

1

Prof turned off all the lights in the house when he returned from prison. He bathed, cleaned, ate, washed and slept in the darkness which ate up the whole house. When he did not have any cleaning or cooking to do, he would sit in his chair reciting passages from books he had memorised. He cooked his meals on an old kerosene stove whose red and yellow flames leapt out of the whorled burner and lapped the sides of the steel pot. The light from the fire made him wince and mutter *ish, ish, is*.

His house was not always dark as soot because the wan light of an electric bulb drifted in at night through the only window in the sitting room and sat on the arm of the chair opposite his. It irritated him. In the daytime, the heavy curtains his mother had hung covered the room in a thick shade but could not prevent the sun's intrusion. The slight parting in the curtains allowed a thin stroke of light to fall on the floor of the sitting room. Prof tried though, to keep in the darkness. He adjusted the curtains, but they always fell apart, inviting shadows to lay claim to new spaces in the room.

It was dark, but never dark enough.

Prof soon grew tired of aligning the curtains. He turned his attention to staring at the shadows which formed beside the furniture, moving around the house like a blind man born to his handicap, sensing when something was not in its rightful place. He regained his confidence that the flat was as familiar with him as he was with it. He crept in and out of his rooms, floating like a paper lifted by the wind. Sometimes, he strayed into a room where he grazed an object, took note of the positioning and counted his steps backward and forward to prevent him from hitting the same object twice, after which he moved on like nothing had changed. As he moved from one room to another, filling spaces, he dreamt of dreadful ways by which his enemies—those who made him go to prison—would die or how he would cope as an exile in a foreign country.

On the nights that his irritation filled-up the room, he defied the fear of the lights from the electric bulbs on the streets and took a long stroll around Jakande Estate in Abesan. It was at these times that he bought kerosene or some foodstuff that he needed. Carrying an empty 4-litre jerrycan, he would brace himself with a panegyric before leaving the house with a walking stick made from a rusty iron rod which had

once served as a curtain bar. He walked on the street, covered from head-to-toe like a woman in burqa, his ears catching distinct conversations in the mix of clamouring voices, car honks and sometimes bleating goats finding their way home, alongside the music that blared from roadside CD/DVD kiosks.

Prof stopped by one of the kiosks defaced with campaign posters for the just concluded election, that had seen President Obasanjo elected for a second term. The poster that caught his attention was torn and what was left was the lean face of Muhammadu Buhari, the name of Chuba Okadigbo, his ANPP running mate, and the words: WE'LL NOT DO...IT'S A PROMISE.

Prof wondered what the lost words could be. After ten years of absence, here was what he returned to; two former military heads of state contesting for president. He struggled to dismiss the thought of Nigeria's politics from his mind, but he could not.

'Obasanjo of the 70s contesting against Buhari of the 80s, and this is 2005!' He blurted, 'How can this country move forward when it seeks the dead to bring revival?'

People stared at him but turned away before their eyes met. It was often this way; people hurried ahead or crossed to the other side of the road once he turned to meet their eyes. He was more interested in those ones who walked ahead of him in a pair or in threesomes, sharing neighbourhood gossips or intimate stories. It was through their like that he discovered his neighbourhood was also the black cauldron that cooked rumours for the several blocks of flat with bright fluorescent lamps to savour.

Prof met one such rumour of himself and his flat on one of his infrequent night strolls. As he walked away from his house that day, scrutinising it like a stranger, he listened to two straw-thin teenage girls hawking plantain chips tell the story of his life as they must have heard it.

'That is the house of the man I was telling you about, the bastard one that came back mad.'

'Is it that Professor that Uncle was talking about yesterday?'

'Yes! His father was a landlord here, before he died.'

'Does the man even come out?'

'Out? That is trouble for us in this neighbourhood. If you go to his doorstep you are as good as dead!'

'Uncle said that if he kills, nothing will happen as he is a mad man—he'll be free

of guilt.'

'How does he live inside that place without coming out for lights?'

'Uncle said he has iron bars on his doors and windows?'

'How does uncle know *sef*? What does he eat? I think he will eat only cockroach and rats.'

The girls took furtive glances at Prof's building and when one tried to point towards it, the other one hit her on the shoulder to drop her hand.

'Stop it! Don't point.'

'What will happen if I do?'

'Nothing, just don't point to that mad man's house.'

'He could even be dead.'

'Until his dead body begins to smell, and council comes here, we can't even go near that place.'

Prof walked behind them. He listened with a little smile sneaking onto the corners of his lip, till it gave way to a small chuckle as the girls hurried away. It was at that moment that Desanya came to stand beside him. She would join him on his strolls, and they would both stand in front of the building to compare his flat to the others. His flat caught the eyes, the way one notices a missing incisor tooth on a young woman.

Prof observed the way the darkness of the flat established itself before the world around it. There were times he told Desanya of how bothered he was that the darkness encroached on the brightness of the area. Sometimes, he told her of how he considered allowing some lights into the rooms as he stood outside, but once he stepped into the house the darkness in the room enfolded him and made him lurch about like a drunkard breathing through his mouth each time, until he considered turning the lights on. Desanya left him at these times, evanescing into his thoughts the same way she came.