders.

At the end, I was not quite sure that Kechi's explanation was entirely in self-justification. However, I felt I could afford to spare her some gesture of sympathy, if rather a silent one, as I continued to pat her back to the rhythm of her quiet sobbing.

I considered that in the light of her explanation, and bearing in my mind her obvious awareness of the fact that I could offer her about as much as a beggar could offer a wealthy man, her profession of love could conceivably be as genuine as she made it sound. In which case the

poor girl was, like many of us, a victim rather than a villain. She needed re-acceptance rather than contemptuous, righteous rebuff.

Haven't we witnessed the war provide an excellent opportunity for a vast, vulnerable section of the population to be taken advantage of, exploited by toads? Men of sudden power and influence exercised their strength in different ways, depending on whether the victim was a man or a woman.

The big boss could send you to the battle-front and your death with a snap of his fingers. The suddenly wealthy toad could send desperate women running towards him with another snap of his fingers.

We have seen lean men become fat and fat men grow lean. And the size of the fat man's stomach became a measure of his wealth and success.

We, the victims, suffering under the different weights of different exploiters, not knowing the other man or woman's burdens and strains, ran the risk of standing on a white sheet and pointing accusing fingers, not at our exploiters, but at our fellow victims.

Not being a woman, how could I understand the problems and pressures of the Kechi Ugbomas of the land who are harassed by the hardship of the war? How, for instance, could I understand the length to which a woman would go to obtain the sanitary towel she must have every month, from the foreign envoys who had exclusive monopoly of the route to Lisbon and other European capitals where sanitary towels were sold two for a bob?

Was it fair to expect some kind of abstract, utopian uprightness from these victims of exploitation in the face of a seemingly unending trail that had proved an excellent testing-ground for new weapons of temptation?

But, above all, have I resolved in my own mind whether one pebble of morality would benefit all of us like a ripple in a pool?

Tentatively, I felt that Miss Kechi Ugboma might in fact be classed as a comrade rather than a conspirator; a victim rather than a villain.

Do you think that I am searching for a rationale for what you would call my *volte-face*? I don't know. . . .

26 BITS AND PIECES

I HEAR an air raid happened at Mount Carmel, Emekuku, today, hitting Father Nwobi's relief compound. That's an unfortunate target. For I know from first hand how crowded Father Nwobi's compound could be at any given minute of daylight. Father Nwobi has an air-raid shelter, of course. But the miserable multitude milling around his compound in hopeless search of food are not so fortunate.

The casualty figure has not been released, although unofficial accounts put it at over twenty-four dead on the spot. I can imagine it will run to three dozen empty-bellied, empty-handed old men, women and children.

But what eye-witness could not suppress was the spectacle of Father Nwobi's canned beef and other hoarded relief food exploding under the fierce cannonading of jet fighter aircraft. I gather it was like a confetti of foodstuff. This episode provokes me into unaccustomed lyrical lament ...

Food for the giving
to sustain the living
Hoarded
Now shredded
Like the starving
that now
lie dead!

What does a layabout do but listen to gossip and hearsay?

Kechi tells me that Gloria got gonorrhoea last week. And I don't think she has been cured – there are no drugs, of course; not even in hospitals.

Gloria is one of Kechi's best friends. And from what I hear, at the rate she is going, they may bury her before this year is out.

But I gather, too, that Gloria is not uncheerful. She claims that an army officer, no less in rank than a lieutenant-colonel, gave her the dreaded disease. And since this guy has over a dozen girl-friends Gloria reckons she won't be the only casualty. Safety in numbers, sort of.

And do you know – Gloria, Kechi says, wouldn't mind going to bed with her colonel once again. Says Kechi, quoting her friends: 'He is so good in bed. He has a member as big as a rocket, with a warhead to match his enormous wallet!'

You will agree this one is a damned outstanding colonel putting some dozen people out of action in so short a span! If he had the same facility in dealing with the enemy, don't you think this war wouldn't last another fortnight?

In Biafra gonorrhoea has become as common as the common cold. And no wonder. For the juice flowing freely every day in this bizarre country of singular pleasure is enough to float an aircraft carrier.

Bizarre country, I said.

Everyone to his calling.

Many foolish, wretched, barefooted ones are busy obeying orders and pumping hot lead into the enemy.

The sensible ones, the big ones, occupy themselves more pleasurably pumping fluid up women.

I strongly believe that sometime, somewhere, during this war, our brains migrated from our skulls to our groins.

Thus a few are fighting.
While others are fucking.
Fighting for freedom.
Fucking for virginity.
All in the name of the rising sun.

But I have a grave premonition that the sun may be setting, even though it is still midday.

I had lunch with Kechi at the motel this afternoon. (You're right: that's when she gave me these titbits.)

Very pleasant meal, too. Stockfish soup and pounded yam. Reminded me of the good old days at Okere's.

I have got to thinking a lot about Kechi Ugboma during the past twenty-four hours. It was easy to think of her with sympathy after I tried to cast her in the role of a victim rather than a villain.

I'm not saying that I'm in love with her.

No.

Not yet.

But there's something about Kechi I want you to know, if you hadn't figured it out by now.

By the standards and values prevailing now, I'm no goddamned use to anyone. I mean to Kechi, for instance, I should be as much help as a wet log to a fireman.

To most people I, and many of my fate, am an object of pity.

'Ah, what a pity, another young man maimed by the vandals . . . still, the war must go on.'

Precisely. One monkey doesn't stop a show, does he? And that's as it should be.

You are lucky, in fact, if you get this gesture of sympathy.

But not so with Kechi. She accepts me as a man. A *complete* man. Not a pitiable amputee. Toss him a coin and look the other way.

When I told her about my health condition, I was sure that would dampen her enthusiasm and let me off the hook. But do you know what she said?

'Bullshit!' (Yes, I didn't tell you that her language didn't become an air hostess!)

And what would you do if you were in my place?

But let's not get distracted by sentimentalism. For the matter I have in hand is not exactly poetic.

You'll recall that a few chapters ago, I tried to tell you a little about the matter that brought me wandering into this town and was unashamedly overwhelmed by emotion. I shall resist the strain this time.

I am stalking a prey. And before you accuse me of unprovoked murder, I had better tell you all about it in detail. . . .

27 THE M.P. KNOCKS

MY FREEDOM from military service ended less than twenty-four hours after the clash I had with my boss in his office that afternoon. For at exactly 6.00 the next morning, three armed military policemen knocked on my door.

The first thing that struck me was the superfluous show of force and fire-power. Three armed men to arrest one epileptic! It was a ludicrous case of over-kill.

Ordinarily, when a soldier addresses a civilian as 'old boy', the latter is in for a rough time. And when this ominous appellation is used by a military policeman, betake thee to thy defences!

'Come out of dat room, ol' boy!' a fat and flabby M.P., who must have been fighting his own war in a relief depot, ordered me.

I knew what was coming. Quickly I made mental note of all my

essential belongings and the total came to *nil.* I buttoned up my trousers, straightened up the shirt I had slept in and came out quietly.

'You tink say na so we go fight de war?' the fat and flabby one charged as soon as I stepped out of the room. 'Others de fight for trench, you de sleep! Able-body man like you!' He shoved me aside, not very gently.

'How ol' you be?' he queried.

'I'm twenty-three years,' I told him.

'You see 'am?' He turned to his comrades-in-arms, who nodded grimly.

'Small boys wey be sikteen years de dere de knack bullet you dey for house de sleep! Come on, quick march!'

Obey before complaining, says the golden rule, doesn't it? I took two steps forward and halted.

'Excuse me, please,' I said and dipped into my hip pocket to produce the medical certificate, my life-belt, which I carried on my person at all times.

But I wasn't to be excused.

'Shaarrap!' came the response. I ignored him and proceeded to produce the paper that exempted me from military service on account of my health.

'What paper dat?' the M.P. snapped, snatching the life-saver from my fingers. 'Na paper you go take fight war? Hey? I say na de t'ing wey go kill all of you, book-people. Too much book. Na him kos dis war!

'Oders de carry machine-gun you de carry paper! Paper na him be bullet? Come on, quick march!' With that the M.P. ripped the paper into tiny little pieces and began to shove me towards the waiting jeep.

As I sat on the tool compartment in the back of the jeep, between two armed military policemen, some familiar voice kept ringing in my ears.

'You may laugh now, Udim, but you won't for long. ... Forget about your medical certificate. I shall get you into the Biafran army even if you carry a medical certificate from the World Health Organization!'

I had thought that I had had a last laugh on the boss then. ...

28 THE MAKING OF AN AMPUTEE

MY TRAINING as a cadet officer lasted exactly nine weeks. Having had me conscripted, Mr Boss had perhaps expected me, as a conscript, to end up in the recruits' training-pit. But the army was desperately short of officers and, heavy officer casualties having dampened the zeal of many

qualified young volunteers, my reasonably fair education automatically qualified me for the School of Infantry for cadet officers. Mr Boss must have been riled by this little hitch in his master-plan.

While the training lasted, I hoped that I would have an epileptic fit to help me dramatize my plea that I was unfit for active service. But I didn't.

Everything moved swiftly afterwards, and soon after my training ended, about two dozen of us were commissioned and shipped off to the raging battle-fronts.

1968 was not exactly a cease-fire period in the war. For one thing the Federals were smarting from an act which, at any other but war time, would have been treachery.

It was like this. A quiet interlude had occurred on the Aba front in mid-1968. For some two weeks both sides had appeared to have run out of either ammunition or the itch for a fight. From hurling lead, death and insults at the enemy, the Federals had taken to tossing packets of cigarettes and canned beer at them from across the Ogbor river.

Soon both sides graduated to a state of truce, if a rather pregnant, fragile and unofficial truce. They laid planks across the river's broken bridge and, with the acquiescence of their commanding officers, sort of said to each other: Listen, old chap, why don't we take it easy? Dead men don't draw higher allotments, do they? After all, the principals do no more than sit in their air-conditioned bunkers and fight occasional skirmishes on the air-waves. So why don't you and I cool it a bit? And maybe a gradual contagion will lead to a general cease-fire?

Thus began what was later to be called *fraternization.*

For several days, maybe weeks, while little knots of troops from each side shuttled in turns across the bridge, exchanging food, cigarettes, beer and reminiscences, the high commands were deliberately kept in the dark. Soon the little, wary parties that carried out the exchange visits grew on both sides. Somehow, the Biafran Defence Headquarters became aware of the fraternization, and reacted sharply. It ordered that:

THE NEXT BATCH OF VANDAL TROOPS
TO CROSS OUR LINES
MUST REPEAT MUST BE DISARMED AND
ARRESTED AS P.O.W.S.

It was a difficult action for the men of the Aba command to take. But orders were orders. And so they broke their solemn vow to honour the covenant they had made with their foes.

The propaganda *coup* we executed with the news of the *capture* of the

prisoners of war probably hurt and angered the Federals more than the treachery itself. And in predictable fashion, a few days after, all the front lines exploded in unison with vengeful fury.

It was in these inauspicious circumstances that I was deployed to the front line after my commission.

I knew I hadn't any choice of battle-fronts, but I tried to exercise one. Not because I wanted a quiet front (there *wasn't* at that time), but because I did not want to go to any of the battle-fronts near my home town. Mother was still blissfully unaware of my new status (I hoped), and I wanted to stay far away from home, to maintain the illusion as long as possible.

And so, after some minutes of friendly *wahala* and verbal table-tennis, the postings officer agreed not to send me to my home front.

I got Aba.

29 THE EPILEPTIC WARRIOR

THE GRAVITY of the situation on the Aba battle-front needs no further emphasis.

I hesitated in the rear locations only long enough to remember what my uncle Achi said to me just before he went back to Kano in late 1966 to be murdered in the pogrom. I had just packed my grips to return to the university and we were contemplating what would happen if war broke out. Uncle Achi called me in late one evening and said in his harsh, brassy, intimidating voice:

'Kalu, I'm going back to the north tomorrow morning. There's little I can do to help myself here. I have to return to Kano. I know Ibos are as welcome in the place now as a leper in a beauty salon, but Kano is my home. So you are on your own now, with your mother. Always remember that life is tough, and gets tougher daily. I see you are taking life easy, probably because of your health condition. You need not to. That's bad for you. Take life by the horns as if it were a dangerous bull. If you don't do that, life may take *you* by the horns. And that will be just too bad.'

Advice, my mother said once, needs no response. Uncle had slapped two five-pound notes into my palm and the conference was over.

The thought of his words was a tonic for one on the brink of battle. It was the classic incitement for a sceptical warrior.

Perhaps this accounted for my performance on the battle-front. From second-lieutenant and platoon commander, I rose to lieutenant and company commander in less weeks than it took me to train as an officer. I even acted as a battalion commander.

I kept up my usual correspondence with Mother as if nothing had changed, using my civilian residential address, where, once in a while, I would go to collect her replies.

Then one day Mother called at my house suddenly and learnt the bad news: her only, sickly son had gone off to the wars, without so much as a brief good-bye. She fell into a predictable state of hysteria. I took a pass as soon as I got the news, went home and tried to reassure her that I would be all right. I believe all I succeeded in doing was to restore her pessimism.

I arranged for my allotment to be paid to her regularly. She must have felt that I was bribing her into connivance with my blood money, but she spared me the agony by not putting it in so many words. She did remind me, however, in the familiar, tearful tone that spoke louder than her frail voice and simple words:

'Kalu, remember that you are all I have got. If anything should happen to you, you will not find me alive again.'

I knew that if she found out the actual circumstances of my conscription into the army, she would certainly go out of her mind. I only told her that my office nominated me at the request of the government.

Some nomination!

Some request!

We had had a patrol report on enemy build-up at Ovom, some three miles beyond the Ogbor river that demarcated the hostile line. Ovom was the enemy's headquarters. EN H.Q. in military parlance.

All we had was this general idea that the enemy was up to no good. When put under a military microscope, the vital *info.* on which our counter-action should be planned was missing:

How soon?

H-hour?

Target/objective?

No idea. It was like the hunter who came home with a tortoise only to discover that there was no tortoise. Only the hefty, empty shell.

At a meeting the following evening, a young officer daringly suggested a raid on the EN H.Q. Another, a little naïvely, suggested capturing an enemy patrol and interrogating them to find out their plans. It would be less costly, he believed, than a behind-the-line raid. And least feasible, he forgot to add.

And the commanding officer (C.O. to us) did not forget to remind the young brat that you did not pick up enemy personnel as easily as you would *udala* fruit in the harmattan. And even when you did you might still find the ripe, sweet fruit rotten and sour inside.

Our C.O. formally over-ruled both suggestions on the pragmatic ground that after the P.O.W. pow-wow, any of our boys caught by the Federals behind their back yard would be merrily skinned and scalped. He broke the stalemate by ordering a twenty-four-hour alert and as much build-up of our own troops as our resources allowed.

But make no mistake about it: we were wide awake, alert as hell, when the enemy struck five mornings later.

When I say *struck* I use the word in its literal, pugilistic sense. They hit us with everything they had, including a few they didn't have, hammering our heads with iron gloves of artillery, mortar and armoured cars. Screeching bombs and crying shells drowned the bark of automatic rifles. But not the wailings and groanings of the wounded and dying young men on both sides.

A straight jab of shells combined with a vicious upper-cut of small-arms fire flattened one company including the lieutenant commanding it. One platoon walked into a left hook of sniper fire and went on its knees and stayed there. Our side of the battle-line seemed to be breathing through a broken and bloodied nose.

I was still unhurt, so far, as were the majority of my boys.

But the scene on the enemy side of the battle-line gave me no cause for self-congratulation. For as I lifted my head and peered cautiously across the blanket of gunsmoke, to the highlands where the tree-tops met the hazy morning sky, I saw a swarm. An angry swarm of enemy troops. Even through the din of acrimonious gun-play, I could hear the war-chant, the dreaded '*Oshe-bei! C-o-m-m-a-n-d-o!*' that ritually preceded a desperate assault.

Quickly I girded my loins. Throwing away my Madsen automatic rifle that seemed suddenly inadequate in the face of the swarming bees, I dived headlong behind a nearby gun position and took possession of a captured heavy machine gun.

With my head between my arms, I closed my eyes and began to pound

away, swerving the muzzle in a vicious arc that roped in the line of advancing invaders.

Suddenly the war-chant was replaced by an eerie quietness interpolated by agonized groans and screams. I continued to tear away until the hammer echoed emptily on the chamber of the gun.

Gingerly, I lifted my head. The only living things across the line before me were the khaki-clad backs of fleeing enemy. Wearily I rose to my feet and began to stagger back to my frightened men. I had shot my shot. Literally.

The twitch and mild tremor I felt at the time, I ascribed to my latest exertion. But it all happened so swiftly that I didn't make it to my men before I slumped to the ground, foaming at the mouth.

I had my first epileptic fit in several months.

For a while I could still hear the anxious voices of my boys. But they sounded miles away. Soon after, I completely lost consciousness.

I was to learn later that no sooner had I fallen than a barrage of enemy mortar began to cover the flight of the surviving invaders. I got one of the shells while still in my fit.

The very bomb that struck me also mutilated two of my boys.

Consciousness, which I regained in hospital the next day, came in the form of a sharp, stinging pain in what I thought was my right arm. Also, I felt like a spent shell. But with an anxiety that overcame my total exhaustion, I opened my eyes.

An ugly nurse, clad in a white uniform that had gone brown with dirt, rushed to my side and put a warm palm over my forehead, near my eyelids, as if to keep me from opening my eyes and seeing something unpleasant.

I shook my head to remove her hand.

'Please take it easy,' she said in a pleasant, plaintive voice that did not seem in accord with stories of brusque-voiced war-time nurses. Such a pleasant voice, if my stories were true, meant something horrible. I began to fear the worst. I felt the sharp pinch of pain again.

'Please take it very easy,' she repeated for emphasis. 'You've been under sedation.'

My nod was a sharply painful effort. I tried to smile and discovered it was twice as painful.

I raised my lids a crack and looked down my body and found I was shrouded in white cloth.

Heavens! White cloth reminded me of death and corpses, and for a split second of aberration I thought I was dead and lying in state, and that I was my spirit come to visit me.

The sharp bite of pain in my right arm gave me a bitter reassurance.

Dead men don't bite. Or feel bites.

I tried to raise my right arm, the pain notwithstanding, to remove the white shroud. But I couldn't. I felt like the hand wasn't there. I tried the left hand, it felt different. I brought it out from under the cloth and, ignoring the nurse's plaintive protest, pushed the shroud down to my waist, exposing my naked body.

I looked at my right hand, but what I saw was not my hand. I saw a thick roll of white bandage smeared with blood; my blood. I looked into the nurse's face; she was looking the other way. But she could not hide the tears streaming down her cheeks.

I didn't know whether to cry or to laugh.

I began to think about my mother.

News about Mother was kept from me until I was fit enough to leave hospital. Mother had collapsed and died when news of my fit and injury reached her while she was in the village market. Just as she had predicted she would.

So, you see, my ex-boss had done more than just incapacitate me.

30 SAFE LANDING FOR THE DUKE

CHIMA DUKE FLEW into the enclave on Thursday, forty-eight hours before the Cradlers' League ball. He landed on the airstrip in the awkward hours between midnight and early morning.

It was one of those happy landings. The airstrip was bustling with activity, yet noticeably relaxed. No bomb raid had occurred all night and it was too late now to expect one, though far inside the bush a dozen or so gunners crouched behind huge Oerlikon and Bofors anti-aircraft guns and nervous fingers clung tensely to triggers.

An official car picked up the Duke and drove him in comfort for the twenty-five miles to his base at Owerri.

Before he left, the Duke had performed one of his regular personal chores. He had gone into the small building that served as offices and arrival-cum-departure lounge at the southern end of the airstrip to meet an old acquaintance and collaborator.

To his consternation the familiar khaki-clad figure was not beaming

from behind the counter this morning. Chima was perplexed. He had never known his friend to be anywhere else at this hour but in his place behind the counter. Moreover, he always knew when the Duke was on board. He had the passenger manifest.

The Duke made a mental note to ask the Chief of Air Staff to discipline the truant for gross dereliction of duty. What did he think he was regularly tipped heavily for? To stick his arse outside the building? Incompetent bastard! Son of a head-hunter! He will be fixed; real good, too. The Duke was livid.

He braced himself to meet the unfamiliar, apparently unfriendly face that now scowled where his collaborator used to beam from. After an exchange of unpleasant pleasantries, the Duke, rather haughtily, placed a locked leather brief-case on the counter and asked:

'Where is Osita?'

'He is off-duty for today.'

'But, damn it, I haven't known him to be off-duty before.'

'Oh, well. It had to happen some day.'

'Will you keep this for me, please?' the Duke asked, indicating the locked brief-case.

'I will; but can I have an idea what's inside it?'

'Never mind what's inside it. Just keep it safe.'

'It will be safe, all right; that's not the point.'

'*What* is the point then?'

'I mean, I may have to make a declaration of contents if Security should make a check,' the man behind the counter told Chima Duke.

'Check for what? Haven't they heard of classified State documents? Anyway, just mention my name, Chima Duke, State House, if anyone asks any questions,' the Duke bluffed.

'Look here, mister,' the man's tone was suddenly stern. 'You may be General Ojukwu or the Duke of Edinburgh. But this airstrip is a high-security area. You should know it if your address is State House. There's still a war on.'

'O.K., Mr C.I.D. There are five thousand, eight hundred dollars in foreign currency in that brief-case,' the Duke jabbed a finger at the doubly locked case, 'and a hundred dollars in it for you if you keep it safe and keep your mouth shut,' Duke added in a vicious whisper. 'I should collect it on my way out in six days.'

A crooked grin suddenly split the once-angry face behind the counter. The man leant over the counter towards the Duke, stuck out an open right palm and whispered. . . .

'Payment before service, sir. Hardship doesn't wait for travellers.'

The Duke glared at him, drew the brief-case back towards him, fished out his bunch of keys and opened it. He counted ten ten-dollar bills and pushed them towards the open hand of the receiver.

Duke plucked a ball-point pen from the inside cover of the brief-case, wrote $5,700.00 on the top dollar bill, initialled it, replaced the pen, and locked the case.

He pushed it back to the man behind the counter and adjusted his tie.

'It is in your own interest to take good care of that stuff,' Duke grimaced, wagging a finger at the man behind the counter. 'I should be back in six days, or less.'

'You can collect in six hours, mister,' the receiver assured the Duke.

If Chima Duke were a superstitious man, he might have felt in his bones that the absence of his collaborator, Osita, that morning was a bad enough omen.

31 LUNCH FOR THREE

THE DUKE ARRIVED in Owerri at 6 a.m. and drove straight to his quarters. He would see Kechi Ugboma in the evening. For now, he needed a rest. Moreover, that unformed robot at the airstrip building had upset his equilibrium.

Kechi Ugboma was still changing out of her working-clothes and thinking about Kalu Udim when Kalu knocked on her door and entered the room.

She rushed up to him, barefoot and bare-breasted, and gave him a long, passionate kiss on the mouth.

'Am I glad to see you, boy!'

'Same here, baby.'

'I was wondering how soon you would be here. I left the office a quarter of an hour early.'

'You had fifteen minutes' headstart on me.'

'I'm glad you are here. The first time you have entered my room. It's a special day.'

'And it's not a bad room, either.' He remembered his decrepit pigsty.

'You must meet my friend Ihuoma. She's my neighbour. She is an

extremely nice girl. Should be back soon.' She was still hanging on his shoulders.

'She can't be nicer than a certain girl I know.'

'Who is she?' There was a glint of suspicion in her eyes.

'Miss Kechi Ugboma, who else?'

She hugged him again, harder, and kissed him longer.

'You are sweet, Kal.'

'Minus one arm.'

'Shut up!'

'Thank you.'

Oh, my God, isn't he super? She buried her head in his chest.

'Look, you're not going to leave early, are you, Kal?' She looked up at him.

'No, not early.'

'Bless you! I will cook lunch for us. I've got some stockfish and lots of rice.'

'Sounds delicious.'

'The thought of eating with you is delicious, my love.'

'Let's get started.'

She kissed him again.

'I meant the cooking,' he smiled.

'First things first,' she replied, and kissed him again. And again. And again.

Ihuoma returned in time to join them for lunch.

They talked a lot: about the war, the play of the other night, and later about the Cradlers' League dance.

'Kal, you will take me to the dance, won't you?' She sounded like a little girl. At heart she was one; a helpless one trapped like most of the others.

'Would it be like the play?' There was mischief in Kal's tone.

'Don't be silly.' It was a sweet reproach. 'A dance is a dance, and a play is a play, silly sweet. It shouldn't be lament all the time. A ball for a change. And you will take me, won't you?'

'Stop teasing. Who takes who?'

'*You* take *me*, Kal. It shouldn't be any other way. You took me to the play, remember?'

The way she took every opportunity to make Kalu Udim feel like a complete man touched the young amputee's heart. She didn't want him to feel that *she* was taking him out, just because he was poor and she paid the bills. His eyes went soft; he stubbed out his cigarette and nodded.

'Of course I'll take you, love. I was just pulling your pretty legs. And Ihu can come along with us, can't she?'

The other girl nodded gratefully. She had been silently contemplating Kechi Ugboma since after their lunch. It was a new Kechi, she concluded. She had to be. All care, concern and sweetness for this disabled, unemployed and unemployable young man. It didn't figure, she knew, but there it was.

A couple of hours later, long after Ihuoma had returned to her room and the couple had spent blissful minutes hugging, kissing, and making love, Kalu rose to go.

Kechi protested vehemently.

Kalu pointed out over and over again that it would soon be six o'clock and curfew time. Besides, he wanted to go over to the Men's Hostel to say hello to his friend Meju's cousin. He hadn't seen him in nearly one week and that was rude, to say the least.

At last, reluctantly, very reluctantly, Kechi agreed to let him go, but not before she had extracted a promise that Kal would have lunch with her again the next day.

The long lines of cars were beginning to form outside the Women's Hostel when Kalu Udim came down from Kechi's room on the first floor. Chima Duke's gleaming white Peugeot saloon passed the young amputee at the intersection of roads to the two hostels. . . .

32 THE A-LINE HOSTESS

THE DUKE WAS too busy peering ahead to ascertain that Kechi's window overlooking the field was open to notice the young man. The young man was too occupied with repairing his arm-sling which had slipped out of place as he hobbled down the staircase to pay the car and its occupant any more attention than he gave to those parked outside the hostel.

The Duke's knock on Kechi's door filled her with renewed joy.

Kal has returned, she thought.

She flew like a bee to the door and opened it. Her outstretched arms fell to her sides as she saw the fat, greasy face grinning at her.

'Oh!' It was almost a scream. She realized how little she had thought of him in the past few days.

'Come on, honey, aren't you glad to see me?'

'I . . . well . . . it's just that I wasn't expecting you today. Tomorrow, maybe.'

'Surprises, my dear, surprises; they're what make life exciting.'

'I . . . I guess so. Come in, please.' Kechi sounded formal.

'And more surprises for you, my dear,' Chima Duke announced, dumping a heavy Portuguese airline bag on Kechi's bed. The bag was plastered all over with airline stickers and tags that proclaimed the Duke's recent itinerary: LISBOA. LONDON. PARIS. GENEVE.

'Here you are. Your dresses,' he said, unzipping the bag.

The long-promised A-line dress. Not one, not two, but several of different designs and fabric; plus other feminine accessories: lipstick, body and hand cream, toilet soap, undergarments. He made her try them all, as he sat back, leering lecherously at her robust, tantalizing figure.

The dresses were of simple, A-shaped mini-cut, with narrow straps for sleeves and a plunging neckline that gracefully revealed the top curves of Kechi's prominent bust.

As a new trend in fashion, the A-line's popularity was in grossly inverse proportion to its unimaginative simplicity. But in the darkness of the blockaded and beleaguered enclave, it was the *latest* that had managed to filter in from the outside world. But right now the A-line was more than a new design in women's wear. It was the immediate link to his ex-boss that Kalu Udim had been waiting for.

33 A HOTLINE TO HEAVEN

KECHI UGBOMA had lunch ready when I arrived on Friday afternoon. Again she had left the office early, today half an hour earlier. I calculated that in twenty-four hours I had misappropriated forty-five minutes from her war effort. (She came back fifteen minutes early yesterday, remember?)

'That's some lovely dress you've got there,' I said, pointing a good hand to the hanger over the bed.

'Oh, that!' She seemed startled. I had an unfounded feeling that she wished I hadn't noticed the new dress, but I wasn't sure. She returned abruptly to face the pressure stove hissing in the corner of the room.

I saw she did not welcome a prolongation of the discussion on the above-mentioned dress and complied; at least for now.

I relaxed on her soft bed and read an Agatha Christie paperback while

Kechi cooked our lunch. She interrupted me every paragraph to say something – sweet something, or sweet nothing at all.

Just before lunch was ready Ihuoma returned. She dropped in, and soon I wished she had given us a wide berth. You see, Ihuoma worked with the War Information Bureau of the Defence Headquarters, and what latest detail of the progress, or lack of it, of the war she didn't know could be stuck in a flea's nostril.

'Ke,' she called in a grave voice. 'I think I should be moving my belongings down to the village. I'm disturbed by our latest situation reports.'

I sat up in the bed. I guess I'm still a soldier at heart. Once a soldier always a soldier, maybe.

'Things seem to be crumbling on all the fronts, Kal.' She shook her head and sat on the edge of the bed. 'Worst of all, Avu was overrun this morning, and Okpala junction was being shelled by midday today. It can't get any closer, can it?'

It can't, I thought. Avu is only a few miles from Owerri and Okpala junction is less than sixteen. If Okpala goes, then our boys at the Imo bridge on the Owerri–Aba axis must withdraw quickly or be cut off. Rotten situation.

'I guess this is the end,' Ihuoma sighed and stood up to go to her own room. There was a mixture of relief and fear in her tone. 'This is the long-dreaded end. I can't see us coming out of the present push.' She shook her head again.

'So it's as bad as that?' I asked the girl who should know.

'I'm afraid it's worse than I have ever known it since the collapse of Enugu.'

'For me, I am going to take it easy.' Kechi spoke for the first time, calmly. 'And for me, defeat would be victory. I guess I have had enough,' she concluded.

'Kal, I want us to go to a prayer house,' Kechi Ugboma announced out of the blue. We had eaten lunch in an unusual silence provoked by Ihuoma's latest, cheerless, war report.

'Prayer house?'

'Yes, a spiritual church house.'

I had heard about spiritual churches and prayer houses. They had been proliferating in the thirty months of war and hardship, and now they existed in just about every other block. This is of course understandable. People remembered God, *their* God, in moments of difficulty and danger. I gather that before the fall of Umuahia, spiritual church houses, which were invariably a room in someone's flat, were a kind of air-raid shelter.

People were known to betake themselves to the shelter of such holy houses at the first whine of an approaching jet fighter or bomber. The shelter of God's air-raid bunker was believed to be bomb-proof.

The vital elements of the spiritual churches were the visionaries, seers, male and female, who had a hot-line to God and communicated with celestial powers who gave them messages to pass on to sinful, puny mortals.

I knew a good deal about spiritual prayer houses but I had never been to one.

'Why, all so suddenly?' I asked Miss Ugboma, returning to the matter of the aforementioned prayer house. 'To say our last prayers, perhaps?'

'I don't know about last prayers,' replied the one-time convent prospect. 'Let's say, we have been to a play, we're going to a dance tomorrow; prayers today would be just in order.'

'You don't think there will still be a dance tomorrow, do you, Ke? Not with shells falling all around us, surely?' I meant it.

'Yes, if there is still a hall to dance in, darling,' she replied sweetly. ' "A little fighting, and a little dancing", to paraphrase a major I knew once. Fair is fair, sweetheart.' She was already dressing up for the prayer house. She even condescended to cover her long, lovely hair with a white scarf. God's holy house was known to be intolerant of the sight of female hair (though not that of a male).

The common knowledge that the prophets and apostles of spiritual churches have not corrupted themselves with war relief and blood money quickly settled my mind about going to have their blessings bestowed on me.

The Spiritual Church of God, Douglas Road Chapter, Owerri, was housed in a large but decrepit room behind a crumbling thatch-house a few blocks from the public motor-park.

There were over two dozen people inside. You could see that from the number of pairs of shoes that littered the doorway to the room. (God's spiritual houses were not tolerant of shod feet, male or female.)

A white cross marked the sacred door.

We shed our shoes and went solemnly into the room. All the female heads in the room were covered with scarves in the manner of Kechi Ugboma. All knees were firmly planted on the floor. Three candles burned brightly, and another cross, also white, but larger than the first, hung high on the eastern wall of the room, above the burning candles. A bowl of holy water was placed on a small, white table in the corner. The room smelt of incense.

No one took any notice of the new entrants when Kechi's and my knees took their places on the crowded floor.

Make no mistake about it: the congregation in this small room did not consist of helpless amputees or disabled soldiers like me seeking solace in the strange oasis of instant salvation. It was made up of recognizably *big* men, top men you would not expect to meet anywhere outside the corridors of powerful government ministries, directorates and agencies where they held the balance between life and death.

Was this where they sought forgiveness for their sins and relief for their troubled consciences? Was this where they found succour? Was this their source of spiritual peace at the end of each evil day?

Was this a well-spring that watered the tyrants' hearts? Or a whipping-block that caned their bare buttocks for the crimes of their hidden souls?

It would be interesting to find out. I would not have been in the least surprised if my ex-boss had planted his knees on the floor like all else, suppliantly looking up to the cross, like the others, for instant forgiveness. But, after a careful survey, I was positive that he wasn't. He was probably in another church house – there were hundreds of them. Or maybe he had given up his soul to the devil.

Would I have settled my score with him here in the holy house if I had seen him . . .?

34 A MESSAGE FROM GOD

I DID NOT NOTICE the prophet enter the room, for he walked in on his bare, cat's-paw-like feet. He was a tall man who had gone thin from endless days of fasting for our sins. He was dressed in a long, white, ankle-length robe, and carried a lighted candle in one hand and a small cross in the other.

He knelt down before the big cross, the small cross and candle in his hands, and went straight into the business in hand – prayers.

Perhaps 'prayers' is not the right word. 'Invocation' is about the term that correctly expresses the powerful supplication that the prophet delved into.

'Jah Jehovah Emmanuel!' the prophet cried.

'Descend!' chorused the congregation.

'Jehovah, Jah!'

'Descend!'

'Adonai!'

'Descend!'

'Yahweh!'

'Descend!'

'Elohim Sabaoth! God of Abraham, Jehovah God of the Jews! Eli, Eli, Jah! You said to me: "Call upon me, and I will answer." I call upon You, now, Jehovah Jah, Jehovah most powerful, most mighty, most merciful; You called me to Your service and I answered You, I call upon You now to answer me in the name of Jesus!'

'A-men!' came the congregation.

'Answer me!'

'A-men!'

'I say answer me now in the name of Emmanuel!'

'A-men!'

'In the name of Jesus!'

'A-men!'

When the prophet felt that his call had been answered, he asked for silent confessions from the congregation. I wished he had called for *open* confession (I have nothing to hide, thank you).

Afterwards he began a long, solemn, hair-raising prayer that pricked my flesh with its sheer force and eloquence.

He ended by asking. . . .

'Jehovah God, Thy children have suffered a great deal in the past months. Thy children continue to suffer in the fervent hope of Thy salvation. But, Lord, where is Thy salvation?

'If Thy children roam about in hunger and hardship, Lord Jehovah Jah, where is the shepherd? Lord, the wolf, the devil and evil men lurk in dark corners, thirsting for the blood of Thy children. Lord should we quench the thirst of the devil with the blood of Thy children?'

A few latecomers entered at the end of the prayers. But not too late because the interval marked only the first instalment of the prayer series.

'Where are my visionaries? Did anyone get a message from Our Father?' the prophet asked the congregation.

A smallish girl stood up immediately, trembled briefly and went down on her knees again.

'Before God and man,' she began, stopped, and screamed: 'Unclean! Unclean! Thou shalt not desecrate the Lord's house!'

She rose again, eyes tightly closed, groped, and pounced on a white-clad girl, one of the three who had just entered the room.

'You shall make the Lord's house clean and keep it holy! Leave the house of the Lord until you be clean! Leave!' Eyes still closed, the seer pushed, shoved and wheeled the startled newcomer to the door.

(Kechi told me later that unclean meant the girl was paying her monthly dues like every normal, adult woman.)

When the sacred commotion subsided, it became clear that no one else had seen any visions. Though of course the prophet had. For he soon gummed his candle to the floor and launched into great revelations.

He began with . . . me!

'Kneel down,' he commanded.

I knelt.

'Before God and man . . . ,' he began, 'this is the first time you have come to the house of God.'

Easy one, I thought, sceptically.

'I heard a voice,' said the prophet.

Whose? I wondered.

'And the Lord said to me: blessed is the young lady that brought you to salvation.'

Another easy one. Kechi was a regular; I wasn't even an initiate. Besides, he could have seen us when we arrived together.

'And the Lord said unto me: "Thou shall not seek vengeance for vengeance is Mine." '

I must admit this one threatened to dent the armour of my scepticism. But let's see. It could be a ritual opening line.

'You have injury on your hand and pain in your heart. But the agony you bear is shared by the Lord. The Lord says to you the man you are searching for, the object of your mission, should be given the other cheek. "Turn the other cheek," says the Lord God of Hosts. Weep not, for the Lord is with you. So says the Lord of Hosts. Next. . . .'

I was startled, yes, you are right. But I was also confused. This mercilessly accurate revelation of my innermost secrets, this public baring of my soul, mingled with the preposterous command that I turn the other cheek to a man who put me to near-death and prompted the irrevocable death of my beloved mother, was a most disconcerting experience.

I was confused; and angry.

Turn the *other* cheek?

One half-dead man plus one dead woman equals two cheeks, says my arithmetic: one plus one equals two.

Where is the *other* cheek, then? I don't have a *third* cheek to turn for my ex-boss to slap.

No, sir. Thank you, pastor.

If my ex-boss has discovered my presence and intentions in this town, and is in cahoots with you, pastor, he is out of luck!

Thank you and good-bye!

*

Kechi Ugboma should have been happy after the prayer service. The prayer man had told her that the Lord of Hosts had answered all her prayers (whatever they were), and that the Holy Spirit had given her blessing in abundance for bringing the young amputee to the holy house. The prophet had added that soon after the war Kechi would get her job back with the airways; soon after that, too, she would be happily married, and she would have twin babies, a boy and a girl. Her place in God's kingdom, he had revealed to her, was assured.

But Kechi Ugboma was not happy. Her solid good message from the Lord had been diluted by the earlier revelation that her beloved Kalu Udim, the only one in the world that meant the world to her now, was harbouring grudges of possibly homicidal proportions. The prophet had appeared restrained in his revelations, Kechi thought, but ironically his restraint had proved more revealing. His restraint showed the depth and gravity of his discovery.

Kechi decided that she had better have a word with Kal. If there was any truth in the prophet's words, and she had no doubt there was, then she would persuade Kal to tell her everything.

The thought of hearing *everything* suddenly frightened her. What would *everything* involve? The prophet had talked guardedly about Kal searching for a man; about Kal seeking vengeance.

Who was Kal searching for?

What sort of vengeance was Kal seeking to wreak on this man?

Above all, why?

The idea of vengeance in connection with this young, gentle, and infinitely sober ex-serviceman seemed incongruous to Kechi's mind. You didn't need to be in love with him to appreciate the fine qualities of this young man.

After leaving the prayer house they had walked down Douglas Road in loud silence until they reached the roundabout, virtually the cross-roads.

'Kal, would you like to come with me for supper?'

'I'd rather not, Ke. In any case, I'm not hungry.'

Kechi tried harder to persuade him. But he insisted on returning to his room down-town.

'I will join you for the Cradlers' dance tomorrow, Ke. For now I want to be in my room alone,' he said with finality.

'Kal, listen. I am terrified.'

'You needn't be. I'll be with you tomorrow evening.'

'Kal, do you still love me?'

'Did the visionary say I didn't?'

'Kal, that's not my question. And don't jive me!'

'Ke, in how many languages do you want me to say I love you? Shall I say it in braille?' He had smiled faintly, weakly, with effort.

Kechi squeezed his good hand. But she remained terrified, his return squeeze having failed to inject some courage, some reassurance, into her.

35 PROPOSAL FROM A PIMP

SHE WAS WALKING across the field to the Women's Hostel when the big car pulled up by the drive-way, a yard or so ahead of her.

It was May-May, the high-society pimp, who jumped out from the back seat and ran towards her.

'Ke, baby! Where've you been? I have been looking for you all evening!'

'I went to prayers. What's happening? Is the town evacuating?'

'What for? We're having a party, darling! At State House. You-know-who is giving a big party for a French delegation that is leaving tomorrow. You must come. He gave me the car to go get all the good girls. Where's Ihu? I couldn't find her, either.'

'I don't know, I'm just returning, May.'

'O.K., you tell her; the car will return for you at 7.30 p.m. But one thing, Ke, no boy-friends. This is a big thing for a big delegation.' The girl's voice dropped suddenly. 'He says if *we* are good to the Frenchmen, we may get French aid, so you be a good girl, Ke baby. O.K.?'

'I don't know about Ihu, May-May, but you can count me out.'

'What's the matter with you, Ke dear? Miss a State House party? You must be crazy!'

'Don't bet on it, love.'

'Then what's your problem? Are you broke? That's why you must come!'

'I'm O.K., baby,' Kechi answered sweetly, 'but none of that stuff for me. I'm in love.' She sounded firm. The assertion caused her mood to lift a bit. She thought about Kal, and repeated: 'Yes, I'm in love with a guy I love, if you'll pardon the tautology.'

'What has being in love got to do with it, Ke? He doesn't have to know, does he? Look, don't disappoint me.'

'Forget it, May. I'll see you at the Cradlers' tomorrow night.'

'Ah, so you'll be there! What happens to your new boy-friend then?' May-May thought she had caught her friend off guard.

'I will be there with *him*.'

'Now, who is kidding who? What about the Duke? Don't think we don't know!' she said triumphantly.

'I don't care what you know, dear, but know right. Duke is not my boy-friend, and I have no dance date with him tomorrow. Only with Kal. Now I must be running home. See you tomorrow.'

The riotous fun that was had by all at State House that night echoed loudly the next morning, but not louder than the insistent crash-bang of artillery and mortar bombs, as the enemy's final push for Owerri continued in earnest.

36 THE DUKE PREPARES FOR THE BALL

CHIMA DUKE had not seen Kechi Ugboma since he delivered his purchases from Europe two days before. They had been two busy days for him. There was a mountain of paperwork to plough through after his long absence from his desk.

Since that morning many months ago when some upstart brat – he had forgotten his name now – impetuously pretended to the throne by making decisions and taking actions in his absence on matters beyond the brat's comprehension and he was forced to discipline him, everyone had learnt to leave his desk strictly alone. In spite of the resultant accumulation of work, the Duke would not have it any other way. If his subordinates acted in his absence as often as he was away, they would certainly begin to entertain the treacherous thought that they could sit on the throne, do the Duke's work, that the Duke was dispensable. Allowing them to do that would be tantamount to sharing his power and authority, his executive prerogatives. Thus, the situation of executive deadlock that resulted from his frequent absences reinforced the Duke's feeling of indispensability. And it always gave him a proper feeling of executive super-power to return to his desk, tackle the build-up with unfamiliar gusto, and quickly let it be seen that things were beginning to move once more.

In the past two evenings, too, the Duke had been busy briefing the Chief Secretary to the government on the result of his European mission. That, also, was another task that reinforced the importance of his office and role in the scheme of things. Reporting directly, and usually in person, to the Chief Secretary, not even the Permanent Secretary of the

Ministry of Trade that controlled his directorate, brought him within a heartbeat of the General Commander-in-Chief himself. And that, in Chima Duke's reckoning, was close enough to the ultimate fountain of power.

But this evening, he had taken a break from his high state chores. He had told the Chief Secretary that the briefing would continue on Monday evening as he had some personal problem pertaining to his separated family to attend to.

The Chief Secretary, himself a family man, had quickly and sympathetically agreed. Family matters at this time were pressing problems that took precedence over issues of war and peace. In truth, however, Chima Duke's family problem was his affair with Kechi Ugboma. The Cradlers' League ball was happening this evening and he was going to escort the girl, elegant in the A-line dress that he had bought, to the Cradlers' ball.

Not that it had been mutually arranged. He had not bothered to discuss it beforehand with Kechi Ugboma. He had not even thought it necessary. His simple logic was the old adage, made new by the situation of war and want, that he who pays the piper calls the tune. He had no doubt in his mind: he who bought the dress escorts the lady.

At 7.15 p.m. the Duke looked up from his overseas papers, called Sampson, his cook-steward, and ordered a warm bath. The Duke always had a warm bath. He believed it helped him shed some of his excess weight. Whether it did or not he never bothered to find out, which was very much like the Duke: his wishes fathered his beliefs.

He also ordered Sampson to cook a late-late dinner for two, for after the ball.

By 9.00 p.m., after a leisurely warm bath, fifteen vain minutes before the dressing-mirror, and a shot of brandy to make himself feel good, the Duke was set.

He entered his car and began the five-minute drive to Kechi Ugboma's hostel across the road.

In the pigsty that was Kalu Udim's castle, it was also 7.15 p.m. when he too began readying himself for the Cradlers' ball. In these unenchanted slum surroundings crickets began to chirp at the first hazy approach of dusk, while toads and frogs croaked all day. The most elegant house around had mud walls and a thatch roof. Kalu Udim was always at home here. He was among his social kith and kin.

He began his preparations that early, not because he needed, or could afford, a prolonged warm bath or a leisurely lingering before the dress-

ing-mirror, but because he had a long way to walk to Kechi's hostel in the teachers' college a mile and a half down in the pleasanter part of the town.

The prophet's comments of the evening before had caused him considerable disturbance. But by this evening he had managed to achieve the enormous feat of sweeping the whole episode out of his consciousness, into the innermost recesses of his mind.

Kechi, he remembered, had been visibly disturbed by the whole business, and the least reassurance he could give her was to keep his promise to attend the charity ball with her.

This evening he could almost boast he was elegantly dressed. He wore a light-blue French suit, a present he had bought for himself after the last term at university before the war broke out, and his black Bata shoes which were worn at the heels, but the leather was still healthy. He put a fresh white sling on his bad arm.

It was almost 8.45 p.m. when he arrived at Kechi Ugboma's door.

37 'GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, SIR'

KECHI UGBOMA was at the door as soon as she heard the knock. She wrenched the knob anxiously and quickly wrapped herself around Kalu Udim's neck.

'Hello, my darling,' she murmured excitedly. 'You look lovely.'

'Thanks, baby,' he replied with a touch of shyness. 'And that's a fantastic dress you have got there.' Her kisses were warm, wet and welcoming.

They entered the room and he shut the door. She returned to the dressing-mirror and patted her hair into place. For this special occasion it was not plaited into tendrils. She had had it combed out Afro-style, and it stood on end, revealing its full, luxuriant length.

Kalu's compliments on the dress had reminded her fleetingly of Chima Duke, the provider. It was another A-line of creamy-white cotton material that clung to her full body, revealing every contour.

As the thought of the Duke was fleeting through her mind, the Duke's Peugeot saloon was pulling to a stop in the parking-lot below Kechi Ugboma's window.

The knock on the door came as a surprise, for Kechi was not expecting

anyone, and Ihuoma, her mate, had changed her mind about accompanying them and had already gone off with her new date, for the dance.

It was Kalu Udim who said, 'Come right in.'

Chima Duke did.

He was dressed in an expensive grey French suit and black court shoes. And if you could ignore his pot-belly which preceded his entry into the room, you could say he looked rather smart.

The Duke focused his eyes on the simply but elegantly dressed figure standing between the young man and the dressing-table. She was frozen perfectly still like a freshly clothed dummy. Without turning, the Duke took in the young man, who had his back half-way between the corner wall and the door. The young fellow seemed to have his right hand stiffly in a sling.

Kalu Udim turned to see the new arrival.

It was Chima Duke's turn to freeze.

Recognition. Recollection. A rush of emotions: anger, jealousy, guilt, pity, renewed anger. They chased each other furiously inside him, none gaining predominance.

If Kalu Udim suffered any attack of emotions, his face did not betray it. He remained perfectly calm.

To the Duke's utter chagrin, the young man turned to the petrified girl and said in a voice so calm that it seemed to mock the older man's inner agitation:

'Now don't stand there looking like a ghost, Ke, Mr Duke and I are old friends – aren't we, Mr Duke? It's very good to see you again, sir.'

The guts! The cheek! Duke's insides swelled some more. He licked his lips and tried to recoup his composure. He managed a smile, and took a hesitant step towards the couple at the dressing-table.

He offered his right hand to Kalu and suffered a relapse of the emotion of guilt when the young fellow extended his good left hand.

Kalu turned to Kechi and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring look, and said: 'I'm glad Mr Duke is here, Ke, because I don't really feel up to the dance,' and continued, thinking quickly, 'I really came down to try to excuse myself. I have been feeling dizzy all evening and if I should have a fit I would rather have it at home.' He sounded thoroughly convincing. 'O.K., baby?' He squeezed Kechi's hand.

Kechi hesitated. 'I think you are . . . you are being bloody gallant, Kal. I mean, I really think you are. Chima, I mean Mr Duke, and I have no plans to go to the dance together. I believe he dropped in just to say hello, you know what I mean?' She was truly suspicious that, having caught her on the hook, Kal should be so eager to let her off. He looked

all right to her and she wasn't eager to buy his story about not feeling right.

The Duke had sat down on the edge of Kechi's bed and was listening hopefully to the quiet dialogue: hopeful that Kechi would not succeed in persuading the young fellow, this bundle of embarrassment and bad memories from the past, to change his mind. The girl looked so good, so delectable, he was sure he couldn't endure the disappointment of seeing her go off to the dance on someone else's arm; probably end up in someone else's bed, afterwards.

'Anything but gallant, Ke,' Kal replied. He looked down sadly at his bad hand. Some gallantry, he thought bitterly. 'I just think it's providential that Mr Duke should drop by at this time. It could have been worse. Come on now, be a good girl. Just let me scrounge around your kitchen and I'll be all right, O.K.?'

'Are you going to stay around and wait for me, then? I shouldn't be too long at the dance if you are feeling ill,' Kechi asked.

'No, I'll be going back home soon. I'll see you around lunchtime tomorrow. Have a good time.' He turned to the Duke. 'Once more, it's very nice to see you again, Mr Duke. Please bring her back in one piece,' he managed a smile.

'She will be all right,' the Duke assured him with suppressed eagerness and gratitude to the one who opted out.

The Duke's incipient smile was wiped off by the young man's next statement.

'Good. As you well know, the dance-hall is a good place for conscription; so don't let them trample her under foot when the stampede begins.'

The innuendo was lost only to Miss Kechi Ugboma.

38 A BALL WAS HAD BY ALL

THE BALLROOM, which was the former assembly hall of the teacher's college, was filled with writhing bodies, laughing faces and throbbing soul music played by The Hykkers, a hardy group that had weathered the war-storms with remarkable resilience. Celestine Ukwu's highlife band waited at the corner of the stage for its turn to perform. It was a good balance of musical tastes. The former group catered to the soulful craving of the young audience, and the latter provided slow,

sedate highlife tunes for the older guests. This way the organizers, the Cradlers' League, shrewdly roped a good percentage of the population of Owerri into this laughing, writhing, sweating, melting mass.

Chima Duke, a long-time benefactor of the Cradlers' League and, to Kechi's surprised discovery, one of its patrons, was not left to sit among the common folk. They had a seat reserved for him, and Kechi, at the high table in the quieter, blue-lit corner of the hall. The high table was adorned with such rare luxuries as whisky, brandy, beer and roast chicken. There were some flower decorations, too, and the prosperous-looking men and their ladies crowded around the opulent table seemed to be without a care in the world. They shouted mutual pleasantries across the table, above the din of the roaring sound.

Kechi sat uncomfortably in her comfortable chair by Chima Duke's side. She had not bargained for this instant celebrity status. She would have been quite happy hanging on to Kalu's good arm and leaning on a corner wall, where there was standing-room only.

Another thought fuelled her discomfort: in spite of his dubious gallantry, there had been a vague touch of bitterness in Kalu's voice back at her room. Also, she had felt that there was something tacitly hostile in the meeting of the two men that evening, something she could feel in her bones but couldn't put her finger on. She hoped she hadn't hurt Kal terribly, beyond repair. No doubt, she thought, Kal would conclude he had been two-timed. But she knew it was untrue. And she believed that the strength of the truth would vindicate her at the proper time. Truth will triumph, says the British Council. Kechi smiled. She had made no previous arrangements, directly or not, with the Duke about coming to the dance together. If she had allowed herself to be persuaded by Kal to go to the dance with the Duke, it was because it was the next best alternative to prolonging a situation that was rich with embarrassment and quiet tension.

Somehow, in her subconscious search for an explanation, Kechi did not for one moment connect the prophet's words of yesterday with the events of the evening.

A little later, the charivari of the soul band ended and yielded the temporary peace and quiet that followed to the more measured melody of the highlife band. As soon as the band struck up a well-known number, the young ones in tight trousers and short skirts also yielded the dusty floor to the big and benevolent.

There was a kind of hush as they danced. None of the shaking, rocking, and gyrating commotion of the young people. They danced in a slow, dignified shuffle, holding their delicate ladies at discreet arm's length.

Chima Duke looked into the face of the girl at the length of his arm. She looked subdued and danced rather reluctantly. But Chima Duke thought she was beautiful, all the same; even more beautiful now than if she had been bathed in smiles. He felt like drawing her close to him, squeezing her. But the decorum that his status imposed, as well as his protruding stomach, precluded a response to the urge. He decided to wait till bed-time. Why hurry when he had all the night and all of Sunday morning?

39 MEET THE MAAB

I DID NOT GO scrounging around Kechi's kitchen, for I had lost all appetite for food many minutes before I fobbed her off with that promise. For the sight of Mr Chima Duke, my former boss, for the first time in God-knows-how-many-months, this unexpected fulfilment of several weeks of searching, waiting and hoping, was a rich and nourishing enough manna from heaven to extinguish all my hunger for earthly food.

Moreover, my relationship with Miss Kechi Ugboma has, at last, yielded to me such a surfeit of satisfaction that I think I would be committing the deadly sins of greed and gluttony if I took any more from her. Could I really ask more of, or take more from, someone who delivered, right into my hands, the corpulent person of Mr Chima Duke, the killer of my mother and half of me?

The long journey back to my room seemed so effortless I didn't remember when I made it.

I took out my small ring of keys, selected a copper-coloured Union and unlocked my battered suitcase.

It was there, all right.

It felt cold and heavy in my palm and in the darkness it was almost invisible.

The MAAB automatic pistol is an efficient weapon, as any dead soldier can tell you: handy and rather snuggly in a manner that belies its invariably deadly purpose. It was capable of accommodating in its slim clip, and emitting at a very high velocity when called upon, a total of twelve 9mm calibre bullets. Mine was issued to me when I first assumed command of a battalion a few weeks before my injury.

A comrade and protective companion in the days of able-bodiedness

and combat, it has survived the uncertain period of my injury and hospitalization and become my most valued, yet untouched, possession; a relic of a tragic interlude in my peaceful life.

If the pistol could talk, probably it would have asked me why I had kept it, safe and snug, undisturbed, even through my critical periods of hunger when it would have fetched me a small fortune in the black market. Indeed sometimes, when I have reflected on my situation and my mission, I think I could hear it asking me: 'Tell me, Veteran, what is my mission, my purpose, my *raison d'être*?'

I found that I could remove the half-empty ammunition clip with my good left hand without fresh practice. I found the full clip I had kept and slipped it into the magazine. Its metallic click filled me with a faintly erotic sensation. It seemed to say to me: 'Ready and at your service, Veteran.'

I put the gun in the left side pocket of my trousers, shut my door and locked it.

For a brief second I felt the door key in my palm. It was as light as a feather compared to the pistol. I contemplated my mission and its consequences for another brief second and decided that I would not need this key or the room for a long time to come. I would be a very happy guest of the Biafran government, an unrepentant tenant in their huge grey Death Row down the road, in a matter of hours. And as far as I was concerned, with the MAAB automatic safely in my hip pocket, that room was totally empty of any valuables. Anyone who cared to could break into it and was welcome to my bed of nails. Without further sentiment I tossed the key into the dark night and began the return journey to Kechi's room.

I occupied my mind thinking of the beginning of the long, lonely journey that was to end in a few hours. My heart was filled with a fresh surge of the bitterness that had kept me going through the months. . . .

40 ECHOES OF BITTERNESS

I UNLOCKED Kechi's room, left the key in the keyhole and shut the door. I switched on the light and brought out the gun. I released the safety-catch and slipped the weapon under the pillow on Kechi's bed.

I re-crossed the room, switched off the light and groped my way back to the bed. I kicked off my shoes, and, with one-handed ease, lit a ciga-

rette from a packet Kechi bought for me yesterday. I drew quite a lungful of smoke and eased myself on to the soft bed.

I tried to relax.

I blew out a long, lazy ring of smoke, wishing I could exhale the tension building up inside me.

No way.

The more I tried the greater, and faster, the build-up.

My heart, my head, my eyes, ears, every bit of my sensory organs, began to be filled with echoes from the past. Echoes of bitterness. . . .

'For your brazen insubordination, Mr Udim, you'll have to go into the army and learn some discipline. I'll see to it . . . !

'You may laugh now, Udim, but you won't laugh for long. . . . Forget about your medical certificate. I shall get you into the Biafran army even if you carry a medical certificate of exemption from the World Health Organization!'

I could hear the M.P.'s knock on my door now, and nearly reached for the MAAB.

I could hear the staccato drum-beat of gun-play and the tom-tom of mortar bombs taking off.

I could smell the acrid odour of dirty hospital beds and ill-clad but kindly faced nurses.

I could see my white shroud, and the crimson stub that was my right arm.

I could smell fear. . . .

Death.

Doom.

Death.

I could feel the cruel pangs of death. . . .

Mother dead, dead, dead.

I could hear the stentorian voice of my one-time comrade-in-arms, Major Chilaka Ukatta as relayed to me by Kechi. . . .

'Tell me, Kechi, what have you been up to with that one-armed *bandit*?'

I took another very deep drag and rubbed my eyes, for I could now see my fellow amputee, the one-legged veteran, thrown off by the vicious force of the car on which he had rested his bones, and his hopes, on that hot day on the way to the relief centre.

I could hear the nonchalant voice of Rev. Father Nwobi, the relief centre priest. . . .

'I'm sorry, my friend. There's nothing I can do for you. We have little food left in our store. . . . Look, I haven't much time. No relief today and that's all.'

I thought of the Duke. I remembered the prophet's holy words. . . .

'The Lord says to you the man you are searching for, the object of your mission, should be given the other cheek.'

I also thought of a poet I know, and remembered one of his most poignant verses. . . .

Not the bleeding wound, but the jeering scar
Not the cry of agony, but the taste of tear drop
Not just the cause, but the just cause and effect
Not the ruins of war, but the treachery of history.

When mortal man can slip through the tight
fingers of death's immortal grip

And break through the impregnable fortress of
haunting dreams

Then shall memory cease to be my woe
And I too shall learn to court my foe.[4]

I put out my cigarette and tried to shut off my brain. Failing, I lit another cigarette, and continued to wait in the darkness.

41 THE LAST SUPPER

THE SWEET SOUND of music continued to waft across the dark fields from the crowded hall, and grew louder in the quiet chase of Saturday night towards Sunday morning.

So far throughout the evening not a stray word had passed between Chima and Kechi. Occasionally they danced to a highlife number, Kechi doing so out of courtesy, in deference to the select gathering around their table.

As soon as they had left her room earlier in the evening she had decided against participating in the Miss Cradlers' League fashion contest. She did not want to win, or lose, in Kal's absence, for it was with him that she had planned to go to the event. And, whatever you might

[4] Bons Nwabiani, artist and poet, *Memory is My Woe.*

think of Chim's entitlements as the provider, she did not want a fat and flabby rich-man escorting her to the dais to be crowned if she won. Such a grand public appearance would be best made in the company of the man she loved – Kalu Udim.

In the preamble to the contest, the voice of the master of ceremonies occupied the vacuum created by the now silent bands. Girls of varying degrees of good looks and elegance began trooping out on to the floor to form a single file.

The cheers were warm and the applause long. But not so warm or long as to drown the trembling explosion of artillery bombs that suddenly shook the fringe of the city no more than ten miles away. An embarrassed silence drowned the happy hall. Chima Duke and his mates at the high table exchanged discreetly anxious glances. The bombardment had been going on all evening but no one could hear it for the delightful din of the dance hall. It took this brief intermission to bring the sad sound of war home to all.

The men around the big table exchanged anxious whispers. The big table began to look like the scene of the last supper. At least two top army officers stole out quietly.

The event, having begun, was continued, largely to avoid creating a state of panic. In the end few people could remember which girl won the contest.

A little after two in the morning the last dance in Biafra was over. Kechi felt a great relief.

The quickly emptying hall was a blaze of lights in the midnight blackout. Women, men, including soldiers A.W.O.L. from the battle-front, and teenage boys and girls, were all over the place, spilling out from all exits into the vast, damp lawns, on their way home.

Chima and Kechi drove the short distance to her hostel in continued silence. Chima smoked quietly, an expensive, fragrant Portuguese brand. His fingers caressed the steering-wheel lazily, as he snailed down the drive-way, silently groping for a way to ask the unfriendly girl to come home with him for the night.

It was only when he stopped the car in his customary parking-space beneath her window that he spoke.

'Can I see you up to your room?'

'Yes, if you insist. Otherwise I could go up on my own.' Her tone was not encouraging.

Still, together they ascended the staircase, the girl leading the way, and walked the few yards to her door.

She groped to insert her duplicate key into her keyhole but found the first still in the lock.

'Oh, my God, how can Kal do a thing like this – leave my bloody key in the hole!'

She twisted the knob and stepped into the pitch-dark room, followed by the brooding figure of Chima Duke.

The Duke had been thinking that maybe he should tell her all about Kalu Udim, the embarrassment from the past. I believe his sudden appearance on the scene is responsible for the disaster of the evening, he told himself.

He walked into the room close on Kechi's heels and snapped on the light switch before Kechi could grope her way to it.

A very familiar figure blinked and stirred on her bed.

42 FACEOFF

I LEANED UP on my left elbow, leaving my fist thrust deeply beneath the pillow. I gave the couple a warm, welcoming smile. 'Hi, there. You two don't look like you had a good time. Anything wrong?'

'Kal, are you all right?' For all you could hear, the girl might not have been listening to me.

'I'm perfectly well, after a good snooze; never felt better, thank you. You are the one who doesn't look too good. Did you miss the prize?'

'I'm fine. I just changed my mind about taking part, that's all.'

She came up to the bed and bent down to adjust my sling that had slipped in the process of my leaning up.

'Just a minute, Ke, don't bother about the sling. I hope you don't mind, but I would like to have a brief word with Mr Duke here,' I told her, hoping she didn't pick up the quiet menace that crept into my voice.

Kechi turned round to glance at the man behind her as if he had just walked into the room.

'Listen, darling, what is it you must talk about at this hour of the morning?' She turned to me again. I think she sounded more reproachful than questioning.

'Never mind the time, Ke. As I told you earlier, Mr Duke and I are old friends. Aren't we, Mr Duke?' I did not care any more whether or not Kechi felt the hardening steel in my voice.

Mr Duke looked a little uneasy. I don't blame him. I would be more than uneasy if I had come face to face with myself. I decided to lay the

cards on the table for the benefit of Kechi, for she was beginning to show signs of apprehension. Which was truly not unfounded.

'You see, Ke, Mr Duke and I are such good old friends that he gave me a lasting present, a memento.'

The echoes from the past were filling my ears and my brain again. My anger was rising. I kept a corner of my eye on the Duke.

'You gave me this, Mr Duke, didn't you, sir?' I raised the stub of my arm and nodded towards it. 'You gave me this amputated arm, Mr Duke, didn't you!' I heard my yell as if from a distance.

I saw a horrified look on Kechi's face as she turned again to look at Mr Duke. She took a step towards me. I stopped her dead in her tracks with an angry frown. No woman, not even Kechi, was going to come between me and this man now.

Mr Duke was standing behind her, his back to the closed door. I could not discern his features any longer; fear, and possibly guilt, had branded him with a hot iron.

Kechi made another desperate attempt to reach my bed.

'Watch it, Ke. I suggest you keep clear of the firing line.' I think my warning left her in no doubt about the gravity of such a venture.

For that brief moment, I felt different: I felt like a soldier, a wounded, vengeful one facing an enemy. I looked at Kechi and felt some pity for her. She stood perfectly dead, open-mouthed; a scared, pretty doll in her A-line dress.

Firing line! The two words must have hit Mr Duke like real bullets. I saw him move to step backwards. I let him.

Soon his back slammed against the closed door right behind him.

I think my attempted grin came out as a grimace.

Mr Chima Duke was frightened. And he was not making any attempt to hide it.

I grimaced at him once more.

I looked at the fat, greasy face.

The face that launched a corpse, my mother's corpse.

He still looked every inch the big shot, the V.I.P., the well-connected, the powerful.

But a frightened one. A frightened big-man is quite a sight.

I looked at his lips; the lips that pronounced my sentence and uttered my doom. They were trembling. I could understand his fear. He had a lot to lose: he had a lot of money, he had travelled to foreign lands, sampled foreign food, wine and women. (Is there not a surfeit to the good life?)

It quickly occurred to me that the door had been simply shut, not

locked, and the knob was exactly at the end of Mr Duke's arm, slightly to the right of him.

I moved. I whipped my left hand from under the pillow, swung my feet off the bed and sat bolt-upright on the edge of the bed all in a flash. I suppose once a soldier always a soldier.

I faced the Duke squarely.

It was clear to me that the Duke did not mistake the intent behind the steely, single-eyed gaze of the MAAB automatic, for his trembling hands flew into the air above his shoulders.

'For Christ's sake, Kechi, stop him, stop him and let me explain.' You can guess who is talking.

'Mr Duke, I think it's only fair to warn you against the temptation to move even one split inch,' I said in a cold, alien voice.

I felt that if any explaining was called for, I would do it – to Kechi, to be fair to her. After all, this battle-ground is her room. I began, right from the beginning, talking slowly, and distinctly, like Voice of America news in special English. . . .

Finally I apologized to her. 'I'm sorry that my score with my former boss has to be settled in this place,' I deliberately waved the gun sideways, to indicate Kechi's room, 'but my mother died of heart failure when she heard I had been wounded in battle. She collapsed in the market place and died *there.* So, you see, death comes to us in all kinds of places and circumstances. It never waits for a suitable setting.

'But make no mistake, darling, I do not love you one bit less.'

I saw Kechi sink to her knees, choked and stammering. . . .

'Please, please, Kal, my darling . . . if . . . if you love me . . . please lis. . . .' It must have been the tears in her voice that moved my hand to waver, my aim to falter for the second time. I had heard that tearful voice before – my mother's.

But the corner of my eye did not waver from the Duke.

I saw him shift a couple of inches to steal a glance at the knob of the door.

I saw him, too, as he began to lower his right hand, hopeful that the crying girl had fully commandeered my aim and attention.

I let him put his hand firmly on the knob.

Then I put the first bullet into his stomach. I squeezed the trigger and hit him a couple of times more, this time in the chest.

Three bullets.

One for Mother.

One for my conscription.

The last for my amputated hand.

A complete trinity.

He must have died before he slumped to the floor.

The screams from Kechi Ugboma must have drowned the echo of the shots.

From the window I could see a few lights spring up in the rooms of the next block.

I could hear faint, vague voices from below. . . .

'They must be conscripting. . . .'

'Possibly. . . .'

'. . . dance just ended and they may want to conscript a few boys. . . .'

'. . . back to bed. . . .'

I stood up and put the gun back in my hip pocket. I adjusted my sling and lit a cigarette.

Kechi must have fainted with fright. I gave her a long, compassionate look and decided to let her be.

I knew my way to Death Row.

EPILOGUE: SUNSET AT MIDDAY

KALU UDIM was in the Old Grey Building for about one week.

He remembered Christmas Day for the intensified sound of war from the shrivelling fronts.

He remembered New Year's Day for it was that day that the Old Grey Building was evacuated and all the inmates were taken to Orlu Prisons about twenty-eight miles away.

The enemy was at the gates of Owerri by 2 January 1970.

On 10 January, he heard from the prison guard that the General Commander-in-Chief had gone abroad 'in search of peace'.

Peace of the graveyard? Almost all of Biafra had been overrun. It didn't make sense to him in the circumstances.

He wished he had heard the General's broadcast himself. He could only think that what the General was seeking was asylum, his own piece of peace.

12 January proved Udim right. He did not miss that day's broadcast, for it had been repeatedly advertised on the radio for midday.

There was quite a crowd around the lone transistor radio on the chief warder's table that noon. Prisoners and guards rubbed shoulders and waited anxiously.

The broadcast did not come at midday as scheduled, but some four

hours later. It was made by General Philip Effiong, Chief of General Staff:

FELLOW COUNTRYMEN,

As you know, I was asked to be the officer administering the government of this republic on the 10th of January, 1970. Since then I know that some of you have been waiting to hear a statement from me. I have had extensive consultations with the leaders of the community, both military and civil, and I am now encouraged and heartened to make this statement to you by the mandate of the armed forces and the people of this country. I have assumed the leadership of the government.

Throughout history, injured people have had to resort to arms in their self-defence where peaceful negotiations fail. We are no exception. We took up arms because of the sense of insecurity generated in our people by the events of 1966. We have fought in defence of that cause.

I take this opportunity to congratulate officers and men of our armed forces for their gallantry and bravery which have earned for them the admiration of the whole world. I thank the civil population for their steadfastness and courage in the face of overwhelming odds and starvation. I am convinced now that a stop must be put to the bloodshed which is going on as a result of the war. I am also convinced that the suffering of our people must be brought to an immediate end. Our people are now disillusioned, and those elements of the old government regime who have made negotiations and reconciliation impossible have voluntarily removed themselves from our midst.

I have, therefore, instructed an orderly disengagement of troops. I am dispatching emissaries to make contact with Nigeria's field commanders in places like Onitsha, Owerri, Awka, Enugu and Calabar with a view to arranging armistice. I urge on General Gowon, in the name of humanity, to order his troops to pause whilst armistice is negotiated in order to avoid the mass suffering caused by the movement of our population.

We have always believed that our differences with Nigeria should be settled by peaceful negotiations. A delegation of our people is therefore ready to meet representatives of the Nigerian Federal Government anywhere to negotiate a peace settlement on the basis of O.A.U. resolutions. The delegation will consist of the Chief Justice Sir Louis Mbanefo as leader, Professor Eni Njoku, Mr J. I. Emembolu, Chief A. E. Bassey, and Mr E. Agumah. The delegation will have full authority to negotiate on our behalf. I have appointed a council to advise me on the government of the country. It consists of the Chief

Justice Sir Louis Mbanefo, Brigadier P. C. Amadi – army, Brigadier C. A. Nwawo – army, Captain W. A. Anuku – navy, Wing Commander J. I. Ezilo – air force, Inspector-General of Police Mr P. I. Okeke, Attorney-General Mr J. I. Emembolu, Professor Eni Njoku, Dr I. Eke, Chief A. E. Udoffia, Chief A. E. Bassey, Mr M. Mbu, Mr E. Agumah, Chief Frank Opuigo, and Chief J. M. Echeruo. Any question of a government in exile is repudiated by our people.

The civilian population is hereby advised to remain calm and to cooperate with the armed forces and the police in the maintenance of law and order. They should remain in their homes and stop mass movements which have increased suffering and loss of lives.

On behalf of our people, I thank those foreign governments and friends who have steadfastly given us support in our cause. We shall continue to count on their continued help and counsel.

I also thank His Holiness the Pope, the Joint Church Aid and other relief organizations for the help they have given for the relief of suffering and starvation. I appeal to all governments to give urgent help for RELIEF and prevail on the Federal Military Government to order their troops to stop all military operations.

May God help us all.

When the broadcast came to an end, Kalu Udim was the first to return to his cell.

He felt that the delay did not make any difference.

The language of capitulation was unmistakable. The rising sun had set. And it set at midday that day.

The third and final phase had come to an end.

And so it came to be
that we who gulped down
catechism to receive baptism
we who bowed before that crucifix
feared the sacristy
and stopped dead on roads
to say the angelus
were to groan beside the guarded fence
as They dispensed corned beef in Lent
gossiped with the market women
communed with money-doublers
and They suffered
not the little children
to come unto Them

We drained our manhood
sleepless,
spading in the heated blackout
to raise ivory Salem on
quicksand layered with
wholesome blood and splintered bones;
dragged, rudderless
we are lumbered home
to reyouth in coldfisted darkness
gilded with tepid rainbow colours.

PR 9387.9 .I7 T6 1979
Iroh, Eddie.
Toads of war

DEMCO



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EDDIE IROH has recently made a mark with his action-packed thriller of the war in Biafra called *Forty-eight Guns for The General* (AWS 189). During the war he was desk editor for the Biafran War Information Bureau. Afterwards he worked for Reuters, the News agency, and for Evans, the publishers. He now heads the Features and Documentary Department of Nigerian Television, Enugu. He is at work on a third book to complete this trilogy on the war.

The focus of this second book switches from the battlefront, where ill-clad and half-fed conscripts are being shot and maimed, to Owerri town where a bizarre elite ranging from bureaucrats to clergymen are growing fat on blood money and the black market in the final days of Biafra. At work Kalu Udim, who lost a hand at the front, comes up against his civil servant boss, Chima Duke, who makes sure that in-coming relief includes perfumes and dresses for Kechi Ugboma, a former air hostess. Kechi falls in love with Kalu, but she cannot afford to leave Chima. This dramatic novel is brought to a climax when, because it is a time of war, Kalu tries to resolve affairs with an automatic pistol.

Cover photograph by Bill Heyes

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