

**PART ONE****CHAPTER ONE****How it All Began**

It was about 2:30pm on a bright, sunny afternoon on August 13, 1999. The passengers on board flight 740 had just fastened their seat belts and the plane was about to take off from Barboura City International Airport in Boluaké, Central Africa. One passenger seemed in no haste to travel, but rather determined to settle scores with a flight attendant.

"This is unbelievable! Unbelievable! Who are you to prevent me from getting on this plane? You're lucky that I happen to be in a good mood today."

The man looked at his sparkling silver watch and adjusted the red tie he was wearing with a white shirt, dark brown suit and a pair of shiny black shoes. Each of them seemed to blend in smoothly with his dark complexion.

"Once more I am deeply sorry," the flight attendant responded, shaken. "The plane will soon be taking off. We really can't let people walk around

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right now. All passengers must return to their seats."

He looked at her from head to toe and then shook his head.

The last thing I remember hearing him say was that he had a PhD dissertation to present in two weeks and that the last thing he wanted to do was argue with anyone. Fuming, he walked slowly toward his seat, pulling along a cart filled with huge text books. The passengers murmured.

The Boeing 767 increased its speed and I kept looking through my side window to refrain from making eye contact with the frail-looking, balding white male who had taken position next to me on seat 26B. Slouching forward on his seat, his eyes bulged out and were so wide open that they almost looked as if they would pop out. And his face looked pale and dry. I didn't recall him responding when one of the flight attendants walked by saying: "Hello sir, how are you doing?" and he seemed so oblivious to everything that occurred within the plane. He didn't turn. He didn't move. He didn't utter a word...let alone cough. He just

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sat there slouching forward with his eyes bulging out.

How great therefore was my surprise— and even more so my fear— when the plane slowly began taking off and this fellow's right hand suddenly trembled as he raised it up feebly toward me. That was the first time I looked at him directly, because it seemed as if he were aiming for my neck. It was then that I realized he was trying to fasten his seat belt. Whew! How relieved I felt when he did. But then I looked at him afterward with the corner of my eye and there he was again...slouching back to his original position.

The silence that ensued was broken a few minutes later:

"Mesdames et Messieurs, good afternoon. I'm Alphonse Jean-Baptiste, your pilot on this flight. Welcome onboard flight 740 from Barbours City to Philadelphia, United States of America. We'll make a brief stop in Paris and we estimate this flight to take at least eight hours and a half. Enjoy your flight and 'merci' for choosing Air La Colombe."

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Then the man sitting next to me suddenly began shivering. His right arm and shoulder shook uncontrollably and he quickly rolled up his sleeves and proceeded to scratch himself with a fierceness that I couldn't describe in words. Obviously, something was itching him— although I had no clue what it was— or why. He slouched forward even more, bending his back with both hands placed upon his shoulders as if he were suffering from a high fever. Turning around, I realized that the passengers behind us were all focusing on the area where we sat— some whispering to each other, others simply looking on with an air of speechlessness, probably wondering what the heck was going on.

“Are you all right, sir?” asked a flight attendant, darting to the scene.

The bulging eyes and the pale-looking, powdery white face. Yep, I noticed the sudden change in her facial expression when the flight attendant saw them.

“H-h-h-h-o-t-t-c-c-o-o-f-f-e-e,” he stuttered, shaking.

Wow. So he could actually speak.

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"I'll get that for you in a minute sir, hold on," the flight attendant responded.

After the passenger had drunk his coffee, the idea of engaging him in conversation had briefly crossed my mind. But the thought of looking into his eyes was enough of a deterrent. Well, at least not until he pulled his shirt up toward his nostrils, blew his nose, cleared his throat and then spat on the floor in between our seats.

"You spat in the direction of my seat sir," I said.

"S-s-s-s-o-o-o-o-o-o-o?"

"Why didn't you go to the lavatory if you felt you needed to do that?"

Powdery face-if I may call him so, stared at me without saying a word, and this time his eyes seemed to look even bigger. His right shoulder suddenly began to tremble. What was I going to do? I had to quickly think of something that could make this fellow stop staring at me. It seemed as if he was prepared to do that until we got to our final destination and that would have made my entire

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journey uncomfortable. I had a great idea. I stopped looking at him, and then pressed my seat button so that it inclined a little bit backward. I lifted my head up as if I were looking at the sky and spread out my hands, shouting as loudly as I could:

"Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo! Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo!!"

The row of passengers seated in front of me as well as to my right, looked at me in utter disbelief.

I shouted again...louder.

"Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo! Aaaaaaaaah, Zambo!"

Powdery Face blushed. He frowned. It was then that I realized he had somehow managed to grab a newspaper from behind the seat in front of him. How in the world he was going to be composed enough to hold it with both hands...I had no clue. But this time around he wasn't the only one looking at me— everyone in the section where we sat was zooming in on us. I didn't care, I couldn't handle sitting next to that man for the next several hours.

With shivering and unstable hands, he squeezed the newspaper and tossed it to the ground, squashing it

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with his shoe. He drew close to me, and yelled furiously in my face:

"S-s-s-s-h-h-h-u-u-t-u-u-u-p-pp! L-u-u-n-n-a-a-t-t-i-i-c!"

"Spread your hands sir," I said.

"W-w-w-w-h-h-h-a-a-t-t-h-h-e-hell?" he responded, startled, with his mouth wide open.

"I said spread your hands. If we call on Zambo, the village ancestor in charge of travel, he will ensure that this plane gets to its destination safely."

Two angry-looking male and female flight attendants stopped at our seats. When the male flight attendant looked at me I saw that he was fuming with anger, for not only was he frowning, but his face looked red hot.

"Let me respectfully warn you two gentlemen," he emphasized with a deep breath, as if releasing fireballs of anger that had been mounting up inside of him— "unruly behaviour will not be tolerated on this flight. If this continues, you both shall be kicked off this plane and placed in police custody at the nearest airport. Have I made myself clear?"

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Powdery Face looked at me and then stuttering, asked if he could change his seat.

"I'm sorry Monsieur, but all our seats are currently filled," the female flight attendant responded.

With an air of resignation, the man sitting next to me bent his head and covered his face with both hands, speechless. This time the thought of turning around to look at me didn't even seem to cross his mind. I thought the drama had finally come to an end until the female flight attendant stretched her neck sideways and asked me:

"And you sir, what's your problem?"

A sense of panic got hold of me. I realized this had potential to become more serious than I thought. And even if I argued that Powdery Face was the reason for it all, the flight attendants would probably have felt more comfortable making me their scapegoat to avoid any further interaction with the strange fellow sitting beside me. I had to think of an explanation that would not only have been persuasive, but could



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have also helped defuse the situation. Bingo! I had a perfect idea.

"This is the first time I've had to travel on such an instrument that transports people high up in the sky at such a terrible speed," I pretended, emphatically. "How can you expect me to react normally when being taken so far away from my village on...on this kind of thing?"

The flight attendants looked at each other and I could see from their faces that they were trying so hard not to burst out laughing. Even Powdery Face turned around and looked at me for the first time in a while with a slight smile on his face, which enabled me to discover that he had lost a few of his front teeth.

"Don't be nervous, sir. You and your fellow passengers are in good hands. Our pilot and the entire crew have several years of experience. We want you to feel comfortable," said the male flight attendant, who in a suddenly soft-spoken tone, now seemed remarkably harmless.

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How shocking it was when his counterpart asked if she could get me some juice- as if drinking anything would have in reality helped make a person less nervous if he or she were travelling on a plane for their first time.

Proceeding with my strategy, I didn't respond for several seconds but rather sat still with my eyes and mouth wide open, spreading out both hands and looking up toward the luggage compartment.

"Orange...juice," I answered, as if having given it some thought.

The female flight attendant took a deep, audible breath of relief while her partner shook his head and said:

"We'll get that for you, sir." Then he added, "By the way, our apologies. We realize we didn't introduce ourselves to you both. I'm Christophe and this is Nadia."

After that, there was zero interaction between Powdery Face and me. He grabbed a set of headphones from the seat in front of him, put them on and pressed a button so that his seat inclined backward.

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He looked at me one last time, shook his head, crossed his feet and closed his eyes.

The following morning, our plane landed at Paris Charles de Gaulle Airport. I woke up to the sight of flight attendants making rounds while picking up trays of leftover food. Wait a minute. Had I fallen into such a deep sleep that I didn't hear anyone asking me if I wanted a croissant for breakfast? But then I looked down and saw that my tray was empty, hence I must have eaten before I dozed off. Getting up hastily from his seat and grabbing a bag from the luggage compartment with his unstable right hand, Powdery Face scurried out of the plane without looking behind him.

"Excuse me, how long is the flight from Paris to Philadelphia?" I asked Nadia, who happened to walk by.

"Another nine to ten hours," she responded.

"My goodness! I would like to think Zambo has other things to do besides sitting around listening to me screaming his name for another nine hours!"

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"Please don't start, sir."

More passengers came in and took their seats. Several minutes later, the plane took off from Charles de Gaulle Airport.

We arrived at Philadelphia International Airport a few hours after midday (US time). As the plane drew closer to the runway area, the pilot, Alphonse Jean-Baptiste, said:

"Mesdames et Messieurs, we have begun our descent toward Philadelphia International Airport. Please remain seated and keep your seatbelts fastened. We hope you had a great flight and that you won't hesitate to fly with Air La Colombe next time."

The passengers fastened their seatbelts and my heart beat with a mixture of excitement and uncertainty as I looked through my window seat. A journey that started to seem endless had now come to an end. The screeching sound of the landing plane was almost drowned in a sea of applause.

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Moments later, at the interior of the airport, I waited in line behind several travelers to have my passport examined by Philadelphia immigration and customs officers dressed in black trousers, short-sleeved white shirts and golden pins attached to their shirt pockets. One of them stood in front of us and spoke from a microphone:

"All travelers coming in from Europe are immediately advised to take off their shoes. You may not wear your shoes until you reach the exterior of the airport. Thank you."

The travelers grumbled and murmured. Young and old, tall and short, slender and heavy-set, I saw people taking off their shoes, holding them in one hand and pulling their luggage with the other.

I tapped the gentleman standing in front of me on the shoulder to ask him why travelers coming in from certain parts of the world were being told to take off their shoes. From the way he spoke, he sounded like an English or Irish man:

"What world you live in, boy? These clowns think we might be carrying Mad Cow Disease in our shoes!"

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I then recalled how frequently I came across articles in some of my home country's local newspapers and watched reports on local TV stations about beef being banned from the United Kingdom on a consistent basis. But what did that have to do with anyone's shoes? Were the customs agents implying that anyone who had walked on European soil was potentially bringing Mad Cow Disease into Philadelphia or more specifically, into the United States?

"Your travel records state that you were on a transit flight from Paris to Philadelphia. Why didn't you take off your shoes?" asked the customs agent who examined my passport.

"I stayed within the plane throughout my flight, sir. I don't understand why you are asking me to take off my shoes," I explained.

"I don't care. Take off your shoes."

His unwillingness to consider my explanation bothered me.

"I said I didn't leave the plane, sir. Therefore with all due respect, I refuse to take off my shoes."

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"Listen, don't waste my time! I got bigger fish to fry, you got me? You wanna come into my country? You play by my rules! Got it?"

People around us had now begun noticing what was going on, so I thought it was best for me to stay out of trouble. I reluctantly took off my shoes and another customs agent examined the contents of my suitcase and pulled out two plastic packets of powdery spices that were tucked underneath my clothes. He held them up with both hands.

"What are these?"

"They are traditional spices from my country. The one in your left hand is called Egusi; the one on your right is called Njangsang."

The customs agent placed the spices on a wooden table and tore them up slightly with a pocket knife;

"Hum...hum...hum...Igwasa...njinseng..." he said, sniffing them.

"No, no, no. I said Egusi and Njangsang."

He paused for a minute, looking at me while placing both hands on his waist as if overwhelmed by the names of the spices.

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"Yeah, right. Who gives a damn anyway?" he continued.

The customs agent went through my suitcase again and pulled out something wrapped in brown paper that had been sealed with tape. He cut the tape off with his knife and opened up the brown paper.

"And what the hell," he said, holding out its contents before me, "is this?" "Some kinda beef jerky or something?"

"Yes. We call it soya."

"I'm sorry sir, but I can't let you bring that into the United States."

He returned the spices to me and confiscated the beef jerky. After that he retreated into a nearby office with a glass window, and a different customs agent came forward and proceeded with the inspection process.

I closed my suitcase and headed toward the exterior of the airport. How shocked I was to look through the glass window and notice the previous customs agent who had examined my personal belongings sitting comfortably and eating the beef jerky he had seized



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from me. On my way out of the control perimeter, I knocked on the glass window and put my face close to it, so that our eyes met with each other. The agent trembled and with my eyes wide open, I shouted:

“Mad Cow Disease! Mad Cow Disease!”

The agent spat out the beef jerky.

Outside the airport, I looked with much curiosity at the cars racing down the highway at incredible speed. I wasn't sure who could help me get to my destination, but I noticed there were at least three yellow cars parked at the front. I took out the little white sheet of paper that was inside my pocket and which read: “Rodeoville University.” Just then, a short black male with a thick beard wearing a long, brown garment approached me. He had on a pair of low white shoes and a blue, oval-shaped hat over his head. He smiled but I was a bit shaken upon noticing that each of his front teeth were a mixture of sparkling silver and gold and that they shone underneath the rays of the sun.

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"What's going on, young buck? Seems like you're looking for something. What you need? A cab?"

"Yes, please. I need someone to drop me at..." I paused to take out the sheet of paper again. Reading from it, I continued, "856 Linden Avenue. I'm going to Rodeoville University."

"Cool. I could take you there. Nice outfit. Look like you're royalty or something. Where are you from, man? What's your name?"

"My name is John Malinke. I'm from the Republic of Boluakè, Central Africa."

"That's cool man," the short fellow responded, shaking my hand. "I'm Abdul. Follow me. I parked just a block away."

Abdul opened the trunk of his cab and helped me put my luggage in. I sat in the back seat and before I knew it, we hit the road. One of the first things that struck me was how organized the motorists were— or at least seemed to be— compared to the chaos that often took place on the major streets of my home country's capital city, where road rules were often deliberately ignored and even the most gentle drivers

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became forced over time to develop aggressive and defensive mechanisms behind the wheel in order to survive.

Moments later, the cab driver stopped rather abruptly in an isolated street corner that seemed to lead toward an alley. With his right foot, Abdul pressed hard on his brake pedal, making the car swerve around twice. Screeching, it stopped in front of what looked like an abandoned building, and from where I sat, I could see that the street was riddled with trash and broken bottles.

"Gosh! Those damn breaks are really messed up!" he exclaimed.

He turned around.

"I'm sorry. I don't think I could take you any further," he continued.

I couldn't believe what was happening. Was this a bad dream or what? I was speechless.

"But sir, why did you pick me up in this cab knowing that its brakes were not in good shape?"

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With a distant, unemotional look in his eyes, Abdul responded, "Well, things happen. You owe me 25 dollars."

"25 dollars? How can I pay you 25 dollars when you haven't even taken me anywhere close to my destination?"

Just then, a white male wearing a black hooded sweatshirt emerged from the alley. I could only see his chin and part of his nose because he had pulled the hood down so that it covered most of his face. He walked very fast. And he seemed angry. Very angry.

My heart raced.

"Who is he?" I asked in panic, pointing at him.

The white male pulled out a gun, rushed toward the back seat and opened the door. He pulled me out, slammed the door and pointed the gun at me. All I could see were his lips moving when he shouted:

"Welcome to Philly, buddy! Gimme all your money! Now!"

I trembled. I couldn't believe what was happening. I put my hands up while Abdul and the man frisked me. Before I could think to reach into my left pocket and

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pull out my wallet, they had done that already. My heart beat fast because all I had within it was 30 dollars and a national ID card from my home country. I had no clue how those two men would react, given how merciless people like them tend to be.

"Dude! All you got's 30 freaking bucks? Can't you do better than that?" the white male threatened.

Hearing those words terrified me even more.

"This...This...is...is...all...all I have," were the few words I could squeeze out of my mouth.

Continuing to hold me down at gun point, the white male turned to Abdul, his counterpart in crime, who nodded. With ferocity, Abdul took out the 30 dollars and tossed my wallet aside. Then the white male told me to turn around with my hands up and my back facing them. I felt as if my heart would melt.

"Don't move. You turn around pal, I'ma shoot ya," said the white male.

I heard the sound of something heavy being thrown to the ground, two doors slamming in haste and the sound of a car backing up in full speed. I was confident it had to be Abdul and his accomplice

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getting away but I was too overcome by a mixture of shock and panic to risk turning around. I remained standing there with my hands up until I heard a dog barking a few steps behind me. With both hands still in the air, I turned around slowly and when I saw the little brown dog rummaging through one of the trash cans, I bent down, picked up my wallet and pulled my suitcase along the deserted street.

My name is John Malinke. In the spring of 1999, my life took an unexpected turn. I had just completed my last semester in high school and was waiting for the results of my final exams (An Examination called the General Certificate of Education) to be announced on state radio. Nothing in the world would have suggested to me that anything extraordinary was going to take place on that April evening when my father, according to his daily routine, sat on the brown leather sofa in our living room. It was one of his favourite places in our home, decorated with a red carpet in the middle of which stood a big wooden

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table covered with a long, red cloth made out of a flowery design. The TV set was turned off and he listened to the day's news from the huge stereo system. Minutes later, an announcer interrupted the newscast that had been in progress.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the results of this year's successful candidates at the Advanced Level General Certificate of Education Exam have just been released across the nation. We will begin this moment broadcasting those for the Government Central High School in Barbours City."

"Sarah! Quick!" he shouted, calling Mum. "We are moments away from finding out John's results. I hope that boy made it...otherwise you know what a disgrace that would be to this family," he continued, getting up from his seat.

Mum rushed out of their bedroom to join Dad in the living room. The announcer began:

"Center number 043: Government High School, Barbours City. Passed in five subjects..."

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"Let's just hope and pray his name comes up at least within the three and two subject category..." Dad said, walking in circles around the living room.

The announcer proceeded:

"Passed in four subjects..."

"Oh my God...oh my God..." went Mum, sitting with both hands firmly crossed, as if in prayer.

The announcer got to the three subject category and pressed on.

"Kenneth Ikini-Geography: B; History: C; Economics: C."

My parents looked at each other.

"Wasn't that John's friend Kenneth?" Dad asked.

"Kenneth Ikini? Yes, yes...you're right. They just said he had three papers."

"And now...the last category for successful candidates in this examination. Passed in two subjects..." the announcer continued.

Mum and Dad held each other's hands, their heads bowed down.

The announcer read through a few more names and then said:



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"John Malinke-French: B; History: C."

Mum and Dad jumped and screamed.

"I haven't seen that boy since midday. Where did he disappear to? Where is he? Where is he?" Dad asked.

"I think he's at the neighbourhood stadium watching a tournament."

"Get him! Get him!" he jumped. "We have to celebrate."

Running, Mum pushed through the green gates that stood at the entrance to the residence.

Meanwhile with my arms folded, I stood in the sidelines of a soccer field just a few blocks away from our home, watching my neighbourhood peers play. It was one of those interesting days when teenagers, middle-aged men and even a few supposedly elderly people- well, at least those not older than 45 years old- came out to play. My head moved from left to right as I watched the ball being kicked from one direction of the field to another. We lived in a neighbourhood called Mapula and it had progressively become trendier over time, with at least a major café, restaurant or bar on almost every block. Early

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that evening, the Mapula soccer team was playing against its counterparts from Lakanuwa, a neighbourhood a couple of miles away. Both teams had been rivals in the sport for many years in Barboura, the capital city.

From a distance, I noticed Mum running toward me with her arms spread out.

With a heavy breath of excitement, she said:

"John, your results have just been broadcast on state radio. You passed, son! You passed!" she exclaimed, giving me a tight hug. Words couldn't describe how excited I felt. I had officially graduated from high school. Although I briefly pondered what the next step would be, the happiness of that moment temporarily allayed those concerns.

The following night, and much to my surprise, a multitude of family friends and acquaintances showed up at our home to supposedly congratulate me. It felt as if they had rather come to congratulate one of us for an appointment or to join us in celebrating an extremely important event. I mean, was it such a big deal that a high school senior did well in his end of

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year exams? If that many people were showing up for this, what would the vibe have been like at our home in case I hadn't made it? I probably wouldn't have had the courage to step out of the house and probably less than half the number of those who were currently proceeding in and out of the front door would have stopped by to console me.

Some of them were people I hadn't seen in years, although they lived in the same city. Others came all the way from Calonari, our village. We had set the living room up in anticipation of guests, but in all honesty I didn't imagine seeing that many people. Our living room table was filled with bottles of beer, plates of potato chips, pots of rice and chicken stew and trays of cookies. Among them was an unexpected guest. He was barely five feet tall, thin, and always wore shirts too big for his size. His feet stood lightly on the ground and he walked clumsily, his feather-weight stature making him seem like one who could easily be blown away by wind. Neither the villagers nor those who lived in Barboura city knew his name. Thus, throughout generations, they called

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him Mr. Nobody. No one liked to hear him speak because his voice was said to be extremely hoarse. He seldom spoke, but when he did, everyone knew that it was him. Mr. Nobody had supposedly been living in isolation in a small brick house in Calonari since the late 60's. While the villagers grew old and passed away over time, Mr. Nobody for some reason kept on looking younger each year. He would have wrinkles all over his face for several months and then in ensuing years, they would mysteriously disappear, leaving it looking as smooth and clear as that of an infant. I was quite shaken upon noticing from afar that he was walking toward me. What could he possibly want to say to me?

"You did very well young man," he said, with his hoarse voice.

"Thank...thank you very much Mr. Nobo...I mean, sir," I responded.

With a sarcastic half smile, he returned to the dining room table and took a plate, cutlery and served himself. From watching him, the rumour about his voice came to my mind. It was said that from an

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early age, he had developed the strange habit of drinking hot palm oil from his parents' kitchen when they weren't home. One day after drinking half a bottle of flaming oil, he tried to speak to his parents but realized that he had lost his voice. He remained speechless for two days. His parents, worn down by concern, took him to see a physician in Barbours city one day and in the process their son suddenly regained his voice after a loud, cracking cough. Since then, his voice was never the same again and it made even his own parents shiver.

So there he stood, Mr. Nobody, loading up his plate with five pieces of chicken when others took two, and seven pieces of fried plantain when others took three or less. As he walked around with a plate covered with mounds of food, the guests looked at him and whispered to each other. Then one of them, Mr. Aké, Dad's friend, had the guts to confront him.

"Can't you show some respect? How can you load up your plate as if this food was prepared for you alone? Think of others!"

A dreadful silence took over the room.

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Wrathful, Mr. Nobody put down his plate. He turned to Mr. Aké, who at 5'11 stood like a giant before him, and his words sounded simple enough:

"You will see," he said.

In a haste, he walked out of the living room, while two guests ran behind, pleading with him to return.

The guests pulled Mr. Aké behind and told him what a mistake he had made. Mr. Aké shrugged his shoulders. It was then that they told him the story of Mr. Effa.

Years ago, a man named Mr. Effa challenged Mr. Nobody in the village of Calonari. He stood outside his house, grabbed Mr. Nobody and threw him to the ground when the latter was getting ready to go to a nearby river to wash his clothes.

"Why are people so scared of you in this village?" asked Mr. Effa, shoving him.

Mr. Nobody fell on the dusty, stony road and dirtied his sparkling white shirt. As he lay on the ground, Mr. Effa cracked up and shouted at the villagers walking by:

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"You see, I told you that this man is not invincible."

Mr. Nobody got up and dusted his shirt. Mr. Effa stood in front of him, putting his clenched fists beside his waist.

"You will roam around this country for the rest of your life and never find peace," said an angry Mr. Nobody, his voice sounding even hoarser. "You will never be able to sit in one spot for more than five minutes. Because of that, people will offer you food and you will refuse to eat. They will give you water, but you won't even be able to drink."

"What?" Mr. Effa laughed, mockingly.

Everything seemed normal with Mr. Effa until one fateful evening when he sat on a rocking chair in front of his Calonari home. Five minutes later, he felt as if he was being pricked by a sharp pair of needles.

"Heyyyyyyyyy!!!" he screamed, jumping away from his chair.

"Lucas, are you all right?" asked his wife Atina, from inside their house.

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"I'm fine. I'm fine..." he responded, looking at the chair, wondering if he should attempt to sit down again.

Atina began noticing that Lucas couldn't sit still at lunch or dinner. He kept swaying from left to right on his chair and came up with a million excuses to leave the dining table and go to the kitchen to get additional spices, more water, more food, anything that could prevent him from having to jump off the table when it was close to five minutes. In the process and much to Atina's surprise, he suddenly developed a preference for standing while eating. Nor could he sleep at night because he kept rolling, twisting and turning to the point where he left their room and ended up in the living room on most nights.

"I forgot there's a program on TV that I would like to watch," he'd say, or:

"I feel as if I need to eat and drink something. Let me quickly grab some cookies and a bit of water from the kitchen. I won't be there for long, you don't have to come with me."



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Mr. Effa's wife became very worried. She wept for her husband every afternoon when it dawned on her what Mr. Nobody had done. Over and over, she knocked on the front door of Mr. Nobody's isolated home. He was always there but he never answered. His living room was consistently dark and the curtains were always drawn so that no one could peep inside. She pleaded with him in writing and even slid notes under his door, but he didn't respond either. Besides, Atina was too embarrassed to tell her husband she knew what had happened to him.

It didn't take long for word of Lucas Effa's condition to spread around the village. On those few occasions when he tried to accompany his wife on errands, the villagers kept whispering to each other and pointing at him. Children mocked him and it was custom for people to ask Lucas, on those very few moments when he ventured outside his home:

"Mr. Effa, are you all right? Mr. Effa, are you all right?" as if they didn't know the answer.

Atina couldn't take it anymore and the two soon parted ways. In an attempt to escape his woes, Lucas

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somehow managed to get a job in Barboura city as an accountant at the ministry of finance. Yet, he couldn't sit still. Every five minutes, he left his desk to complete one unnecessary task after another. Civil servants who travelled from out of town to follow up on files were often frustrated and disappointed to realize that Mr. Effa was seldom ever at his desk.

"Where is Mr. Effa?" they would ask.

Often, responses varied from:

"We saw him sitting here just about three minutes ago," his co-workers would respond, or:

"He said he was going outside for 10 minutes to get some fresh air. It's been over 45 minutes since he left. We have no idea where he went," others would say.

And so files kept piling up on Mr. Effa's desk and there was just no way for his absence to go unnoticed. Consequently, he lost his job and since then, began roaming all over the cities of Boluaké.

Such was the fate the guests at our residence that night feared might happen to Mr. Aké, who to this day

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has been dropping off baskets of fruit and vegetables in front of Mr. Nobody's house, hoping to receive his forgiveness.

After the guests had left, I sat with my parents in the living room. Dad rubbed his hands.

"Son, as you know, your mother and I have worked extremely hard for everything we have. It didn't fall from the sky. You have just made an important step in your life— a transition from high school to college."

Tightening the scarf she wore on her head, my mother added: "We both want what is best for you and that includes getting a university education."

She paused a little bit and then continued:

"John, we would like you to go to college in the United States of America."

I stood with my arms folded, quite unable to believe my ears. I had mixed feelings. College in America sounded interesting...exciting, actually. Yet I wasn't sure what to expect from such a move. Would I be able to survive in a country with such an entirely

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different culture and so far away from home? Who was going to take care of my parents while they grew older as the years went by? Besides, at almost 26 years of age and after having had to put a hold on my education for several years due to family circumstances beyond my control, I probably would be getting into college a lot older than most of my American classmates. After my father lost his job at the ministry of agriculture, I had spent four years out of school helping my parents develop a plantation that today helps provide the bulk of their income. Whenever I thought about those four years I spent away from the classroom setting, a sense of lost time— and of former classmates who probably already graduated from college— took hold of me. Yet in retrospect, it wasn't lost time at all. It was for a worthy cause and the hard work I put in with my parents during all those years had finally paid off.

I looked down at the carpet in deep thought for a few seconds, gently tapping my right foot. My eyes met with my parents', who were sitting in front of me

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and had been watching me silently. I asked a single question:

"Mum and Dad, given the sacrifices both of you have already made so far to pay for my education here at home...won't it be better if I went to a university in one of the country's many states? I'm worried that pursuing an education program abroad may cause you an even greater financial burden."

My parents looked at each other. My Dad picked up a glass of water from the side table nearby and began to think.

"Well...you need to see this as an opportunity, John..." Mum said. "An opportunity to learn about other people and cultures, improve on your skills and develop new talents that may be beneficial to you when you return home- or wherever you may choose to be."

There was silence in the living room for a few minutes, after which Dad added:

"We've scheduled for you to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) in about two weeks.

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After that, Uncle Robert will help you submit applications to a number of American universities."

Uncle Robert, Dad's younger brother, worked at the American Embassy and was quite familiar with the visa application process.

I thanked my parents sincerely, but at that time it all seemed like a dream. Was this really happening? Was I going to be embarking upon one of the most important journeys of my life within just a couple of months? I wasn't sure how everything was going to play out.

A week and a half went by a lot sooner than I expected. During that period, I spent at least two hours a day revising sentence construction, grammar, the past and present tenses, verbs and adverbs, the passive and active voices, and you name it. My main source of practice was "How to Ace Your TOEFL," which Uncle Robert had dropped off at home about two days after my final exam results had been broadcast on the radio. After each practice test, I reviewed the

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featured answers at the back of the book and realized that they corresponded with mine at least 90 percent of the time. Hence, I felt quite hopeful that I would do well on the test. I loved to write and Composition, Essay-Writing and Literature were among my favourite courses.

On the day of the test, my parents gave me much encouragement.

"Don't be nervous because all the questions they will ask you shall be similar to the ones you came across on your practice tests," Dad said.

"We know you'll do well John, don't be worried," Mum said.

Just then, the door swung open and Uncle Robert walked in.

"Is the young man ready?" he asked.

"I am, Uncle," I responded, turning.

Uncle Robert hugged my parents and then said:

"All right, let us go and take care of business."

We got into Uncle Robert's white pickup truck. He revved up the engine, put in a cassette tape and

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increased the volume. Then he began to cruise at an unbelievably high speed.

"Uncle Robert, please slow down."

He looked at me with his eyes wide open as if he couldn't believe what he heard.

"What? Slow down?" he laughed. "Your appointment is at 11:30am. It's 10:48. Depending on whether or not we beat traffic, you might be late for this thing. You know how people drive in this town. You can't do gentleman driving in this place and survive."

With those words, he accelerated again, stubbornly. I too couldn't resist laughing. That was Uncle Robert. As he liked to say, he was one of the very few men I knew of in our city and probably even in the entire country that began braiding his hair long before it was considered en mode for men to do so. When he was in his twenties and early thirties, he said, men who wore corn rows— the look he had been sporting almost since I knew him— were often perceived as rebellious and regularly judged and stereotyped in all sorts of unimaginable ways.



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Uncle Robert parked his car outside the American cultural center.

"Good luck. Don't panic," he said, stretching his head through the driver seat window.

"Room 68? Go straight down the hallway. It will be on your right," said a lady, when I walked in and asked for directions to the room where the test was scheduled to take place.

I realized upon entering Room 68 that most seats, except for two, had been filled.

"John Malinke? You made it just on time," said the examiner, a white male casually dressed in a pair of jeans and a brown Polo shirt as he looked at my identity card and then seconds later, at his watch.

He told me to sit on one of the unoccupied seats and then began distributing sheets of paper and pencils to each of us.

"All right peeps, its 11:35. Before we proceed, I must caution you. You got questions? Raise your hand and I'll come up to your desk. No talking, no whispering. Failure to abide by the rules will cause

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you to be sent out of class...in which case you're gonna have to reschedule your test. You may begin."

In perfect silence my peers and I began taking the test. There were sentence completion questions, a reading comprehension section, and other parts that tested grammatical abilities, such as our knowledge of verbs, adjectives, nouns and adverbs. We had to use our pencils to colour the blank circle beside the letter corresponding to the right answer. For example, if the correct answer in a given question was "A," we would use our pencils to colour the blank circle next to it until it turned black. If the correct answer was "C," we would do the same thing. There were also "True" and "False" questions that equally required us to follow the same procedure.

Several minutes later when we were all deeply rooted in our test, the door slowly swung open. Our examiner got up from his seat in front of the class and walked toward the door. The person who came in was speaking to him in a very low voice, so we couldn't discern what he was saying. But we all heard our examiner say:

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"I'm sorry sir, but I can't let you in. The test is already in progress. You were supposed to get here before 11:30am. It's 11:55. You're being a distraction right now. You'll have to reschedule your test. Sorry. You can't come in."

With those words, our examiner gently shut the door.

Almost half an hour into the test, the majority of my fellow examinees got up from their seats and walked up to the front to turn in their papers to the examiner. They got up one after the other, one after the other.

"Thank you. Thanks," the examiner kept saying.

Before I knew it, there were only three of us left in the classroom and the number soon went down to two. I felt a little odd. If so many students were leaving the class within such a short period of time, it may have implied that the test was relatively easy to them. I had answered most of the questions, I thought. I should not have to accept to be the last person to leave. I didn't want the examiner to think that I was less prepared in comparison to the other examinees. Plus, he kept looking at his watch almost

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every 15 minutes. Perhaps he had some place to go. I stood up quickly and gave the examiner my paper, so as not to be left behind by the only other student who was sitting on the last desk in the back of the room.

It was finally over and I was excited, although that was the first time I had taken a test whose answers were going to be scanned and graded by a machine rather than a human being. It was quite impressive how the Americans kept coming up with all sorts of new technology. Outside, I met Uncle Robert leaning on the right passenger door of his car.

"So how was it?" he asked, eagerly.

"I think I did well, Uncle. I hope to get a good score."

"That's the way to go! Give me a high five!" he exclaimed, raising his right hand.

As we rode in silence for a couple minutes, a dreadful thought came to my mind. I realized that while in a haste to leave the classroom, I forgot to provide answers to the sixty questions left on the back sheet of my exam. Obviously, the grading machine

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was going to interpret each of them as "incorrect" answers.

When I returned home, my parents asked me how the test went. I paused for several seconds to think about what to say.

"I think it went quite well," I said, attempting to conceal my emotions.

"Are you sure? You seemed quite hesitant to respond," Mum said.

"No, no. Don't worry at all, Mum. I think I did well," I reaffirmed.

"Have confidence," Dad said, in between drinking a glass of beer. "The boy will do well."

I didn't want my parents to be worried, yet I couldn't take off the mask of self-confidence from my face until I had retreated into the privacy of my room. While there, I lay on my bed and wondered in silence if such a silly mistake was sufficient enough to mess up the plans my parents had for me.

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Two weeks had gone by. It was a Saturday afternoon and there I was lying on my bed when I heard a knock on my bedroom door. It was Dad and he held some envelopes in his hand. Whenever I saw that, I knew it implied that I had some mail.

"This is for you," he said, handing me an envelope. "It says Test of English as a Foreign Language. Your results must be out."

With those words, he shut the door. My heart beat fast as I opened the envelope. I already had a sense of what my results would be. They couldn't be good. I remembered that I forgot to answer a bunch of questions on the last page which by the way seemed to constitute the bulk of the exam in terms of points and also the number of questions.

"Shraaaaak!" went the envelope, as I ripped it open. I took out the sheet of paper and quickly glanced through it until I had reached the bottom, where my paper-based test score was typed in bold. It read "399," a score significantly lower than the minimum required by most universities.

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This had potential to turn everything upside down. What was I going to tell my parents, Uncle Robert and other relatives? If I said that my score was acceptable, the truth would eventually come out when I would get turned down by American universities. If I pursued that option, I would come across as dishonest. It was better to tell the truth, as painful as I knew it would be, than to act as if everything was all right.

I heard another knock on the door and I panicked, thinking that the moment of truth had come much sooner than I expected, with one or both of my parents possibly showing up to hear the good news about my results.

"Yes?" I answered.

The door opened.

"John, your friend Kenneth is in the living room. He wants to see you," Mum said.

I felt instantly relieved.

I peeped into the living room. There was no one sitting there. I tiptoed past it so that my steps and the noise of my sandals won't cause any unwanted

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attention. I wasn't ready to discuss my test scores with anyone at that moment. I slowly turned the door handle and just when I thought I had successfully made it outside, Mum and I ran into each other on the front porch.

"Your father says you've received your test scores. Is that true?"

"Yes."

"How did you—"

"The prince of the city!" yelled Kenneth, coming up a few steps behind her.

Kenneth often showed up at the worst possible times and was undisputedly one of the most talkative people I knew. Many times, if I didn't come up with creative ideas to interrupt his conversations, he could go on and on for almost two and a half hours. But at that moment his presence was welcome. Before he emerged, my heart was beating fast like someone who had just finished running a marathon.

Mum stared straight into my eyes and smiled, then went into the house. I could perceive she probably sensed the degree of relief that I felt from



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Kenneth's sudden interruption. The one thing I was certain about was that since she didn't get an answer to her question, she probably wasn't going to bring up the topic again for the remainder of the day.

Kenneth was wearing a pair of sparkling white tennis shoes and a white long-sleeved shirt that looked fairly new. He wore a golden chain on his neck and a pair of white glasses so big they looked like the goggles landscapers wore to protect their eyes while mowing lawns. His face— from his forehead down to his cheeks— was riddled with pimples. Kenneth had a humpback and in terms of height, he barely attained five feet. Yet despite that, in his vanity he had a tendency to bend his back when he walked, and his critics often said he did that on purpose to make himself feel significantly more important than he was.

"I've told you not to call me prince of the city," I said.

He laughed and then looked at my sandals.

"Boy, what's wrong with you? Every time I come to your house, you're always with those sandals. Don't

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you have better taste?" he asked, pointing at them.

"I know mine are more expensive than yours but I mean..."

He paused for a moment and I watched him adjust his huge glasses that had almost begun slanting to the side of his face. Kenneth and I left the compound and went out through the gate. When we got to the street, he said:

"Prince of the city, this town is no longer safe—so many rascals are operating on the street corners—especially at night. I don't walk alone as much as I used to. Things are tough. I had to hire a driver," Kenneth said, pointing at a pickup truck parked just several feet away from our house. A man sitting at the driver's seat waved at us. I guessed he probably suspected Kenneth was talking about him and it must have made him feel uncomfortable. I wondered why he needed someone to bring him in a car when he lived just a few blocks away from us."

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"I've told you to stop calling me prince of the city," I reiterated. "How is Emelda? Have you seen her lately?" I asked.

He looked behind us and took a quick glance into the living room as if to ensure no one was sitting there. Then he told us to walk toward the gate, which was halfway open.

"I saw Emelda today," he whispered. "She wants to see you tomorrow afternoon around midday. She says she wants to talk to you about something very important."

Something very important-What could that possibly be about? I wondered in silence.

"Would her parents be home by then? You know the rule. Unless you're a potential fiancé, you don't show up at a woman's home when she still lives with her parents. It's disrespectful," I said.

"Ha, ha, ha," Kenneth laughed. Then he suddenly looked serious. "Slow down. If she's asking you to show up at midday it implies it is safe for you to do so. Don't you trust me? Why would I want to put you on the firing line?"

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He looked at his watch.

"I should be leaving now. Remember. 12 p.m. tomorrow," he continued, as he made his way through the gate.

The driver in the pickup truck turned on the engine.

"Kenneth, wait! I yelled."

He turned around.

"Do you have any idea what it might be about?"

He adjusted his glasses, reached into his right pocket and took out several coins wrapped in a white plastic bag. I guessed he planned to use them to pay the man who dropped him off. Why in the world he chose to do so at that moment...I had absolutely no clue.

"I can't help you with that," he replied. "I don't get into people's affairs. That's between the two of you. I'll know after you meet her. Good luck! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Kenneth opened the door and sat in the back seat of the pickup truck, the pressure of his humpback making him slouch forward in a strange way, as if he were both bending down and sitting at the same time.

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I thought it would have been better and much more comfortable if he sat at the front next to the driver, but I guessed personal comfort wasn't among his priorities at that moment. He waved at me, the driver made a U-turn and then the car headed up the block.

Later that evening, I helped my parents set the table, dish the food and carry it out of the kitchen. It was one of my favourite meals- rice and peas with spicy brown stew chicken. I just loved to chop up the onions in little bits, cut the tomatoes and sauté them in olive oil and then toss in some minced garlic, sprinkle some black pepper and stir in the ingredients. Upon doing that, it often smelled so good in the kitchen that Mum would tease me saying, "Did you ever think about opening up a small restaurant?"

Several minutes in the middle of dinner, we switched from the cable channel we had previously been watching and turned on our national TV station, where the news anchor was reading a summary of the day's

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top stories. That particular journalist's use of the tenses was so bad that each time he appeared on TV, Dad squinted and increased the volume to figure out what he was saying.

"What??" went Dad. "I don't understand why they allow a man who speaks such horrible English- to present the news on national television. Instead of saying the player did it to boost his ego, the clown just said: 'the player did it to massage his ego'. Horrible! Horrible! The words 'massage' and 'boost' don't have anything in common," he shook his head.

The next topic was about Kenneth and whether I had any idea what he planned to do with regards to going to college. I said I didn't and at that point I was getting a bit nervous because I felt the conversation could possibly inch toward an inquiry about my scores on the Test of English as a Foreign Language.

Then the phone rang.

"Get the phone John," Mum said.

Motivated by my reluctance to talk about my scores, I dashed off to the living room to pick up the phone.

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It was Mr. Lawrence, an old friend of Dad's. He wanted to say hello to my parents. At the time he called, we had pretty much finished eating, so Mum let me begin clearing the table. I put the leftover food in plastic containers and then into the fridge. After that I gathered the plates and cutlery and took them to the kitchen and began doing the dishes.

After their phone conversation, Mum and Dad sat in the living room watching TV. While I continued doing the dishes, I discerned that at some point, someone was going to have to bring up the issue of my test scores. It would be better if that suspense were over sooner rather than later. My scores at the test weren't good enough by most American standards and here were my parents hoping that an American university would take me in. What if that didn't happen? What would be the next plan? Did they have another plan? Even if they did, their primary hope—their first choice was probably that it would be a university in that part of the world. How would they feel to learn about this? How were they going to react?

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"John! Come here for a minute please," Dad called from the living room.

Boom! Bingo! Bang! What could that be about? A flurry of thoughts rushed through my mind. I had an idea—a good idea as a matter of fact. I didn't want to think about it any further. I simply had to get it off my chest and as quickly as possible, for the moment seemed to have come much sooner than I expected. My hands were still wet when I came out of the kitchen.

"Sit down," Dad said.

I took a seat.

He twisted and untwisted his arms. Mum had a blank stare in her eyes but I could sense that they were nervous and worried about something. Dad sighed and then began:

"An envelope addressed to you came in this afternoon upon which the word TOEFL was written. I suspected it had something to do with the results of your test. We have been trying to find out its contents but I have the impression that there is



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something you should share with us that you're not doing. Is that correct?"

Dad picked up the remote and turned down the volume of the TV set.

There was silence as the three of us looked at each other.

"Well," I said with a slight tremble in my voice, "I have received my scores. They are below average. Not good enough for acceptance at most credible American universities. My score was 339."

Mum and Dad looked at each other. I looked down at the carpet for a couple of seconds. I continued:

"I was quite nervous when I took the exam. I ... I think I rushed through it because many people taking the test left the room before me. I felt bad about being the only one left inside. So while rushing, I forgot to answer many questions at the back of my sheet and their scanning machine marked each of the unanswered questions as incorrect."

Dad turned off the TV. He bent his head and buried his face in both hands. I also noticed the expression of concern in Mum's face. Dad got up from his seat

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and stood in front of me. Staring straight into my eyes, he put his hand on my shoulder and said:

"Son, how can you make such a foolish mistake?" he asked, his voice reflecting a combination of concern and disappointment. "When you take such an important test- and not just this one- any test in the future..you don't rush out of the room because others are leaving! You hear that?"

I nodded my head in agreement.

He continued: "Just because they left the exam center before you does not mean that they wrote the test with confidence. You may be surprised that those same people were leaving the room for the same reason as you- the silly fear of being the only ones left behind!"

Dad folded his arms and looked down at the carpet, then stood up and began pacing back and forth in short circles around the living room. Mum got up from her seat as well.

He looked at me and said: "But don't let this by any means discourage you. You have come this far, you can't afford to give up in the middle of it all.

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Because you don't have much time, we have no choice but to send your test scores to the various schools just as they are."

He scratched his head and proceeded: "The Malinke family is a family of fighters, not quitters. We hope that at least one out of all the universities you applied to would give you a chance— the benefit of doubt— in spite of your TOEFL scores. Your mother and I have never doubted your dedication to education. Your scores from just a few months ago at the General Certificate of Education exam provide enough evidence to attest to that fact. So keep your head up and continue to walk with confidence! And even if this path is obstructed, another one will open up in due time."

With those comforting words my parents gave me a hug. Mum looked at the clock on the living room wall.

"Jacob, it's almost 11 p.m.," she said to Dad.

"Already? Time went by so fast tonight," he responded. "All right, son. Courage..." he said, patting me on the back.

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They both wished me a good night and left the living room to go to bed. I turned off the kitchen light and slightly opened up one of the living room curtains to ensure that the security light at the front porch had been turned on. It was. I felt relieved by my parents' words of encouragement but I surmised that on the inside, they were still worried-worried because my TOEFL scores had now created an atmosphere of uncertainty.

I turned off the light in the living room and began walking toward my bedroom to go to sleep. On the way, I heard Dad say from their room:

"You see how these people make things so difficult for Africans? What are the odds that an African child who grew up in a learning environment where only teachers and school administrators used computers and typewriters -and who hand-wrote all of his tests and assignments- could comprehend how to take such a standardized test? How could he possibly feel comfortable taking such a test? The competition was unequal from the very beginning!"

**CHAPTER TWO****Emelda**

The following day after breakfast, I did the dishes and mopped the kitchen and living room floors quickly in order not to miss the rendezvous with Emelda. I was supposed to meet her at noon and when I looked at the living room clock it was already 11.45am.

"Where are you rushing to this morning?" Mum asked me.

"Not at all-I just have to meet up with a friend or two," I replied.

I had a bicycle in the back yard and even though Emelda's home wasn't that far away- in fact she lived just a couple blocks away from Kenneth- I felt I would get there faster if I rode my bike. I rushed to my room, put on a black short-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans trousers and black tennis shoes. I looked in the mirror. Everything looked all right and in place. I wore my watch, combed my hair and then

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sprayed some nice perfume Dad had given me a while ago and headed out the door, hopping on my bike. I rode. I rode. My watch read 11:51am. I parked my bike in front of our neighbourhood convenience store. I quickly took out some coins from my pocket and counted them:

"200... 300... 500. I had 500 Naras. That should be enough," I said to myself.

At the convenience store, I saw a crowd of people standing in line in front of the cash registry. Most of their shopping carts were filled with items. All I needed to get was a packet of chocolate cookies. How was I possibly going to meet her on time if I had to wait for all of those people to be served? I took the packet of cookies from the front and then stood beside the line to get the cashier's attention.

"Madame Nadine...excusez-moi s'il vous plait," I said to the French-speaking cashier when she noticed me standing out of place. "I'm in a mad rush because I have a very important rendezvous and I'm worried I may be late. Please...here are 500 Naras for the cookies."

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Nadine stretched out her hand and I quickly put the coins in it. After that, I put the cookies in one of the grocery bags behind the cash registry and darted out.

I arrived at Emelda's at 12:05pm. Holding the packet of cookies in one hand, I leaned my bicycle onto the tall mango tree at the centre of their yard and made my way past the dark green hedges to my left and right, heading for the front door. I rang the doorbell with the cool confidence of a man assured he would be meeting no one else but the object of his affection. Was she home or not? From the doorsteps, I could see that the side windows were swung wide open, although the blinds made it hard to tell if anyone was inside. There was complete silence. I rang the bell again. It was now 12:15. Nobody came forth. I concluded she wasn't home. In resignation, I walked back toward the tall mango tree where I had placed my bike, having already concluded that it was a botched rendezvous. My watch read 12:22. Just as I got on my bike and was getting ready to leave, someone unlocked

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their front door. I turned. The door swung open. It was her. Out she came, dressed in a black skirt with a white blouse and black sandals. Her finger and toe nails were painted red, her long, corn rows sparkled and her caramel complexion dazzled beneath the sun. Her entire being radiated an immeasurable degree of confidence. Her walk was a unique mixture of gentle and classy, with each step as measured as that of an off-duty runway model. She was shorter than me— about 5'8 in terms of height— and of slim build but with a curvy body. She was 23, three years younger than me. *Tchwak! Tchwak!* Went the sound of her sandals, as she walked down the steps and came toward me. She stood in front of me and for several seconds, stared at me straight in the eye without saying a word. There was zero expression on her face. Emelda knew how to play the game.

“When you want to see a woman, you have to be patient,” she said.

“I waited for you for 17 minutes.”

“17 indeed,” she said mockingly. “Could you wait for me for 45 minutes or even an hour?”



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"Well, I'm not sure. I guess it would depend on the reason why," I responded.

"If I'm that special to you, you should. It's a rule, not an option. We shouldn't even be having this debate," Emelda said emphatically.

Noticing me holding a plastic bag with cookies in my hand, she asked:

"What are you holding like that?"

"I bought you a packet of cookies from the convenience store," I answered, giving them to her.

"Oh...thank you," she said, smiling. "That is so nice of you. What kind are they?"

"Why don't you open them and see for yourself?" I asked.

Emelda opened the bag and took out the packet of cookies.

"Chocolate- my favourite," she said. "Come here," she continued, her arms stretched out to embrace me.

We gave each other a tight hug. After that, we stood just a few steps from each other, holding our hands and looking silently into each other's eyes. I suspected what would probably happen next but who was

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going to make the first move? I wanted to give her a kiss but what if both or one of her parents suddenly showed up and caught me in the act? How disrespectful that would have been. First you show up at a person's home when he or she isn't there and then when he or she returns they see you giving their daughter a kiss? That would have been so wrong. We continued looking into each other's eyes. Slowly, I began to notice that Emelda had inched considerably forward and that her lips and mine were practically locked in the same direction. Before long, I felt as if some magnetic force was pushing me to place my hands around her waist...which I did. Emelda held me firmly, my lips and hers slowly inched closer and closer to each other - and there we stood...kissing underneath the mango tree.

We sat on the grass beneath the tree and she opened the packet of cookies, took one and offered me the other. For about a minute, both of us were silent, as if reflecting on what to talk about next. Then she said:

"Did Kenneth tell you why I asked to see you?"

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"No," I answered. "I'm quite curious."

Emelda gave a mocking laugh.

"So in your mind you think it is normal for us not to hear from each other in two weeks and still remain silent?" she asked.

"Well...I don't know what to say. I would have probably sent Kenneth to check on you."

After I said those words she suddenly stopped trying to take a bite out of her cookie and looked at me straight in the eyes with a shocked expression on her face.

"What did you say?" she asked.

I realized that I had given the wrong answer. It was obvious that this wasn't what she wanted to hear. And everything seemed to be flowing so well until my response to that question. But I couldn't take my words back. I wasn't prepared for what came next. Emelda proceeded to tell me about the number of men—my age, below and older— who approach her on a given day. The fact that she was still sitting next to me after I gave such a stupid response, she said, didn't imply that she was limited in terms of replacement

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options. She knew she was perceived as— and carried herself like— the pearl of the area where we lived.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it that way,” I responded, not sure what else could have been an appropriate response to her sudden outburst.

She held my hand and we both got up from where we were seated.

“I think you should be going now. My parents should be returning at any moment.”

For about a minute or so, we walked in silence, holding each other’s hands. I noticed she had been looking down as if in deep thought. She turned to me:

“There’s a party tomorrow night at The Aquatic Night Club. All of our age mates and every couple in this area that is worth something...will be there.”

I could guess what was coming next.

“Do you want to go?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“What time does the party begin?”

“11.30pm.”

“It’s going to be hard for me to leave my house at that time. My parents won’t let me. It’s quite late

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and the city isn't very safe at night these days you know...the crime wave is getting out of control."

Emelda laughed.

"Sometimes I have trouble understanding you," she said. "You talk like an old man. Can't you think of a reason better than that? Anyway, that's your problem. I'm just letting you know. That's why I asked Kenneth to tell you I wanted to see you."

I pondered for a few seconds.

"So do you mean you're going to go to the party whether I make it or not?"

"Yes."

I was speechless. I felt as if I had been stabbed right in the chest and my heart started beating incredibly fast.

"Do people have to pay to get in?" I asked her.

"What do you expect? It's a party at a club. Of course they have to pay."

"How much does it cost?"

Emelda was losing her patience. She took a deep breath.

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"John, look. I'm beginning to get tired of your stupid questions. I have to get back into the house soon. I told you my parents are on their way. It costs 100 Naras for couples and 50 Naras for singles."

"I really can't afford that kind of money right now, Emelda. I don't have a job and the little pocket money I get from working on my father's plantation barely comes close to 100 Naras."

"Your problem," she responded. "Well, think about it. Whatever you decide.. let me know somehow by 7 p.m. tomorrow."

With those words, she quickly kissed me on the cheek and rushed back into their house.

I stood there alone, my heart pounding and pounding, my legs barely able to move. All I could think of was, "how in the world am I going to get that sort of money? And how could I possibly leave home so late in the first place?"

I got on my bike and rode, oblivious to the motor bike riders and cab drivers who suddenly stopped in the middle of the street to pick up passengers,

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inconsiderate of the motorists who drove closely behind them; neither did I pay attention to the pedestrians who crossed the street without bothering to look left or right, or to the motorists and pedestrians who spent their time arguing over who had the right of way. That was the least of my concerns. I rode on and on and on.

I had been vacuuming the living room carpet when Kenneth showed up at our doorstep the next morning. It was about 10:30a.m. I didn't feel like seeing him at that moment because his presence reminded me of the party- something I wasn't ready to talk about. I turned off the vacuum cleaner and walked out to the front porch. The first eight words that came out of his mouth sent a shiver down my spine because they required an immediate decision.

"She sent me to come and see you," he said.

"Can I really trust that you don't know what this is all about?" I asked.

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Kenneth's glasses dangled sideways a little bit and almost seemed to reach the tip of his nose, so he adjusted them.

"That's between the two of you," he said with a chuckle. "None of my business. I mean- unless you want to share...?"

"Are you aware that there is a party at The Aquatic?" I asked.

He nodded.

"Are you going?"

Kenneth's demeanour changed.

"John, are you insulting me? What woman in her right mind would want to be seen walking with me in public? What mother would let her daughter hang around me?"

He frowned. He drew forward with a clenched fist as if ready to start a fight. I slowly drew backward.

Kenneth continued:

"Look at me. I've been struggling with a face marinated in pimples from the time I was a teenager. My back carries more weight than any other part of my body. Why would I humiliate myself by going to a place like that?"



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He paused and I began to reflect on how difficult it was for me to get him to introduce me to Emelda even though she was his neighbour. He said he had asked her out and she refused. She laughed and mocked at the idea and it was an even greater challenge for him to get closer to her so that over time she could become used to him and he could then introduce me to her more easily- which was exactly the way things turned out.

In anger, Kenneth turned around and began to leave, but I stopped him.

"Sorry. I didn't mean at all to offend you and I wasn't insulting you," I said. "I was just asking because I don't think I can make it either. She has made up her mind to go, but I can't afford the cost and I don't yet know if my parents would be willing to let me go out so late even if I asked."

Kenneth was growing impatient. Though silent, the expression on his face indicated to me that he wanted to hear something definitive. He needed an answer.

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"Well- at this point...," I went on, breaking the silence with a deep breath, "tell her that I won't make it. I honestly doubt if I will make it."

He nodded his head.

"Your decision, my friend. I'll talk to you later." With these words, he turned around and made his way through the gate. I stood there for a moment wondering if I had any other possible option. Even though it was tough, I felt as if I had made the right decision.

I had thought about bringing up the topic after lunch when I sat in the living room with my parents that afternoon. Dad was reading a newspaper and Mum and I were watching TV. For reasons I had already explained to Kenneth, I didn't think they would have felt comfortable about me hanging out in Barboura City so late at night. And I could understand their argument. Yet nonetheless, wouldn't it have been better for me to have at least given it a shot? Just when I was about to open my mouth, Mum turned to me and said:

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"Oh. John, I forgot to tell you. A letter came in the mail for you today. I think I mixed it up with ours by error. Let me get it. It's from another American university."

I wondered if it was worth the trouble for them to keep informing me when I had received mail from the other schools I had applied to. I didn't expect any of them to respond favourably to me considering my scores. In the weeks that ensued after I took my TOEFL test, I endured through one rejection letter after another. It seemed as if every university interpreted my scores to mean that I lacked the necessary level of proficiency in English. Over and over, I opened envelopes to discover letters that read:

*We thank you for your interest in our university. Unfortunately, your TOEFL scores indicate that you do not have the level of proficiency required for acceptance into our institution. Therefore, we are unable to offer you admission at this time.*

Reading another letter with the same tone couldn't have come at a worst time. My mind was focused on

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attempting to obtain permission from my parents to go to the Aquatic. How unfortunate that I should have to deal with another rejection letter when I was just about to mention the party! Its probable negative content would have certainly only dimmed my chances. After Mum gave me the letter, I stood up so that I could open the envelope within the privacy of my room. It was a letter from a school called Rodeoville University. I had sent applications to so many universities that I couldn't even remember this particular one.

"Why don't you open it here?" Mum asked. "Open it here. It concerns all of us- not just you."

At that moment, Dad slowly put down his newspaper. Mum was silent. Dad was silent. I looked at the envelope and then gently opened it up with an uneasy, slightly trembling right hand. Heart beating fast, I took out the letter. It read:

*Dear Mr. Malinke:*

*We received your application dated March 15 requesting admission for the fall semester of 1999 into Rodeoville University's Bachelor of Arts Program*

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*in Journalism and Mass Media. Upon reviewing your TOEFL scores, we concluded that you do not seem to have the required level of English proficiency. However, we are willing to help you bring up your reading comprehension, critical thinking and writing skills through special intensive English courses offered at our University.*

*The admissions committee believes based on your academic transcripts and your application essay- that you have the profile of a potentially good, hardworking student. In that respect, we are pleased to offer you admission into our University for the fall semester.*

*Sincere Regards,*

**Ed Philips**

**Director of Undergraduate Admissions,**

**Rodeoville University**

I could not believe my eyes! This couldn't possibly be true. I must have been dreaming. This must have been a mistake. What? I was so overwhelmed with joy. With a broad smile, I looked at my parents.

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"Yes! Yes!" I jumped up in excitement, holding up the letter. "Come on, son! Tell me...tell me that it's good- good news for a change?" Dad asked, standing up.

Mum remained seated with her hands crossed, looking at me anxiously and waiting for some sort of official confirmation of everything she felt she could sense.

"I'm going to Rodeoville University! I'm going to Rodeoville University!" I exclaimed.

"Praise the Lord! Thank you Jesus!" Mum shouted, spreading out her hands and looking up at the ceiling as she got up from her seat.

The three of us hugged each other. We formed a circle and held each other's hands, jumping and shouting. Those endless months of silent tension and endless anxiety were finally over. Dad opened up the CD player and put in one of his favourite jazz albums.

"Get a tray from the kitchen. Put three glasses on it and take out the bottle of champa--"

The look in Mum's eyes- a deep, stiff and cold stare- prevented Dad from completing his sentence.

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"I mean...the bottle of sweet, non-alcoholic wine in the fridge," he continued.

When I returned to the living room, Dad held up the bottle of wine. Standing in the centre of the living room, he told me to bring my glass.

"Well, even if this was champagne or some other alcoholic beverage, you deserve to drink it today for two reasons: first of all, you're no longer a teenager; secondly, even if you were a teenager, today is a very special day. I'm sure your mother too will agree with me on this one," he said, pouring out the wine until it filled half of the glass.

He turned to Mum.

"Why are you looking at me so funny? Bring your own glass too. It's non-alcoholic. Today is a happy day. What's the problem? It's you who bought this wine. We all drank it together on the first day you opened it. Did you get drunk? No. Did I get drunk? No. Did the young man get drunk? No. So why are you looking at me as though it's a different drink I'm holding?" he asked.

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He poured some wine into her glass. We all sat down once more. Just then, it dawned on me that this special circumstance provided me with an opportunity that I would have been silly enough not to consider. This was my best shot to mention that night's party at The Aquatic Night Club. I waited until there was a bit of silence in the living room and the intense excitement had slowly begun to give way to a regular daily atmosphere.

"There is a party tonight at The Aquatic. I would like to go— well, I wanted to ask if it's all right for me to go," I said.

Mum and Dad looked at each other.

"When does it start?" Dad asked.

"11:30pm," I responded.

"That is a bit too late," Mum remarked.

"What kind of party is it?" Dad asked.

"It's just a social event that is being organized by a number of my former classmates and acquaintances in the neighbourhood."

"Is anyone accompanying you?" went Mum.



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"I wanted to go with Kenneth but he doesn't seem interested. But that shouldn't be a problem. I can persuade him," I said.

"I hope they aren't asking you to pay to get inside. Are they?" Dad inquired.

"We have to pay to get in. It costs 50 Naras for one person and 100 Naras for two people. If Kenneth and I went, we would have to pay 100 Naras."

Dad shook his head.

"Son, that's a bit too much money. Too much money to pay just to get into a night club. Why don't you do this? Ask Kenneth if he could accompany you. It's always best to go to those places with someone. The more people you could go with, the better it is. I'm sure you're quite aware of the crime wave in this city especially at night time. Besides, Kenneth seems to have a driver who accompanies him every now and then. Maybe he could give you both a ride. If he accepts to go with you, your mother and I will give you 50 Naras each. But don't think this is something we'd be able to keep doing. There are so many better things that a young man can do with 100 Naras."

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I thanked my parents and dashed outside, got on my bike and rode as fast as I could to Kenneth's house. It was almost evening and I desperately needed to get a hold of Kenneth before it was dark. I ran into him sitting on a plastic chair in the middle of their yard and from the look in his eyes I could discern without a doubt that he was quite shocked to see me riding up from across the street and then leaning my bike against the side wall that led to the main entrance of their house.

"Kenneth! Kenneth! I need your help. It's very urgent," I said, almost panting.

"Hold on. Hold on. What's the problem?" he asked, standing up.

"I changed my mind. I'm going to the party."

"What?"

He pushed me back for a few minutes, looked away from me and then down at the grass, as if trying to put all his thoughts together.

"What made you suddenly change your mind?" he asked me.

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"I really don't know how I could explain it. It just happened. I need your help, please. Can you tell Emelda that I'm going to the party?"

"But I already told her that you weren't going. It's too late now. I don't think there's much I can do," Kenneth said.

"Kenneth I'm begging you. Please, I desperately need your help. My relationship with Emelda may not have a future anymore depending on what happens tonight."

Following those words, he was silent. He looked down and then within the next couple of seconds that ensued, looked up at me with a broad smile. His big glasses had almost slid to the tip of his nose, so he took them off, shook them and put them back on— even though they still dangled across his face.

"What's making you smile so much?" I wondered.

"I want to tell you something. But when you see Emelda, don't tell her that I told you. She's a proud person. She won't be happy. Promise me."

As anxious as I was, I didn't hesitate to quickly say, "I promise."

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"When I spoke with Emelda, she told me that if you weren't going to go to the party, she wouldn't either. She said that too many people in the neighbourhood and among your classmates are aware of your relationship, so it would be a disgrace to both of you if she showed up there all alone."

I was quite moved by those words because Emelda seldom ever expressed her feelings that openly.

"So what do you think I should do? Shouldn't I at least let her know I have changed my mind? You can help me do that, right?"

I was taken aback by his response.

"No. I don't think that is necessary," he responded adamantly. "I think this is a great opportunity to test the extent of her love for you. Forget about informing her. I propose that both of us should go to the party. She promised not to be there if you weren't going. If we run into her there, it means she didn't expect you to show up and that you're probably not the only person she is seeing. After all, I'm sure you know Emelda a lot better than me even though I happen to be her neighbour."

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I paused to think for a minute. Why would someone who admitted being uncomfortable within social circles suddenly become interested in going to a party at the last minute?

"Kenneth, I don't think that's a good idea," I retorted.

"Foolish! Foolish!" he yelled, frowning. The pressure from his humpback seemed to be taking quite a toll on him. He patted it several times and then continued:

"You're making me stand longer than I can handle. My back is starting to hurt. I need to sit."

Kenneth sat down, his back forcing him to lean forward in quite a strange manner. He tried to cross his legs but the weight of his back seemed to prevent him from doing so. At one point I actually feared he was going to fall.

"Every man needs to give that test in some way or the other," he emphasized. "Don't mess up your chance to do so. The driver and I will pick you up at 11 p.m. Is that all right with you?"

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Those words repeated themselves in my mind: *Every man needs to give that test in some way or the other. Don't mess up your chance to do so. Don't mess up your chance to do so.*

I didn't want to rush to an answer, although Kenneth could guess considering the way he stared at me silently, that his words and the expression on his face were sufficient enough to sway me toward his direction.

"Okay..." I responded, although I was not a hundred percent certain if I had made the right decision. "11 p.m. is fine."

At 11 p.m. prompt, I gently pulled aside some of the curtain in my bedroom. I peeped outside the window and noticed a figure slowly walking toward the front door. While the person walked past the dark garden and approached the front porch, the motion detector light shone upon him and I realized it was Kenneth's driver. Under normal circumstances, knocking on our door at this time of day would have

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caused an alarm. I opened the window, stretched my head out and said in a low voice:

"Psssss...psssss...I'm coming. Just give me a few minutes."

He nodded and I shut the window. I took the 100 Nara bills that my parents had given me and which lay on my bedroom table, put them in my pocket and closed the door.

When we got to the car, Kenneth was in the back seat, crossing his legs.

"Are you ready to have fun my brother!" he exclaimed.

I had never seen Kenneth so excited. And yet it wasn't as if he had originally wanted to go the party in the first place. I took out 50 Naras and gave it to him. He refused to take it.

"What! You think I can't afford 50 Naras? Are you insulting me? I don't need your money."

"Kenneth, it costs 100 Naras for two people. I pay half and you pay the other," I answered.

"I have 50 Naras. I don't need your money," he re-emphasized.

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The driver started the car and off we went.

There were several people standing in line waiting to get into the Aquatic Night Club. Each of them was paired up in twos- one man and one woman. The line was long and it appeared as if the couples had been waiting to get in for quite some time. Nonetheless, they all seemed very excited. Most of them held each other's hands and were laughing and chatting excitedly.

Kenneth and I observed from a distance. Considering my observations, I said to him:

"Kenneth, I don't think it would be a good idea for both of us to stand in line and walk in there at the same time."

"What are you trying to get at?" he asked.

"Can't you see for yourself? Every woman standing in line is with a man. Every man standing in line is with a woman. The two of us would look out of place."

Kenneth nodded.

"I agree," he said. "So what do you suggest?"



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"I propose that we stand separately in line. I'll be ahead of you. You can stand about two or so places behind me. That's probably the best thing for us to do in this kind of social setting."

So I stood about three places ahead of Kenneth and did my best to ignore the fact that I was alone and to pretend not to notice the many couples standing in front of me. The lines began moving a lot faster and one couple after the other went in. Before long, it was my turn. Realizing that I was alone, the security guard at the main entrance looked at me strangely, as if he didn't want to accept my payment. I gave him a straight, stern look in the eye and he let me in.

I had heard a lot about The Aquatic but had never been in there before. It was dark inside and the only sense of illumination came from several oval-shaped, revolving bright lights on the ceiling. Some were green, red, blue, yellow and white. I loved how their different colours seemed to reflect upon and match with the clothes some of the respective couples had on as they walked around or danced. The dance floor was very spacious and every couple of minutes,

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something that looked like some sort of white smoke came out of the bright lights on the ceiling and then down to the dance floor. The music in the club sounded very much like American dance music and everyone both on the dance floor and out of it— appeared to be having a good time. There were wooden tables and chairs upon which some couples sat engaging in conversation over a drink. Some couples sat at the bar, while others simply stood watching other people dance. As I walked around, I began to wish Emelda were with me and regretted having come in there in the first place. I had a feeling that most people who knew about my relationship with Emelda were watching me.

Just then, someone tapped me on my shoulder. I turned around and it was Kenneth. He spoke to me, but due to the loud music, I couldn't quite get what he said.

"Can you speak a bit louder? I didn't hear you very well."

"I said— what are you doing walking all over the place? Why don't we go to the bar and get a drink?" he asked, yelling.

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The seats at the bar were all occupied, so we stood there and ordered our drinks. I got a glass of cranberry juice and Kenneth ordered a gin tonic.

"I didn't know you drink alcohol," I said, while he drank.

"It only has five percent alcohol," he responded defensively.

I drank some of my juice. Looking around, I noticed that not a single woman at The Aquatic seemed to be sitting or walking alone. Each of them appeared to be with someone. Moments later, I saw several heads turning around one after the other to watch a woman make her entrance into the club and head toward the dance floor. I couldn't see her face clearly, but she wore a sparkling red dress. A man was walking behind her, holding her hand. There was something about the way she walked that made me feel uneasy. It seemed like a familiar walk. My heart began beating fast. Yes, it was her-Emelda. Kenneth looked at me and although he spoke not, I knew what he was thinking. I drank some more of my juice. From the bar, I watched Emelda and the unknown male take position in the

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middle of the dance floor. He had a round face with a short, thick moustache and short black hair. He put his arm around her waist and they began to dance. I didn't like the way they were twisting and turning. It made me feel very uncomfortable. Everyone on and around the dance floor was silent. I could see some couples whispering to each other upon realizing that not only was Emelda dancing with someone else, but that I was there too, watching helplessly from the bar. This time I didn't merely feel as if all eyes were on me— my thoughts at that moment reflected the reality of the circumstance.

Hurt, disappointed and speechless, I began to tap my almost empty glass on the long bar stand. From the look in the bartender's eyes, I got the feeling that even she felt sorry for me.

"What are you going to do? Will you just stand there all night and observe her from a distance? You tested her. She failed. Look at how she's embarrassing you in front of everybody!" Kenneth exclaimed, his big glasses slowly sliding down his nose.

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"She lied to you, John. She lied to you! Save your reputation!"

Emelda was now holding the man tightly and wrapping her arms around him as they both swayed from side to side on the dance floor in harmony with the song they danced to. I thought I had seen enough. I put the glass down, walked through the crowd of onlookers and made my way straight to the dance floor.

I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around, shocked.

"Emelda: we need to talk- now!"

"I can't. I'm dancing with somebo--"

I pulled her by the arm and away from the dance floor. The man she was dancing with charged at me furiously.

"How dare you interrupt us? Who do you think you are?" he asked, angrily. "Get your hands off her!"

The next thing I knew, Kenneth came running toward the man with a clenched fist, his glasses dangling across his face.

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"Look at that short fool!" he said. He stooped down, picked Kenneth up by his shirt collars and threw him on the dance floor.

"Aiiiiiee!! My back!" Kenneth shouted.

He swung his hand wide to give me a slap me but missed. I had raised my fist and was about to punch him in the face when someone held my hand and three people came forward and separated us from each other. Two security guards inside the club told Kenneth, Emelda, the man and me to leave. A man pulled Kenneth up from the dance floor and the guards forcefully led us to the exit.

"You are a lucky man! I would have taught you a lesson!" the man shouted when we were outside.

The three men who broke up the fight had also followed us outside the Aquatic. Two of them continued to hold the man's arms to prevent further dispute and walked him to his car, a black Mercedes parked on the corner. Emelda leaned on the wall, standing there with her arms folded. She was looking down. I walked up to her.

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"So? I thought you weren't going to make it tonight," I said.

"And...? Didn't you say you weren't coming either?" she retorted.

For a few seconds, we looked at each other. I felt betrayed and disappointed. But then at the same time, I wondered why I felt surprised. She was no angel and I couldn't suggest that I was perfect either. And yet in spite of that, my interest in her was so genuine that I now realized I had deliberately closed my eyes to her countless and obvious flaws.

"When are you ever going to change, Emelda?" I asked with a sigh. "When will you realize that there is more to a man than the car he drives or the amount of money he makes? I may not be able to afford a Mercedes right now but that doesn't make me less of a man than anyone else." I paused.

She didn't say a word. She just looked at me and shrugged her shoulders. She stopped a taxi that was coming toward our direction.

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"I don't think I could ever trust you again," I said, as she opened the door to get into the back seat of the taxi.

She slammed the door. The taxi drove off. For a moment, I thought I was the only one standing on that street corner until I looked straight and a few blocks away and noticed Kenneth had been watching me from a safe distance. He was leaning on the car that brought us both to the Aquatic.

"If she really loved you, she would not have come to the club regardless," he said, as the driver started the car.

I felt as if I had handled more baggage that night than I was prepared to, so I chose not to respond. And as we rode, the reality of the circumstance began to dawn on me. My relationship with Emelda was over. Everyone saw it unfold. It was going to be a long, uncomfortable night for me when I reached home.



### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **The Malinke Family**

I hate to recall how Dad lost his job at the Ministry of Agriculture. Talking about that incident always made him feel so much pain inside. Yet in many respects, that unfortunate experience became a blessing in more ways than one several years later. It turned him into an enterprising business man. He owned and ran one of the biggest plantations in Calonari, our village. The beginning was difficult and required enormous sacrifice. My Mum used to be a nurse, but when Dad's employment at the Ministry ceased as abruptly and unexpectedly as it did, she decided to quit her job to help him develop and run the plantation. It became a successful business and much of the money from it helped my parents pay for my education. I also took a number of years off from school to assist my parents with running the plantation. As it expanded over the years, my parents were able to hire some people to work on it on some

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weekdays and weekends. At least every other Friday evening, I accompanied my parents to Calonari and on Saturday mornings we worked on the plantation and dealt with all issues relative to cultivation. It took at the most an hour to drive from Barbours City to our village, so the ride was never uncomfortable. We considered ourselves lucky by virtue of the fact that Calonari was one of the few villages in the area that had a hotel. Traders, administrators and business people often travelled back and forth from Barbours City to Calonari and often needed a place to spend the night, so the hotel- The Diamond Hotel, as it was called- turned out to be a positive addition to both the Calonari and Barbours City communities. After several hours of hard Saturday labour at the plantation, my parents and I often spent the night at the Diamond and left either on Sunday afternoon or early Sunday evening.

We had different routines at the plantation on any given Saturday. On some Saturdays, I weeded and cut the grass. We didn't own a lawn mower during the early years, so I cut most of the grass with a

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machete. On other Saturdays, I cultivated the soil, planted, or harvested fruit. My favourite part of the experience often occurred in the process of harvesting and putting the mangoes, guavas, bananas and corn into a big raffia basket and filling it up until it was all loaded with fruit.

Selling our produce at the Calonari Central Market was a wonderful experience. I loved its rural atmosphere— the large crowds of people shopping from one vending table to the next, the children kicking little soccer balls and the anxious customers waiting in line while vendors grilled pork, beef and chicken. The most satisfactory aspect of it usually occurred when my fruit basket was empty and I counted the day's earnings and gave them to my parents. It was always encouraging to see the reward of hard work and sacrifice.

None of us ever imagined that the plantation would someday yield as much profit as it did. We plunged into it with much uncertainty, but it was perceived to be a risk worth taking. The thought of watching Dad sit at home five days a week in front of the

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living room TV set— a man with a passion for perfection and hard work— was disturbing. The family had to survive somehow.

I will never forget how vividly Dad explained the events that caused him to lose his job. He had an ability to describe events to people in ways that made them feel as if they were there when they occurred. As was routine after lunch break one afternoon in 1992, Dad pulled up and parked his Toyota Corolla in front of the Ministry of Agriculture. As usual he was with William, his co-worker and childhood friend for many years. Dad and William walked into the building and took the stairs. Then a conversation ensued between the two men that unbeknownst to him, would have a lasting impact upon his life:

"I'm very excited about this meeting, William. I've been working so hard in this Ministry for eight years. Eight years. It's more than about time for me to get a promotion," Dad began.

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"You certainly deserve it. Hopefully your hard work will pay off at the meeting," William concurred. Dad and William walked into a conference room, where a group of employees sat in a circle around a big table. The seat at the center of the table was unoccupied and there was a microphone on it. There was a framed map of Africa hanging on a stone wall and pictures of farmers harvesting and cultivating crops in what seemed to be rural areas.

A tall, lanky man entered. It was the Minister of Agriculture. Everyone rose to acknowledge his presence.

"You may be seated," he said, nodding.

Dad and his co-workers sat.

The Minister looked down at a folder on his table, opened it up and quickly glanced through a document. He closed it and then said:

"First of all, I want to commend you for the good work most of you are doing. As you may recall, a folder with very sensitive policy information was stolen from my office several weeks ago." The minister cleared his throat and raised his voice:

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"I would like to inform you that it has been found and the culprit is seated among you."

An atmosphere of silent tension took over the conference room as everyone at the table looked at the other suspiciously.

"So...Mr. Malinke, would you please tell me what you were doing sneaking into my office in my absence and why you needed this information?" the minister inquired, turning to Dad.

Dad could not believe what he was hearing.

"Pardon me Your Excellency, but you must be making a mistake. I'm not quite sure what you're talking about—" Dad responded, his voice trembling.

"Mr. William? Do you have anything to say?" the minister asked.

Avoiding eye contact with Dad who was sitting across from him, William said:

"Your Excellency...I did see...Mr. Malinke sneaking into your office three weeks ago. I was the only employee on the sixth floor that afternoon. He had no idea I was there."

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Dad looked at William with his mouth and eyes wide open to express his astonishment. He looked down at the table, took a deep breath and clasped his hands nervously.

William proceeded:

"At first I thought he had gone in to drop something off at your desk, but when..."

He paused for a moment to think.

"When I saw him leave with a big black folder in his hand, I knew something was wrong. About a week later, he began sharing these really amazing ideas with me that I knew could not possibly have come out of the mouth of a man of his calibre."

Dad was speechless. He folded his arms and looked down pensively.

There was silence in the conference room for a few minutes. Afterward, the minister said:

"Mr. William, with all due respect to you- Mr. Malinke has been working here for several years. Don't you think it's possible that his longevity and experience might have helped him develop more vision for this department?"

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"Absolutely not, your Excellency! He confessed to me that he stole the folder."

Unable to contain his anger and disappointment anymore, Dad stood up and looked straight into William's eyes.

"Sit down! Sit down, Mr. Malinke! There will be no tolerance for disorder at this meeting!" the minister yelled.

William opened up a brown suitcase and took out a 10-page paper. He got up from his seat and gave it to the minister.

"Your Excellency, Mr. Malinke typed this paper. It lists several policy ideas that the author dishonestly attempts to take credit for. Look carefully. Notice his name on the top left hand side and his signature at the bottom of every page."

The minister glanced through a few pages quickly. He shook his head, frowning.

"This is a shame. Mr. William, you're...you're right. This is exactly the information that was listed in the paper work that disappeared from my office. What a betrayal of trust."



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"Your Excellency, this isn't true. I've been set up. You need to believe me. Give me a chance to defend my honour," Dad said, his tone reflecting a mixture of despair and resignation.

The Minister slammed his fist against the table in anger.

"Honour? What honour? Whatever honour you may have had in this office is now completely gone, you hear me? Gone! I'm not interested in listening to what you have to say. You're a disgrace to each and every one of us. Please leave this building immediately. You're fired!"

The Minister turned to William.

"Mr. William, good work. I'm very proud of you for your honesty. I would like to appoint you my secretary general so that you could help me implement my policies. This office needs civil servants like you who embody integrity and loyalty. Would you be interested in the position?"

With a broad smile and as an expression of humility and gratitude, William bowed slightly and put his hand on his chest.

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"Yes...yes, your Excellency. I am profoundly humbled. Thank you so much."

Moments later, William met Dad clearing his office desk.

"You hypocrite! How dare you stand in front of me after what you just did? Get away from me! You have ruined my career. You have put an end to everything I have worked for. I don't want to see your face."

"Haven't you learned that in life we need to be careful about the people in whom we confide, Jacob? You keep talking about how long you've been here. Shouldn't you have known better given your professed eight years of experience?" William responded.

Dad gave William a big, hard slap on his cheek. He stumbled and fell, crashing on a table nearby. Two of Dad's co-workers rushed to the scene and held him back.

"You messed with the wrong man. Your conscience will torment you for the rest of your life. Consider yourself lucky. You would have risked breaking one of your cheek bones. Have a good life."

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On his way home after work that evening, Dad stopped at a bar. At the bar stand, he initially thought he'd leave after drinking a glass of wine or two, but as he began to open up to the bartender and spill out the juice about his problems that afternoon- he felt as if perhaps a bottle of whiskey would have done a better job in terms of helping him quickly forget about his experiences at the Ministry. And so he ordered a bottle of whiskey- and quite a big one for that matter- and drank himself out. He got so drunk that he wouldn't even have remembered his name if a stranger were to walk up to him and ask.

How in the world he was able to make his way home safely that night remains a mystery to me to this day. He often called home to inform us when he had to stay out late- and on those few occasions when he returned home really late, he made sure he was in before 10 p.m. But on that fateful night, Mum and I waited and waited. The clock in the living room read 10:15p.m. And up until then, there had been no knock on the door, no one rang the bell and our home phone didn't ring.

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"I know he's on his way," Mum said to me at 11 p.m. as we continued sitting in the living room watching TV absent-mindedly.

Although she did her best to mask it, I could detect a shiver in her voice and yes, we were very worried.

At 11:20 and with quite a struggle, I persuaded Mum to go to bed and offered to sit in the living room and wait for Dad for as long as it took. We both agreed however, that if he didn't show up by thirty minutes after midnight, I should call the police.

At 11:40, I turned off the lights in the living room and turned down the volume of the TV set. Several minutes later, I heard some footsteps coming toward the entrance to our house. Someone swung the gate open and later pushed it with a loud slam. I looked through the blinds and noticed a figure— it appeared to be a man— inching closer to the front porch. My heart beat fast. I couldn't quite see the person's face. I instantly realized that I had forgotten to turn on the security light that lit up

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the front porch and in the heat of that moment, I felt as if turning it on would not have been the best thing to do. We may have been dealing with an armed intruder. Who had just walked in? Was it Dad? If so, why didn't he come in with his car? There wasn't any time for me to waste questioning and wondering. In the darkness of the living room, I could see that whoever had come in was twisting and turning the door knob. The silence of the night faded away as it was overtaken by a series of loud thumps:

BOOM! BOOM! The person was kicking the front door.

"Ssssh...John, did you hear that?" Mum whispered over my shoulder, tiptoeing into the living room with a flashlight and a big stick in her hand. "Someone's breaking into the house."

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! The thumping got harder.

"Give me the stick, Mum," I whispered in return.

"No. I can deal with the person myself."

"Sssshhh...Mum, just give it to me."

I seized the stick from her, leaned on the wall beside the door and held the stick in swinging mode.

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Mum held her flashlight, ready to point it at the intruder's eyes.

"Are you ready?" I whispered, as she held the knob, ready to swing the door open.

Mum nodded.

She quickly unlocked the door and before I could hit the intruder or Mum could use her flashlight, he had pushed it forward and made his way into the living room. I turned on the light.

"Oh my God! Jacob!" Mum exclaimed.

The stick trembled in my hand.

"What... what...are you holding that stick for?" Dad asked, as he turned around and looked at me.

With those words he staggered and fell on the carpet.

"He's drunk," went Mum.

"Should we try to take him to the room?" I asked.

Before Mum could respond, he stood up, but then fell again after just a few steps.

"Not tonight," Mum replied. "Let's pull him up. He'll sleep on the sofa."

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Pulling Dad up from the carpet to put him up on the sofa was not an easy task at all. We met with stiff resistance.

"What are you...doing? What are you...trying to do? Who told you...I want to go to bed?" he kept saying.

When he lay on his back on the sofa, each of us could perceive that he had had a long day— most likely a bad day. He took a deep breath, yawned and stretched out his hands. Then he closed his eyes and turned his head sideways, facing the wall. Several moments later, we could hear him snoring in the living room.

In the hallway, as Mum and I were retreating to our respective rooms, she expressed a concern that was very much on my mind as well:

"I wonder what happened to him today."

It was the following day that Dad gave us an account of the incident at the Ministry. He didn't speak much that morning. When he woke up— or at least got up from the sofa— Mum and I had already been eating breakfast. He didn't turn around and look at

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the dining table where we were seated. He headed straight to their bedroom to take a shower. Walking past the living room moments later, he said he had parked his car somewhere down the block and was taking a walk to drive it home. Although Mum remained silent even after he had left, I could surmise from looking at her that she and I probably shared the same thoughts. The owner or bartender at the bar where Dad had been drinking probably suggested that he leave his car parked at their business site rather than risk driving. After all, the bar we had in mind, if we were right, was only about a thirteen-minute walk from our house. It was open 24 hours and the manager probably had someone accompany Dad at least to our gate, given how drunk he was that night.

Mum and I had been sitting at the front porch when we heard Dad's car honking at the gate. I got up and opened it and he pulled up into the driveway. He joined us and took a seat outside as well. There was silence for a couple of minutes as no one seemed to know what would be the appropriate thing to say given



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the circumstances. It was Mum who eventually broke the silence:

"Jacob, when did you return home last night?"

Dad cleared his throat.

"I don't recall. I didn't take note."

"You returned at midnight. You were kicking the door, do you know that?"

"Oh, really? Was I?"

"Jacob, you seem to be taking this lightly. I'm serious."

Mum paused.

"What would you have done if it were a wooden door and it ended up getting broken from all your kicking?" she continued.

"I would have sat in front of the house every night until we put up a new one. The mere sight of me sitting here in the dark every night during odd hours should be enough to frighten anyone."

"What an idiot you are," Mum answered, as she burst out in laughter. "I told you I'm not joking."

Dad and I also began laughing, but the unfortunate incident of last night, which was about to be

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forgotten— was soon replaced with feelings of disappointment and sorrow in Mum's heart as well as in mine— when Dad narrated his story.

"William. William. I can't believe it. In spite of how much you did for him— in spite of how faithful you've been to him," Mum responded after he had finished.

Since then, Dad developed the habit of leaving home early in the mornings after breakfast and returning home drunk in the evenings. If he wasn't out drinking, you'd find him sitting in the living room with either a big bottle of wine or beer on the table. Most of the time, there was an empty bottle standing next to the one he had been drinking from, which implied that he had possibly downed a couple others earlier. Guests who asked for alcoholic drinks often put us in a difficult position because Mum and I had decided privately that we wouldn't keep any more of such drinks at home. It wasn't until we received a surprise visit late one evening from Mr. Alfred, one of Dad's friends from the village of Calonari who had come to Barbours City to follow up a

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document. After I had asked him what he would like to drink, I specified that only non-alcoholic beverages were available. I was shocked by his response. Looking at my parents, he said:

“Did my ears deceive me or did I just hear what I think I heard? Is this young man insulting me? How can he expect an elderly man like me— an honourable indigene of Calonari, who grew up drinking palm wine and beer from an early age— to switch to those artificial, chemical drinks that the white man uses to poison people’s systems in your big towns? No! I cannot accept such an offer.”

I was forced to ride my bike to the nearby bar and buy two bottles of beer. Since that visit, Mum and I decided that when we did purchase alcoholic drinks, I would be hiding them in the closets in my room, where I kept my clothes. I generally hid bottles of wine and beer at the bottom shelf and covered them with a pile of clothes. Whenever we expected a guest who was a potential consumer of alcohol, I took two beer bottles from the closet and put them in the refrigerator when Dad left home in the mornings. As

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soon as I heard his car approaching the gate, I rushed to the refrigerator, took out the drinks and put them on a tray with an opener, on the stand beside the kitchen sink. It was an indirect way of saying, "These are out of reach. You can look if you'd like, but you can't touch." That didn't make a difference at all, for Dad often had drunk before he returned home. This was beginning to take a toll upon the family atmosphere at home. Dad grew more and more distant and Mum became tired of returning home to find him drunk after having spent long hours taking care of patients at Barboura Central Hospital.

The dramatic manner in which his alcoholism came to end is another incident that I will never forget. I was in the kitchen sweeping one evening, while Mum was doing dishes beside me. We heard someone at the gate ringing the bell persistently. I rushed outside to see who it was. It was our neighbour Minetta.

"Is your mother there? I need to see her. Quick! Quick! It's urgent," she panted.

Minetta was quite a huge woman and I noticed she was sweating and out of breath. It appeared as if she had

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been running to our house from some place far away or something.

"Minetta, what is the matter? Minetta, what is the matter? Please don't tell me...please don't tell me..."

Mum shouted, overcome by sudden emotion as she ran out through the front door, sponge in hand.

Minetta pulled Mum's hand.

"Come, mama. Come and see something."

I locked the front door and took the key, closed the gate and followed them to discover the reason behind this urgency.

We darted across the street, past cabs and motorists flying in our direction. With Minetta leading the way and gasping for breath, we ran and ran until we arrived at a gutter in a hidden corner. In it lay a man with an open briefcase and a big, empty bottle of beer by his side. Some papers from the briefcase were scattered about in the gutter as if they had been blown by the wind. With her eyes wide open, Mum put her hands on her head while I struggled to contain the shock, sorrow and embarrassment that took a hold of us both that moment.

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"Jacob! Jacob! How can you do this to me? How can you do this to me?" Mum wept, tears running down her cheeks. It was the first time I had seen her cry. She always looked happy, strong and full of energy. It was rare to come across her in a bad mood.

We pulled him up, Mum dragging his left hand while I did the same with his right. He was staggering and a crowd had begun to gather. We hurried home and while inside, although he staggered, Dad was able to make his way to their room. The days that ensued were not easy at all. The atmosphere at home became increasingly tense. For about three days straight, Dad was sleeping on the living room sofa. And except for dinner time after Mum had returned home from work, I seldom saw them at the same location. If one was in the bedroom, the other was in the living room watching TV; if one was out sitting on the front porch, the other was often nowhere to be found, showing up only when he or she was certain the other had probably retreated into the bedroom. Mum began leaving for work much earlier than usual in the

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mornings and her visits to our neighbour Minetta became more frequent than usual.

Dinner time was often the most awkward moment for me. I was generally left with no choice but to increase the volume on the TV set a little louder than usual to help ease some of the tension and break the silence. Many times, I had to think of things to say to both of them to get either of them to speak rather than just watch them staring at the wall, the food and their plates. And when either of them did speak, the response was often predictable. If I said:

“Dad, the mailman brought the water bill this afternoon,” he would nod and respond:

“Unhum.”

Similarly, if I said:

“Mum, one of your co-workers called when you were away to ask if you could fill in for her at the hospital tomorrow morning because she caught a cold,” her answer would be:

“Unhum.”

At least the one sense of consolation during that period was that when Dad did go out, he didn't return

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home drunk. But even then, I wondered quietly if he had simply reduced the quantity of his alcohol consumption— or whether the embarrassment of having been found lying in a gutter beside an empty bottle of beer produced an impact strong enough to have made him consider giving up that negative habit.

Nonetheless, the tension at home was beginning to take a toll on the three of us. I wanted to sit both of them down in the living room and find a way to get them to make peace but I wasn't sure how. I felt I needed to do so with someone close to one or both of my parents— an individual who could act as a mediator. For a moment I thought about contacting Uncle Robert, but then I changed my mind. Uncle Robert, although he had a good heart and always meant well, had a hard time keeping anyone's secrets. It was possible that he would have sought counsel from individuals outside the family realm on how best to approach the matter— and in so doing, several unintended ears would have then become aware of the problem at our home. However, within the family, he was the best bet.



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The next possible option was Minetta, our neighbour and Mum's friend. Ever since we moved into our home in Barboursa City, I knew her to be a polite, reserved, and discreet woman. She was undoubtedly one of Mum's most faithful friends and also very intelligent. As a matter of fact, the only time I ever saw her look quite nervous and agitated was on the day she rushed over to our house after she had discovered Dad lying in the gutter. My heart felt at peace with the idea of asking her for help.

And so one afternoon, when I was home alone, I went over to Minetta's house. Upon arriving at the front door, I rang the bell. I could hear some music coming from her living room. There was no response, so I rang again.

"Who is it?" said a female voice.

"It's John."

"Who?"

"John. John Malinke," I shouted.

The door opened and a woman came out. It was Minetta. She was dressed very relaxed in a pair of brown sandals, a grey T-shirt and some long blue

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shorts— obviously not expecting any guests. From the look in her eyes, I could tell she sensed something wasn't right because I seldom paid her a visit without being accompanied by my parents.

Minetta turned down the volume of her sound system and got straight to the point as soon as we were seated in her living room:

"What's the problem?"

I took a deep breath and clasped my hands.

"I need your help. There's a crisis at home. Ever since you discovered Dad in that gutter, things have just not been the same anymore. My parents barely speak to each other. They avoid each other's company as much as possible. Please, I need you to help me get them to make peace."

Pensive, Minetta looked down and then up at the ceiling. She shook her head and asked:

"And why do you think I am the right person to do so?"

"I can't think of anyone else who has been as much of a faithful friend to my Mum for as long as you have been," I responded pleadingly.

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Minetta stood up, folded her arms and began walking around the chairs in her living room.

"Your mother has always been very fond of your father. "She always spoke so highly of him whenever we were together. I remember when they first moved here. Jacob was such a wonderful gentleman. Even if he had to go out for a drink, he was often home before late. And he often took your mother with him. I never knew him to be a big drinker. I don't understand this sudden change in his character."

Arms still folded, she now turned to me without saying a word. I could read in between the lines. She wanted to know the reason why. I needed her help, so I had to play my part.

"There's a reason for all of this," I said. "But please promise me that what I tell you will remain between us."

I then told Minetta about Dad's unfortunate experience at his previous place of employment. When I had finished, she nodded as if she were attempting to justify a particular perspective that she had in mind.

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"Now I see. That explains it all," went Minetta, sitting down. "The behaviour you described earlier was so unlike your parents."

She sighed and then folded her arms again.

"I'm willing to help you," Minetta said. "Let us come up with a strategy."

What a brilliant strategy it turned out to be. Minetta decided she would visit us two days after I showed up at her home. I was to tell Mum and Dad separately that she would be coming over to see them. The task was to make it sound like a routine visit, but one that necessitated both of them to be present. And I can say with much certainty that I had never seen Mum and Dad sitting as stiffly frozen as they did on that fateful evening when I led Minetta into our home. After I had served Minetta a drink, I left the living room and went to my bedroom. However, my curiosity couldn't stop me from eavesdropping. I stood in the hallway leading to our rooms and from a safe distance, peered safely from the wall.

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I watched Minetta take a sip of her drink and slowly put down her glass, her hand slightly trembling. For several minutes, there was silence in the living room. Dad was looking at the TV. Mum was looking down.

"Are you people going to talk to me or what?" Minetta yelled. "I've come to visit you!"

Once again, there was silence. Then, pointing at them, Minetta said:

"Listen. Perhaps you people think this is none of my business. But in my capacity as your neighbour and friend for many years, I humbly ask that you listen to what I have to say."

She poured more of her drink into her glass and drank some of it. Afterward, she continued:

"John came to my house two days ago. He complained that you've not been speaking to each other for almost three weeks. I have some advice for the two of you and I truly hope that you shall listen. You both seem to forget that life is full of ups and downs. Jacob, while I deeply regret what happened to you at your former job, I don't think it's fair for you to

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punish your entire household for the unjust actions of others."

Frowning, Dad turned to Minetta. I became nervous, fearing that things might suddenly get out of hand.

"Who told you I lost my job? How did you get that information?"

Dad turned to Mum.

"Sarah, do you think going around gossiping will provide us with a solution to our problems?"

He looked past the living room and toward the hallway.

"Or could it have been John?" he asked.

At that point I considered retreating silently into my room, lest anyone were to leave the living room in anger and in the process of walking toward the hallway, find me eavesdropping there. But the silence that ensued for a few minutes encouraged me to stay there and continue watching and listening.

"Jacob, why would you accuse me of something I know nothing about?" Mum retorted.

Minetta stood up.

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"Enough! Enough! This has to stop— for the sake of our friendship and your son, both of you must stop this nonsense! Jacob, it doesn't matter who told me that you lost your job. What matters most is that the person who informed me cared enough about you and this family to have done so. I told your son when he came to see me that for as long as I can imagine, your wife has always been very fond of you and thought very highly of you. Jacob, I beg you. If you love your family...and I have no doubt that you do, please spare us this trouble. Think about the effect your current behaviour will have on your family. And when I talk about family, I'm not just referring to you, your wife and child. That includes me as well. Your wife is my friend and I have valued our friendship for many years. As her husband I consider you as a friend too. If she's hurting, I feel for her."

After having said that, she sat down.

With both hands in his pockets, Dad got up from his seat and walked to the kitchen. He did so with a

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sigh, taking a deep breath and looking up at the ceiling. Then I heard Mum say:

"The man I married was not an alcoholic. He was not a drunk. Jacob, I can't continue living under such tension anymore. I've put up with this for as long as I possibly could. If you don't stop what you're doing, I'm going to leave."

I was so shaken by those words that I stopped eavesdropping in the hallway and made my way back into the living room to console Mum, who had begun to cry. Just as I was doing so, Dad equally emerged from the kitchen walking very slowly. His eyes, red and watery, appeared to forcefully hold back tears from running down his cheeks. He stood confused, watching Mum weep while Minetta wrapped her arm around her shoulder. I stood just a few steps away uncertain of what to do but overcome by emotion. Moments later, Dad stretched out both his arms as if to embrace Mum. Realizing her hesitance, he pulled her arm gently toward him, she got up from her seat and they both hugged each other. Looking sideways, my eyes met with Minetta's. I could see tears coming out of her eyes



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and I was certain that just like me, she felt relieved and hoped that this semblance of reconciliation would last.

We all took our seats again and for the most part, there was silence, except for the occasional noise of Mum blowing her nose on tissue paper, her eyes still watery. Dad wrapped his arm around her shoulder and then looking down at the carpet, he rubbed his hand nervously and then in a voice stirred by disappointment and anger, he said:

"The Ministry of Agriculture was my life. It was all I knew."

He stood up and with his hands behind his back, walked as if he were going to the hallway which led toward our rooms. Then he turned around, walked toward us and stopped in the middle of the living room. Clenching his fist, he said:

"It's no point going back to what happened. But if anyone had told me William would do such a thing to me, I never would have believed. A man I considered a friend for eight years— with whom I shared my bread. How do I move on from this? Very soon, John will be

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getting ready to go to college. Who's going to pay his school fees? Where will the money come from? In fact, how is he even going to go through high school?"

It was at that moment that the gravity of the situation began to hit home. I suddenly realized that I may not be starting my first year in high school any time soon. College was actually more of a concern and we desperately needed to save money somehow. Dad's question was right. Where would the money come from? Everyone in the living room began to brainstorm quietly.

"Sarah, I am sorry. I am so sorry for everything I've put you and John through," Dad continued after his own long pause. "I promise never to do such a foolish thing again. I am so...sorry."

With those words, he sat down. This time around, it was Mum who got up from her seat and went to Dad and gave him a hug. Within a space of time ranging from several minutes to about an hour, the revolving circle of sympathy seemed to have moved from Mum then to Mum and Dad, and then finally to me. It was

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starting to seem likely that my academic future would be affected by the unfortunate turn of events. The living room was once again silent. Moments later, Minetta said:

"Jacob, I have a friend who works in taxation at the Ministry of Finance. I could talk to him about you. When I spoke to him last week, he mentioned something about an opening in the department of billing and taxation."

"Taxation. Taxation. You expect me to work with bill and tax collectors? The most despised people in almost every country? Have you seen how the population threatens and insults them on a daily basis? Don't you think I deserve something a bit better than that?"

There was some more silence for a few minutes.

"After this betrayal, I would rather start my own business than work under anyone," Dad continued.

"Your own business! That might be the key," went Mum, suddenly jumping up from her seat as if excited by that thought.

"What do you have in mind, Sarah?" Minetta asked.

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"I don't know...I was thinking that maybe we could get into some sort of farming business or so— and then if it goes well, maybe we could develop it into a plantation?"

Dad nodded his head as if in accordance with the plausibility of the suggestion, and then asked:

"But if we start a farm, who will cultivate it, run it and so on? You have your own responsibilities at the hospital. John is a student and needs to soon start worrying about going to college. He is 18 years old."

At that moment, my heart froze within me. The subject of my college enrollment had yet been brought up.

Once again, there was silence.

"Listen. It seems to me as if each of you is going to have to make a sacrifice somehow," said Minetta, in her usual frank, straight-shooting manner. "Jacob, you can't expect to keep sitting at home doing nothing and then allow the entire burden to rest solely on Sarah's shoulders. And although I don't know how much you used to earn at the Ministry of Agriculture, I'm sure I can safely guess that having

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worked there for eight years and given your responsibilities, you probably earned more money than her."

Then Mum pleaded:

"For our family's sake, please consider the proposal I have put forth, dear. Let's look into developing a farm. I'm willing to quit my job immediately so the three of us could put our hands together and do something productive."

"Sarah, have you lost your mind?" Dad asked. "If you quit your job, how will we earn enough money to buy food, water and other household items within the next few months?"

"Dear, I don't think it will be an understatement for me to say that I think we've both saved quite some money over the years which should be enough to help us survive during this challenging period," Mum argued.

"What are you saying? Do you know how long these challenges will last?"

"Enough! Enough!" Minetta yelled, standing up. "I've had enough sitting here watching you two behave like

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children. Jacob, your wife loves you so much that she's willing to leave her job— to put aside the opportunity to keep earning a steady source of income— in order to stand by you at this time when your family needs solidarity more than ever. You are blessed, you hear me? You are blessed!”

Minetta broke into tears and then continued:

“You people don't know... what it feels like to walk into your house one day... and suddenly realize that your husband has gone...vanished without a trace. Then all you see...is a note on your pillow...saying, 'I don't need you anymore. I've found someone better.' And then...and then you see his wedding ring on your bed. You don't know...what it feels like to be dropped...abandoned by the person you felt was the...love of your...life.”

Each of us was so touched by Minetta's words. I wasn't surprised at all to see Mum rush to her friend and give her a tight hug. The sight of Minetta in tears was so troubling to her. Minetta wiped away her tears with the palms of her hands and Mum held her by the hand and led her to her seat. Looking at Dad, I

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had the gut feeling that Minetta's last words echoed and resounded in his ears: *abandoned by the person you felt was the love of your life.*

"I'll do my best," Dad suddenly said, vaguely. "I'll give serious consideration to the suggestion about starting a farm."

Minetta got up from her seat like someone barely strong enough to stand on her feet. She walked to the front door and Mum followed her behind.

"I've heard and seen enough," Minetta said in a voice filled with emotion as she turned and looked at Dad and me standing there speechless in the living room.

"I should be returning home now."

Mum accompanied her to the front porch and when she returned, an air of uncertainty took over the living room as each of us sat down silently and began to reflect. And then the brief silence was broken when Dad turned to Mum and said:

"I am truly sorry. Please forgive me."

Afterward, he looked at me and went on:

"Each of us is going to sacrifice somehow to help this family continue to stand on its feet, John."

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Those words served as an affirmation that for an indefinite period, my education would have to be put on hold. It was hard for me to take. I thought about my classmates who would be moving forward and the possibility that some of them might start to look down on me. I wondered if I might have to start avoiding them. I was both bothered and saddened by this stunning development. I was 18 years old and my age mates in our neighbourhood as well as some of my classmates were known to be quite ignorant of life's challenges and were not very sensitive about other people's feelings. I could only imagine what they would say:

"What happened to John? I haven't seen him in school for a long time."

"Me too. I heard he stopped school to work on his father's farm."

"Really? Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha. He has become a farmer against his will."

That thought troubled me so much that I talked to Mum about it before we went to bed when we were both drawing the curtains in the living room.



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"Don't worry about people who live for today and who don't think about tomorrow, my son," she said. "Life is unpredictable. Such people have no sense of humility. The eyes of God are upon the humble and he takes note of their struggles. He doesn't think like human beings do. Each of us is making a big sacrifice now, but if we stay focused and determined it will pay off in the end. What a day...let me go to bed."

After having said that, she left for their room. Turning off the lights in the living room and also making my way to bed, the certainty that I won't be returning to school the following semester and as a matter of fact for an indefinite period, persisted within my mind for quite some time. Yet it dawned on me that it was a sacrifice I had to make for the sake of our family. And amidst those concerns, I had forgotten something wonderful had actually taken place at home on that day: Mum and Dad had resolved their differences. As I lay down to sleep, I thought to myself, "It's been a hell of a long day." And with an uncertain future now hovering over the three of us, the night seemed even longer.

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Thus began the family's somewhat risky venture into the agricultural sector. I remember when Mum returned home after her last day at the job and how emotional she was. She had given the hospital two weeks' notice and on that day when she showed up at the central hospital in Barboursville city for the last time, she was shocked when one of her co-workers rushed toward her and grabbed her by the hand saying:

"Sarah, come quickly! I've been told you need to report to the administrative hall immediately."

Mum tried to find out what was going on but the nurse didn't respond. She kept on walking so fast that Mum, following on from behind, struggled to catch up with her pace. As soon as Mum entered the hall, a group of people shouted aloud:

"Surprise!!"

Doctors and nurses lined up, as well as a few patients whom she had taken care of with dedication during her career. There were some balloons and there was also a long, white placard hanging in the middle of the wall beneath the ceiling, upon which the words

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"FAREWELL, MRS. MALINKE. THANK YOU FOR YOUR FAITHFUL SERVICE," was boldly written. The resident doctor made a speech thanking Mum for her hard work and loyalty, and at the end he gave her an envelope of 30,000 Naras. After that she shook hands and held brief conversations with all those who had shown up to bid her farewell.

It was about a week later that we began actively searching for an area where we could obtain land to begin planting. We made so many trips to Calonari driving in circles from one part to another that from the look in their eyes, I could tell the villagers must have been wondering what was going on and were probably quite tired of seeing us. After at least another week of asking questions and bargaining with some of the village land owners, we finally came across a man who had one of the most presentable plots we had so far seen.

"I won't accept anything less than 100,000 Naras," the man said, as he walked us around his plot.

I sensed Dad would have probably liked to bargain a bit less but so far, that seemed to be the lowest

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price he could get from any of the villagers. The plot we were more inclined to purchase was slightly about an acre. In many ways it was perfect because it appeared to be located in an area that received direct sunlight probably several hours a day, an important requirement for successful planting. Mum pulled Dad aside and said to him in a low tone:

"I think you should go for it, Jacob. You won't get a better price than this."

We all walked around and inspected the plot while the seller, following closely behind, walked with his hands behind his back in an air of anxiety.

"Okay. We'll take it," Dad said.

He reached into his wallet and took out a sum of money. The owner of the plot counted. He nodded and smiled. The transaction was successful. The man then asked us to accompany him to his house situated just a couple of steps away from the plot, so that he and Dad could sign the paper work showing transfer of ownership. It was to serve as a receipt. On his front porch, there were six bamboo chairs with red, round cushions and a big wooden table in the middle. Given

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its size, it looked like the sort of table a family would use if they chose to eat lunch or dinner outside. We sat on three of the chairs.

"May I offer you people some palm wine?" the man asked Mum and Dad.

There was silence. Dad turned and looked at Mum. They looked at each other for a few seconds but no one seemed willing to respond and our host was probably starting to be astonished by their behaviour.

"Uhm... uhm...no," Dad said. "No, thank you. We'll all drink water if you have some," Dad replied.

When the man went inside to get the water, Mum and Dad looked at each other again. She smiled at him and I could guess we both shared the same thoughts. Dad had turned down an offer of alcohol, something which had seemed impossible just a couple of months ago. Our host returned with a jug of water and a tray upon which were three glasses. After we had drunk and my parents engaged him in conversation for some time, he went back in and then returned with a black folder. He took out two pieces of paper, which Dad carefully read. Afterward, Dad signed part of it and the man

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did the same. When we got up from our seats ready to leave, our host gave Dad a copy of what he had just signed.

"Keep this," he said. "This one is yours."

The document gave Dad exclusive ownership of the plot and when the farm was developed and its produce was sold for profit, he had to deduct eight percent of his yearly earnings as payment in taxes to the Calonari rural council.

"I haven't even started working on that plot yet and people are already emphasizing taxes," Dad complained while we walked to the car. "And to think Minetta wanted me to consider working as a billing and tax collector. Even if the farm were not ready in a year I would still receive letters in the mail reminding me that the time had come for me to pay my taxes," he continued, sternly.

Thus began the unpredictable venture into the agricultural sector. About a week after we had purchased the land, we drove to Calonari again and began to develop the farm. The first day was marked

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by intensive labour. Mum weeded, while Dad and I cut the grass with our machetes. When we finished, we stuffed all the weeds—and the grass that had been cut—into brown bags and then drove off to discard them at the village refuse center. We were so exhausted on our way back to Barboura City that we knew there would be absolutely no way for us to cook dinner for ourselves. So we stopped at the Calonari Central Market, bought some roasted chicken and then ordered some rice and curry sauce for takeout from a restaurant along the way.

Upon arriving home that night, we went to bed hopeful that with determination and persistence, the investment might produce positive results. Slowly and steadily, we began to make progress. We started off by planting yams. The first step, which we had begun two weeks before, was to nourish the soil by adding fertilizer. Afterward, we loosened the soil with a garden tiller to ensure proper root spreading. Then we planted the yam tubers about two inches deep and between 11 to 12 inches apart from each other and covered the soil with mulch to retain warmth and

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moisture. At least every three weeks, we added fertilizer to the soil and continued to water it so that it would remain moist. About 140 days after planting, it was harvest time. The leaves had begun to wither and change into a yellow colour. Mum, Dad and I proceeded to dig up the yams with shovels and it felt good to see the fruits of our hard work. We collected all the yams and put them in a basket.

Each of us was anxious on our first day of sale. It was a week day around noon and we had rented some space at the Calonari Central Market and put a basin full of yams on a wooden table. Mum sat on a chair behind the table, while Dad and I stood beside her, watching shoppers walk by. We were quite worried initially because it seemed as if no one felt the need to purchase what we had to offer. There also appeared to be a lot fewer people shopping than usual and yet the weather was so good. For several minutes we stood there helplessly watching shoppers walk past our table without even looking. What hurt most was that some of them had been buying oranges from the



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lady vendor next to us. When Mum was tired of sitting, she got up and Dad sat down. We all took turns sitting on the chair when we got tired of standing.

"Start a farm, right? Yes, we did," Dad said. "This isn't going to work out. I think we should put those yams back in the basket and leave. At least we tried," he continued, voicing regret and disappointment.

From the look in her eyes, I discerned Mum was equally getting frustrated, although she didn't say a word and simply kept looking at the people walking past us as if deliberately ignoring our presence. We were getting a lesson about the realities and fierce competition of the marketplace. And then I had an idea:

"I think we need to do something differently," I said.

Mum and Dad wondered what I had in mind that could possibly help produce results that would be any different from that which we had been experiencing.

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I stood in front of our table and raised my voice as loudly as I could as other shoppers began walking toward our section:

"Fresh yams! Fresh yams! Buy your yams here. Only 250 Naras per yam! You can't beat this price!"

I already began to notice something different after I had said those words. Some people who were walking past our table turned and looked. Some of them turned around and stopped at our table to look at the yams, while others who were walking toward our section converged toward our table as if my words had produced some sort of magnetic effect. And even better, the number of people shopping seemed to have gradually increased.

"Nice yams. Nice texture," some shoppers said, feeling them.

Some bought two, some four, others six, and so on. Before long, the basin was empty and we had a great sale. I looked at the vendor beside us and her table was still full of oranges. She looked back at me and I noticed she didn't seem very happy. Just several minutes ago, no one selling in our section would have

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given the three of us a chance. To my surprise, the lady next to us angrily began putting all her oranges into bags and left.

"That's the African," Dad said, shaking his head. "Never wants to see his brother or sister succeed. Always pulling people down. I'm sure this lady will try to think up something to make us lose customers. She'll probably spread a false story around."

"How did you come up with that idea, John? That was excellent. I'm really proud of you," Mum said.

"Well, I just thought it might make a difference," I replied.

And that's how the family business began to grow. On days when Mum could not accompany us, Dad and I traveled down to Calonari to work the farm or to harvest. On quite a good number of occasions, I went alone via public transportation. I caught a bus from Barboura City early in the morning on some week days and took a bus that dropped me right at the entrance to the village. Since it was quite a walk to get to our farm, I made sure I wore solid sandals that could

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resist the stones and the dusty road. Sometimes I worked on the farm. On other occasions, I harvested and then sold the fresh yams at the Calonari Central Market. I often made sure I had finished selling before 4 p.m. so that I could catch the 4.30p.m. Bus back to Barboursa City. I really began to love the atmosphere at the market. On beautiful sunny days, it was common to see large crowds of people walking by stopping at one stand and vending table after another. You could see children kicking little balls, men with long sticks leading cows or sheep for sale, hens roaming around the street with their chicks and so on. The smell of grilled chicken, beef and pork often filled the air while anxious customers stood in line waiting to make a purchase. More often than not, I returned home with my basket empty because the sales usually went very well. I gave the money either to Mum or Dad and then depending on how much we made after each sale, I was given a portion of it to hold as both an allowance for the month and as pocket money.

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This was how in four years (from 1992 to 1996), our modest business grew to the point where it began to serve not only the village community but also some of Barbours City's residents. After a profitable venture planting yams, we experimented with corn on that same farm as well. That too yielded much profit. Eventually, Dad was gradually able to hire workers to assist us with regards to labour, while he and Mum began to now concentrate on the management and financial aspect of it. The farm continued to grow to the point where as we acquired more space and proceeded with additional planting—growing plantains, bananas, tomatoes and various fruits and vegetables, it grew into a vast plantation. Mum and Dad were able to purchase lawn mowers, tractors, vans, trucks and other things that were essential to the employees and to us as well, because we didn't completely cease working on the plantation. Mum and Dad generally played more of a supervisory role, but I traveled down to Calonari as often as possible to help our employees out on the plantation. Now that we had a few trucks and vans, one of our employees often

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traveled down to Barboura City to pick me up and then dropped me home in the evenings when we had finished working. The revenue generated from our business helped Mum and Dad pay our rent, buy food and other household needs and items and also pay our employees at the end of each month.

As a gesture of appreciation for the tremendous growth of our business, Mum, Dad and I gave a special offering at Barboura City Baptist Church during our harvest thanksgiving service in 1995, three years after we had started the farm. We brought several baskets filled with plantains, pineapple, yam, corn and banana. Some of our employees helped us carry some of the baskets and bring them to the front, just before the pulpit where the pastor preached.

"Such a blessing can only come from God Most High," I remember Dad saying while he drove us to church that Sunday. "Only He can turn a man's life around to such an extent from a future that once seemed so uncertain. My dear wife, my dear son, this is clearly the work of God and we should be very grateful to Him."

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We had a great time at service on that day, rejoicing and singing praises to God for the great thing He had done in our lives.

It was also in 1995 that I began the first step toward completing the two years I had left in school. I was 18 years old when I put my education on hold in 1992 and making that sacrifice for a two-year period in order to join my parents in concentrating on an investment whose returns were both unpredictable and uncertain was not easy to do at all. Some of my initial fears were confirmed. Just as I had suspected, former classmates who lived in the neighbourhood began stopping at our house after not having seen me in school for weeks. Breaking the news to them was very difficult to do. Aware of their inability to keep any secrets, I simply told them that for personal reasons, I wouldn't be able to go back to school for some time. I didn't tell them about what Dad went through. It didn't surprise me when Kenneth showed up at our door about a month and a half after we had bought the land and begun working on the farm. Academically he was two years behind me,

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but putting my education on hold for that same period of time enabled him to eventually catch up with me.

"John, what is happening? I haven't seen you in school for weeks. Is everything all right?" Kenneth asked.

I wasn't sure if I wanted to tell him exactly what was going on. I remained silent for some time thinking about what to say. I decided to tell him but pleaded that he should promise that it will remain a secret. He agreed to do so.

"But are you ever going to make it back to school again?" he asked, after I had told him everything.

"I hope so. I can only hope," I replied with uncertainty.

I had hoped Kenneth's promise to me would have been enough to prevent the story from spreading. Just about a week after confiding in him, classmates who lived in the area and who had come to me to express their concerns suddenly changed their attitude toward me. When they saw me walking toward them, they looked away. Some of them put their heads down while others whistled, walked extremely fast and looked up at the



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sky. It was obvious to me that they had heard something. I was ignored and looked upon with contempt. I was perceived as a school dropout with an uncertain future. Before we purchased a van and had employees who could take turns picking me up from home to go to the plantation, I occasionally used to hear children in our neighbourhood shouting in my direction when I emerged from the bus station carrying my two empty baskets in hand:

"Farmer boy! Farmer boy! When will you go to school again? Farmer boy! Farmer boy! How much did you sell today?"

There were a few times when I returned home feeling down and discouraged to the point where I could barely speak at table during lunch or dinner. This greatly bothered my parents and one night after I had returned home from the farm, they sat me down in the living room. Dad said:

"John, your mother and I have noticed that you look disturbed. What's the matter?"

I didn't want to say anything that would have caused them to become additionally worried given the stress

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that they both went through already—Dad losing his job and taking the risky venture into an uncertain business and Mum having quit her job to support him and prior to that, having had to endure through his alcoholism.

“Everything is fine, Dad. There’s no problem.”

“That’s not true, John. Even your voice this night reflects a lot of stress. Talk to us. What’s wrong?” Mum broke in.

I didn’t say a word. She continued:

“Does this have anything to do with your classmates who live in the neighbourhood?”

With reluctance, I nodded.

Dad sighed.

“John, I believe your mother already held this conversation with you. You shouldn’t be blaming yourself for anything. You are not responsible for what happened to me. I don’t want to repeat what she told you but permit me to say... my son that many times we go about life completely clueless about what tomorrow may bring. Imagine how tougher it would have been for us if this business venture had failed and

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we ended up having no other alternative. What would we eat? How would we pay our rent?"

His eyes began to slowly get watery and red as his speech became filled with emotion. I didn't want him to get any more emotional than that, and in my heart I wished I could plead with him to stop talking any further. But as he continued speaking, I sensed from him an itching—a yearning for expression—as if he was carrying a burden on the inside that he never got a chance to let out until then.

"The people currently looking down on you were never your friends. They were opportunists. They hung around you because they felt there was something they could gain. Now they feel as if the tables have turned and that you have fallen. So they are starting to show you their true colours. Son, be proud of who you are as a person. Your mother and I are proud of you. We love you and that should be all that counts. Don't be bothered by what strangers think of you or of us your parents. Know that we love you and always will. The people mocking you today don't know what the future holds for them. But as your parents

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we can assure you that you have a bright future. You'll return to school and take it a step further by going to college. The sacrifice you have made is temporary. You are a Malinke—strong, hardworking, determined and perseverant. I never again want to see you looking troubled in this house, have you heard?"

I nodded.

"Have you heard?" he repeated.

I nodded once again.

"Is that clear?" he emphasized one more time.

"Yes Dad, it is. I have heard."

He took out some money from his pocket and gave it to me saying:

"Take this. Go to one of the convenience stores in the neighbourhood and buy yourself some cookies and some juice or something. Keep your head up. Live your life. Your life isn't over. It's just beginning. You have all this life ahead of you."

Mum smiled at me while I walked toward the door that led into our living room. I got on my bike which I had placed at the front porch earlier, and began to ride. I felt much more at peace but yet, a part of me

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wondered how in the world so many of my age mates had come to find out the reason why I had to put my education on hold and I wasn't happy about that. There had to be a source. Someone must have told one person who then told another before it eventually spread around. I decided to confront Kenneth because he was my primary suspect. I was sure he had something to do with it and I felt betrayed. How could I have trusted him so blindly? I needed to get to the bottom of all of it. Thus, on my way to the convenience store, I stopped at Kenneth's home. Coincidentally, he was standing outside when I arrived. From the way he looked, I sensed that the speed with which I rode and the abrupt nature in which I stopped in front of their home probably caused him to wonder what was the matter. Well, that is, assuming he didn't already guess what it was all about.

"John, what's going on? You seem to be in such a hurry. Is everything all right?" he asked, running toward me.

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"Kenneth, what have I done to you to merit such kind of treatment?" I questioned, getting off my bike. "My classmates are mocking me because I've had to put my education on hold to help my parents run our farm. None of them was aware of the reason I stopped showing up for class until after I had confided in you. How could you betray me like this? I thought you were my friend! I thought you were someone I could trust!"

Kenneth adjusted his glasses and gently tapped me on my shoulder, his humpback looking even more crooked than usual.

"Hey, slow down! Slow down, John! I didn't share what you told me with anyone at all. Please believe me, I didn't."

We both looked at each other silently for about a minute. I wished I could believe him, but I found it increasingly difficult to do so at that moment. I still felt he must have had something to do with it. I turned around and got back on my bike.

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"Please believe me John, I didn't. Remember there are people who will do anything to set two good friends against each other and that there are certain things we cannot hide no matter how hard we try," Kenneth continued. "I beg you to hear me. I didn't tell anyone."

I didn't know what else to say at that point.

"I'll think about it. Enjoy your afternoon," I said, and rode off.

Since then, I began questioning his sincerity as a friend.

Mum and Dad made a wonderful, happy couple. Growing up, I seldom ever saw them get into arguments. The only exception occurred when Dad lost his job and began his struggles with alcohol. They often carried out various household chores together—for example cooking, cleaning the interior and exterior of our home, and shopping. Most of the time, we did each of these things together. In terms of physical build, they were quite the opposite of each other. Mum was tall and slim, while Dad was more

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heavysset and much shorter than her. She had short and somewhat thick natural hair, but Dad didn't like to grow his hair out at all. He liked the bald look. He was dark in complexion, while Mum was much lighter. Every now and then on some weekends when he was relaxed and in a good mood, he loved to tell me about his youthful days growing up in Calonari and how he met Mum. In his early twenties, he was one of the most popular fighters in Calonari and his determination to succeed always gave him an edge over his adversaries in the end, despite the number of times he was picked up and thrown to the ground during tournaments at the village courtyard. This amazed most people, for although he had the build of a fighter—the broad chest, the big arms and the strong legs—his height was perceived by spectators and adversaries alike, as a major handicap. In most fights, no one gave him much of a chance. But his intelligence and the swiftness of his jabs and upper cuts during critical moments of each fight often worked in his favour.



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When he was 24 years old, he participated in a tournament that unbeknownst to him, would cause him to decide to put an end to his fighting career much sooner than he had expected. Calonari had to choose a boxer to face one of the most dreadful fighters of the region. His name was Akuta and he was from the neighbouring village of Sima. Everyone who had to fight him already resigned himself to defeat before the tournament even begun. He was at least six feet five inches tall with gigantic legs, huge arms, a wide chest and a very big stomach. His left eye constantly popped out as if it was swollen or bigger than the other and both of them often looked red.

It was no surprise to many that Calonari chose Dad to face Akuta. In just a few years, he had emerged as one of the village's most skilled and enduring fighters. His resistance even during arm wrestling contests with other village fighters was remarkable. Those qualities earned him the nickname "Spako"- in other words, "the man who never gives up". Whenever his admirers ran into him, they would say "Spako!" and pounding his chest with a clenched fist, Dad

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would respond, "That's the name! That's the name!"

All attempts by Calonari's fighters to persuade Dad to not take part in the fight were unsuccessful. To him, it was more than just a fight. He had a reputation to defend. It was a matter of pride. Fighting Akuta was pretty much a death sentence. During that stage of the tournament, there were no rules. Referees let contestants fight until they could fight no more. Fights often ended when one person was knocked out unconscious, blacked out or simply had no energy to continue. Akuta took advantage of his size and the terror attached to his name. That always had a psychological effect upon his adversaries. Most fighters of the respective villages were simply content to have reached that stage in their career. To them it implied that their talents had received considerable recognition. Most knew that it took facing Akuta to put an end to everything.

On that day when Dad had to fight Akuta, the latter came to the village courtyard in Calonari with his usual delegation. He walked in between two women who were by his side and four men followed him behind.

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Two blew trumpets, while the other two played drums. The villagers had formed a wide circle around the courtyard.

"Akuta!! Akuta!! Akuta!!" the two men playing drums shouted.

The ground in the area of the courtyard where the fighters battled consisted of white sand. The fighters were not allowed to wear sandals or gloves and falling on the sand was not a pleasant experience. Spectators on the other hand, stood on the grass and watched keenly. Proceeding with the routine provocation prior to each fight, Akuta's delegation began to perform. The two drummers drummed; the other men blew their trumpets and danced in circles around the crowd. The two women equally began performing a traditional dance while the crowd watched. But no one applauded, for such provocation was not encouraged. Akuta hit his big stomach a couple of times and then rose up his clenched fists to the sky. One of the drummers stopped drumming and ran toward Akuta with a bottle of beer that he took out of his bag. He gave him the bottle and Akuta

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removed the cork with his teeth, to the amazement of the crowd. Then he put the bottle on the sand, bent down, picked it up with his mouth and not holding it at all, emptied its contents. When Akuta had finished, he tossed the bottle aside and yelled:

"Huuuuurrrrrggghhh!!!!"

Dad stood facing him from a distance. He knew the villagers perceived him at that moment to be no different from a cow waiting to be slaughtered. Akuta joined his delegation and began dancing around in a circle.

"Akuta!!" one of the men shouted.

"Huuuuuuuurrrrrrggggghhh!!!" he answered.

"Akuta!!" he shouted again.

"Huuuuuuuuuurrrrrrgggggghhh!!!" he went on.

Then Akuta suddenly stood still with his eyes wide open as if he were hypnotized. His left eye popped out. Whenever that happened, it implied he was ready to begin fighting.

One man left the crowd and walked up to Dad. He whispered in his ear:

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"Get out of this while you can. Get out now!" he pleaded.

"If I have to die, so be it. I am not a coward. I will fight this battle!" Dad retorted, angrily.

He pushed the man away and the latter rejoined the crowd.

Akuta dashed toward him, his big stomach preventing him from running as fast as he would have liked. Dad stood there with a clenched fist. Akuta jumped up as high as he could, hoping to squash Dad and pin him to the sand with the weight of his giant legs. Dad bent down and gave Akuta a solid punch on his stomach just as he was about to land.

"Paaaaff!" went Akuta's stomach.

Akuta staggered backward a little bit and then held his stomach with both hands; his eyes wide open in amazement. How dared he punch him? Who in the world had the nerve to punch the great, big, bad Akuta? Akuta and Dad bent down and faced each other like sumo wrestlers about to tear each other apart.

"Huuuurrrrrrrrrgggghh!" went Akuta.

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Spreading both his arms wide like a bird about to fly, he dove at Dad and headed him on the chest. It hurt a great deal and Dad fell on the sand. In great pain, he lay there for close to five minutes.

"Akuta!! Akuta!!" the drummers shouted, cheering him.

The crowd looked on in silence and despair, wondering if this was going to be the moment when Akuta would put an end to the career of another of their good fighters—and this time one of their best—as he proceeded with his three-year reign of terror over all the villages in the area. The women who were part of Akuta's delegation once again began dancing. Taking advantage of this psychological advantage, Akuta jumped, hoping to stamp Dad's chest with his giant feet, but he rolled over and Akuta landed on the sand. Dad shook his head and shoulders to dust off the sand that was on his body. Akuta charged at him, jumping high up in the air again. Dad ran toward him and as he was about to land on the ground and gave him a hard kick on the stomach.

"Paaaaffffff!" went Akuta's stomach once again.

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Realizing that Akuta was foolish enough to look down at his stomach again and hold it with both hands instead of maintaining eye contact with his opponent, Dad gave him a powerful upper cut that threw him to the soil with a splash. Akuta couldn't believe his eyes. Dad dashed toward him while he lay on the soil and also jumped up, aiming to land his feet on Akuta's stomach. But Akuta held his feet and Dad fell on the sand. Akuta was furious. He picked Dad up from the sand and flung him toward one of the drummers, who lowered his head in great panic. Dad fell on his stomach. Akuta then began to dip Dad's head into the sand and pull it out as he pleased. Dad began coughing and choking. The spectators were silent and kept on looking, overcome by despair. No one was courageous enough to step forward. If Jacob Malinke had to die, it would be better if he died alone. After all, no one forced him to become a fighter.

"Stop that fight! He's going to kill him!" a woman shouted from the crowd.

Dad's face and eyes were covered in sand, but from the corner of one of his eyes, he was able to see a

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tall woman dressed in a long, green garment running from the crowd toward their direction.

"Please! I beg you. Leave that man alone. You're going to kill him. Haven't you done enough?" she yelled.

Akuta, much like the crowd of spectators, marveled at the woman's courage and her dangerous decision to partake of another person's woes. He pushed her, pulled Dad by the arm, carried him up and shoved him aside. Dad fell on the sand. At that point, some spectators began leaving the courtyard, confident that the outcome of the fight was predictable and sad that once again, one of Calonari's valiant soldiers had reached a point of no return. Dad lay on the sand for about two minutes. The tall woman who had emerged from the crowd stooped down beside him and said in his ear:

"You're going to get yourself killed. I plead with you—if you care about your life, get up and leave now. I'm willing to help you."

The woman pulled Dad's arm and helped him sit up on the sand. In all respects, it was a done deal. Akuta



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had won the fight. The drumming intensified. His dancers stepped up their act.

Dad got up. His eyes reflected rage. He clenched his fists and stood like a boxer yearning to prove his worth despite having been knocked down multiple times. The drumming ceased. The dancers stopped performing.

"What are you trying to do? Have you lost your mind?" the woman asked him.

Dad ignored her. He walked forward, keeping his eyes focused on his target. The crowd, which had greatly reduced in size, began to increase again as spectators re-converged to the courtyard amidst the suspense.

"Akuta!" Dad yelled.

Akuta turned around and gave him a look that seemed to say "how dare you!"

"Malinke! No one in Calonari can defeat me. I have crushed your best and boldest. I have broken their legs and ribs. I will be happy to make you my next victim if you cannot read between the lines!!" shouted Akuta, in an incredibly deep voice that

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seemed to echo across the crowd, making the spectators and even those in his delegation tremble.

"Akuta!" Dad continued. "Real fighters don't win fights just by jumping on their opponents and throwing them in the air. Real fighters use their brains, their arms and feet. I challenge you to a hand and foot contest."

"Don't test me, Malinke!! I've been tested by the best. You're doing it at your own risk. I'll tear you apart!! HUUUUUURRRRRRRGGGH!!!"

Akuta tried to punch Dad but he dodged. Dad gave him three, solid punches on the stomach. Akuta held his stomach with both hands, staggering backward. In rapid succession, Dad punched Akuta on the cheek and gave him a powerful upper cut that sent him tumbling on the sand. The crowd was silent. The drummers and dancers looked helpless. Akuta lay on the sand for about a minute. When he got up, he was furious. This fight had been over. He had already won. There was no one in Calonari who could challenge him. He seized one drum and pushed the drummer aside. The drummer fell on the sand. He threw the drum at Dad, but it

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missed him. The crowd booed at Akuta. Akuta and Dad ran toward each other. Dad jumped and kicked him hard on his stomach. Akuta fell on the sand with a loud splash. Dad jumped up and with both feet, landed on Akuta's stomach and pressed it on the sand.

"Huuuuuuuuuhhhhhhhgggg!!" Akuta yelled, in great pain.

Using his feet, Dad continued to exert pressure on Akuta's stomach. He put his head up and tried to get up from the sand but the pain on his stomach was too intense. Dad persisted. Finally, Akuta took a deep breath and blacked out on the sand, unconscious. It was a humiliating defeat that marked a definite end to his career, for he had thrived on the notion of being undefeatable.

"Spako! Spako! Spako! Spako!" the crowd shouted.

"That's...that's the name..." Dad answered, in a shaken but relieved voice, raising both fists up in the air.

He was exhausted. It felt as if all his energy had been drained out of him. His feet suddenly felt weak and he slowly found himself going down—and down—and losing consciousness... he fell on the sand.

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When he opened his eyes, he was lying in bed at the village hospital and the tall woman who had since been attempting to dissuade him from carrying on with the fight sat facing him. He was in a lot of pain with a sprained neck, sore knuckles and bruises on his arms and chest from having been thrown onto the sand over and over again. His right cheek was swollen. His entire body was sore. The woman took some cotton and poured a bit of alcohol on it. Then she gently began to rub it around the wounds on his knuckles. After that, she covered his knuckles with bandage.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, in great pain. "That pricks," he said.

Dad took a deep breath and looked at the woman in consternation.

"You see? This is what happens when people choose to put their lives at risk," she said, in a low voice. "You almost got yourself killed."

"Why...why are you doing this?" he asked.

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The woman was silent for a moment and looked at him straight in the eyes. She leaned forward slightly.

"It's my job," she replied.

They looked at each other without saying a word. It seemed as if they both wanted to say something specific to each other, but lacked the courage to do so at that moment. Just then, the doctor in charge of the village hospital came in.

"I think you should let Mr. Malinke rest," he said.

"He really should not be speaking."

The woman looked at Dad and stood up. She smiled at him.

"Well, I guess I should be leaving now," she said.

She walked toward the door and opened it. While she was about to shut the door, Dad said:

"Wait a minute. What is your name? Can you at least tell me your name?"

"Sarah. It's Sarah. Nice meeting you. Hope you feel better soon."

"May I ask...?"

But before Dad could say anything further, the doctor shut the door and he and the woman left. He wished he

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could get up from his bed and ask the woman one or two more questions—perhaps invite her somewhere for a drink so he could get to know her better. He didn't recall having ever seen her in the village before. She couldn't possibly live in Calonari. He resigned himself to the thought that he had lost a great opportunity, and that was difficult for him to take.

When he recovered, he decided it was time to call it quits with regards to his fighting career. He had had enough of the pain, the injuries and the constant pressures. The positive side of it was that at least he became a living legend in Calonari—the only fighter who not only had the courage to stand up to Akuta but to defeat him and put an end to the latter's career for good. And the committee responsible for organizing various tournaments in the village decided to put an end to all fights. Never again was Calonari going to continue putting its sons at risk. This decision gave Dad additional credibility as the last fighter standing. He took up an entry-level job working at the processing unit of

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the Regional Office of Agriculture, which served Calonari and its surrounding villages. He helped staff review documents and contact individuals who mailed letters requesting for information or applying for different services and opportunities. Within a year, Dad's hard work and professional consciousness led to his appointment as head of the processing unit. But his heart wasn't at peace because no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get that tall woman he had met out of his mind.

For about a month after she had left him lying in bed at the hospital, he went around Calonari searching for indirect ways to find out if anyone might have known who she was and where she was based. He tried to obtain information from vendors at the market, small business owners, acquaintances and neighbours. Unfortunately, no one seemed to know who she was. Then he remembered what the woman had said in response to his question about why she was going out of her way to help him:

*It's my job.*

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"Wait a minute. It's my job. Could she have been a nurse?" he wondered.

So he sought out the nurse who was on duty during the period when he had been admitted at the hospital. For some reason, he felt as if she wasn't telling him the truth and was deliberately withholding information from him when she responded:

"I'm sorry Mr. Malinke, but I can't be of much help. I have no idea who she is. I see her around the hospital once in a long while, but we hardly speak to each other. Now if you may excuse me, I have a patient to take care of."

And the resident doctor wasn't of much help at all either, although Dad had been through a hard struggle to schedule an appointment with him.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha," laughed the doctor, when Dad met with him in his office. "Mr. Malinke, is this some kind of joke? You must understand that I have a very busy schedule. I honestly don't have time to find out who people are. However, I wish you the best of luck."



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Discouraged both by these demonstrations of insensitivity and the outcome produced by his own efforts, he decided to give up. Just a couple of days after he had done so, he received a tip from a rather unlikely source. In those days, long before Mr. Effa and Mr. Nobody, was a man named Zacharias. Zacharias was mentally challenged and was none to sometimes become quite aggressive. Consequently, the entire village avoided him. But in general, spent most days sitting on one of the gutters in the village and when he did stand up, it was often to walk and dance in circles as if to entertain passersby. As a result, few people took him seriously. It was no surprise therefore that climbing the hill on his way back to my late grand parents' home, Dad ignored Zacharias when he ran toward his direction and began jumping in front of him.

"Booooh! Booooh!" Zacharias yelled.

"Zacharias, I'm not in the mood for games," Dad responded. "You're standing in my way. Allow me to keep moving, please."

Dad kept walking.

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"Booooh! Booooh! Baaaaaf! Bing! I know what you're looking for," Zacharias continued.

At that moment, Dad stopped, turned around and looked at Zacharias. Zacharias walked up to him. With a mocking look and his eyes wide open, he began turning his head around in circles.

"Aha! Now you want to listen to me, hein? Blah! Bop! Booooh!" he shouted, in Dad's face.

Dad pushed him away.

"Look Zacharias, as I said, I'm not in the mood for games. I've been courteous enough to try to listen to what you have to say. Yet it appears as if you're out to provoke me. I'm not going to tolerate that. Let me go."

Dad continued walking.

"Sarah!" Zacharias shouted.

Dad was stunned. Once again, he turned around. Zacharias walked toward him again, but this time in a much gentler manner.

"Excuse me? Can you repeat what you just said?" Dad asked, overcome by a mixture of shock and emotion upon hearing that name come out of Zacharias's mouth.

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Zacharias began making a number of gestures with both hands.

"Sarah. The tall woman. I know where you can find her," he said.

"Wait a minute. Am I dreaming here or what? How did you know I was looking for her, Zacharias?"

"Everybody does."

"Why should I believe you, Zacharias? How do I know you're not up to one of your usual tricks?"

Zacharias began turning his head around in circles once again, and his eyes seemed to roll over.

"Booooh! Bop! I'm not forcing you to believe me. But I know I'm telling you the truth."

"Okay. Where is she?"

"I, Zacharias, do not give out information except if I get something in return. Bim! Bof!"

"I'm not going to offer you a bribe to obtain information. I prefer that you give it out of your own will."

Zacharias was surprised. He had never heard anyone respond to him that way. People generally avoided him and when he dared come close to anyone, that person

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often gave in. His tricks usually worked. He was silent for some time, wondering what to say next. Then he answered:

"Understood. Blah! Bing! Central Hospital, Barbours City."

"Hold on. Are you saying I'll be able to find her there?"

"Bof! Bing! Booh!"

"Come on Zacharias, don't black out on me now. Please. Answer me."

"Find her there. Yes. Find her there," Zacharias said, as if struggling to process his thoughts.

Dad took 40 Naras out of his pocket and gave it to Zacharias.

"Well, thanks. I appreciate. Zing! Bim!"

Dad left and Zacharias continued running around in circles as he had been doing previously.

That information made Dad's heart light up. He now had a clue which if credible, could lead him to that stranger he met—the mysterious but interesting woman named Sarah. It was for that reason that he asked to be transferred to the Ministry of Agriculture in

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Barboura City despite strong objections from his hierarchy, who were concerned about losing such a competent and efficient collaborator. But his persistence led them to give in and about two months after he had ran into Zacharias, Dad moved to Barboura City. He rented a two bedroom apartment in the heart of the city and at the Ministry of Agriculture, took up the same responsibilities as in the regional office that served Calonari. The only difference was that this time around he worked in the Secretary General's office.

A couple of months after having adjusted to his new environment, Dad called in sick and used that as an excuse to not show up for work. He decided that he would use that entire day to trace Sarah's whereabouts. His strategy: to pretend as if he had come down with a bad cold and needed to see the resident doctor for a prescription. It was quite frustrating to realize the number of patients sitting outside on a bench waiting for their turn to be called into the doctor's office. When he took a seat, it seemed as if his turn would never come. There were

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countless stories of a few rude, angry nurses who often drove patients away and asked them to return the following day just because they were fared up of continuing to deal with them. Dad hoped silently that it wouldn't be the case on that day. He was there for a purpose. He had a mission to accomplish. Sitting on the bench, he watched the nurses walk in and out of the hospital building— in and out of labs, in and out of the clinic, in and out of various wards of patients who had been admitted there. Not a single one of them looked like the woman he was hoping to see. Zacharias seemed to have been up to his usual tricks again. Could he have been that dumb that he moved from Calonari to Barboura City because of Zacharias?

After having sat on the hard bench for about an hour, he began to feel disappointed. Either Zacharias had lied to him or the woman he was looking for didn't work there on that day if she did at all. Perhaps it was her day off. His feet pinched inside his shoes from sitting there that long and he felt sorry for the patients, the "real patients" who

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showed up much later than him. Those ones probably didn't stand the chance of seeing the doctor on that same day. Dad began to feel as if he were being unfair to those who were really sick considering the reasons why he showed up. For instance, the patient who was next in line after him deserved to take his place. Yet, he was obstructing her for a purpose that wasn't anywhere near as serious as that for which she was present. So he stood up so that he could stretch his feet a little bit and was ready to leave the hospital premises.

"Mr. Vincent Ndobe?" a nurse called from outside the doctor's office.

A tall woman with short braided hair wearing a long, white lab coat stretched her neck out toward the patients' direction. A man stood up. Dad turned. He couldn't believe his eyes. It was her. It was that woman. It was Sarah. His heart began to beat fast. So Zacharias was telling the truth? What was he going to do now? He couldn't sit on the bench anymore because that wouldn't have been fair to those in honest needs of medical assistance. Nor could he seek any

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attention from Sarah, who accompanying the patient to the doctor's office, was obviously occupied. It was bad timing in all respects and that could have actually influenced how Sarah might have responded to him if he tried. Nonetheless, he had to do something. He knew he may never again have such an opportunity. He wondered and wondered. Finally, he concluded that he would have to take a big risk. Noticing a nurse walking toward the doctor's office from a distance, he decided to walk up to her.

"Excuse me. I need to see someone urgently and I was wondering if you could help me."

"Are you a patient waiting to see the doctor?" she asked.

Dad could guess what the nurse would have said if he answered affirmatively.

"Well...not exactly, but I need to speak with one of your co-workers urgently."

"Who do you want to see?"

"Her name is Sarah."

"Why don't you tell me what it is you need to see her for? I could transmit the message for you."



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At that moment, the nurse was starting to be a bit too smart.

"I sincerely appreciate your willingness to help, but it's confidential. I need to talk to her personally."

"You better have a good reason to do so," the nurse said. "I'm sure you realize you're going to interrupt her."

The nurse accompanied Dad to the doctor's office and made him sit down in the patients' waiting room directly next door, where a secretary sat typing on a computer.

"And what was your name again? The nurse asked as she walked to the doctor's office."

Dad didn't want to tell the nurse his name. It would have spoiled the surprise. However, before he could even utter a word, the door to the doctor's office swung open. Out came the patient who had walked in several minutes ago, and Sarah following behind.

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"Aha! There you are," said Sarah's co-worker. "I was just about to let you know there's a man in the waiting room who's been insisting to see you."

"Really? Who is he? What is it about?"

When she walked into the waiting room, Dad stood up. Their eyes met each other and both of them were silent. Dad's heart beat fast and he was certain that Sarah's heart did the same as well. If eyes could kiss and embrace each other, that would have been one of those rare moments. The other nurse couldn't help but wonder what that was all about. Respecting the fact that it was none of her business, she shook her head and left. Sarah looked down and then back up at Dad, nervous because she wasn't expecting to see him and also because she was overcome by emotion.

"You know...I really can't spend much time talking to you. I've got patients to take care of," Sarah said.

"I understand, Sarah. I called in sick at work just to look for a way to come here and I even asked to be transferred to Barboura City because I wanted to be next to you."

Sarah looked at him. Dad paused.

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"Ever since you left Calonari, I couldn't stop thinking about you. I was wondering who you were and why you were so kind to me. I walked up and down the village asking if anyone knew you."

She looked at him straight in the eyes.

"Well, I've been watching many of your fights," the lady said in an emotionally charged voice as she avoided telling Dad directly that she was one of his admirers. "I have some friends and a few family members in Calonari."

The door leading to the doctor's office opened. It was the doctor himself.

"Where is the nurse on duty? Why is it taking so long for the next patient to come in?" he shouted, stretching his neck toward the waiting room area.

"Listen. I have to go. We've got patients to take care of. Thanks for stopping by. Maybe I'll see you around—if destiny permits," Sarah said, in a very low tone.

Dad held both her hands.

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"Wait. Please...I'd like us to sit down somewhere and talk. I really wish to see you again. Can I meet you somewhere on your day off?"

"I work seven days a week. I'm sure I'll see you around, though."

"No. That can't be true. I don't believe that. You must have a day or two off. I'm not letting you go until you tell me what day that is," Dad insisted.

"I see you're persistent. Good. All right...I'm off on Thursdays."

The doctor opened the door again.

"Where is the nurse on duty, for goodness sake? I don't have all day. Sarah!"

"Can you meet me at 12 p.m. this Thursday in front of the Ministry of Agriculture so we can go somewhere for lunch?" Dad asked.

"Okay, okay. That would be fine. See you on Thursday," Sarah responded absent-mindedly, as she quickly picked up the list of patients from a desk in the waiting room area and rushed to the doctor's office.

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"I wonder if she even paid attention to what I said," Dad thought to himself as he left the waiting room area.

On his way out, he overheard the doctor yelling from within his office:

"Where were you? You know what a bad reputation this hospital is beginning to get because of some of your colleagues' attitudes. You're one of the few faithful employees we have left. I wasn't expecting this from you. We need to maintain a good, professional image! Get the next patient, please!"

Dad felt for Sarah but there was nothing he could do. He worried that she might take it out on him later if she were upset about the manner in which the doctor was talking to her—that is, assuming that she showed up for their scheduled date. And as he left the hospital premises, he noticed the funny stares coming from the patients seated outside on the bench, although he pretended as if he could care less. It was certain he thought, that there must have been quite some gossiping and murmuring among them ever since he walked into the waiting room.

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On that Thursday, Dad stood in front of the Ministry at lunch break as any eager man would do on a first date. At 12 p.m. prompt, he was there already. He watched the numerous cabs that drove by and his heart beat fast each time any woman emerged from one of them. He waited in the fierce heat for at least 26 minutes, looking at his watch and pacing around back and forth slowly within the vicinity of the Ministry in order not to continue getting unwanted attention from cab drivers who assumed he was standing there because he needed to catch a cab. 28 minutes into his wait, he was getting ready to give up and to resign himself to a solitary lunch break when he heard a voice behind him say:

“Mr. Malinke!”

Turning around, he saw a woman walking up toward him. She was wearing a pair of dark sunglasses, a red blouse, a black pair of trousers and red shoes. She also wore red lipstick. Dad's heart began beating fast once more. Yes, it was Sarah. Smiling, she stretched out her arm to shake his hand.

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"I'm sorry I'm late," she said. "I had a few errands to run in the morning."

"I can't complain. You look gorgeous."

"Thank you."

Dad took Sarah to a restaurant he had discovered. It was next to his office and it specialized in Western cuisine. Sarah ordered a hamburger and some fried potatoes, while Dad ordered spaghetti with meat balls. Sarah enjoyed her meal and was impressed by his sense of taste and class.

And thus it was that for a two-year period after their first date, Dad began dating the woman who would later become Sarah Malinke, my mother. Their traditional wedding in Calonari, their court wedding at the Barboura Town Council and much later, the wedding at Barboura City church, were heavily attended. Dad's friends and some of the former wrestlers of the village frequently teased him that he got married to a woman very much taller than himself. To each of them who said so to him, he hit his chest with a clenched fist and replied:

"They don't call me 'Spako' for nothing."

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Whenever he did that, his friends yelled out his nickname to flatter him even more.

"Spako!" they would say.

"Yes. That's the name...that's the name," he would reply, hitting his chest with a broad smile on his face.

**CHAPTER FOUR****Rendezvous at the American Embassy**

The offer of admission from Rodeoville University was much needed good news. The next challenge was obtaining a student visa from the American Embassy in Barboura City, something I had never attempted to do before. It was in many ways a unique experience that I vividly remember as if it happened only yesterday. It was a hot weekday morning and like everyone else trying to get a visa, I joined the anxious crowd of people standing in line waiting to walk through a metal detector after having been searched by security guards in black from head to toe.



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"Put your keys or anything metallic inside this container!" a frowning security guard yelled at me when it was my turn to walk through the metal detector. I removed a key from my shirt pocket and after walking through the metal detector, took a seat on a bench inside next to anxious interviewees. At the center of what smelled like a freshly painted white wall was a picture of the American Ambassador to the Republic of Boluaké, John J. Williams Jr. There was an American flag in the middle and to the extreme right was a picture of the consul—Ellen Smith, a white female with shoulder-length, red hair and dimples on her cheeks. Embassy staff and interviewees communicated with each through numbered booths with glass windows that prevented direct physical contact. Small, circular microphones were placed on each booth to enable speaking.

The consul buzzed from booth number 4 and a red light lit up. The man seated next to me eagerly stood up.

"I'm sorry Mr. Thomas but we won't be giving you a visa, okay?" I heard the consul say. "Your

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documents just don't look authentic to me. Next in line, please."

I got up and walked to the booth. I slid my acceptance letter, passport and high school transcripts beneath the glass window for the consul to review them. After having carefully examined each of my documents, she slid them back beneath the glass window and I put them into my folder. However, she continued holding on to my passport.

"I've reviewed your documents, Mr. Malinke," Ellen Smith said.

She paused and then looked at me straight in the eyes. I instantly became nervous. The consul cleared her throat:

"This may be your first time here but I'm sure you've heard that this embassy prefers to be cautious with regards to issuing visas."

I felt a cold shiver traveling down my spine.

"But—consider yourself quite lucky. After reviewing your documents, we concluded that you qualify to study in the United States."

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I couldn't possibly describe in words how relieved I felt. My heart could finally start beating normally.

"Come back this afternoon at 4 p.m. prompt to get your passport and pay for your visa," she added.

"Good luck."

She was about to retreat into her back office when I realized I had a question or two to ask her.

"Excuse me please..." I said.

"Yes sir?"

"Where do I pay for my visa and how much would it cost?"

"The fee's 150,000 Naras. You're gonna pay for it at booth number 1. We only accept cash."

"Thank you, thank you very much."

"By the way, one thing..." she added.

I wondered what else she wanted to say.

"Keep in mind that when we issue these visas to international students, we expect them to return and work in their home countries," the consul emphasized.

"Best wishes."

While leaving the embassy, I got involved in a conversation with a visa applicant who by all

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accounts equally seemed to have had a good interview with one of the embassy's representatives, for he wore a broad smile on his face.

"They say we should come back at 4 p.m. If for any reason we happen to be a couple of minutes late, that won't be too bad, would it?" I asked.

"Who told you that? The Americans are very strict. You should be here by 3:45 p.m. at the latest. You might be surprised to arrive here a few minutes after 4 p.m. only to find out that they will be closing in 30 minutes time. I won't risk that if I were you."

Mum and Dad were so pleased to hear the good news when I returned home with Uncle Robert. Uncle Robert sat with us in the living room and each of us celebrated over some drinks-nonalcoholic, of course-and snacks. Dad was so happy that it prevented him from thinking twice about the fact that he had to give me 150,000 Naras to pay for my student visa.

"It must be true what they say-that when one door shuts another door opens up somewhere else," Dad

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said. "This young man has had quite a tough couple of years."

When I returned to the American Embassy in the afternoon, what a more relaxed atmosphere I discovered! The number of people sitting outside waiting to be called in to pay for their visas wasn't even close to half the population I saw standing in line earlier in the morning. It was obvious that the selection process had already been done. At 4 p.m. prompt, embassy staff opened the doors and everyone seated outside began entering. It was a rapid process and before long, I was standing in front of the cashier at booth number 1 to pay for my visa. I was so pleased that chapter was over. After taking my seat on the passenger side of Uncle Robert's car, I looked at my passport. The visa contained my picture, the name of the university I would be enrolling in and an expiration date. Based on the information I read, I was supposed to show up at Rodeoville University no later than August 28 of that year (1999). I also looked through some of the documents in my possession which demonstrated the enormous

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sacrifice my parents had made to get me that far—for instance a copy of an affidavit of support that I had presented to embassy staff, proving that Dad would be able to support me financially and pay for my education for at least two years —and a copy of a bank statement showing that he had at least a certain amount of money in his account.

“Well done John,” Uncle Robert said as he drove. “We are proud of you.”

It dawned on me at that moment more than ever that I was about to embark on a long adventurous, yet unpredictable journey.

**CHAPTER FIVE****Preparing for Transition**

Mum and Dad had given me a hint that I should expect to travel to the United States in early August

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1999 if everything went well. It was the month of July and I was sitting in the living room watching TV. A flurry of thoughts began to go through my mind. I thought about Kenneth and one or two former classmates in the neighbourhood whom I was without a doubt going to miss. Not to mention Emelda. Despite her complicated personality and penchant for unnecessary drama and trouble making, I felt for some reason that I would miss her too. Was it going to be easy for me to make new friends in America? Would I be able to integrate into their culture with relative ease? Those were the questions that preoccupied me during that period. Then Dad opened the gate and moments later he and Mum drove in.

"So...how's our tough, future university student doing?" Mum asked.

"Fine— I'm just getting my mind prepared for this big move, I guess."

Dad put the car keys on the dining table and he and Mum sat with me in the living room.

"We have some information to share with you," Dad said.

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I wondered what other news could possibly come my way at a time when I had completed both the college and visa application processes. In my heart I feared that perhaps Rodeoville University might have suddenly reconsidered its decision to accept me. I listened attentively.

"You won't believe this. The Chief of Calonari, Azafor III is inviting us for a ceremony in two days."

I was shocked because I didn't think my presence was necessary. I shared my thoughts with Dad:

"Okay—but Dad, do I really need to be present? I mean, such ceremonies are often for more elderly people...not those within my age range."

"I'm not finished, John. Listen to me. The ceremony aims to honour you."

"Honour me? But what for? Who am I?"

"Hold on," Dad continued. "The ceremony aims to honour you—and us. The chief has been very pleased with the extent at which our plantation and business has helped the economy of Calonari. It has helped create employment and the varieties of our produce at



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the village market continue to attract people from neighbouring towns."

I was quite surprised. Did this merit a ceremony?

"But if that's the case Dad, don't you think you and Mum should be the ones getting much of the credit for this? You're the ones running the business. It is thanks to you that these positive developments have taken place," I added.

At that point, Mum broke in.

"John, you are right. But we can't take credit for this alone. It was a collective effort. It is only fair that your own contributions should be recognized as well. And without the assistance of the employees—the farmers, the drivers...our business wouldn't have grown to the extent that it has."

She paused for a minute.

"Anyway, one of the main reasons why the chief would like to see you is because when we ran into him, we mentioned that you would soon be leaving the country for college and as a son of Calonari who has contributed to the growth of his village, he felt it

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a good idea to honour you—considering that you may be gone for a while.”

At that moment I was overwhelmed by a sudden feeling of gratitude toward the chief. I wasn't expecting this. Not many people my age get an opportunity to receive such an honour from the ruling authority of their village, except if they had done something truly exceptional.

“I'm sure you know that when a chief decides to honour you or to organize a ceremony on your behalf, you can't refuse to show up. Not only would you risk developing a bad reputation in the village, but the shame and stigma attached to your refusal will trouble you for quite some time,” Dad emphasized.

When they left the living room, I felt very much at a loss for words to express how surprised I was. I wasn't expecting to hear that at all and I wasn't ready to receive such sudden, unwanted attention in front of the entire village community.

On the day of the ceremony, I wore one of my favourite dress shirts and pair of trousers. I

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polished my shoes as best as I could because everything in my opinion had to look perfect. After all, as much as I hoped this wasn't going to be the case, there was a strong possibility that the chief would ask me to stand in front of the crowd and address me publicly. I still was very much amazed that this was happening. It was almost noon and I heard Dad call me from the living room:

"John, are you ready? It's time to go."

"I'm ready Dad," I responded from my room.

When I came, he picked up the remote and turned off the TV set. He was dressed in a dark brown suit, sky blue dress shirt and a black tie. Mum was wearing a green dress and black shoes. They stood up and we locked up the house and got into Dad's car.

"It's a good thing I didn't wear shoes with high heels," Mum said as we rode. "I wouldn't have been able to walk on all those stones."

"What difference would it make anyway?" Dad asked, laughing. "The dusty roads will still get them dirty."

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The sun shone brightly over Calonari's fresh green vegetation. Upon our arrival, we noticed several of the villagers sitting in rows underneath a big canopy in front of the chief's palace. There were three empty chairs placed in front of the rows of seats. As soon as we walked in the direction of the canopy, a man holding a piece of paper signaled us to come toward him. He made us occupy the three front seats. While we sat, I marveled at the chief's palace— a large imposing residence with yellow walls, a big green roof and a garden adorned by multiple flowers. The man who led us to our seats walked past two guards holding rifles standing on both sides of the main entrance to the chief's palace. I suspected he went in to inform the chief of our presence. The guards were dressed in brown berets, short-sleeved white shirts, brown trousers and black boots. The chief's attendants emerged from the residence holding trays of roasted chicken and beef to serve the guests, while others followed from behind with trays of drinks.

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Moments later, a chubby potbellied man wearing a black hat and a woman emerged from the chief's palace. He wore a long, grey traditional garment and the woman accompanying him also had on a similar garment that was orange in colour and a necklace with sparkling golden beads that she wore around her neck. She had fierce eyes and looked very stern. It must have been Chief Azafor III and his wife, because an armed guard followed them closely behind and led them to a podium where there was a long table covered in white cloth and upon which drinks and some of the food had been placed. There were three seats at that table, and the chief and his wife occupied two of them. I wondered who they were reserving the third chair for. The other guard kept watch in front of the gate, firmly holding his rifle.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Chief Azafor III!" the guard following them shouted.

We all stood up. Making a gesture with both hands, the chief ordered us to sit down. I had heard a lot about him, but this was the first time I was getting to see him in person. I began to wonder how

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in the world I would have the courage to stand in front of the chief, let alone feel comfortable dealing with the stares of the entire village. A few minutes after he had sat down, an aide whispered something in the chief's ear. He poured a drink into his glass, drank some of it and then stood up. Afterward, he stepped forward to a microphone on the podium.

"My fellow residents, when you're married to a woman as pretty as the one seated on the table over there and you also happen to be the chief of your village, you better be good when it comes to time management."

The crowd laughed and applauded, and for the first time I saw the chief's wife smile—well, a little bit.

"If I'm not a good husband to my wife, she will run away from me. And if I don't make my presence felt from time to time, strangers might think Calonari does not have a chief!" Azafor III continued.

He paused.

"But the reason I'm speaking to you today people of Calonari, is because a son of our village, John

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Malinke, will soon be leaving us to pursue his education in America. The Malinke family has been instrumental to the development of our local economy. So as an expression of gratitude, I decided to organize a ceremony in their honour. John, come forward, please."

If I had the ability to freeze and turn into a huge block of ice at that moment, I would have done so. My feet felt stiffly cold as I emerged from the crowd and walked toward the podium to meet the chief. As was tradition, I bowed down before him. He tapped me on my shoulder and an aide came forth with a bottle of water, which he gave to the chief. Azafor III put one hand on my bowed head, and holding the bottle with the other, began pouring some of it on me.

"May our ancestors be with you when you travel to that country across the great lakes!" he said.

He poured more water on my head.

"Do great things and represent the Republic of Boluaké and Calonari positively in all your activities."

He poured some more.

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"You may now raise your head and you can sit with us on the high table."

So the third chair at their table was reserved for me? I thought to myself. I never would have imagined that. I didn't feel I deserved such an honour at all. The water was dripping down to my clothes as I walked to the high table, so one of the chief's aides rushed to me with a thick handkerchief that I used to wipe my face, neck and head. I bowed down at the chief's wife as I made my way to my seat and she smiled—well, a little bit.

Moments after the chief and I had sat down, three men with leaves tied around their heads emerged from his palace. Dressed in animal skin and walking barefooted, they stood in front of the podium and faced the crowd, and their bodies seemed to be covered in dust from head to toe. It dawned on me that they were some of the village's traditional dancers. The two men began drumming with ferocity.

After a few minutes, two of Chief Azafor's aides ran toward them with some big, blue plastic bags. One of the men threw his drum on the grass and pulled out a



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yam from each of the plastic bags, while his partner kept on drumming. Both men danced as if they were shivering—their hands, necks, feet and stomachs shook and trembled as if they were suffering from a high fever. One of the chief's aides left the dancers and then returned with a machete. He gave the machete to the dancer who had previously thrown his drum on the grass. The dancer in question threw the yams on the grass.

"Hayaaaaah!! Haaayaaah! Ahanda! Ahanda!" he shouted.

With unbelievable swiftness, he split each yam into two with his machete. After that, he threw the machete on the grass. Then both men proceeded with the trembling dance, picked up the yams with their mouths and dashed into the chief's palace. The crowd applauded. The chief's attendants served one last round of refreshments while a local band played music and the crowd got louder as people began interacting with each other. From my seat, I could see a number of people coming up to greet Mum and Dad. I had to think of something to say to the chief. He had gone

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out of his way to do something so special for me, but breaking the ice with someone of his stature wasn't that easy for a man my age to do, although he seemed like quite a down to earth, friendly person. At least I could have started off by thanking him, I thought.

"Your Majesty, I am very humbled. Thank you so much," I said.

"Young man, come on. You have been a very good example to the youth of Calonari since you started that project with your family." Then he paused as if he were giving it some thought and then continued:

"I hope they learn to follow the example that you have shown. Isn't that so, beloved?" he asked his wife.

Chief Azafor III's wife nodded and for the first time, I saw her smile broadly. It seemed as if she reserved those smiles for moments when the focus wasn't entirely upon her and her husband, for I noticed very few eyes at that moment bothered to pay attention to what was going on at the high table. An aide came along holding a long, big stick which he handed to the chief.

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"Chief you forgot your stick," he said.

"Oh! Thank you, Rudolph. I can't believe I forgot," Azafor III replied.

The chief put the stick on the floor beside his feet. It caught my attention because I noticed he always walked around with that stick wherever he went. I didn't feel courageous enough to do so, but I wanted to ask him why. And I knew I may never again get such an opportunity.

"Uhm...chief?" I said.

"Yes, young man?"

"Do you mind me asking why you always walk around with this big stick?"

"Because I have to be ready to defend myself in case I see Shadow Man."

"But—who is Shadow Man, Your Majesty?"

At that moment the expression on his face changed. He appeared to think deeply, as if recollecting a number of thoughts that made him uncomfortable. Azafor III looked down at his stick as if to reassure himself of its presence. He took a deep breath and said:

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"Eight years ago, one of Calonari's residents went fishing in Zimi city. While fishing, he realized that a strange force kept pulling on his hook. Instead of stopping, the idiot got on his knees and put his head inside the water to find out what was the problem.

"What happened?"

"He fell into the sea and got attacked by an octopus. We never saw him again. He reappeared in the village one night two years later with three legs."

I couldn't believe my ears.

"So what does the stick do?" I inquired.

"Well, he walks like an octopus with his left and right leg spread out and the middle leg sort of crawling crookedly in the center. When he uses his left and right legs to grab his victims' necks, those who have big sticks target his middle foot. All you need to do is hit it hard and he will run away. He only appears at night and has made it a habit to attack the chiefs of this village when they are sleeping."

The chief drank a glass of water. He continued:

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"Two chiefs were dethroned because he defeated them twice. He can follow me to any part of the world. And I have to be honest—I'm worried about you too, John. Now that I have thrown such a huge event in your honour, he might try to attack you in that country across the great lakes."

The chief paused and then quickly drank another glass of water. I could sense an alarming degree of nervousness—as if merely talking to me about this could in itself produce a dangerous consequence.

"But why would Shadow Man want to attack me? I'm just a student. I don't hold an important position."

The chief laughed.

"Just a student, huh? Well, ask Shadow Man if you see him. As for me, if I fail to defend myself when next he appears, I'll lose my title. And you can never tell when he will come."

Chief Azafor III picked up his stick and stood up.

"Okay. I have to leave now. I have an entire village to take care of and another long night to spend worrying if Shadow Man will reappear."

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With those words, he and his wife left the table and two armed guards followed them as they retreated into his palace. The chief's aides equally followed along, while one of the armed guards shut the gate and stood watching the crowd from the yard. I was so grateful to the chief and profoundly humbled that he did such a thing for me. Much of the crowd had begun to leave. Just a few moments later, the guard opened the gate and three aides came out to clear the tables, clean up and take the leftovers.

"From now on you'll be famous in Calonari," Dad joked as he and Mum walked toward me. "Now you see why I said you had to show up? Your absence would have been an embarrassment to the chief and he would not have looked at it very kindly."

"I didn't know the people of Calonari could have so much fun as well sometimes," Mum said while the three of us walked to the car. "I really enjoyed the band and the entertaining atmosphere."

"Well, it all depends on what event the chief of Calonari may be organizing at any given time," Dad said. "Every chief has his own personality. The

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current one is very friendly and approachable. He has a great sense of humour. He only gets into a bad mood when he thinks about the whole Shadow Man issue."

"Yes. He talked to me about it," I added.

"Really? He did?" Mum asked.

I nodded.

"You see? I told you this chief is extremely friendly. Many of his predecessors were so stiff and rarely opened up to the people of their community,"

Dad said.

"But why does his wife seem to be so cold and indifferent toward people?" I asked.

Dad and Mum looked at each other.

"Well son, sometimes people do end up with others who may be quite different from them. For instance, I'm a lot taller than your father—as a matter of fact, significantly taller."

"So what? That didn't stop me from being the greatest wrestler Calonari ever had...nor from marrying you!"

Dad countered.

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"That's exactly what I'm trying to suggest," Mum said. "The only thing that matters is the qualities either person can offer you."

Laughing, we got into the car and made our way back to Barboursville city. As we rode, I felt I clearly understood their point: opposites can and do attract each other.

The days that ensued were characterized by running errands back and forth—buying casual wear such as T-shirts and jeans, shorts, sandals and polo shirts. Not to mention suitcases, shoes and other things. Dad usually drove me to the mall and Mum accompanied us along when she could. The ceremony in Caltonari and my stops at the malls and shopping centers in Barboursville city were sufficient signals to demonstrate that I was in a phase of transition. However, it was difficult for me to accept that fact. I wrestled with it. The excitement over having finally received an acceptance letter from one American university had given way to feelings of sadness and uncertainty. I would soon be leaving my parents whom I was used to



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seeing around me all my life, in order to embark on a journey to a country far away. I would no longer be seeing Kenneth, even though there were quite a few times when I doubted his sincerity as a friend. Furthermore, despite my misunderstanding with Emelda, I had hoped that maybe—just maybe if I were around a bit longer—she and I could have worked things out and who knew? Perhaps we would have kept in touch frequently despite the distance. After all, don't they say out of sight doesn't mean out of mind? I pondered..

One night in mid May 1999, I sat in the living room watching TV with Mum and Dad after dinner. Turning to me, Dad said:

"Well John, your mother and I went to a travel agency in the city yesterday and we were able to pick a date that we felt would work best for you in terms of your journey. If I'm not mistaken, you're expected to report to Rodeoville University before mid to late August, right?"

"Yes Dad."

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"So we got you a ticket for August 11. That's the day you'll be traveling," he said.

"If you get to the US by the 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> of August, that will give you enough time to become familiar with your new school, the city of Philadelphia, and whoever is going to be your roommate, since you will live on campus," Mum added.

I now had a date to refer to and my departure was going to take place in just a matter of several weeks.

"John, if anyone asks you what day you're leaving for the US, you don't tell the person. You know that, right?" Mum asked.

"Yes," I responded.

"Never assume that everyone wishes you well. There have been countless stories of people your age and younger who reveal those things to friends and even some relatives and then-Boom! The night before they were scheduled to travel abroad for college, they went to bed and didn't wake up the next morning. All because some wicked people went to see witches and

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wizards during unholy hours of the night to do them harm," she continued, with a snap of the finger.

"Or invited them out to eat and drink the night before their departure," Dad added. "You are now a grown man. We won't be around you all the time anymore. It's good for you to keep these things in mind and to be very vigilant, because people are wicked and you can't take everyone at face value."

That reminder shook me quite a bit on the inside. It reminded me about the spectacle at the village, where I was asked to stand before the community and the news of my departure was announced against my will. How could I possibly have known who in the crowd might not have been happy about this development and perhaps silently wished me ill? But then, Mum said something that made me feel at peace:

"We, the Malinke family, trust in God Almighty. As long as God is with us, no one can be against you, John. No matter what any evil people may plan, they will fall into their own traps. Remember to always pray before you sleep and to ask God for His divine protection. Read your Bible, read your Psalms. As

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long as you continue to do so and put all your trust in Him, you need not worry about anything. God is our rock and our refuge. His power is absolute and unlimited."

And indeed that night after I prayed, I slept without a worry, for I felt the peace of God within me.

It was an afternoon two months later (early August to be precise) and I stood in front of our house thinking about just how quickly time had gone by. Moments later, I heard someone call my name. It seemed as if the person was standing in front of our gate. It was Kenneth's voice. I recognized it.

"So you wanted to sneak out of the country without even telling me goodbye?" he asked, as I let him in.

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?" I responded.

He laughed, took off his glasses, blew a few puffs of air at them and then put them back on.

"You think I don't know that you're supposed to be leaving the country? That you were received like a

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prince by the chief of Calonari? I thought we were friends. How could you keep that from me?"

I was at a loss for words. I began to wonder just what information—and how much of it— I should give Kenneth. There were quite a few times when I had had experiences that caused me to question his ability to keep sensitive information private.

"Yes Kenneth, I'm traveling to America for college. I don't think I'm ready to leave my friends right now, but there's not much I can do," I answered.

Kenneth was silent for a moment, and then he nodded his head.

"I'm going to miss you—that's for sure," he said.

Was he being sincere? I had no clue. I preferred to remain silent.

"So when exactly are you leaving? It would be nice for us to at least sit down somewhere over a meal and a drink before you travel. Don't you think?" he proposed.

Immediately, I pictured Mum and Dad repeating what they both had said to me in the living room a couple of days ago:

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*Never assume that everyone wishes you well. There are countless stories of people your age who revealed these things to friends and relatives before they traveled and then unfortunately didn't wake up the next morning after having been invited out for food and drinks.*

Did Kenneth perhaps have a secret plan? Why did he want to know when I was scheduled to leave?

"I don't yet know the exact date, Kenneth. I still have a lot of paper work that is being processed. The American Embassy says there are several of my files that are behind schedule. So I honestly have no idea. But if I do, I'll let you know."

"Okay. I see," he said, although from the look in his eyes and his tone I suspected that he didn't believe me.

While walking him out, I asked him about Emelda.

"I haven't seen her. Have no idea if she's around. Why?"

"Don't you think it would be nice for me to let her know I may soon be traveling?"

Kenneth laughed.

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"John, John, John. You never change, do you? I can't believe you're still dying for her after everything she's done to you. How are you sure she hasn't heard about the ceremony that was held to honour you in your village?"

"I don't know. Maybe she did."

"That's beside the point, John. Think! Think! If she cared about you she would have sent me to ask if it was true that you're traveling soon. She hasn't and I'm sure she has heard the rumours. See the clues, John. See the clues!"

I was starting to get a little irritated.

"Kenneth, I don't understand why you always seem to get so worked up whenever I ask you about Emelda. You always make it seem as if you have more of a problem with her than I do...and I just don't get it!"

"Hey John, look—I've known you for many years and if I see that you're about to walk into a fire—I have to prevent you from getting yourself burned. Don't you get it?"

I reflected on his words for some time, but I didn't want it to always appear as if he was deciding for

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me. It was the same Kenneth who persuaded me to show up at the Aquatic night club several months ago against my will. As a result I ended up in a fierce argument with Emelda and almost got involved in a fight with the man whom she was dancing with. And Kenneth almost got himself beaten up. That incident constituted the primary source for my tense relationship with her. There were quite a few times when I regretted having accepted to go to the Aquatic with Kenneth that night. I would have preferred staying home not being aware Emelda was in there dancing with someone else. But then again, what if I happened to run into her someday on the street walking with the man she had been dancing with that night? It would have been difficult for me to take. So in a sense, perhaps it was a good thing nonetheless that I showed up there that night.

"Kenneth, do you have some time? Could you accompany me to see Emelda now?"

"What? What did you just say?"

"I would like to see Emelda. I need to see her."

"Please tell me you're joking."



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"I'm not, Kenneth. I'm not. Listen...you know I'm going to be traveling soon. I may not get a chance to see her before I leave."

Kenneth frowned, but in the reluctant manner in which he nodded, I discerned that he seemed to conclude there was some sense in what I was saying.

"Okay. This will be the last time I accompany you there. I hate being made to walk all over the place for no good reason. Makes my back hurt even more. I don't like it."

We left for Emelda's home and this time around we were quite fortunate in the sense that she was outside raking some leaves in their yard. Kenneth didn't have to go through the usual procedure on my behalf. He often complained that he no longer felt welcome at Emelda's and that her parents didn't like it when guests and family friends saw him coming in to ask for their daughter. Some had apparently begun inquiring privately if he was her boyfriend and consequently, Emelda discouraged him from showing up at their home as often as he used to.

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"She's seen you. Go and do your thing," Kenneth said. "I'll stand far off in the corner where I can safely hide myself. I don't want to deal with more unexpected problems."

I stood beside their gate and I could see Emelda putting her rake aside and walking in my direction. She was wearing a purple dress and black sandals, her brown complexion looking as radiant as ever.

"John! How have you been? I didn't know you were coming. Nice surprise," Emelda said, opening the gate. "So what's new?"

"Well, not much. Why do you ask that? Have you heard anything?"

Emelda looked down for a moment as if she was reflecting on something, then she looked up at me and shook her head.

"No, no. It's okay. I haven't heard anything."

I didn't believe her. I had the feeling she must have heard about my imminent journey and that she probably wanted me to confirm it. Before I knew it, I was holding her hand. I seemed to have momentarily forgotten about the bitter argument we had had a few

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months ago. We looked into each other's eyes. It was obvious she knew what I was going to say before I even opened my mouth. And I too could guess what she was thinking. Tears slowly began running down her cheeks.

"You've heard it Emelda, I know. Everything about the reception at the village—and that I'm supposed to be traveling. Yes, it's true."

She nodded.

"Wow. So you're really leaving, huh?"

"Yes."

"When exactly are you traveling?"

At that point I turned around to see if Kenneth was nearby. He was standing a safe distance away. I whispered:

"Listen, Emelda. I haven't told anyone what day I'm supposed to be leaving. Please promise me that you'll keep it a secret. Do you promise?"

"I do, John. Don't you trust me?"

Did she really merit my trust? Did I necessarily have to tell her? Did I want to tell her? I took a deep breath.

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"Trust you? Well, I trusted you and I ran into you dancing at the Aquatic with another man."

"My dear, you still haven't put that behind you? Everybody makes mistakes. That was so long ago."

"I know but you hurt my feelings, Emelda. You really did."

After I had said so, she stopped holding my hand. I didn't want things to start getting tense. I honestly would have loved to patch things up with her so that we could forget about the past and spend a bit of time together before I left.

"Please Emelda...I don't want us to fight anymore. You know how I've always felt about you. I wish my journey could even be delayed so I could spend more time with you. I feel as if we never really got to know each other well enough. I'm leaving on August 11."

I wasn't sure what took hold of me at that moment but before I knew it, I was stretching my hand out toward hers. She held it and pulled me toward her. We kissed each other's lips.

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"John, we are standing on the street," she said, becoming cognizant once again that there were people walking past us and that where we stood wasn't exactly the most private place.

"I know... but I couldn't resist. And I see you couldn't either," I teased.

Emelda smiled and she put her arm around my shoulder. We began walking toward the area where Kenneth stood. He was fuming.

"Kenneth! I didn't know you were around the corner. Why didn't you come with John?"

"How can you ask me that as if you don't know the reason why? Thanks to the two of you for making me turn into a public spectacle on the street—cab drivers, motorists, pedestrians—everyone staring at me because I look different. I've had enough!"

"Relax, Kenneth. Please calm down," I said.

"Look. I've been patient enough. Can we leave now, please?"

The three of us began walking. At some point, Emelda stopped.

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"Well John, I hope you'll say goodbye before you leave," she said. "I should be returning home right about now."

"I will...I promise."

Emelda said bye to Kenneth, we hugged each other and she left.

There was quite some silence while Kenneth and I walked. Then turning to me, he said:

"I see you're falling for her again. You never listen."

I didn't answer. He continued:

"You promised to say goodbye to her before you leave. So she knows what day you're leaving? I thought you said you didn't know the exact date."

Kenneth's question put me in a difficult situation. It made me wonder for a brief moment if I should have told Emelda anyway. But to prove that I trusted her, I felt I didn't have much of a choice but to do so. Nonetheless, I didn't want Kenneth to know that I had told her what day I was leaving.

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"No Kenneth, I didn't." "How could I possibly have done that when I don't even have that information myself?"

Kenneth was silent for some time.

"I don't know why, but I keep getting the feeling that you're hiding that information from me," he said, adjusting his glasses when we arrived at the entrance to their house.

"I'm not keeping anything from you, Kenneth. Please believe me."

"Well, let your conscience be your judge. Okay...I'm tired. I don't know if I can risk trying to sit right now anyway. My back hurts so much already. I may be forced to keep standing for some time. I beg you John; please don't ask me to accompany you anymore when you want to see Emelda. I really dislike going there."

"Kenneth, I apologize for the inconvenience I may have put you through today. It wasn't intentional. But I plead with you to accompany me just one last time to go and see her before I leave," I responded.

"No! Forget it! I'm not going to do that."

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"Kenneth, please. I beg you."

"No!"

"Please."

"No."

"Just come with me one last time, I beg you."

"All right...all right. I'll think about it."

Kenneth and I parted ways with me being somewhat confident that he had taken my plea into consideration. And yet the irony was that as much as he suspected I was keeping the details of my travel plans away from him, so did I wonder at times if I indeed knew him well enough.

The early hours of August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1999 started off just like an ordinary day. I woke up in the morning and made my bed. Afterward, I took a shower and got dressed. I went to the living room and set up the dining table for breakfast. I put bread and some honey, milk and cereal. After that I went to the kitchen and boiled some water for tea. When I had finished, I went out to the front porch to sweep and then I sat in the living room and turned on the TV



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set to a low volume, flipped through several channels and stumbled across a program on a British channel that was talking about some survival strategies adopted by tourists and immigrants in order to adapt to climatic conditions different from those they were accustomed to within their home countries. It was interesting to watch the reporter interviewing individuals who seemed to represent various nationalities and ethnicities as they walked on a busy street in London. Questions centered on what the interviewees did to keep warm in winter and how they endured through the brutal heat of summer.

"When it's really hot in the summer I make sure I dress kinda light and that I drink lots of fluids—juice, water—stuff like that. If I'm home I make sure I turn on the fan or the A.C. and when I'm outside I make sure I stay under a shade," said one man who identified himself as an American citizen visiting London.

I wondered how hot it could have been in the city of Philadelphia at that moment.

Moments later, Dad emerged.

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"Hey! How's our traveler doing this morning?"

"Good Morning, Dad. I'm doing fine. Time went by so fast; I guess this day came a bit sooner than I anticipated."

Dad took a seat on the chair facing me.

"Son, relax! Be excited! You're about to take a big step in your life. Open up your mind and your eyes. Don't close yourself to anything. There's a realm of opportunity out there. See the world! Spread out your wings!"

"Is someone feeling sad out there or something?" said Mum, entering the living room from the hallway.

"No. Not at all, Mum. I was simply telling Dad that this day came rather quickly."

"Let's go to the table for breakfast," she said.

There was silence at table. I sensed that although Mum and Dad had done their best to lift up my spirits, it was beginning to dawn on them that in a couple of hours it would be just the two of them left at home. I knew I would miss them greatly, but as Dad had said, the time had come for me to make a big step in my life—to discover the other world that was out

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there and determine where I might fit in. Although I was going to be far away from them, I knew I could always count on them for their advice and support.

"Well...so do you plan to say bye to your friends before you leave?" Mum asked.

Nodding, I answered, "Yes."

"Then don't put it off for too long. You know your flight is at 6:30 p.m. and that you have to be at the airport at least two hours before then. Your friends may have their own plans. As soon as you get a chance early this afternoon you should set some time aside to see them," Dad said.

He drank some of his tea and then asked:

"Have you finished packing?"

"Yes I have," I said.

"Okay that's good...very good. It's not good to wait until the last minute to do these things. Fool around like that and you could miss your flight."

At midday I walked around our garden and took a look at the flowers shining brightly underneath the sunlight. Emelda liked flowers and I thought it would

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be a good idea to show up at her house and surprise her with a nice one. But I didn't feel comfortable at the thought of walking on the street with a flower in my hand all the way to her house. It would have looked odd and I didn't want to deal with any funny stares. I had to think about something. Kenneth was probably my best bet, but I wasn't sure if he would be home, since I hadn't told him when exactly I would be traveling. I thought I should take a chance and call him on the phone, so I went to the living room and dialed his home number. A woman picked up the phone. I recognized her voice. It was Kenneth's Mum.

"Mrs. Ikini?"

"Yes?"

"Hello. This is John. Might Kenneth be home?"

"I don't know. Just hold on for a minute. Let me see if he's in his room."

From the phone, I could hear her yell:

"Kenneth! Kenneth! John is on the phone."

Just a moment later, Kenneth picked up the phone.

"What's the deal, John? Are you leaving today or something? I'm just across the street and you can't

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even stop by to say farewell to me and my parents before you go?"

"It's a long story, Kenneth. I won't have enough time to talk about all of this on the phone. Yes, it has to do with my journey but I was wondering if you could please help me just one last time. I need to see you urgently. If you could come to our house as soon as possible, I would really appreciate it. Does the driver you hired a long time ago still work with you people?"

"Anderson? Yes, he does. But wait, John...what are you trying to suggest? Does this have anything to do with Emelda? ...because if it does, you can count me out immediately."

"Please Kenneth, I can't tell you what this is about at the moment. But if you could please come with the driver as soon as possible, I would truly be grateful."

Kenneth sighed.

"All right, I'll see. I just hope it doesn't end up being a waste of my time."

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It didn't take very long for Kenneth and Anderson to pull up to our house. Opening the gate, I noticed that the car was different from the one Anderson had been driving previously. It was a red Honda. Kenneth sat behind as he usually did, and I saw that he was slouching forward toward the right passenger seat, probably because of the pressure on his back. After we had greeted each other, I waved at Anderson and he opened the door and tried to get out of the car, possibly to walk toward me and shake my hand.

"Anderson, stay in the car! Stay in the car!" Kenneth shouted.

Anderson got back in the car and slammed the door.

I was disappointed to notice that some aspects of Kenneth's character had remained unchanged. Turning toward our living room window, I could see Dad looking at us through the curtains. He shook his head and retreated, probably amazed at the manner in which Kenneth talked to Anderson. I informed Kenneth about the reason why I needed his help.

"There we go again. Emelda. Emelda. Always Emelda, right? I'm sure if you could find someone else to

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help you with this you would have snuck to the airport without even telling me goodbye," he said.

"No. That's not the case, Kenneth. Why do you always think like that? Imagine the stares I would receive if people saw me walking on the street for quite a distance with a long flower in my hand. It would have seemed very strange to them and become open to all sorts of interpretation."

Kenneth nodded.

"I disagree with the reason why you need my help, but I can understand your point. I'm sad that you're leaving but I'm tired of being your contact person for Emelda."

"Thanks for understanding, Kenneth. I appreciate it."

"I wish I didn't have to help you with this but since you're leaving, I don't have much of a choice," he said, shaking his head.

I chose one of the most radiant red roses I could find in our garden, and Kenneth and I got into the car.

"Anderson, drive to Emelda's," Kenneth ordered.

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When we arrived at Emelda's, she was holding two bags which seemed to contain groceries and was about to open the gate that led into their home. When the Honda pulled over, she turned around.

"You can get out of the car and speak with her. I think it would be better if I park the car about a block or two away," Anderson said, in one of the rare occasions that I got to hear his voice.

"Thank you Mr. Anderson," I said, appreciating the fact that he understood and respected that I would need some privacy.

I got out of the car and Mr. Anderson drove off. My eyes met with Emelda's and as soon as she saw me holding the flower, her eyes became watery. She dropped her grocery bags. I stretched out my arm and gave her the flower and she took it...very slowly, as if reluctantly. Her eyes were filled with tears. She hugged me, holding the flower in one hand.

"So this is it, huh? You're leaving today?" she asked, looking straight into my eyes.

I nodded. I was so overwhelmed with emotion that I could barely speak.



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"You're...you're going to come to the country on vacation sometimes, right?"

"I don't know, Emelda. Maybe...but it's going to cost a lot of money to be traveling back and forth. My parents have already had to make a tremendous sacrifice to get me to this point...so I really don't know."

We looked at each other for a moment, and then gave each other a tight hug once again.

"I hope you'll keep that flower. Whenever you see it, I hope you'll remember me," I said.

"I can't forget you, John. I will keep you in my mind all the time," she sobbed. "You're going to be calling from time to time, right?"

"I'll do my best...whenever I can. Take care, Emelda. I'll miss you."

I began walking down the block to where Kenneth and Anderson were waiting. I looked behind and saw Emelda picking up her grocery bags. She held the two bags in one hand and appeared to be wiping tears from her eyes with another. Seconds later, she opened the gate and went in. That was the first time I had seen her

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demonstrate such sensitivity. Ever since I knew her, she often came across as cold and aloof with an amazing care-free attitude. I wondered what could have happened had I had just a bit more time with her before I left. Perhaps we both could have helped each other become better individuals. I wondered why destiny had decided to separate us at that particular moment, but there was nothing I could do about it.

"I hope you have finished," Kenneth said, leaning on the Honda. "I can't sit in the car for too long because my back would hurt and I can't lean on the car or remain standing for too long either. And I'm going through all of this because of you and Emelda."

"Come on Kenneth, why are you acting as if you don't know how important it was for me to see her today?"

The two of us got into the car and Anderson drove off. When the car arrived in front of our home, I realized I would have to brace myself for another emotional moment. This time, I had to say goodbye to Kenneth, someone whom I considered a friend and confidant for so many years.

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"John, I guess the time has come for us to part as well," he said.

"I don't even know what to say. I will miss you man," I answered as we both got out of the car. "Thank you for being a good and faithful friend to me for all these years."

"Don't mention. Keep in touch and call often when you get there. Write sometimes if you can," he said.

"Certainly...I will."

Kenneth looked at me for a brief moment without saying a word. Adjusting his glasses seconds later, he said:

"But there's something I've been dying to say to you that I think I better get out before you leave. It's been itching deep inside."

I became a bit nervous because Kenneth could be quite unpredictable. I wondered what he was trying to get at.

"Well, go ahead. I'm listening..." I replied, despite not knowing what to expect.

"Are you sure you want to hear this?" he asked.

"Look Kenneth, it's a free world. Please go ahead."

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"All right, since you insist."

He cleared his throat.

"Prince of the city!" he yelled.

We both laughed hard.

"I tell you, I have no clue how long it's going to take before I get a chance to say that to you again.

I just had to."

"I understand. As much as I hate that label, you're excused just this time. Don't you ever call me that on the phone," I warned, laughing.

"Well, I can't promise you that because your absence will only make me miss doing so."

"Kenneth, can you promise me one thing?"

"Sure. What is that?"

"Please look after Emelda. Take care of her and if you get to hear anything regarding her social life, don't hesitate to let me know when I call or write. If she decides to move on it's important for me to know so that I don't sit there in a country far away assuming that we still have a relationship."

"Okay— I could do that...I could do that. It's not a problem."

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"Goodbye, my friend. Take care of you," I said, shaking his hand.

"You too," he said. "You know I prefer not to hug anyone because of my back problem. And even if I didn't have one, you're a little too taller than I am."

I tried not to laugh.

"Kenneth, will you stop talking like that someday? I hope you change someday."

Anderson quickly got out of the car and walked toward me.

"Have a safe journey. All the best," he said, rushing back into the Honda as if afraid that Kenneth would have yelled at him for coming out.

He didn't even give me a chance to respond, so I walked to the driver's side of the car and said:

"My best wishes to you too, Mr. Anderson. Thank you for everything."

Kenneth and Anderson rode off.

"John! John! Are you almost ready?" Dad shouted from the living room at about 3 p.m.

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I came out of my room pulling my luggage along, with my traveling bag hanging on my shoulder.

"I'm ready. I finished packing. I think I took everything I need."

"That's good, then. Remember I told you we have to be at the airport two hours ahead of your scheduled flight, so we should leave the house in about twenty minutes. How come you chose to wear an African outfit? Don't you think it will make you stand out a bit too much when you get to Philadelphia?" Dad asked.

"Well, I wanted to wear something that could showcase what part of the world I come from."

"I see. That is good, then. It's important to be proud of your roots. At least the outfit looks light. Don't forget you're getting there in the middle of summer, so be careful not to wear clothes that are too thick."

Mum joined us moments later.

"Ohh...look at our tough first year university student," she said, giving me a hug. "Uncle Robert called when you were out. He said he would have liked

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to accompany you and your father to the airport but that he has a meeting to attend at 4 p.m. and wasn't sure when it would end. But he wishes you a safe journey and says you should of course keep in touch by calling or writing whenever you can. I would have loved to come along too, but Minetta's coming over."

"Were you able to say goodbye to any of your friends—Kenneth and others?" Dad asked.

"I did. It was hard for me to say goodbye."

"Keep in touch with them. It's good to maintain those good relationships. Life is like a circle. You never know who could help you tomorrow," he emphasized.

Then he looked at his watch.

"It's 3:18. We better start leaving," Dad said.

Mum gave me a tight hug.

"Have a safe journey, son. Your father and I are proud of you. When you get to America, you will see all kinds of things and experience a lot of temptation. It is in many ways a country of extremes. But hold on to the values with which your father and I raised you and stay away from trouble as much as

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you can," she said. "We know that by the grace of God, you will make it."

"Thank you so much, Mum. Stay well. I will miss you and Dad so much."

It was about 3:28 p.m. when Dad and I got into his car. He drove fast, but carefully.

"I hope we get there at least by 4:30 p.m.," he said.

The ride was smooth until we arrived at an intersection and got blocked due to the heavy volume of traffic. Dad honked and yelled, but we remained stuck in the same position.

"I can't believe it! There's hardly ever that much traffic on this road. What happened today? It's as if these motorists were all aware we needed to be at the airport within a certain timeframe," he said, hitting the steering with his fist.

Commercial motor bike riders carrying passengers in the back seat weaved in between the long line of cars and rode past them, one after the other.

"Look at those idiots," Dad said, pointing at them. "They don't think. Whenever one sees the smallest opening in between cars, he just goes. If I had moved



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by just an inch, I would have hit him. Then the next thing you know, his friends would show up and surround the car to confront us.”

It was a challenging moment. I didn't want to arrive at the airport late and be informed that I wouldn't be allowed to check in. If there weren't any other flights to my intended destination within that same week, things were going to become a lot more complicated.

The motorist ahead of us slowly moved forward as traffic on the road timidly began to flow, increasing the space between our car and hers. A cab driver who had dropped off some passengers on the side of the street suddenly tried to enter into our lane without signaling. Dad honked hard:

PIIIIOONG! PIIIOOOONG!

“Unbelievable! Unbelievable! He just enters without even looking! These fellows are something else,” he shouted.

Realizing that Dad wasn't going to let him proceed, the cab driver let us go past him before merging into our lane. A few minutes later, traffic finally began

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to flow more smoothly and Dad and I felt more relieved than we possibly could have expressed in words. I looked at my watch and the time read 4:03 p.m.

When we arrived at Barboura City International Airport, it was a mad dash. Dad and I ran as fast as we could. Passengers stood in line, their luggage placed on the floor beside them. Ticket agents and travelers walked past each other and we could hear someone announcing the different flights through a loud speaker. We stopped running so that we could listen. Moments later, we got the information we needed:

"Mesdames et Messieurs, tous les passagers pour le vol 740 de Barboura City à Philadelphie en provenance de Paris sont priés de se présenter au terminal D6. Ladies and gentlemen, all passengers of flight 740 traveling from Barboura City to Philadelphia after a brief stopover in Paris are kindly asked to begin lining up at terminal D6," the announcer said, in French and English.

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We looked around for a sign of the airline company with which I would be travelling.

"That is it," Dad said, pointing. "Air La Colombe-gosh...I haven't had to run so fast in years. I hope I don't get a heart attack," Dad said as he gasped for breath.

At terminal D6, the travelers were already checking in their luggage. I waited patiently for my turn behind a long line of people. Dad accompanied me to the counter, where I was asked to present my ticket and passport. I lifted up my suitcase and put it on the scale so that it could be weighed.

"Lucky man! If it weighed just a little more you would have had to pay extra or take off some items from your luggage," the ticket agent said.

I paid for my luggage and then he tied up an Air La Colombe tag around the handle of my suitcase and I was left with just my hand luggage or traveling bag.

"Well, son...this is the moment," Dad said. "Take care of yourself out there. Study hard, relax and have fun from time to time but always remember to be careful."

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"I will, Dad. I promise," I answered, as we hugged each other. "I will miss you and Mum so much."

"Bye, John. Call when you get there, of course."

"Without a doubt, Dad. Take care."

As Dad turned around to leave, something came to mind.

"Dad..."

"Yes?"

"Can you please make a promise?"

"About what?"

"Well...you know, no more beer—no more alcohol, I hope. I wouldn't want to hear from so far away that you have gone down that path once again—watching you struggle with that was very difficult for Mum and me. The expression on his face reflected a lot of emotion.

"You have my word, son. I promise. You have my word."

I was deeply moved. Dad and I said goodbye to each other again and then I took the escalator to the lounge that served the various terminals. There were several stands where snacks and various refreshments were served. Barbours City International Airport was

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probably no match to any airport in Europe or America in terms of space and logistics, but nonetheless it provided fairly sufficient and basic services to its clients. I bought a sandwich and a bottle of juice from one of the stands and watched travelers walking to and fro as I took a seat in the cafeteria section. After eating, I went for a walk around the respective terminals. There were only four of them, which was considerably smaller compared to what I imagined one could find in a bigger airport in Europe or America—at least based on what I had seen on television.

At about 6:10 p.m., I heard an announcement asking all those who would be on my flight to begin lining up to board the plane. I stood in line and when my turn came forth, I presented my ticket to one of the flight attendants.

"*Merci Monsieur, ayez un bon voyage,*" he said.

I got into the plane, put my hand luggage in the overhead compartment and took a seat. The view from where I sat was excellent. It was by the window and it was great to get to see the technicians, controllers and engineers examining the plane before

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it took off. Almost everyone had someone seating next to them except me. I wondered if anyone would show up later and take the seat beside me or not. For quite some time I didn't think anyone would...until a balding white male who looked confused came to my section and then looked around. He looked very frail and his skin was almost as white as powder. With his eyes wide open, almost as if gouging out, he turned left, then right; left, then right.

"I'm sorry sir, are you okay? Can I help you?" asked a flight attendant.

He didn't even have the common courtesy to respond. The flight attendant must have felt disrespected. He looked at his plane ticket and to my greatest surprise, walking as stiffly as a ghost in a cartoon, sat down next to me. I wouldn't have thought that was where he would end up. By every indication he seemed like a strange man and I wished I could ask to change my seat but I knew I needed to have a good reason to do so. I simply tried as hard as I could to avoid making any eye contact with him and I hoped he wasn't going to do anything silly during our flight. The

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plane took off not too long after we had all watched the routine video on what to do in case of an emergency. While in the air, I imagined Dad was probably at the airport looking up at the sky and saying in his heart:

*Farewell, son. Have a safe flight...good luck and take care.*

**CHAPTER SIX****An African Student in Philadelphia**

The man who gave me a ride in a cab when I arrived at Philadelphia International Airport portrayed himself to be such a polite and professional individual that I never would have imagined for a second that he was who he turned out to be. I began wondering if I needed to be extremely careful and distant with almost everyone who came my way. I made my way through the isolated street corner and suddenly found myself on a road with heavy traffic.

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It seemed to be a highway of some sort because the road was divided into four lanes—two lanes for cars going in one direction, and two other lanes for those going in the opposite direction. I didn't know what to do and I was so scared upon noticing the speed at which motorists were going. Everyone seemed to be doing at least 80 kilometers regardless of whether or not they drove a truck, a bus or a regular-sized car. As they sped off, all I heard was: Whooooooossh! Whooooooossh! Whooooooossh!

I wasn't sure what in the world I was going to do. There I was in a country where I knew no one and had no idea who to contact or where to go to for help. Confused and overwhelmed by panic, I pulled my suitcase along and stood in the middle of the road—in between the two lanes on both sides—and waved at oncoming traffic with my left hand in an attempt to get someone's attention. All of them honked and avoided me. One motorist driving a sports car slowed down when he approached me. It seemed as if he had wanted to make a U-turn or left turn and that I appeared to be preventing him from doing so.



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"Yo! Get off the road, man! Have you lost your damn mind? You wanna get run over?" he yelled.

That made me panic even more and I noticed that the outfit I was wearing seemed to attract as much attention as what I was doing. I got the sense that everyone driving through that highway perceived me to be some immigrant who had just come and who, if he hadn't lost his mind, must have been very confused. I noticed a bridge on the right hand side of the road, not far from the area where I was standing. However, getting there implied that I would have first had to make my way past each of the cars flying toward me at incredible speed. I stayed put in the same spot and took advantage when I realized that the next group of cars advancing toward me seemed quite far off. Yet, they were coming on so fast that it was going to be extremely risky and most of all stupid for me to think I would be able to beat them in terms of speed. So I waved both hands in their direction and then stood with both arms spread out wide. I was confident the oncoming group of motorists had noticed me sufficiently enough from a distance and that my

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posture could not have left them indifferent. Just as I had anticipated, they stopped...but not without honking and yelling at me as loudly as they could, probably wondering if I had lost my mind.

I took advantage of that moment and got on the bridge, pulling my suitcase along as I ran. I had no idea where I was going to, but I kept on running. Within just a few minutes, a white police cruiser with flashing blue lights pulled up and parked beside the bridge. The officer who dashed out was a black male wearing sunglasses and sky blue shirt with long sleeves over a pair of navy blue trousers. There was a golden pin attached to his shirt pocket and a gun in his holster. He came after me with speed:

"1322...I'm on the bridge," I heard him say, in a portable radio.

It dawned on me that continuing to run would have been the wrong, although I wasn't sure if the officer in question had come to arrest or assist me. I turned around and began running slowly toward him.

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"Hold it! Hold it right there! Don't move! Put your hands where I can see them," he shouted, with his arm on his holster and ready to pull out his gun.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot!" I responded, putting my hands up.

I dropped my suitcase.

"Officer, I need your help. I just arrived in Philadelphia and got robbed in a cab."

"Hey slow down, buddy. You're talking a bit too fast for me, all right? I can't quite understand you. You're making me nervous. Spread out your arms and turn around for me, all right?"

I obeyed the officer and turned around with my back facing him. Still pointing his gun, he searched my pockets. When he had finished searching them, he put his gun back into his holster, perhaps feeling a little less suspicious of me at that moment. I turned around and faced him. The police officer said:

"Sir, a call came into our precinct identifying you as a suspicious person on a bridge. Also, you were standing in the middle of the road on a busy intersection. You got some explaining to do, buddy."

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"I...I wasn't sure what to do. I...I just got out of a plane. I took a cab... and the driver brought me here. Then...then I got robbed. He brought me here and someone emerged from a dark corner and pointed a gun at me. I need help...I don't know who to turn to."

"Slow down, slow down. I'm trying to make some sense out of what you're saying, man. If I got it right you took a cab and got robbed. That's it?"

"Yes," I answered, nodding.

"What's in your suitcase?"

"How can you ask me such a question? What do travelers put inside their suitcases?"

"Open the suitcase!"

I took out a key from my trousers' right pocket and stooping down, used it to unlock my suitcase.

The officer did a thorough search of the contents of my suitcase. Finding nothing suspicious or harmful, he got back on his feet and then took out a pen and notebook from his shirt pocket.

"What's your name— where are you from and what's your intended destination?" he asked.

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"My name is John...John Malinke. I am from the Republic of Boluaké in Central Africa. I just got accepted at Rodeoville University. That is my intended destination.

"Come again. Bolua...what?"

"Boluaké. B-o-l-u-a-"

"All right, all right. I think I got it."

When the officer finished writing in his notebook, he looked up at me and said:

"Tell you what, buddy. You're gonna follow me to the station and make a formal statement."

"Make a statement at a police station? I've never had to do that before. Do you mean to say you consider me a suspect? No— I'm not coming with you. I don't want to hear, I said."

I turned away from him and tried to walk toward the direction in which I had been running. He grabbed my arm.

"Hey! Hey! I'm here to help you, man. All right? Relax. Take it easy."

I turned around and faced him and he let go of my arm.

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"Now...I imagine you had a pretty long journey. Getting to a foreign country and dealing with the experience you had cannot be easy. But you need to trust and work with me so we could track down the guys who robbed you and have someone drop you off at school. So once again Mr. Malinke, follow me, please."

I was moved by the officer's seemingly genuine intent to help. But as we walked to the police cruiser, I couldn't resist asking him a question that quite bothered me:

"You kept asking me to slow down because you were trying to understand what I was saying. What language did it appear as if I was speaking? Chinese?"

The officer didn't respond. When he got to the police cruiser, he opened the back seat door and asked me to get in.

"No, I'm not going to sit there," I said.

"What's your problem?" he asked.

"The back seat is often reserved for suspects and criminals. I'm not one. Imagine what a spectacle it will be if I sit behind there in this outfit.

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Americans walking on the street will be wondering what sort of suspect you have picked up this time around."

The officer slammed the door.

"Look, man. I've been extremely patient with you. I honestly don't give a damn where you choose to sit. Now get in the freaking car and let's move!"

I put my traveling bag and suit case in the trunk of his car and sat next to him in the front passenger seat as we began making our way to the police station.

It was a tense ride. The officer didn't say a word to me while he drove and I didn't say anything either— although I looked at him every now and then to see if that could get him to say a word or two. He kept looking straight and occasionally to his left most of the time— avoiding at all costs to look in my direction— and not smiling a single time. I didn't want to be the one who would break the silence because I got a sense he had had enough of the arguments we got involved in since our first

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encounter. The only time he spoke was when we finally arrived at the station.

"All right...here we are. Follow me," he said, parking the car and turning off the engine.

It looked like a fairly big police station somewhere in the heart of downtown Philadelphia. While we climbed up the flight of stairs that led to the main entrance, I realized we seemed to be getting quite a lot of attention from other officers who passed us by during their descent. From the moment I got robbed and made my way through that busy highway to arrive at the bridge where the police man met me, I couldn't help thinking that when most people looked at me they saw a man lost and confused— someone who had been uprooted from his comfort zone and who suddenly found himself in a strange land. And in my opinion my outfit, as unique as it was, had quite a lot to do with it. I couldn't resist making that remark to the officer:

"Have you seen the way your colleagues are looking at me? Could you imagine how worse it would have been if I had to ride in the back seat of your car in my



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outfit until we arrived here? Everyone walking on the streets of Philadelphia would have been staring at me!"

Again, the officer said nothing.

When we got to the lobby, he waved at one of his fellow officers seated at the front desk.

"Hey. How you doing, Terry?" she said as we walked past her.

That moment made me recall I didn't even know the officer's name right up till then. I noticed several officers walking to and fro, some holding sheets of paper, others sitting on desks talking to people on the phone while taking notes, and others dressed in plain clothes emerging from what looked like interrogation rooms. Officer Terry led me into an office and told me to take a seat.

"Wait here for a few minutes," he said, and shut the door. I looked around. There were two empty seats facing me and a long, dark brown desk which looked freshly polished. Upon it was a telephone, an empty plastic cup, a collection of pens and several papers in folders. On the wall I saw a picture of a man

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wearing a formal police uniform— a navy blue jacket with a black hat and black tie over a white shirt. Moments later, a white male opened the door. I recognized him as the man whose picture hung on the wall. He wore a white long-sleeved shirt, a red tie and a pair of khaki trousers.

"Mr. John Malinke, I suppose?" he said, stretching out his arm to greet me.

"Yes I am," I responded, standing up to shake his hand.

"That's okay. You don't need to stand up...nice to meet you."

He sat down on the seat directly facing me and took a deep breath.

"I'm detective Paul Steward," he said. "First, calm down and take a deep breath. Just relax. I'm here to help you."

I tried to make myself feel comfortable.

"Good," the detective continued. "Now here's what I'd like you to do. I want you to slowly and carefully revisit the scene exactly as it occurred," he said, pen in hand and notebook in front of him.

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"Okay...let me try and see," I thought. "When I got out of the airport with my luggage in hand, a man approached me and asked if I needed a cab. He seemed very friendly. He even complimented me on my outfit and asked to know what country I am from. I told him where I was from and that I wanted to go to Rodeoville University. He offered to take me there."

"I got ya. Keep on. I'm all ears," the detective nodded, writing.

"So he put my luggage in the trunk of his car, I got inside and he drove off. At some point I began to notice that he was taking me to an area of the city that seemed quite isolated. There were strange-looking people who kept turning around when they saw us drive by. It appeared as if they were surprised to see someone in a cab venturing into their territory. Heads kept on turning as we rode."

The detective interrupted me:

"I don't mean to cut you off Mr. Malinke but would you mind getting straight to the point? What did the driver do next?"

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"Well...as I said, we got to an area that seemed rather isolated with broken bottles, trash and all sorts of refuse lying on the street. I asked the cab driver where he was taking me to because the place where he was taking me to didn't look at all like an environment where a university would be located."

"Interesting. And how did the driver react? What happened next?"

"Much to my surprise, he stopped the car and complained that he couldn't continue any further because its brakes were faulty. In spite of that he still asked me to pay for the ride. He said it was going to cost me 30 dollars. I refused to pay because he wasn't dropping me off at my destination."

I paused for a moment and the detective nodded and kept on writing. I continued:

"At that moment it was just the two of us. Then suddenly...a white male emerged from a nearby alley walking so fast and furiously toward the cab. He...pulled out a gun, opened the back seat door, grabbed my shirt, pulled me out and ordered me to give him all my money. I had exactly 25 dollars on

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me. The driver got out of the cab and joined him in searching through my pockets."

"Obvious accomplices," the detective remarked.

"They became very angry when they realized I didn't have more money on me. Nonetheless, they took out 20 dollars and threw my wallet in a nearby gutter. The man with the gun ordered me to face the wall with my hands up. He...warned that if I turned around he would shoot me. I heard him slam the right passenger door and the sound of the cab backing up with incredible speed. Even when they drove off I was still so shaken that I kept on standing there with my hands up. It wasn't until I heard a dog barking behind me that I slowly turned around and realized it was now safe for me to move. I never imagined that I would have such a terrifying first experience upon my arrival here," I sighed.

Detective Steward looked at me as if he was quite touched by my words. He tapped his pen on the table for a few seconds and then said: "What I'd like to get from you next is an accurate

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description of the suspects. Let's begin with the guy who picked you up at the airport. "

We heard a knock on the door.

"Yeah— come in..." the detective said.

In came a smiling white lady holding a pencil and two sheets of paper. Her hair was blonde and she wore a pair of tiny round glasses with a thick red frame.

"Pam— have a seat," he said. "Mr. Malinke, this is Pam, our sketch artist. Pam, this is John Malinke."

"Hee, hee, hee...nice to meet you," she giggled in a barely audible voice, avoiding any eye contact while we shook hands.

Pam took a seat next to detective Steward.

"All right, boss. Go on. We're all ears," he said.

"Hmmm...well, he was a very short man," I responded.

There was silence.

"That's it?" the detective asked.

"Yes— that is what I remember."

"You can't tell me that. There's gotta be something specific you remember about this person. I mean...think again, would ya?"

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"Oh...okay. I remember that his teeth were unusually golden...actually, they were a combination of gold and silver."

"Unusually golden-combination of gold and silver," Detective Steward nodded, taking notes on a sheet of paper.

"Yes... in fact I have never come across anyone with such terrible looking teeth. They seemed to reflect underneath the sun and I don't know but...they didn't seem natural to me."

Given the manner in which the detective and the sketch artist looked at each other, I surmised the only thing that prevented them from laughing out loud was the gravity of my circumstance. In Pam's case it was obvious she was holding it in because she cleared her throat a couple of times prior to saying in a faint but sharp voice:

"Is there anything else you remember about him in terms of physical description?" she asked.

I took a brief moment to revisit the scene.

"He wore low white shoes and had a thick beard. And I don't remember how people call them...but he also had

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on one of those circular things Muslim men wear on their heads."

"It's called a Kufi," the detective emphasized.

I was impressed by the speed and skill with which Pam was drawing.

"Uhhh...what else- his complexion...was he dark skinned or light skinned?" she asked.

"He was quite dark."

"Did he tell you his name or introduce himself to you in any way?"

I paused to think for a moment.

"He mentioned a name but I don't seem to remember. Let me see... oh! Okay, I remember now- Abdul! He said his name was Abdul."

Paul Steward nodded and proceeded with his note-taking.

"And uhm...anything distinct about his face? Would you say he had a broadly shaped nose or an averagely shaped one? Anything unique about his eyebrows?" the sketch artist asked.



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"I don't think I remarked anything special about his eyebrows but to use your description— yes...his nose was a bit broadly shaped."

"Great! Every little detail helps..." she said.

"And what about his accomplice? What do you remember about him?" the detective proceeded.

"I couldn't see his face at all. He had on a grey hooded sweat shirt which masked his appearance quite well. All I could see was a bit of his nose and lips."

"Could you describe the gun he was using? What did it look like and what color was it?"

"Well...I'm really not good at that. However, it looked like a pistol and it was dark in colour."

"I appreciate that," the detective nodded, writing.

A few moments later, Pam presented her sketch of the cab driver to us. I was amazed at how almost perfectly it portrayed the suspect. Although she used a pencil, I could see the artificial teeth, the thick beard and the Kufi.

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"Does this look like our guy?" Detective Steward asked.

"A lot," I replied.

He took out a business card from his shirt pocket and gave it to me saying:

"Tell you what. Any time you got an emergency or you think you see someone who looks like this dude, give me a buzz. Don't approach him. In the meantime we're gonna post this sketch around major points in the city and our officers will be on the lookout for cab drivers who fit the suspect's description. Sounds like two very dangerous criminals we've got here. Once you get a phone number, I'd like you to call me cause we've got to be able to contact you if there's any developments. You understand?"

"I do. Thank you, Detective Steward," I said, shaking his hand.

I equally shook Pam's hand on my way out, who with a broad smile and this time making eye contact, said:

"Hee, hee, hee...you'll be fine. The officer who brought you here's gonna walk you to the van. Take care of yourself, okay?"

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The warmth and professionalism of the law enforcement officers didn't leave me indifferent. I saw in them a people determined to render justice to victims of crime and who had sworn to uphold the laws of their society and maintain their integrity. At the lobby, Officer Terry and I met each other again. This time he smiled, stretched out his arm and shook my hand. He didn't seem like the same person I had met on the bridge and who accompanied me to the station.

"See that purple van parked right there?" he pointed.

I nodded.

"The driver will take you to Rodeoville University. Come with me...let's get your stuff out of the cruiser."

I accompanied him and he opened the trunk of his cruiser and took out my suitcase and hand luggage.

The driver in the parked van came out and walked toward us.

"You must be John Milongduh," I guess? He asked, smiling.

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"John Malinke," I answered.

"Let me help you out buddy," he said, carrying my luggage and placing them in the back of his van.

He had a bunch of keys attached to his belt and they dangled around noisily as he walked. He was wearing a black T-shirt and a white baseball hat. There was a tattoo on his right arm and the words RODEOVILLE UNIVERSITY were painted in bold white letters on both side doors of the van.

"All right, man. Good luck..." said Officer Terry, waving at us as the driver began to reverse.

I waved back at him. Although we hadn't met under the most pleasant circumstances and I didn't know much about his personal character, he nonetheless was the first American with whom I had established some sort of a bond. And for that reason I felt as if I would miss him to some degree.

SCRRUUUUNCHH... SCRRUUUUNCH...SCRRRRRRRRUUUNCCHH!!!

The engine went, as he stepped on the gas pedal. A terrible amount of smoke fumed out of the exhaust pipe and the van shook occasionally as we drove.

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"Darn it! Five years since I been tellin' e'm suckers I need a new van. My name's Chuck, by the way. Prefer me to call you John or Mr. Milongduh?"

"You can call me John, sir. And my last name again is Malinke, not Milongduh."

"That's right, that's right— Malinke. I keep forgetting."

His accent sounded much different from most of the people whom I had met earlier and when he spoke it seemed as if he was doing so through his nose. I suspected he wasn't from the city of Philadelphia but didn't want to ask him.

Chuck put a tape in the radio cassette player. The music didn't sound like the kind of American music I used to hear people play a lot on the radio when I was back home in Boluaké, nor was it similar to any of the songs that I used to dance to or see featured on our local TV stations. Nonetheless it sounded familiar because I used to hear such music once in a while and come across a video or two on television sometimes. I could hear the sound of a guitar and a violin. Chuck increased the volume and nodded along

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to the song while I listened attentively to the lyrics:

*Big Billy eatin' friggin blueberries and custard e'r mornin'*

*Stuck sittin' up on his darn old couch cause he's just too big to move*

*Pies, sausage, and ballooned up waffles adorn' his livin' room table*

*And his lady kicks and screams all day but it don't make e'm change a lick*

Interestingly, the musician sang with almost the same intonation as Chuck although he seemed to have a much deeper, drawn out voice. My curiosity had reached its peak and I couldn't hide it anymore.

"Chuck, are you from Philadelphia?"

"Nah, Dude. I'm from Duluth, Georgia."

"Okay, I see."

"Do you like living in Philadelphia?" I asked.

"Well, been here five years— ain't my ideal city but I deal wit' it."

Our ride enabled me to get a good view of Center City Philadelphia. I saw people jogging on sidewalks,

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some walking their dogs, and others entering in and out of big grocery stores and shopping centers. There was a sense of liberty that immediately struck me— a freedom that I saw reflected in almost everyone walking up and down the street. People were dressed so relaxed— many in shorts, T-shirts and sandals. I was amazed by the diversity of the people I saw walking on the street, both in terms of their ethnicity and the clothes they wore. Some men had an urban look— with baseball hats on and jeans with jewelry and uniquely designed T-shirts; others had a more corporate image with their suits and ties or dress shirts and so on. But the majority seemed to be dressed in jeans. As a matter of fact, I couldn't count the number of people I saw wearing jeans and tennis shoes as we drove by. In addition, everyone seemed to mind his or her business and to be focused on the purpose that brought them to a particular place at a given time. My observations gave me the impression I was in a society where people could own anything they wanted to as long as they could pay for

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it— and that fact alone was enough to open up doors beyond imagination.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying the beautiful summer weather. I loved the bright sunshine and the cool breeze and the pedestrians whom we drove past appeared determined in every sense to take advantage of it. Motorists were equally having a good time. I saw many people driving cars playing music extremely loud with their windows all the way down. In Barboura City, it was very rare to come across motorists playing music so loud. And the few who did were often perceived either as foreigners or citizens who had been living abroad for several years and who had come home on vacation— especially for Christmas and New Year. Driving very flashy cars, they often got a lot of attention from the population but soon disappeared in the aftermath of celebrations leading into each New Year. For these reasons, a lot of people began wondering if students who left home to study abroad actually enrolled in college or rather engaged in other activities— including illegal ones— to obtain fast money and taunt former classmates and old



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friends whom they left behind when they came home on vacation. Dad often used to say that such students often gave their friends an inaccurate impression of the realities of foreigners' lives in Europe and America. I couldn't tell or even attempt to guess what lay ahead of me. In Barbours City we didn't have close to half as many street lights as those that I seemed to see on the major streets of Center City Philadelphia. I was particularly impressed by one detail: a pedestrian attempting to go through a crosswalk pressed a black button on a street pole to her right. In just a few minutes, the street light directly facing her turned from red to green followed by a ringing sound- GRRRIIIIIIIINGGG!that alerted all cars coming in her direction to come to a halt. The cars stopped, the lady crossed the street and moments later, the traffic light directly facing the pedestrian crosswalk turned red once again, I heard the same sound and the cars started moving again. Everything seemed so organized. Most streets had four lanes: two lanes on the left side of the street and two lanes on the right side of the street for cars

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going in opposite directions. The right lanes on each street were often reserved for cars going at slower speed and there were middle lanes consisting of broken, black and yellow lines with arrows to guide motorists who wished to make left or right turns within busy intersections.

Although some motorists were driving at high speed, the majority seemed to be courteous toward each other and to respect the high way code. It was so different from home, where cab drivers and commercial motor bike riders caused so much chaos on the streets and where a motorist would overtake you on your left with such terrible speed even though he or she saw you signal that you were making a left turn. The commercial motor bike riders were reckless—carrying three, sometimes four passengers on their bikes, including women carrying babies. As for truck drivers, they owned the streets. Taking advantage of the sizes of their huge vehicles, you would hear them honking loudly from afar and see them approach other cars with careless aggressiveness as they forcefully attempted to make their way past a host of cars stuck

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in bad traffic. From riding with Chuck, I noticed motorists seemed to have profound respect for pedestrians. If they came across a pedestrian on a crosswalk, they stopped to let the person cross the street...unlike back home where a well-meaning motorist who attempted to do the same would often be shocked to see a cab driver overtaking him on his right, almost running the pedestrian over. And as a matter of fact, hit and run incidents were quite commonplace out there. What a difficult environment it was!

"Here we are dude. We're on City Avenue—we've reached Rodeoville University! Yeeehaaaaa—excited? " Chuck said, as we rode further up.

"Wow..." I responded, amazed at the University's vast expanse of construction.

On the left side of the street, I saw students going in and out of a huge bookstore. Next to it on the same side, were two other buildings— one of them had a sign that read: *Rodeoville Office of University Communications* and the other stated: *University Press*. On the right side of the street was a café called *Dimitri's Bakery and Coffeehouse* and next to

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it were two restaurants— one Italian and the other Indian. I wished I had a camera so I could have stopped for a minute and taken some pictures that I could have sent to Emelda. Perhaps the campus bookstore had a variety of postcards that I could choose from as well.

Minutes later, Chuck made a left turn on City Line and we arrived at the entrance of the University's main parking lot. A security guard seated at a booth beside the gate stretched out his neck through a side window and probably recognizing one of the University's vans, pressed a button and the gate swung open.

"Yo, Mr. P.!" Chuck said, honking.

The security guard waved at him, pressed the button and the gate closed once again. Chuck parked the car.

"All right, my man...where exactly was I supposed to drop you off at?" he asked.

"I first need to go to the Office of International Services."

"I see— the OIS, huh? Walking distance... let's get your stuff out of the car. Follow me, dude."

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Chuck offered to pull my suitcase along while I held on to my traveling bag. The grass across campus was sparkling dark green in colour and it felt tremendously soft when I walked on it. I noticed a pattern on the grass— some long, broken white lines which suggested to me that it had just been cut with a lawn mower. Some of the lawn was being watered by a sprinkler and contrary to what I imagined of summer there were quite a good number of students on campus. I guessed most of them were either taking classes, getting registered for the upcoming fall semester or making final graduation plans. Some students sat on the lawn reading books and others barbecued and engaged in conversation while walking in groups of three or more. I was impressed by the uniqueness of the campus architecture. Most of its buildings had stone walls and were designed like the castles of ancient days with square-shaped windows and doors made out of solid, polished wood with golden handles. I loved the tall oak trees, the trimmed hedges and the garden that consisted of a combination of roses— red, yellow and pink.

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I was also impressed by the diversity of the student population. As we walked, I came across White students, Asian students, Native American Indian students, and others who seemed to be of Hispanic heritage. I didn't see too many who looked like me but I saw two or three of them walk by— a black male walking with a white male and a black female with a Native American female who followed moments later. The students seemed friendly— those who walked past us either smiled or nodded when they noticed Chuck and me. With my outfit and Chuck pulling my suitcase along, I was certain they could sense he was helping someone who had just arrived from some country far away.

"Excuse me. Got a pen?" asked one of two white females walking toward us.

"I think so. Let me check," I answered, opening up my bag. "Oh— here you go."

She gave the pen to her friend, who took out a notebook from her bag, tore a piece of paper and wrote something on it. When she had finished, she

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gave it to the other female who had asked me for the pen.

"Thank you so very much," she said, giving me back my pen. "I'm Stacey, by the way. New here?"

"Yes...this is my first time on campus. I'm from Boluaké, Central Africa."

"Wow— and you traveled all the way from there just to go to Rodeoville?"

I nodded.

"Cool! I wish you good luck. I think you're gonna like it here," she continued. "By the way, meet my friend Angela."

Stacey's friend gave me a firm handshake.

"Angela Michaels," she said. "And you?"

"John Malinke."

"Very nice to meet you. Don't hesitate to say hi if you run into us on campus, all right?"

After having said that, Angela and her friend continued their walk.

"Hmmm...looks like someone's gonna be a star on campus," Chuck said.

"Come on. All she did was ask me if I had a pen."

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"Asking for a pen, huh?" he laughed.

Chuck and I walked past a track where several people were jogging. Some of them were older men and women but the others looked relatively young, so I suspected they may have been student athletes. Right next to it, two people were playing tennis. We arrived at a small parking lot in front of an averagely sized building. As we got closer to the building, I saw the words OFFICE OF INTERNATIONAL SERVICES written in bold.

Chuck rang the doorbell.

"How may I help you?" a woman asked, opening a second door from inside.

"Went to pick up this kid who just got here from Africa-met e'm at a police station. Supposed to be one of our students," said Chuck.

"Oh yeah! Is he the guy who got robbed?" she asked.

"Know nothin' about the details ma'am, but I think he's your guy," he replied.

The woman opened the door and let both of us into a big waiting room with enough seats to accommodate a large number of people.



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"You can have a seat," she said to me.

I took a seat and Chuck placed my suitcase beside me in an upright position.

"Well, Mr. Malinke— think I got your last name right this time— I gotta hit the road now. Nice meeting ya," he said.

I stood up and shook his hand.

"Thank you sir, I am truly grateful."

"Calling me Chuck's just fine, my brother. Ain't no biggie. I work on campus, so we're sure gonna see from time to time."

"I wish I had something to give you but I don't have much of any cash on me at the moment," I said.

"Don't even worry about it, buddy...just doing my job. Take care of yourself and get settled. See ya."

After Chuck left, the woman who received us gave me a magazine to read. It was called *Living in America* and it was the third issue.

"This is published by Rodeoville's International Students in collaboration with the Office of University Communications," she said. "Pretty cool stuff. You'll get to discover the trendy spots in the

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city— restaurants, lounges, clubs, parks, and bookstores...all that good stuff. A must read for all new international students. Well, you just make yourself at home. We've got some juice and some sodas in the refrigerator. There's also some candy and chocolate on the table over there," she said, pointing. "All right, let me go get our director."

After I had thanked her, she climbed up a flight of stairs. From the waiting room below, I heard her knock on a door and say to someone:

"Tom? The student you were expecting is here."

"Oh yeah? Wow, that was fast! Let me make two quick phone calls and I'll be down in a bit," the person responded in a loud voice.

The lady returned and asked me to be patient for just a few minutes, took a seat at the reception desk and began typing on a computer. There were tiny flags on the wall representing various countries of the world. I recognized the flags of South Africa, Nigeria, Pakistan, France, Italy, Canada, Brazil, Spain, England and Argentina, for instance. I also noticed some flyers containing information about study abroad

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programs in many countries. Far in the back of the waiting room on the right hand corner, was a circular dark brown table with two black chairs.

"Excuse me. Do you mind if I take a look at that section of your office?" I asked the receptionist.

"Go right ahead. As I said, make yourself at home."

I got up from my seat and upon walking to that area, saw shelves stacked up with multitudes of files. The top of each shelf was labeled with a sticker to reflect the content of the documents therein. I also saw a coffee maker, a water cooler and a refrigerator. Looking at the shelves, I came across some labels that read:

*F-1 STUDENT RULES AND REGULATIONS*

*F-1 STUDENTS SEEKING REINSTATEMENT*

*ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT H-1B VISA APPLICATIONS*

*STUDY ABROAD IN GHANA*

My concentration was suddenly interrupted by the receptionist's voice:

"Sir? The director's ready to see you."

I returned to the waiting room area, where I ran into a white male with short blonde hair dressed in a dark

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blue long-sleeved shirt with brown trousers and a black tie. He was standing beside the flight of stairs.

"John Malinke? Tom Clifton," he said in an incredibly loud voice, stretching out his hand to shake mine. His handshake was so firm that it felt more like a squeeze, and for a moment I felt as if he would twist my fingers. Afterward, he continued:

"Tell you what! Sorry for the inconvenience but why don't we both go sit in the back where you were at so we could have a personal one-on-one conversation!"

Mr. Clifton and I sat facing each other at the circular table in the back. I told him about the robbery and my encounter with the police officer.

"A heck of an experience for a guy who just came!" he said, shaking his head.

I wondered why he felt the need to raise his voice so much when I was sitting right next to him. Each time he spoke my body trembled, but I did my best not to make it evident. It felt more as if he was yelling than speaking normally. The only difference was that he was constantly smiling, so you couldn't say he was

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angry. There were times when his tone sounded as if it would stabilize itself but then moments later, it skyrocketed in a manner that made me feel uncomfortable. Mr. Clifton got up from his seat and went to the shelf.

"Let me take a look at your file real quick!" he said.

He returned with a dark blue folder and took a seat again.

"Got your passport?" he asked, this time in a much lower and controlled tone.

I unzipped my bag, took out my passport and gave it to him.

"Great— that works," he said.

He looked through it carefully and then gave it back to me with the folder.

"I'd like you to take a look at your file, Mr. Malinke. From my perspective I think everything's complete. We've got your I-20, affidavit of support, bank statement, letter of admission...all that good stuff."

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I couldn't help but remark that his voice seemed to have come to some sort of a balance with respect to tone and I silently hoped it would remain that way. I looked at the documents within my file. First the I-20 form. It was a document for the United States Department of Homeland Security, and was issued by universities and colleges as supporting information for student-visa purposes. It officially permitted international students to study within the country. It contained a multitude of details that I didn't seem to have paid as much close attention to prior to leaving my country. It read:

1. *Family Name (surname):* **Malinke**

*First (given) Name:* **John**

*Date of birth (month/day/year):* **04/11/1974**

*Country of birth:* **Boluaké**

2. *School (School district) name:* **Rodeoville  
University**

*School Official to be notified of student's arrival  
in U.S. (Name and Title):* **Tom Clifton, Director,  
Office of International Services**

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*School address:*

**856 Linden Avenue**

**Philadelphia, PA 19000**

*School code (including 3-digit suffix, if any) and approval date:*

PHI200D00748765- approved on 08/06/1999

3. *This certificate is issued to the student above for:*

**Rodeoville University**

4. *Level of education the student is pursuing or will pursue in the United States:*

**BACHELOR'S** (*Journalism, pending student's performance in English proficiency courses*)

5. *The student named above has been accepted for a full course of study at this school, majoring in*

**Journalism**

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*The student is expected to report to the school no later than 08/26/1999 and complete studies no later than 05/15/2003. The normal length of study is 48 months.*

I was quite struck by the sixth item which talked about my level of English proficiency. It didn't reflect the truth at all but at that moment there was nothing I could do. It read:

*6. English proficiency:*

**This school requires English proficiency. The student does not have the required English proficiency but will enroll in the University's Intensive English Language Program.**

I wished I didn't panic and hadn't been as nervous when I took the Test of English as a Foreign Language in my home country. Seeing most my fellow examinees leaving the classroom before me gave me the false impression that I too needed to rush over my exam. Yet the truth was that they couldn't have cared less whether or not I ended up being the last person to



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leave the hall. No one was his peer's keeper. Everyone was fighting for his or her own interests. Unfortunately I was now paying a heavy price. I went on to the seventh item on the list:

7. *This school estimates the student's average costs for an academic term of 12 months to be:*

a. *Tuition and fees*

\$10,500

b. *Living expenses*

\$9,000

c. *Expenses of dependents (0)* \$0.00

d. *Other (specify): insurance & books* \$1,900.00

Total

\$21,400

8. *This school has information showing the following as the student's means of support, estimated for an academic term of 12 months.*

a. *Student's personal funds* \$ 0.00

b. *Funds from this school* \$ 0.00

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c. Funds from another source (specify type: family funds) \$21,400

d. On-campus employment \$ 0.00

Total

\$21,400

9. Remarks: **In addition to the sum of \$21,400 that the student's family has agreed to pay every 12 months, they will pay the mandatory international student health insurance fee of \$1,000 a year for four years. International student orientation will be held on August 20, 1999.**

I noticed Mr. Clifton's signature on item 10, where as a representative of the school he certified under penalty of perjury that all of the information provided in items 1 through 9, was completed before he signed the form and that everything on it was true and correct. The date beside his signature read 08/08/1999. On Item 11 it was my turn to certify that I had read and agreed to comply with the terms and conditions of my admission to Rodeoville University and those of my extension of stay. I also had to agree that all

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information provided on the I-20 form referred specifically to me and was true and correct to the best of my knowledge. Mr. Clifton gave me a pen and I signed the document and wrote that day's date, 08/13/1999. The second page of the I-20 contained specific instructions to designated school officials and students from foreign countries. The document enabled me to see in detail just how much of a tremendous financial sacrifice my parents had made for countless years to get me to that stage in life and I appreciated them even more.

"So—you read through it? Everything looks okay?" Mr. Clifton asked.

"Yes sir, thank you very much."

"Just a little remark if I may," he went on. "I mean...you seem to speak English quite fluently. How come you'd be taking Intensive English courses?"

I was already quite fared up of recalling what happened...let alone talking about it.

"It's a long story, Mr. Clifton. I got nervous and forgot to answer a number of questions on my sheet of paper."

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"Oh no! That sucks! Anyway, cheer up. You'll be all right. I know you're gonna do just fine. Have you talked to your parents since you got here?"

"Not yet."

"Why don't you come up to my office so you can give them a call?"

Mr. Clifton and I took the stairs and arrived at the door leading into his office. He took out a set of keys from his pocket and was about to open the door, but stopped in the middle of the process.

"Oh—can't believe I forgot to do this. Come on...let me introduce you to my assistant."

We stopped at a door just beside his and I could see the following words typed in bold face: **AMISU BANDA, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR**

"Amisu?" Mr. Clifton called, knocking a number of times.

No one responded.

"Probably went out for lunch. Sorry about that. Well, let's get this over with so you can get settled."

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We got into a very spacious office with a big desk and a shelf filled with various books and documents. I took a seat facing Mr. Clifton.

"011's the code we use to call from the US to most foreign countries. Here you go," he said, giving me his office phone.

"Thank you very much," I responded. "Mr. Clifton, can you please put off the air conditioner? I feel very cold."

"Oh—my bad... I forgot you're from a pretty hot part of the world," he said.

He picked up a remote control, pressed a red button and turned off the air conditioner. His office was freezing.

I dialed our home number. The phone rang about three times. After that, a woman picked up the phone. It was Mum's voice.

"Hello?" she said

"Mum, this is John."

There was silence for about a minute.

"Oh my God... John! Praise the Lord. Thank God for His journey mercies."

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"Mum I'm using an office phone, so I can't talk for too long. Something happened..."

"Oh, no—please don't tell me that you..."

"Please calm down, Mum...please. Well... I ...I...got robbed at gunpoint in a taxi."

"You got what? Robbed? Oh, my! Your first experience in a foreign country! What sort of luck is that?"

"Yes...but it's all right. I'm okay now. An officer found me and I went with him to a police station to make a statement. I gave the police descriptions of the suspects and an investigation is in progress."

Mum sighed.

"Where are you now?"

"I'm at my new school—at the Office of International Services. Please don't worry. I'm being very well taken care of."

"Well, be careful. You're on your own out there. Call when you get a cell phone and as soon as you get settled. Your father would love to hear your voice."

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"I know, Mum. Take care and greet Dad, Kenneth and Atina for me."

"Sure."

Tom Clifton took out a business card from one of the drawers beneath his big desk and gave it to me. He also handed a 10-page document to me that addressed in more detail the rules and regulations every international student was expected to follow. Stretching his neck forward, his voice suddenly relapsed into the loud tone I so painfully dreaded: "Any problems, emergencies, you name it- let me know! If I'm busy or not available, my assistant should be able to help you! You're welcome to stop by whenever you want!"

I thanked Mr. Clifton and after he had once again squeezed my hand in the guise of a firm handshake, I took the stairs and returned to the reception area.

"All done?" the lady at the front desk asked.

"Yes...thank you very much."

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I noticed another woman sitting beside her at the front desk and I was quite curious. She was black and had short dreadlocks. Our eyes met with each other and she smiled at me. Before I could manifest my curiosity, her colleague spoke as if she had read my mind:

"Permit me to apologize... I just realized I didn't even tell you my name. I'm Veronica and this is my colleague Danielle."

"Nice to meet you once again, Veronica. Hello Danielle," I said, shaking her hand.

"A pleasure," Danielle responded with a broad and somewhat shy smile.

"His name is John Malinke. He's one of our newest students," Veronica said.

"Awesome. What country are you from? From your outfit I could guess you're from somewhere in Africa," went Danielle.

"Yes, I'm from the Republic of Boluaké in Central Africa."

"Wow. I'd really love to visit the Motherland someday. Everyone who's been there tells me it's so



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beautiful. I hope you brought some pictures," Danielle continued.

"I think I did," I responded.

Veronica got up from her seat and accompanied me out of the Office of International Services. I noticed a University shuttle bus parked outside. Its engine was running and there were a fairly good number of students sitting inside.

"We're gonna get on the shuttle. I'll accompany you to your dorm," said Veronica.

"I'm sorry— what do you mean by 'dorm?'" I asked as we walked toward the bus.

Veronica laughed.

"Dormitory...on campus housing, know what I mean?"

"Okay I understand.." I responded, nodding.

"I see you haven't gotten a hang of American slang yet. Never mind, you'll understand. It's just a matter of time."

When we got to the bus, the driver pressed a button and its door opened automatically. Veronica and I took a seat at the back of the bus where there was room for two people. When we got into the bus, some

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students smiled and nodded when I walked past them, probably guessing I must have been a new student from a foreign country. The bus drove off as soon as we took a seat. For a few minutes, I looked from the glass window on my side and admired the campus scenery— the different buildings, the neatly cut lawns and trimmed hedges, the beautiful flowers and gardens, the track, the football field, the various parking lots. Moments later, I remembered something I had meant to ask Veronica.

“Does Mr. Clifton always talk like that?”

She looked at me for a moment without saying a word and then laughed so loud that most of the students sitting ahead of us turned and looked in our direction.

“Oh gosh...what a question,” she said, speaking as if out of breath as she wiped off her watery eyes.

“Yup he does. We call him radio Clifton.”

I couldn't resist laughing either.

“Jones Hall!” said the bus driver, stopping in front of what looked like a high-rise apartment complex.

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A number of students stood up, walked to the front of the bus and got out. The bus driver once again pressed the button, the doors shut and off we rode to the next destination.

"We'll be getting off after the next stop," said Veronica.

"Next stop— Crimson Heights!" continued the bus driver, making a wide turn into a relatively narrow street.

In about 11 minutes we arrived at the announced stop and another group of students left the bus. There were only about four of us left. The doors shut and the ride continued.

"Last stop...Rodeoville Towers!"

We rode on and the bus driver pulled up in front of another tall building that looked very much like an apartment complex. Its walls were dark brown and it had a wide parking lot.

"Here we are," said Veronica, getting up from her seat.

I walked behind her and did my best to be as observant and attentive as possible.

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The bus's double doors opened wide and we all got out. I noticed a red flag hoisted up on a lawn beside Rodeoville Towers and upon which the University logo "RU" featured in bold white letters. In the parking lot, I saw parents carrying boxes out of cars or pushing them in carts in the process of helping their children move into the building. A lot of the students I came across looked like teenagers or people in their early twenties. Not many of them appeared to be in their mid-twenties like me.

"Come with me," Veronica said.

At the Rodeoville Towers lobby, several students waited in line to swipe their ID cards through an electronic monitoring device at the front desk where two security guards dressed in short-sleeved white shirts and black baseball hats were seated. From their comments, I sensed the security guards were quite familiar with the students who had been moving in. With a heavy load of boxes and appliances, they made multiple entries and exits accompanied either by parents or family members. Veronica and I stood at

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the front desk and one of the guards got up from his seat and walked toward us.

"Yes ma'am, how may I help you?" he asked.

"Hi. This is John Malinke, our newest international student. He's been assigned to Rodeoville Towers but doesn't have a student ID yet. Could you just let him sign in until he gets one?"

"Ain't a problem," he said.

Veronica turned to me.

"Know what room number you've been assigned to?"

"Not at all," I answered.

"Can you check your list of new students, please?" she asked the security guard.

He looked underneath his desk and took some sheets of paper that were beside his phone.

"What was the name again?" he asked.

"John Malinke," I answered.

He squinted and reached for a pair of glasses inside his pocket. He put them on and using his fingers, went quickly through name after name with a low murmur.

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"I think you're looking at the wrong list, sir. Look at the top it says 'domestic students'," Veronica jumped in.

"You're right, you're right. How'd I miss that?"

The security guard scrambled through the sheets of paper, pulled another one up and placed it on the front desk.

"Here we go— Got what we need right here," he said.

He looked through the list carefully and arrived at the second page.

"John Malinke: seventh floor, Room 702."

"Appreciate that. Thanks," went Veronica.

She turned around and said to me:

"I'm gonna have to get back to the office now. If there's anything you need help with, don't hesitate to call or stop by in person."

"Thank you for all your help, Veronica."

"Come on...I'm just doing my job. One of these two gentlemen will accompany you to the elevator. I'll see you later."

The second security guard, who had been silently observing the entire process, stood up and walked me

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to the elevator, where we found four students waiting.

"This elevator sucks! It's so damn slow!" one of them grumbled.

As if it had ears, the elevator opened within seconds, letting out a group of students.

"Press the number 7 when you get in. It'll take you to the seventh floor," the security guard shouted.

I rushed inside in order not be left behind. The elevator slowly began its ascent.

"Could someone please help me press 7?" I asked the students who stood close enough to be able to do so.

One of them did just that.

For reasons I couldn't comprehend, the elevator seemed to stop on almost every floor and this greatly upset the student who had complained earlier. Whenever its doors opened, he quickly pressed a button to re-shut it as soon as he realized there was no one waiting to get in.

"Fifth floor— finally!" he yelled as he got off.

There were two more floors left. The remaining students got off on the sixth floor and as the

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elevator slowly made its way up to the seventh floor I heard some loud music and this increased my curiosity. Within seconds, the yellow light flashed on button number 7. The elevator doors opened. I emerged from there to a vast hallway. A thick purple carpet littered with straws and paper napkins covered the floor and there were doors on either side of the hallway with their respective room numbers written in bold. Amidst the loud music, I could barely walk past the group of students who kept bumping into me. The entire hallway smelled of alcohol and lots of students were either drinking from plastic cups or dancing and others, obviously couples, hugged and whispered in each other's ears. The majority made room for me to pass as I pulled my luggage along and my outfit appeared to be getting quite some attention.

"Yoo-hoo! Welcome to the seventh floor honey!" shouted a dazed-looking female standing in my way. She wrapped her arms around my neck, gave me a kiss on my right and left cheeks, then staggered and fell on the floor. I stooped to pull her up from the



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ground when a shirtless male ran toward me and grabbed me by the arm.

"Dude, are you nuts? That's my girlfriend, man. The hell do you think you're doing?" he shouted.

"She fell. She's drunk. Can't you see that?" was my response.

He looked at my outfit.

"Well, mind your business Mr. Boumboulou Boumbouloulou."

"What did you call me?"

"Boumboulou Boumbouloulou," he repeated in a provocative tone.

I was quite offended. It was obvious he was stereotyping me because of what I was wearing and where he assumed I was from. Knowing my name was probably the least of his concerns.

"Listen... why don't you take care of your girlfriend instead of charging at me like an angry rhinoceros?" I retorted.

I pulled his girlfriend up from the floor and another female student— who seemed quite sober compared to the multitude who roamed around the

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hallway— led her away from the crowd and the next thing I heard was the sound of a nearby door being shut with a loud slam. I guessed she had to be one of her roommates. The drama wasn't yet over. I tried to walk past her boyfriend but he deliberately stood in the way. With a frown on his face, he looked straight into my eyes.

"Rhinoceros? You called me a rhinoceros? You messed with the wrong man!"

He tried to take a jab at me but I dodged and his punch hit the student standing behind me.

"Ouch!" the student exclaimed, placing his palm on his chin.

In retaliation, he lifted up his plastic cup and poured some of his drink on the head of the shirtless male. It ran from his face all the way down to his chest. His victim was just about to punch him in revenge when a group of students jumped in and pulled both men away from each other. What an additional experience indeed!

The elevator doors opened.

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"Yo! Yo! He's in the lobby! He's coming up! He's coming up!" yelled a student running out.

The music immediately ceased. Plastic cups, straws and plastic plates with half-eaten pizzas were quickly tossed into a big trash can in the corner of the hallway. Everyone dashed into their rooms. Doors slammed in rapid succession. Locks and bolts were turned and fastened. I felt abandoned and confused— left at the mercy of something or someone I wasn't aware of and that I probably would have had to discover at my own risk. What were they running from? The elevator doors opened. A black male emerged. He looked calm and poised. He had short hair, wore an oval-shaped pair of glasses with a silver frame and had a light beard on his chin. He held a dark brown folder with the University logo—RU— in bold white letters and had on a dark blue tie, white dress shirt and a grey pair of trousers. By all accounts he looked more mature than most of the students I had come across so far. I guessed he must have perhaps been two or so years younger than me. He looked left and right

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and stopped in the middle of the hallway. He walked around, inspecting the tremendous amount of litter that had been left behind. Moments later, he began walking toward me. I became quite nervous because I thought he would ask me if I had anything to do with the mess.

"Crazy— when will it end?" he sighed and shook his head. "Not only does the damn carpet stink of alcohol but it's so sticky... it's like there's a magnetic effect on your shoes when you walk."

He looked at me.

"Ain't seen you here before. I'm Markel...the RA for this floor."

I used that opportunity to introduce myself as well.

"My name is John Malinke. I'm from Boluaké, Central Africa. I just arrived at Rodeoville Towers."

"Wow, that's what's up. Brother from the Motherland. Nice meeting you, man."

"Excuse me— can you tell me what you mean when you say you are the RA for this floor?"

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A very little smile came upon his face and I got the feeling that he probably would have laughed out loud if he could. But his mood and circumstances at that moment didn't permit him to do so.

"RA: Resident Assistant. I make sure everyone on this floor abides by the University's rules. I'm the liaison between the student body and the administration."

"Thank you for this explanation. I understand now."

He walked around and proceeded to inspect the hallway again. It was so quiet I could hardly believe this was the same floor that was producing so much noise just several minutes ago.

"All right...I'm gonna have to call janitorial services once again," he said with an air of resignation.

He paused for a moment and then continued:

"Are you a freshman? This is your first semester?"

"Yes."

"What room are you going to be at?"

"Room 702."

"702? They sent you to room 702?"

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"Yes...is there a problem with that room?"

Markel gave a sarcastic laugh.

"No...not at all."

"You know how to find it, though?"

"I think so," I responded.

"The rooms are in descending order as you go down the hall. So go all the way down and pay attention to the numbers. 702's the second to the last door on your right. I've got to get to my room now and figure out what's the best action to take to deal with this. Nice meeting you."

Markel and I parted ways and I continued on down the hallway. The carpet being as sticky and messy as it was, I didn't have much of a choice but to hold my suitcase in hand although it felt quite heavy. I sympathized with Markel. Of course I couldn't assume that I knew him well enough yet but so far in my opinion he seemed to be a decent person. I now began to wonder what could have been the mystery behind Room 702. Why did Markel seem so shocked? Why did he have to ask me twice as if to be certain I hadn't been sent to that room by

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error? The countdown began as I walked through the hallway and past the respective doors. Room 710... Room 708...Room 706... When I got to room 706, the door opened slowly and a student peered through.

"Hey...did he leave yet?" he whispered.

I nodded.

"Appreciate it, man. I've got to get down to the lobby," he explained, in haste.

The student and two of his friends got out of the room and each of them tiptoed toward the elevator.

The descending order continued. Room 705...Room 704... Room 703...and finally...Room 702.

I stood in front of the door, uncertain about what could happen from that point onward. I knocked but no one answered. I knocked again.

"Who the hell is that!" yelled a male voice from within.

I wasn't sure if he would have been able to hear me if I spoke in a low voice, so I felt compelled to yell back:

"I'm your roommate! My name is John Malinke!"

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There was silence and then the door opened rather abruptly. Out came a very tall black man wearing a blue baseball hat backward and a rather large black T-shirt. A cigarette hung above his ear and he wore two long shiny necklaces that seemed to reach all the way down to his chest. The pair of jeans he had on seemed as wide as his T-shirt and there was a cigarette hanging on his right ear. He reminded me so much of some of the rap artists I used to see on television back home. For a brief moment we looked at each other without saying a word. After that he looked at me from head to toe and then broke out:

"Let's get this straight, yo. I ain't ready to deal with this...you got that? Yeah, I heard some dude was supposed to be coming over but I ain't think it was you, man. And I don't need no roommate. Shoot...last year it was some Irish guy who kept getting seizures. This year what's it gonna be? Looks like it's gonna be some dude with a bunch of crazy outfits!"

He slammed the door. I reopened it.



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"Look...what you want, man? Please don't tempt me, you heard?" he said.

"You're not even giving me a chance to speak. I traveled so many miles by plane to get here. I left my parents and my family behind and as soon as I got to Philadelphia I got robbed. Honestly I'm tired and I need to rest and recuperate."

"That's your problem. You ain't my roommate. There's gotta be a mistake. I don't need any more weirdoes."

He slammed the door again. I reopened it. At that moment I had had enough.

"Now you are going to listen to me," I said.

"What the—"

"Listen!"

He was silent.

"I don't care how many roommates you may or how much strange behavior you might have seen. I've been sent to this room and it is my right to be here and on this floor just like anyone else! You don't own this floor, do you?"

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We looked at each other for a moment. One of the students in Room 701 opened the door.

"What's going on, guys?" he asked, his door half open as he stretched his neck toward our direction.

"No big deal, Val. I got it under control," he answered. Turning to me, he said: "All right, man. I hear you...I'm sorry about that. Just that I ain't had the best of luck with most of my roommates. You can come in."

The room was very spacious. Two king-sized beds lay next to each other and a light brown carpet covered the floor. There were two huge closets on the walls beside each bed and a sofa and TV in the middle of the room.

"I guess this must be my bed?" I asked, realizing that a packet of new sheets, pillows and pillow cases had been placed on the king-sized bed on the left.

"That's right," he answered. "Make yourself comfy. You could begin putting your stuff in the closet if you wish."

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"I don't think I have the energy to do so right now," I responded. "That would be much later."

He sat on the sofa and increased the volume of the TV set. Using a remote, he flipped through a number of channels and settled on an American football game.

"Touchdown! Yes!" he shouted.

I put my luggage on the carpet beside my bed, opened the packet and took out the sheets, pillows and pillow cases. I almost didn't remark the little note written in bold that had been taped to the packet. It read:

***Welcome from Rodeoville's Office of International Services***

I was touched by this profoundly kind gesture and felt it necessary to thank the staff when next I met them. I began making my bed. My roommate was so focused on his football game that I wondered if he even recalled Room 702 now had two occupants.

"Foul! Damn it!" he shouted.

"Excuse me?" I said, raising my voice so he could hear me.

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He turned down the volume.

"Yeah— what's up? What you need, man?"

"Sorry to interrupt but I don't even know your name. I told you my name is John but you didn't get to tell me yours."

He sighed.

"See why I love to be alone? Y'all damn roommates bring your own baggage. I'm trying to watch the game, for goodness sake!"

He frowned.

"Call me D."

"D.?"

"Yeah, what's the deal?"

"Is that really your name?"

"Dude, you ask too many questions, man. I've been a hell of a lot patient with you already. Yes, call me D."

"Well, it's a pleasure to meet you, D."

"Unhum," he answered, pressing one of the buttons on his remote to re-increase the volume.

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I finished making the bed, opened my suitcase and pulled out a T-shirt. I took off the top of the outfit I had been wearing since I got to Philadelphia, put the T-shirt on and hung the top of my outfit inside the closet by the wall beside my bed. There were already a couple of hangers inside the closet, so I was curious.

"Would you happen to know who put all these hangers?" I asked D.

"It's the same folks that brought you the sheets," he replied, turning toward me. "I see you got a T-shirt on. Was actually gonna say I hoped you weren't planning on lying down in that outfit. I mean...shoot! You must be hot in that stuff. I wondered if that's what you'll be wearing around campus all summer. It gets so damn hot here in the summer time."

"I realized that, that's why I thought I should change into something lighter. It doesn't get this humid in my country."

D. turned down the volume.

"Oh yeah? You really mean that?"

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"Yes— from the moment I got out of the airport and began to walk around I could feel the humidity."

"Wow...ain't that something, dawg. And I always thought it was so freaking hot in Africa... a hundred plus degrees all the time and everyone walking around sweating in the heat. That's the impression we get."

"In my country there is a dry season and a rainy season. Some cities like Barboursville, the capital of my home country, have four seasons. It has two dry seasons and two rainy seasons. Many times at night and sometimes early in the mornings it gets so cold that you would freeze if you had on just a T-shirt. In other countries like South Africa, it actually snows."

D. nodded.

"Amazing...amazing ain't it?" he said.

But there was something D. had said earlier that bothered me and I didn't think it would have been right for me to keep it in. Honestly, I was feeling hurt. I decided to speak out:

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"D. I'm sorry but you said something that quite upset me."

"Oh yeah? Here we go again-another roommate showing his true colours, huh? What the hell did I do, man?" he inquired, standing up.

"You called me a dog. When I was talking to you about how humid it is here, you said something like 'isn't that something, dog?' I wonder what could possibly have made me merit an insult from you when we barely even know each other."

For a moment, D. looked at me without saying a word and then burst out laughing.

"Oh my goodness! This is hilarious," he said.

"You're not helping the situation. What's so funny?"

"Oh my...oh my. I wasn't insulting you. 'Dawg's' a term that's used among young black males to mean 'friend,' 'buddy,' or 'my boy.' It ain't got no negative connotations. It signifies friendship."

His clarification allayed my concern.

"I see...I see. Sorry, then. I just wasn't sure."

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"It's all good. Ain't nothing wrong to ask. And it's spelled D-a-w-g, not d-o-g."

Burned out from the long journey from my country to Philadelphia and the unexpected long walks, car and bus rides, I lay down on the bed and hoped to be able to take a nap.

"Trying to get some sleep, huh?" D. asked.

"Yes. I'm truly exhausted."

"Guess I can't watch the game, then. Never mind, though. I'll go watch e'm at the TV lounge."

"But you can watch it here as long as the volume isn't too loud, can't you?"

"There's no problem, man. I said its okay. I'll see you later."

D. shut the door; I closed my eyes and within several minutes, fell asleep.

When I woke up moments later, the room was dark. I got up from bed and turned the light on. I opened up the blinds half way and looked through the window. It was dark outside as well and I realized



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I had forgotten to set my watch to Philadelphia time. I guessed it had to be either past seven or 8 p.m. The bright street lights, the cars and the pedestrians walking and crossing the street provided quite a fantastic view from the seventh floor. I went to the closet, took out a wash cloth and removed some facial wash from my hand luggage. Afterward, I went to the bathroom and washed my face. Just when I was done, I heard someone open the door to our room. It was D. He came in with two white males. I recognized one of them as the student next door who intervened when he had heard D. and me arguing earlier on.

"What's up, John? Thought you might still be sleeping," D. said.

"No...I really didn't get that much sleep and I have a light headache."

"Jet lag, huh? Chill out, it'll go away. Let me introduce you to my boys."

D. stretched out his arm in the direction of the student whom I had recognized.

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"This is Valence Delfino, he's right next door to us— Room 701. Valence, meet John Malinke."

"My pleasure," I said as we shook hands.

"And over here— this is my man Lane Butters," D. continued.

"Sup kid?" Lane said as we greeted each other.

"We're 'bout to go down to the cafeteria and grab something to eat. Why don't you come with us?" D. asked.

"I would like to but I don't yet have a student ID. I need to use my student ID to swipe through the food section," I explained.

"Damn...that sucks. You have a meal plan, though?" Valence asked.

"I should. I think I do because my parents paid for my room and board and all of my campus needs."

"That ain't a problem. I'll use mine for both of us. I'll help you out," he proposed.

"No, Valence. Thank you but...no. I don't want to get in trouble. I've just come."

"Dude, relax. You'll be all right. Let's go eat," he insisted.

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D., Valence, Lane and I left the room and walked through the hallway. The carpet was still somewhat sticky and on our way to the elevator we came across two overwhelmed-looking janitors. One of them picked up the plastic cups, straws and plates that had been tossed about and the other vacuumed and swept. Their faces reflected an immense anger that I couldn't possibly describe in words. From the look in their eyes I could imagine what they were thinking: *Could these four fellows have been part of the group that made up this mess?* We kept our eyes focused on the wall in front of us and felt a tremendous sense of relief when the elevator doors opened. Valence pressed "0" and the elevator slowly took us down to the lower level.

"Here we are! It's grub time," Valence said as the elevator doors opened.

D. was wearing a pair of jeans trousers that hung down his waist like some American rap artists whom I used to see performing on television in my home country— and he walked with a certain strut that made me fear his trousers could slide down at

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any moment and as usual, his necklaces dangled around his neck.

"D., are you comfortable walking in those trousers?" I asked.

"Oh hell yeah!" he responded with arrogance.

"Dude, people don't really use the word 'trousers' here," went Valence. "It's obsolete. Say 'pants' instead."

"Pants?" I asked.

"Yes," he emphasized.

"All right, I'll try to remember."

Lane hadn't said a word apart from the time when D. had introduced us to each other. I wondered if perhaps something was bothering him or if he had simply chosen to remain silent throughout that period. The cafeteria seemed fairly full for a summer evening. Most students seated eating at the tables looked much younger than the four of us; hence I assumed the majority of them must have been freshmen in their early to late teens that had just moved into Rodeoville Towers. I liked the way the cafeteria was set up. The tables varied in size,

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and seemed designed to accommodate different groups of students. The tables were all rectangular in shape with at least six seats surrounding each of them.

Other tables seemed long enough to accommodate as many as ten or more students. The air smelled of grilled, baked and fried food. Students came out of the restaurant and self-service areas carrying trays of food and drinks. They put their trays on a counter, gave their student IDs to the employees at the cash register, and the latter swiped them and read some information that seemed to show up on a computer screen.

"Beep! Beep!" was the sound I heard each time an ID was swiped.

"John, come with us. Grab something to eat," Valence insisted.

"Well, I told you I don't have a student ID yet but since you assured me there won't be a problem..."

Nervously, I followed D., Valence and Lane from behind. Afraid of being left behind, I ended up copying whatever each of them did. When they picked

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up their trays, I picked up a tray as well; when they took plastic plates and cutlery, I did the same. My first main challenge occurred when I had to figure out what I was going to eat. I didn't think it fair to myself to stand behind them in line from one food counter to another when I didn't necessarily share the same meal preferences.

"Get whatever you want, man. You ain't gotta get the same stuff we're getting," D. said, as if he could read my mind.

I got out of the line where the four of us had been standing and stopped at the burger stand.

"I would like a hamburger please," I told one of the cafeteria workers.

"Small, medium or large?" she asked.

"Medium, please."

"Would you like anything on it? Pickles, cheese, fried onions, bacon?"

"Uhhh...just some fried onions, please."

"You got it."

The employee poured out some oil from a plastic bottle and then into a frying pan. Within a few

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minutes, she tossed some onion into it. She shook the pan from time to time and when the onions began to turn slightly brown, she put a medium-sized beef patty in the pan and turned the heat up a little bit.

"Salt and black pepper?" she asked.

"Yes thank you," I responded.

The cafeteria worker reached for a container by the stove, opened it and sprinkled some salt on the beef patty. She opened another container and did the same thing using some black pepper and flipped the beef patty over until the other side was equally well done. After that, she put the burger in a bun and put some pickles on top of the burger.

"You could get ketchup and mustard over there," she said, pointing.

"Thank you so much. Are there any chips that I could eat with my hamburger?" I asked.

"What?"

"Chips," I repeated.

"I'm sorry but I don't quite understand you."

"I mean potato chips to eat with the burger."

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"Oh! You mean French fries? My bad. We just ran out of e'm. If you come back in about twenty minutes, you'll be able to get some."

"Don't worry. Thank you so much. I'll eat it like this for now."

I noticed D. and coming over to the burger stand while I went to get some ketchup. There, I saw many trays filled with sachets upon sachets of ketchup and mustard. Students who preferred not to get their ingredients from the sachets got them from big ketchup and mustard dispensers on that same spot. I opened up my bun and was about to press the button on the ketchup dispenser when D. rushed toward me:

"You don't want to do that," he said.

"Why?" I wondered.

D. looked left and right and in a low tone, whispered:

"I don't know man, but I heard them folks do a lot of crazy stuff with these dispensers when there ain't that many people around. Spitting in them,



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blowing their noses, even letting blood from their cuts drip inside and stuff..."

"That's enough, D.! I don't want to hear anymore, please...thanks."

He laughed.

"So you go right on and get them packs of mustard and ketchup just like I am," he said.

Within a few seconds, Lane and Valence joined us.

"You're all set, John?" Valence asked.

I nodded.

"All right, here's what I want you to do," he continued.

Valence pointed at a table in the back of the cafeteria.

"See that table there with four seats? That's where we're gonna sit. Now you go there and wait for us. Make sure no one else sits there. In the meantime, let me have your burger. I'll put it on my tray and I'll use my meal plan to pay for it. How come you didn't get a drink?"

"Oh— I forgot."

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"How could you forget? Hurry up. Go get a drink, we'll wait."

I rushed to the area where students were getting drinks. There was a refrigerator from which students got bottled water, yogurt, juices and beverages in cans or bottles. I wanted to try something different, so I stood in line behind other students who seemed to be serving themselves drinks out of a vending machine. Using straws, some of them sipped their drinks out of huge plastic cups. Good enough the cups ranged in size from small, medium, large and I guess— large or extra-large. When it was my turn, I took a small cup, placed it underneath the machine and like those who had stood ahead of me, pressed a button so that the lemonade I was trying to get would flow directly into it. Unfortunately I missed my target and the juice spilled on the floor. I felt embarrassed because there were at least three people standing behind me and I had dirtied the floor. I turned to the student behind me:

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"Excuse me, where can I get a rag to wipe this?"

I asked, more concerned about having made a mess than not being too certain how to use the machine.

"Don't worry about it, buddy. They'll clean it up," he answered. "Here...let me help ya."

He took my cup and stood in front of the machine.

"What were you trying to get? Orange juice?"

"No, lemonade."

He put the cup directly beneath the machine.

"See? You want to make sure the cup's in the center— directly underneath the hole so the juice you want to get could flow out smoothly."

He pressed the button.

"There you go," he said, giving me the cup. "And if you want some ice..." he continued, walking to the part of the machine that dispensed ice. "You just do the same thing."

I followed him with my cup, put it directly beneath the ice dispenser and pressed the button.

PLOK! PLOK! PLOK! Went the blocks of ice dropping into my cup.

"You got it!" he said.

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After I had thanked him I picked up one of the many plastic covers beside the juice machine, covered my cup and got a straw. One of the cafeteria staff was mopping the floor in the area where I had spilled my drink.

"I am so sorry," I said to her. "I didn't do this intentionally at all."

"Hey it's no problem, babe. Stuff happens."

When I returned to the area where I had left the three guys of the seventh floor, I noticed Valence was the only one who wasn't yet seated. D. and Lane were already seated at the table.

"Damn! How long did I have to wait for you, boss?" he asked, quite upset.

"I apologize, I spilled my drink. I told you I didn't need one but you insisted, see?"

"Yeah, whatever. Let me get your cup, man. Go meet the others. I'll be with you all in a minute."

I left the food section and when I looked behind I saw Valence swiping his student ID at the cash register to pay for the food and drink I had ordered. I noticed him talking to one of the

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employees at the cash register, so I guessed he must have been explaining that he was paying for two people. In a few minutes, he joined us at table. He and I sat next to each other and directly faced D. and Lane who had already begun eating.

"Enjoy your meal, gentlemen!" Valence said, sitting down.

"Appreciate it, dawg. Hmmm...these guys make really crisp, excellent French fries. Best on campus," went D.

Valence gave me my burger and drink. I was deeply moved by his generosity and I felt I should let him know that.

"Thank you very much, Valence. I don't have much money on me right now but whenever I do have some money I'll try to take you out for lunch. I'm touched that you went out of your way to use your meal plan just to make sure I had something to eat."

Valence smiled.

"Come on, now. That's the least I can do. I mean, I know you're from Africa and food's so hard to come

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by over there. Better eat while you're here..." he said.

I was so shocked by what Valence said. Holding my burger with both hands I simply froze with my mouth and eyes semi-wide open. It took me a couple of seconds to get over those words. I felt offended but I chose to remain silent. I couldn't believe that the reason Valence was being so nice to me was because he felt I was a starving African who happened to be lucky enough to find himself in the United States. Based on his point of view, it would be totally unjust for me to continue starving in his country, which as everyone described it, was a land of great opportunity. I sensed that Lane, D. and even Valence discerned that I felt offended by those comments. There was silence for a few minutes then D. broke in:

"That ain't right, man. That ain't a nice thing to say," he said to Valence with a smile, in a tone that revealed he was trying so hard not to laugh.

"Hey I didn't mean any disrespect," Valence answered. He continued:

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"But I'd really like to know John...is there cities in Africa or is it all jungle?"

At that point I felt I should speak out:

"Valence, I thought what you were doing was out of good faith. But it's looking more and more as if you're trying to tempt me or provoke me to anger."

"Provoke you to anger? Provoke you to anger? I just asked a freaking question!"

There was a moment of silence.

"Yes there are cities in Africa with major shopping centers just like you have here. And every part of the world has areas that may seem more remote or less developed than others. Africa is no exception."

"There you go! That's all I was asking about," he responded defensively. "Don't get me wrong— I think Africa's a beautiful country."

"Continent," I corrected.

"Yeah...just playing with words, you know what I mean?" he continued. "If I go to Africa, I'd want to see all the wild animals— the lions, the zebras, and you name it. Let me guess: you know all the

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places where folks could see these in your country, right? Aren't most African men trained to deal with these animals from childhood?"

The offensive nature of Valence's comments was really beginning to irritate me.

"Listen— I'm sorry I couldn't tell you where you could see wild animals in my country. I wasn't raised around wild animals and I've never even been to a zoo. I grew up in a big city."

"So you didn't live in a hut?" he pressed on.

I had had enough. I got up from my seat, turned toward Valence and hit the table with my fist:

"Enough!!"

"Hey! Hey! Take it easy, man. It's okay. Sit down," D. yelled, grabbing me by the elbow. "Yo chill out, Val...seriously!"

I sat down. Some students seated around us had begun turning around, their conversations being distracted by the arguments coming from our table. For a while, no one at our table said a word. The silence was broken when Lane suddenly pitched in:



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"Idiots! Idiots! Three grown men acting like fools. Rodeoville's basketball team's the lowest ranked team in the NCAA. That's a fact! When are you guys gonna accept that? Sitting around arguing about a bunch of bull— and worst of all...dragging a clueless foreigner into it."

I couldn't believe my ears. I wondered what world Lane was living in. Was he that absent minded? Laughing, D. grabbed me by the elbow and pulled me toward him. He whispered in my ear:

"Don't sweat it, man. He's hard of hearing."

That's when I understood not only the reasons for Lane's prolonged periods of silence, but also why both Valence and D. seldom seemed to speak to him much. For a brief period of time, there was silence on our table. Then out of curiosity, I asked D.:

"So tell me...are there some interesting places in Philadelphia where people go to have a bit of fun? To dine out, dance and so on?"

"Of course there are! There's tons of places. After I show you around, you're be gonna hit the clubs until you get tired. Philly's hot, man. Ain't no

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place like it. How about in your country or the city where you lived at? They got cool places to hang out or what?"

"Well, I can only speak of places in the capital city— Barboura City, where I grew up. We do have many of such places but the most popular spot is called the Aquatic...where the majority of young people go. It's wonderful. I only went there once, anyway. I didn't used to go out at night or to parties much."

D. nodded.

"That's cool to know. Can I ask you a question?"  
went Valence.

"Go ahead, but I must tell you I'm not going to tolerate any offensive questions or comments."

"Dude, relax. I haven't even said anything."

Valence took a sip of his drink and then continued:

"Did you have a girlfriend in your country?"

"How does that concern you?" I asked.

"Gosh! All I did was ask a question for goodness sake!"

D. raised both his hands up:

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"Cut it out, fellas! Shoot!"

Lane was looking completely lost.

"If you think it's important for you to know, I was seeing someone but we weren't together long enough. I left my country just when we started trying to build a serious relationship."

Uttering those words, my heart suddenly became filled with emotion. I remembered how hard it was for me to say goodbye to Emelda and how much I blamed destiny on the inside for separating me from her at a time when I felt I needed to be around her the most.

"I feel you, dawg. That's gotta be hard. Do you miss her?" D. asked.

I paused for a moment to think.

"Yes," I answered.

At that moment I began to wonder when I would get a chance to see her face again...if ever.

"Was she hot?" Valence asked.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean was she sexy? Good looking?"

"In my opinion... yes."

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"You ain't talked to her since you got here, huh?" D. inquired.

"Not yet."

"You'll be all right, John. Just take it easy. We can't always figure out why, but things always happen for a reason," Valence said, in a tone so much in contrast to his usual manner of speaking.

This time around I sensed some genuine sympathy in his voice and a measure of wisdom when he spoke. The mood at table had changed. Everyone appeared to feel for me— well, at least D. and Valence— and I didn't want those emotions to keep on lingering. Hence I quickly thought about something to say to lighten up the scene.

"D.," I said.

"Yeah...what up?" he asked.

"When I watch you sprinkle that ketchup on your potato chips—"

"French fries, you mean..."

"Okay, French fries. Well, it brings to my mind a few things I've seen on TV about the Masai warriors of Kenya."

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"How come?" he wondered, shocked by my observation.

"They apparently have a tendency to drink cows' blood with their meals and with that ketchup looking so thick red..."

D. stopped chewing.

"Hold it, man! Hold it right there! You're making me lose appetite, damn it! I don't think I can eat this anymore."

I laughed and Valence joined me moments later. But when I turned and looked at him, he stopped. It was obvious to me that he was laughing more for stereotypical reasons than anything else.

"I was just joking. Are you sure you really don't want to eat anymore?" I asked.

"Hey it's all good—I'm all done, dawg," D. said.

The four of us left the cafeteria and caught the elevator. At some point during our ride up, Lane spoke:

"Would you guys stop talking about me? When are you guys gonna stop talking about me? Just cause we're roommates and floor mates shouldn't mean I've got to

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tag along with everything you like. You guys suck! I can tell when you're talking about me."

Neither of us responded. The elevator doors opened and we got out on the seventh floor. Much to our surprise, we realized that a note had been posted on all the doors. It read:

*All seventh floor residents are requested to take part in a mandatory meeting at the TV lounge tomorrow morning at 9:30 a.m. to discuss a recent act of indiscipline. I attach the utmost importance to the strict respect of this note.*

*Markel,*

*Resident Assistant*

"Seems like y'all folks gonna have a long night," D. said.

"Yep, I'm glad I wasn't involved in the mess that happened earlier," Valence added.

Lane read the note but said nothing.

"And thank God everyone knows I'm the new guy...the man from Boluaké," I said.

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We parted ways and each of us went to sleep...at least to get what sleep we could. The dead silence on the seventh floor was a clear indication that the note was on everyone's mind.

**CHAPTER SEVEN****The Meeting**

It was a rather tense atmosphere at the TV lounge when D. and I arrived there at exactly 9:30 the next morning. It was so jammed to capacity that we could barely find a place to sit. A number of students looked as if they had just woken up from sleep and many dressed relaxed in T-shirts, shorts and sandals. Some of them still had their pajamas on and I was amazed at the advanced degree of individual liberty that I hadn't ceased to notice from the first day when I began the ride by bus from the police station to Rodeoville University.

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Even the normally loquacious Valence—sitting beside Lane all the way in the back by the wall—had seemed obliged by circumstances to keep his mouth shut. Noticing us entering into the lounge, he simply nodded. D. and I squeezed in and took a seat in between a group of students. Within a few minutes, we heard the sound of someone slamming a door in the hallway. Markel walked in. There was a stiff, blank expression on people's faces. As the new guy on the floor, I felt like someone who unfortunately happened to have been at the right place at the wrong time. Markel stood in the middle, in front of the TV set. Compared to when I first saw him, he was dressed casually. He wore a pair of jeans trousers—or rather, a pair of jeans "pants," to use D.'s correction—and a sky blue polo shirt with white tennis shoes—or rather, a pair of white "sneakers."

"Good Morning, guys. I don't think there's any reason for me to go over why you're here. You're all aware of what happened here yesterday. Let me make myself clear and this is gonna be the absolute



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one and only time I'll repeat it: I will not tolerate any further acts of indiscipline on this floor! If you're under 21 and you get caught sneaking alcohol into this building or even worse, bringing it onto this floor...you're in big, big trouble. I repeat: big, big trouble! From now henceforth I'm gonna be working more closely with the resident director of this building and other on-campus housing administrators. I assure you all that applicable sanctions will be enforced to maintain order and discipline on this floor."

Markel paused. Not a single one of us as much as coughed or cleared a throat. He continued:

"I think it's safe for me to assume everyone here's at least 18 or older. At your respective ages I expect each of you to act like adults. That implies taking responsibility for your actions. Here's what I expect: within the next two hours I want the persons who organized yesterday's party in the hallway to knock on my door and admit to doing wrong. If they're genuinely sorry for what they did, I'll let it slide. Trust me... I already know

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who's behind it all. If no one shows up and confesses within two hours, everyone on this floor's gonna pay a price...did I make myself clear?"

We all nodded silently. Markel added:

"Oh! Before I forget, there's a new resident on our floor. I'd like you to welcome John Malinke from Central Africa. John, could you stand up so your peers can see you?"

I stood up.

"Be nice to him guys, and make him feel at home. Nice to have you here, John."

After that, Markel left. There was a lot of murmuring in the TV lounge as students pointed accusing fingers at each other, blaming one or the other for one thing or the other.

"This is serious stuff," one student said. "Let the guilty parties confess and get this burden off of our shoulders. I don't wanna deal with that."

A mixed group of male and female students walked up to me to get my impressions of their country so far.

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"How'd you like it here?" some of them asked rather naively.

"I like it a lot. I think it's a very interesting country."

"Going to the game tonight?" asked another.

"Game? I'm not sure. I wasn't aware of that—Maybe some other time. Thank you for asking.

As we all retreated into our respective rooms, Lane said:

"Can't believe he got the entire floor out just to talk about cafeteria food. He's got nothing better to do?"

I couldn't believe he misinterpreted the purpose of the meeting when everything had been so clearly explained on the note that we all read the previous day prior to retreating into our rooms. None of us felt like going through the strain of repeating to him what the RA had just said.

"Damn...you ain't tell him why Markel called a meeting, man?" D. asked Valence.

"Tell who?" he answered. "Dude, didn't he read that stuff yesterday just like the rest of us? I wasn't

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in the mood to deal with another bunch of strange questions I couldn't handle."

"I got you dawg, I got you," D. said.

At dinner time later that day, I sat in Room 702 wondering what I would do to get something to eat. I neither had enough cash nor a student ID card yet, thus going to the cafeteria was out of the question. In the process of unpacking, I discovered a twenty dollar bill that I had somehow put in my suitcase and zipped in the area where I had put my toiletries. I couldn't quite recall how the money got there, but afterward I remembered there once was a time when Uncle Robert took me to his bank to change some of my Naras to Dollars about a week and a half before I left. He had emphasized that it was always good for an individual to have a little bit of pocket money in the local currency of the country to which he or she was traveling and in the exchange rate process I ended up with twenty U.S. Dollars. And Dad had equally told me that it wasn't a good idea for me to keep all of my money in one

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place, which perfectly explained how that twenty dollar bill ended up where I found it. I had to make a tough decision. I couldn't afford to depend on Valence's misplaced sense of generosity and spending the little cash I had on me would not have by any means been the most brilliant idea. Yet I had no clue when my student ID was going to be issued and starving as a result of that wouldn't have been good either. So what was I supposed to do? D. spoke as if he could read my mind:

"Why you sitting on your bed looking all worried and in deep thought? I'm heading downstairs to eat. You ain't coming?" he asked.

"I would have liked to come but I can't swipe."

"Come on, man. Let's go. I'll get you stuff to eat. Just pick out what you want and I'll use my meal plan to pay for it."

"I don't want you to go out of your way to do that for me, D. Valence did that already. I don't feel comfortable."

"It ain't a problem, man. Get that out of your mind."

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"Are Valence and Lane going to be in the cafeteria?" I asked.

"I think they're there already."

"Imagine what Valence would think if he saw you getting food for me. He who has such a strange perspective of what life is like in Africa."

D. nodded.

"I know what I'm gonna do. I'll get you a sandwich or a burger and when I'm done eating I'll bring it up to you. You cool with that?"

"I honestly would have preferred it if you didn't."

"I'll do what I said. See you soon," he stubbornly insisted.

I spent the next forty five to fifty minutes sitting on my bed absent-mindedly watching D.'s TV from a distance. Although the football game that was on didn't interest me much, out of respect I couldn't pick up his remote to switch the channel and surf around. I had meant to ask him if I could do so but it had slipped my mind. Moments later, the door opened.

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"Got you a roasted chicken sandwich with lettuce, tomato and Italian dressing," D. said, giving it to me on a plastic plate.

"Thanks, D.. thanks a lot," I responded as I took off the aluminum foil that was used to wrap up the sandwich.

A few minutes after I had begun eating, D. confided in me:

"You won't believe this, man. On my way back I ran into these three cats talking in the hallway."

"You ran into three cats talking in the hallway? That's strange. Where in the world do people come across cats speaking to each other? Rodeoville Towers must be a strange building. I'm beginning to get worried."

"Ha,ha,ha!" he laughed. "Oh my...I see you still ain't gotten a full grasp of American lingo, huh? When I use the word "cats," it's just another way of saying 'people' or 'individuals,' know what I'm saying? So what I'm getting at is I ran into these three people—three students if you will—talking in the hallway."

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"I get you now. I'm sorry I keep forgetting. I see it's practically the same as the word "dawg" which you used when speaking to me a while ago," I reminisced.

"Exactly, brother. That's what I'm talking about."

"So what were they saying?" I asked him.

"Well...them walls might have ears so I gotta speak low."

D. looked around, then to his left and right as if to ensure that no one was about to open the door.

"Hold on," he said.

He opened the door slightly and peeped into the hallway. He looked left and right and then shut the door.

"Turns out it's the guys in 706 that organized the party. At least that's what I heard. It's like they confessed to Markel and stuff," D. said in a very low tone.

"Really? So what's going to happen to them now?"

"I think they're in much less trouble since they spoke the truth...know what I'm saying? I heard the R.A. was pretty hard on e'm. Gave e'm all some



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stern warnings. They fool around like this again some other time, they're in for it. You could bet there ain't gonna be no more parties on this floor."

D. sat on the sofa and picked up the remote.

"Damn...the game's over? Hey, what you want to watch, man?"

"I don't have a preference. Anything that you think is good."

"You ain't trying to tell me you've been sitting here watching football all this while, are you? Cause I know most you all brothers from Africa prefer soccer."

"I didn't feel comfortable changing channels without your permission."

D. laughed.

"Come on dude, don't be so uptight. I don't care. We're roommates now. You're in America- it's a free world!"

"In my culture it's considered impolite to touch people's things without their permission."

D. nodded.

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"I'm impressed...I hear you. But you don't want to overdo it here or else you'd be labeled 'too nice' and folks gonna take advantage of you. It's a dog eat dog world here, man- good stuff comes to those who hustle. Get what I'm saying?" he asked.

"I guess so," I answered.

D. switched to a music channel.

"Check this out," he said. "This show's being broadcast from a TV studio on campus. It's Rodeoville's TV station, if you will- presented by communications students."

I was impressed by the professionalism of the students who introduced the videos. The presenters were a black female and a white male. I could see passion and dedication reflecting off of them.

"Do these two students host the show all the time?"

I asked.

"Nah, there's another team that takes over toward the weekend. A black dude and another girl, I think she's Hispanic...Latino."

I digressed a little bit:

"Did Valence ask you where I was?"

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D. laughed.

"Yeah, that was one of the first things he asked me. Seems like he was wondering how you were gonna eat tonight," he replied.

"He must be a real fool," I said.

**CHAPTER EIGHT****Fitting In**

It was a couple minutes past midday and I had been out for a walk around campus. I took a seat on one of the benches on the lawn and with admiration, watched the sprinklers water the vast expanse of constantly fresh-looking, light green grass. The grass always felt so soft when you walked on it and ever since I had arrived on campus it didn't seem to have sprouted beyond a certain level, which persuaded me that it was probably cut at least every other week. Not too far from me, some

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students were playing Frisbee and others were jumping rope. They had to be freshmen, I thought to myself. I couldn't imagine juniors or seniors in college spending time doing that. There was much more affluence on campus. I began to see a lot more students who looked my age or older and individuals who based on my observation could have been professors or teaching assistants. They were dressed quite formally and held either folders or briefcases. Walking fast, they gave off an aura of depth and seriousness— nodding to acknowledge the students along their path, but in too much of a hurry to stop and speak to anyone.

"Excuse me, could you take us a picture?" asked a student walking in my direction.

"Sure...no problem," I said.

She gave me her camera and giggling, took a seat on the grass underneath a nearby tree, wrapping her arm around a male student's shoulder.

"Okay— are you guys ready? Smile..."

The couple smiled broadly. I took the picture.

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"Thank you so much," she said, as I returned her camera.

"You're very welcome."

"Hey- where are you from? You have an accent."

"I'm from Central Africa."

"Wow...awesome!"

On my way back to Rodeoville Towers, I took a moment to once again admire the campus scenery- its gigantic stone walls that had a touch of German architecture; the sparkling wooden doors that led into the various buildings; the rather unique flight of stairs...even though climbing them sometimes felt quite heavy on the knees. I had begun to feel quite bored. Interaction among students on the seventh floor was primarily limited to roommates. Sure, there were the usual "hellos" and "how are you doing?" from time to time but for the most part, students kept to themselves. Everyone seemed to have their own crew or clique...an inner circle that would not admit any outsiders. The forbidden party that took place along the

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hallway when I had just arrived was the only time I saw the seventh floor mates acting like one big, happy family. I was still trying to get used to the individualistic nature of certain aspects of American culture: for example, someone whom you see on a regular basis may say "hi" to you today and then walk past you tomorrow as if you had never met. And if you chose to take the initiative and say "hello" to the person, the decision on whether or not to respond would depend on the individual's mood at that particular time. In my culture, such an attitude was considered very disrespectful but I had to accept that it was a different environment in which not everyone shared the same values. Besides, not everyone felt a reason to be nice or friendly toward individuals who were courteous to them.

I had nonetheless started becoming quite familiar with the names of a good number of the buildings on Rodeoville University's campus and where they were located. The Office of International Services was among the first

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buildings I made sure I became familiar with. It wasn't too much of a walking distance from Rodeoville Towers, which was obviously a good thing. I couldn't wait for classes to begin so I could get a chance to meet more people. But when I thought about the fact that I would first have to take a series of English courses designed for students whose proficiency levels were deficient, some of my excitement faded away. I wished there was someone I could talk to because I honestly didn't need to sign up for such courses at all. I also had a burning desire to talk to my parents. I hadn't had a chance to talk to them again since my arrival when I was in Mr. Clifton's office. I could only imagine how worried they must have been. It was important for me to speak to them and reassure them that all was well.

In addition, within the past few days I had been surviving with the twenty dollar bill that I found in my suitcase. I had discovered some restaurants within the campus vicinity that offered food at more affordable prices in comparison to what was

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served at the cafeteria. For five or six dollars I could eat a full meal, whereas at the cafeteria five or six dollars was the minimum price for merely a small sandwich or burger. I didn't want to deal with the possible embarrassment of taking food and then being informed at the cash register that the amount of money on me was insufficient to pay for it. Hoping to count on D. once more would have been both unfair and unrealistic. He had already gone out of his way to assist me and asking Valence for anything was out of the question to me.

And then there was Emelda. I wondered if she still kept me in mind or whether my departure to the United States could have been used instead as a sufficient excuse for her to return to her old ways. She loved attention so much and was painfully impulsive. I yearned to hear her voice...and Kenneth's too.

"Damn, I've been looking for you all over the place," D. said when I opened the door to our room.

"Really? What happened?" I wondered.



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"A lady called from some International Services Office here on campus. Said you've gotta go get your picture taken at Ruthford Hall."

"Get my picture taken? What for?"

"So y'all could get your student IDs done."

"Oh...I see. Do you by any chance remember the name of the lady who called?"

"Hmmm...something like Vera or Veronica- that's right, Veronica. I think that's what I heard."

Since I didn't know Veronica's office number, I went to my closet and in my wallet tucked beneath my clothes, found the business card Tom Clifton had given me. For purposes of respect, I didn't think it would be right for me to call him directly when the card equally listed a number I could use to reach the reception desk.

"D., could I please use your phone?"

"Who you trying to call, man?"

"I just want to return Veronica's call."

"All right, I got ya. Cause I ain't gonna pay for no international calls...know what I mean?"

The phone rang.

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"Office of International Services— how may I help you?"

"Good Afternoon...my name is John Malinke. I'm calling from Room 702, Rodeoville Towers."

"Oh yes! This is Danielle. Veronica called you earlier. You need to go to Ruthford Hall and get your picture taken. I'd say go there as soon as you can."

I rushed out of the room to the hallway and got on the elevator. When I was out of the building, I asked a few students for directions to Ruthford Hall. Along the way, I recognized a number of buildings the students had indicated I would walk past while en route to Ruthford Hall. Nonetheless, finding it proved to be a bit of a challenge.

"Mr. Malinke!" someone shouted behind me.

I turned, wondering who could have possibly been calling me in an area of campus that was rather unfamiliar to me. It was Chuck.

"Where are you heading to, young buck?" he asked, with a broad smile on his face.

"Hey! How have you been?" I responded.

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I was so pleased to see Chuck.

"Been all right, buddy...and you? How's things coming on your end? Gettin' used to the new environment?"

"Well, I'm trying to do the best I can. I was wondering if you could help me. I need to go to Ruthford Hall and I'm having a bit of trouble finding it."

"Ah! Ruthford Hall- sure...I could help ya. Come with me."

Chuck took the lead. We turned right, walked past the University's main library and went down a flight of stairs.

"That's it," he said, pointing to a tall black and grey building just a few blocks away.

"Chuck, I owe you so much. I'm not sure what could be good enough for me to do to thank--"

He interrupted me.

"Hold it right there, dude. You don't owe me nothin'. It's always a pleasure to help. Good luck with everything. I'll see you around."

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At the Ruthford Hall lobby, I asked the security guard where exactly the pictures were being taken.

"You could either take the stairs or the elevator to the third floor," she said.

There were too many people waiting to take the elevator, so I decided to take the stairs along the corridor.

"Excuse me, sir!" the security guard shouted.

I wondered what she was calling me back for.

"You didn't sign in," she said.

I was too preoccupied trying to figure out where to get my picture taken that I didn't notice there was a sign-in sheet and a pen at the front desk where the security guard was seated. I signed in and took the stairs to the third floor.

As soon as I got there, I came across a message which read:

*Student ID Pics- Third Floor Auditorium*

For guidance, I followed an arrow placed on a sign post beside the message, which seemed to be directing me to turn right. After I had done so, I came to an area where lots of students were seated

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waiting their turn to be photographed. The photographer was using a long camera mounted on a tripod. Two people assisted him during the process: one woman who made sure every student signed in on a sheet of paper before getting their picture taken, and a man who sat in front of a computer screen beside the photographer and his camera. He seemed to take care of the lighting and often looked on the screen to ensure that each student followed the photographer's instructions correctly or in other words, took the right poses.

I waited patiently for my turn, which came quite sooner than I had anticipated.

"John Mila-Molink-Malinke!" shouted the lady who took care of the signing in process. "Oops...I hope I didn't murder that name too much."

I got up from where I was sitting and walked toward the photographer. I took a seat on the chair facing him just like everyone else. He adjusted his camera.

"Could you turn your face slightly to your right?" said the lighting guy.

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I complied.

"Perfect...there you go. Stay still, now. Don't move," he continued.

"Smile," said the photographer.

I did.

"Awesome," he said.

He pressed the button and it gave off a bright flash. The picture had been taken.

"Here you go," said their female colleague, giving me a flash card with a number boldly written on it.

"Come back in about an hour. The number on this paper is your identification number. You'll need to present it when you return to pick up your ID."

I didn't feel like returning to Rodeoville Towers so soon. I felt bored and didn't have much of any money to catch a train, bus or cab for an adventurous walk down Center City Philadelphia. I decided to kill time at the Office of International Services despite having no clue what it was I would be doing there for an entire hour without an appointment. The walk from Ruthford Hall to the Office of International Services wasn't complicated

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at all. I found my way rather easily and didn't have to stop to ask for directions. If necessary, I could also find my way from the Office of International Services to the cafeteria and from the cafeteria to the University's main library and a number of other buildings. I had made quite some progress, I thought.

"Hi John, what brings you here today?" asked a smiling Danielle when she opened the door and let me into the Office of International Services.

"I need to wait for about an hour to pick up my student ID card from Ruthford Hall."

"Oh, I see. Wow...so you're just gonna sit here and chill 'til it's time to go back?"

I nodded.

"It's boring in Ruthford Hall and I don't feel like going back there so soon."

"I feel you. Well, have a seat. Grab a magazine if you wish," she said.

I took a seat in the waiting room at the reception area and looked through a few of the magazines

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piled on a wooden table in the middle. Moments later, I heard Danielle say from the reception desk:

"John, I'm mad at you. You know why?"

I had now become quite used to various expressions of American slang, so I understood what she meant. She was smiling anyway, so I felt assured that whatever her reproach could have been...it hopefully wasn't anything serious.

"Why are you upset with me?" I asked.

"You made a promise you didn't keep."

"A promise?"

"Yes you did," she insisted.

I took a moment to think.

"Oh! The pictures...I remember. I completely forgot—I'm sorry."

"All right, can you make one last promise?" she asked.

"Probably— what is that?"

"Don't come in here next time without pictures from back home. If you do, never you talk to me again," she said, shaking her head.



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I couldn't resist laughing. A few minutes later, I heard someone say from upstairs:

"Danielle, could you reschedule my 3 p.m. appointment for tomorrow morning? I have a meeting with the director of admissions."

It was a female voice and I guessed it was Amisu Banda, the Assistant Director at the Office of International Services whom I hadn't met yet.

"I got you," responded Danielle, with much voice projection. "What time tomorrow morning?"

"Uhhmm...let's see. I'd say about 10 a.m. because I won't get here before 9:30."

Danielle got on a laptop at the front desk and began typing. I imagined she was updating Amisu's calendar in a database within their system. She picked up the phone and dialed a number.

"Hi. Mr. Fabius? We'll need to reschedule your 3 p.m. appointment. There's been a change in the assistant director's calendar. Does tomorrow at 10 a.m. work for you? Perfect. We'll see you then. Have a good day."

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I didn't know Danielle that well yet but I thought I liked her character. She struck me as a caring, sensitive and considerate person with a lot of integrity. The kind of person you felt you could confide in.

"Danielle I have a concern and I was wondering if you could perhaps help me," I said.

"Oh sure! What's the matter?" she asked.

"I haven't talked to my parents in a while and I've ran out of money. I don't think I could survive like this beyond the next two days."

"I'm so sorry to hear that. So basically what you're saying is you'd like us to help you get in touch with your parents?"

I nodded.

"Shouldn't be problems at all...just give me a minute," she said.

Danielle pulled open the top drawer of the reception desk and with both hands, shuffled around some pens, pencils and pieces of paper.

"Aha! This should work for you," she said, holding something up. "It's a phone card. We keep a few

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around in case some of our students need to call home. You're actually lucky 'cause that's the last one we had. Reminds me I should tell Tom we need to get more of e'm."

"A twenty-minute phone card. Thank you very much, Danielle."

"Just doing my job, but you're welcome."

"Is it okay if I make the call from here?" I asked.

"I wouldn't feel comfortable with my roommate listening to the conversation."

"You certainly can. You know the code to dial from here to Africa?"

"I do. It's 011."

"All right...I'll go take a bit of fresh air outside while you make your call. I'm just in front of the building. Be back in a few minutes— take your time..." she said, walking toward the door.

I knew Danielle didn't necessarily need to go out and get some fresh air at that particular moment and that it was just a polite excuse to enable me have some privacy. I was sincerely grateful to her for that. I took off the plastic cover from the

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phone card and read the calling instructions behind it. I picked up the phone at the reception desk and called our home number in Barbours City. The phone rang a couple of times and then I recognized Dad's voice:

"Allo?"

"Dad? It's John."

"John! You had your mother and I worried. Why has it taken you so long to call?"

"I'm sorry, Dad. I don't yet have a phone so I either have to use my roommate's own or call from the Office of International Services."

"How are things? Did the police ever find those people who robbed you?"

"Not yet."

"Why is it taking them so long? Is that not a country that equips its police force and military with the best resources?"

"Well, I don't really know what to say. Maybe some investigations simply take longer than others."

Both of us paused for a moment as if thinking about what next to say. I led the way:

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"Dad—"

"Yes?"

"I— I urgently need some pocket money. I've been struggling to survive on a twenty-dollar bill for the past several days and that's all the money I have. I've had to split it into bits to pay for food in cash. I don't think I would be able to keep surviving like this much longer. My roommate and a few people I got to know have also been chipping in to help me pay for food."

"But we already paid for your meal plan— so why are you using cash to buy food at the cafeteria?" he asked.

"Because I need to use a student ID card to swipe each time I take food. I didn't have one but it's going to be ready today in less than an hour's time."

Dad cleared his throat.

"That is good. As a matter of fact the issue of pocket money is the main reason why your mother and I have been worried we hadn't heard from you in such a long time. We are in the process of sending

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you some money through World Wide Express. You should be able to get it by tomorrow. The amount is 300 dollars. Manage it well. 100 dollars is for you to use as pocket money. 200 dollars is for you to deposit at a bank and create an account. Call me tomorrow afternoon your time...for confirmation."

"Thank you so much in advance, Dad. How is Mum doing?"

"She's fine. She's sitting at the front porch with some guests as we speak. I'll tell her you called."

"And the plantation?" I asked.

"It is doing quite well. Once in a while business is a bit slow and we don't sell as much as produce as we would have liked but by and large it has been quite okay."

"That's good news indeed. Please can you greet Kenneth for me whenever you might see him? If you do, please tell him to expect a call from me this week."

"No problem. Before you go John, I need to emphasize something—"

"Yes Dad?"

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"You used to work extremely hard when you were home. You played a great role in helping your mother and I develop the plantation. Continue with that spirit. Don't become complacent. We will do our best to send you what we can when it's possible but see what you can do to fit in. As you can imagine, trying to pay your tuition every semester and your meal plan every year has already required us to make enormous sacrifices. Find out how to get a job on campus. Most of all, get good grades in all your courses, follow the rules of the country and strive to be the best in all you do."

Those words of encouragement seemed to stir up a fire inside of me and I was deeply moved. Although Dad was thousands of miles away, those words made me feel so much as if he were with me in spirit.

"Thank you Dad...I will do my best."

"Good— don't forget to call tomorrow."

"I won't."

Then I recalled something.

"Dad you remember you made a promise to me when you came to see me off at the airport, right?"

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"Uhhh...what promise? I don't remember."

"Come on...I know you do."

He laughed.

"I have to admit that there used to be times when I would feel like drinking a jug of ice cold beer..."

He paused.

"But I am conscious of the fact that I made a promise to you and your mother, so you have nothing to worry about. I have become a champion at drinking natural juices and non-alcoholic beverages. In fact I drink so much juice that your mother seems to have completely forgotten my beer days and I want it to stay that way. All right, let me get back to our guests. Don't forget to call tomorrow. Bye."

"Bye Dad," I said, laughing but sincerely pleased at this new sense of consciousness.

Danielle walked in. Although she didn't say anything, I could tell from the look in her eyes that she wanted to return to her spot behind the reception desk.



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"I noticed you laughing. Must have been cool talking to your family," she said.

"Yes. I definitely needed to make this call. Thank you so much. I should go and pick up my student ID now."

"Sure...that's very important. Don't forget though; don't come in here without the pictures you promised."

"You have my word. Do you happen to know if there's a World Wide Express service somewhere on Rodeoville's campus? I'm expecting some money from home tomorrow."

"The bookstore has one but it's only operational during specific hours. There are lots of places down town with World Wide Express service locations too though," she said.

Our conversation got interrupted by the lady upstairs:

"Danielle can you come up, please? I need you to help me update a student's file."

I didn't think it right to bother Danielle any further. She had been extremely patient and helpful.

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I thanked her and made my exit from the Office of International Services.

At Ruthford Hall's Third Floor Auditorium, the photographer was dismantling his tripod and his two assistants were putting their equipment into small boxes. I seemed to be the only student present.

"Ah! There he is..." said the woman in the group. "Last to come, last to return. John Malinke, I suppose," she asked, looking at her list.

"Yes, I'm John Malinke."

"Sign right next to your name please," she said.

After I had signed she gave me my student ID card. It was white in colour and my first and last names were written boldly in black. Beneath that information featured the name of the University and on the right side of the card, a head and shoulder picture of me. It read:

JOHN MALINKE

STUDENT

RODEOVILLE UNIVERSITY

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I finally had a student ID! I could now hopefully swipe it at the cash register after getting food from the cafeteria and equally present it to security guards at the front desks of the various campus buildings. I felt both relieved and excited when I put it in my pocket. I would no longer be forced to isolate myself in Room 702 when D., Lane and Valence went down to eat. Nor would I have to make any further tough decisions with the very little cash I was clinging on to.

I met Valence in our room when I returned.

"Here's your boy," he said to D.

I wondered what the matter was.

"Am I interrupting your conversation or something?" I asked.

"Nah...chill out, man. Here's the deal. Valence and I are stepping out tonight. We'd like you to come with us," D said.

I took a couple of seconds to think.

"Thanks but I don't think I'll be able to join you. I've had a long day and I really don't have money."

Valence laughed.

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"See, I told you he's not gonna be interested," he said.

D. shook his head.

"You're tripping, dawg. You really are. Don't be a loser. Forget about money. I got you covered. You're in Philly, man! You can't spend all your time locked up in Rodeoville Towers. Go out! Check out the night scene. Meet some ladies," D. said.

"So where exactly do you guys want to go?" I asked.

"Crush. One of the best clubs in the city," Valence said.

"I'll have to think about it," I responded.

"Ain't got nothing to think about. Don't be so anti-social," D. added.

"Look...it's not that. It's just that I was seeing someone back home and I don't think she'll like it if she heard I went to a club. I may end up meeting someone else and even worse...dance with her."

D. and Valence laughed out loud.

"Dude, someone's got to knock some sense into you," Valence said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

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"You're thousands of freaking miles away. How the hell do you know what she's doing? She's not gonna sit around waiting in the same spot 'til you go back home. I mean— fit in, for goodness sake."

Valence's words made me think for a minute. Although there were several aspects of his personality that I didn't like, there was some truth to what he was saying. I was thousands of miles away and had no clue what Emelda might have been doing. Was she trustworthy enough for me to hold on to her exclusively from so far away? I would have liked to but given what I believed I knew about her character, I had strong reservations that she would have done the same for me.

"All right, I'll consider it. But if I do go out it won't be because of what you said, Valence. It would simply be because I want to get to know Philadelphia better."

"Sure...whatever," he responded mockingly.

"You gotta make up your mind by 10 p.m., man. We leave at 11," D. said.

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"No problem. I'm going to the cafeteria to eat first."

"You could use my ID to swipe. I ate already," D. proposed.

"I don't want to take such a risk. What if they see your picture and then realize that we are two different people? Isn't that impersonation?"

"Piece of cake! All you gotta do is look for a cash register with a white employee. To most white folks all black men look alike. They can't tell the difference."

"Never mind— I got my student ID card today, so I should be able to swipe on my own. Thanks a lot, anyway."

"That's what's up! Now you can hit the caf at your own convenience. I'm happy for you, man."

At about 7 p.m. that evening I went down to eat in the cafeteria. How liberating it felt to be able to get food without feeling as if I was inconveniencing D. or having to sit and endure through Valence's silly and ignorant comments. I got a tuna sandwich

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and some orange juice. I felt quite nervous when I approached the employee at the cash register. There were quite a few students standing behind me in line. What if I swiped my student ID and his computer indicated that the funds for my meal plan had not yet been electronically transferred? Without much of any cash on me it would have been a huge embarrassment if the transaction turned out unsuccessful. I would have been left with no other option besides leaving my tray of food by the cash register and returning to my room. And even if someone in line offered to use his or her card to pay for my meal, it wouldn't be fun to be remembered as the guy who got food from the cafeteria but didn't have enough to pay for it...especially if some of them got to find out I was from an African country.

"Next in line, please..." said the man at the cash register.

Masking my concerns I came forward and swiped my ID.

Bip! Bip! The green light flashed. The man at the cash register squinted and read through his computer

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for about a minute or two. I immediately thought my fears were about to be confirmed.

"You're good," he said, turning to me. "First time swiping, huh?"

I nodded with a tremendous sense of relief. It had worked! I was lucky to find an empty table amidst the crowd of students sitting in the hall. I took a seat and began eating my meal. I couldn't help but notice there were at least two or three people sitting at the majority of tables around me— others sat in groups of four or more and each of them seemed deeply engaged in conversation...chatting noisily and excitedly. I felt as if I would have loved some company and began missing D., Lane and Valence's presence. Nonetheless, I believed I could endure through it. After all, it wasn't guaranteed that there would always be someone available to keep me company either at lunch or dinner time and I didn't plan on being long in the cafeteria. While eating, I looked at the crowd of students in the seating area directly facing me and at a distance, felt I recognized someone. She was sitting alone as well.



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Could it have been her? I stretched my neck and looked to the side. I didn't think my eyes were playing a trick on me. It seemed very much like her. Yes, I wasn't mistaken. It was Veronica. At least that was someone in the crowd I could talk to and it had been a little while since I ran into her on campus.

I carried my tray of food along and walked through the crowd with a broad smile on my face toward Veronica's table. I wasn't sure if she had noticed me coming from a distance but at some point it seemed as if both our eyes met and she quickly looked the other way.

"Hello Veronica!" I exclaimed upon reaching her table.

She looked at the tray of food I was carrying and then at me.

"Hi. How do you do?" she asked.

I wondered if there was something bothering her but I didn't think it appropriate to ask. Perhaps that would have been getting too personal. Yet the way she responded didn't feel like the warm, cheerful

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Veronica I thought I knew. I neither saw the smile nor the enthusiasm. At that moment it seemed as if she were merely trying to give me a bare minimum of courtesy. But perhaps I was rushing to conclusions. That alone wasn't sufficient enough for me to make any assumptions.

"Do you mind if I join you?" I asked.

"Go right ahead," she responded.

I took a seat. Veronica seemed so focused on her food. Once in a while she looked to her left and to her right but most of the time she looked down at what she was eating. Not once did she look up to make any form of eye contact with me. I found it very strange.

"I got my ID done today, so I was finally able to swipe and get food on my own," I said in an attempt to break the silence.

At last she looked up at me.

"Oh good! Means your roommate passed the message. I know you've got a passport but you don't want to walk around without some form of local ID on you. You lose your passport, you're screwed."

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I wasn't sure why but while she ate, Veronica kept looking nervously to her left and right. At one point she began eating at an incredibly fast pace as if in a hurry to catch up with something or perhaps someone.

"So do you live on campus?" I asked.

She shook her head.

"I don't but I don't live far from the University."

Looking around I noticed quite a few students seated around us were constantly looking at our table as they ate. Veronica and I weren't doing anything out of the ordinary, so what was all that staring for? As my eyes moved around, I noticed there wasn't much racial mixture at the tables. A majority of white students seemed to sit with each other, while most black students seemed to be bonding in their own corner. I noticed a black male and a white male seated at one of the tables but at least in that section of the cafeteria I seemed to be the only black male sitting with a white female. And the attention we were getting wasn't coming only from the white students who constituted a majority of the

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population within the cafeteria, but also from the available black students as well.

Could that awareness have affected Veronica to the point where simply making eye contact with me was reason enough to make her feel so uncomfortable?

"Nice talking to you this evening, John. I really should go now. I've got some errands to run," she said in a voice filled with precipitation.

I wondered what errands she suddenly needed to run several minutes after 8 p.m. but this was the United States of America-every individual had his or her own unique schedule. Nonetheless, I strongly felt the reason for Veronica's sudden rush was related to the unwelcome attention we received at our table. An attention none of the multitude of students at the tables around us seemed to be getting. My meal suddenly felt tasteless. I ate what I could, cleared my table, threw the left overs in the trash bin and put my tray on the shelf. After that experience I promised to myself that never again would I sit at table with Veronica at the cafeteria or at any other social gathering. I wondered if I should expect the

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same kind of reaction if I were interacting with any other white female on campus. Based on what I saw, I didn't think it was a risk I would have wanted to take. Was there so much racial intolerance and division on Rodeoville University's campus that social interaction between men and women of different races was strictly forbidden? Could it also have been possible that I didn't know Veronica as much as I had thought? Was I judging her character solely on the basis of how well she received me in her role of a foreign student advisor when maybe-just maybe she didn't necessarily think much of me as a person?

Upon leaving the cafeteria, I stopped at the men's room to wash my hands. After I had done so, I placed both hands underneath the dryer. I was quite impressed by the advanced technology. It seemed to have a motion detector that turned it on as soon as anyone put their hands underneath it. Within several seconds, my hands were completely dry thanks to the intense heat it gave off. I noticed there was a lot of graffiti on the restroom walls. Students had scribbled all kinds of graffiti and symbols with red

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and blue markers. Some of them seemed to be criticisms and cartoon-like representations of certain professors, apparently those who for one reason or another weren't held in very high esteem. I found one of the comments particularly funny. It stated:

*Dr. Smith, shark teeth— an idiot with a PhD*

But then looking around I came across a written comment that almost made my heart sink in:

*Niggers: the source of all America's problems. Go back to Africa where you belong!*

This particular comment didn't seem like the previous ones directed at the professors which could have been taken lightly or interpreted as mere jokes. There was nothing friendly about the tone and when I read those words a second time, I felt a reflection of the hatred, anger, bitterness and ignorance of the author. I had known enough from watching American documentaries and movies on the Civil Rights Movement in my home country that the word "Nigger," when used to describe a black person was aimed at injuring, humiliating, and dehumanizing the individual and

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creating deep, permanent wounds into the innermost parts of the soul.

The door opened. Instinctively, I wondered if the white male coming in with a grey tank top and a dark blue bandana might have been one of those who had the habit of coming in there to write on the walls when there weren't many people around. There were tattoos on his neck and left and right shoulders. He nodded and smiled in acknowledgement of my presence and I did the same as well. After that, he began washing his hands. Leaving the bathroom, I concluded that the mere fact that he smiled at me and seemed to acknowledge me implied that he must have been a courteous person. I doubted he would be the kind of person who would write such comments on the walls. If he were involved, I probably would have sensed some guilt in him and he probably wouldn't have bothered making any form of eye contact with me. But then again, how could I possibly have known? I hadn't been at Rodeoville University long enough to have been able to make any accurate assumptions. In the

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elevator, a million questions went through my mind. Was there an aspect of Rodeoville University that I didn't know about? What about the University's claims about fostering an environment of diversity, tolerance and respect that I had read so much about in its brochures and newsletters?

I opened the door to Room 702. D. was on the phone talking to someone.

"Ain't in the mood to talk about that right now. We gonna sort it out tomorrow, you got that? Sleep tight...talk to you later," I overheard him say.

I sat on my bed. D. turned to me:

"What's the deal? You look pretty beat down."

"Do I? No...I'm not beat down at all. I'm fine."

"Nah dude, I can tell when you ain't in a good mood. You can talk about it," D. insisted.

I tried persuading him once again that there wasn't anything wrong. I lay down on my bed and took a nap.



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When I woke up moments later, I felt someone's hand tapping me on my shoulder. It was D.

"So what you say? You're gonna come along with us to the club or what?" he asked. "It's 10:35 p.m."

"Probably," I answered, still feeling a bit drowsy.

"I need a 'yes' or 'no' answer. It ain't that complicated."

I stayed silent for a minute. Considering D.'s persistence, he probably wouldn't have taken it too kindly if I had said I wasn't coming.

"All right— count me in."

"You go, cuz!" D. exclaimed delightfully.

"I'm sorry but I don't quite understand the term you just used to refer to me," I said.

D. laughed.

"You mean 'cuz?' It's kinda like me calling you 'dawg' or 'brother.' It's a symbol of affection. In this case 'cuz' is the short form for cousin...like you're my African cousin. Get what I mean?"

"I'll make sure I remember that. You seem to use so many different words that convey the same meaning," I remarked.

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"You're crazy man," he said, shaking his head. "Get dressed, though. We're gonna be leaving soon."

I went to my closet and tried to choose from a couple of shirts I had hung up.

"Let me check out what you got in there. Don't want you putting on anything ridiculous," D. said, coming toward me.

I picked a shirt and showed it to D. It was a short-sleeved shirt with bright colours sewn out of local African cloth from my home country.

"What do you think about this?" I asked.

"Nah...absolutely not. You can't wear that," he said.

"What's wrong with it?" I wondered.

"Dude, you don't want to keep walking around all over the place looking like you just came. You're gonna seem vulnerable. I mean...this is Philly. You could be seen as an easy target."

"I wasn't aware of that. To whom could I be perceived as an easy target?"

"I don't know... to anyone. Ain't you the one that got robbed? You don't wanna keep coming across like this really naïve fella wherever you're at. Trust

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me, John. I know what I'm talking about. Of course you can't hide where you're from cause you sure sound different. But in some of these corners man...you gotta dress and act like you're straight out 'da hood."

D. examined my collection of shirts and T-shirts.

"This one sucks. Nope...the color's kinda off on this one—too formal for the club. Would get you the wrong kind of attention," he said as he looked at one after the other.

Finally he said:

"Now here's a good one," he said, pointing at a black T-shirt with the number 38 boldly written in front in dark blue colours. "Would be a perfect match with the pair of denim pants you got on. You have a pair of black shoes too, right?"

"I do."

"Cool! Wear those..." he proposed.

I wore the shirt and pulled out my pair of black shoes from beneath the clothes I had hung up in my closet. The door opened and in came Valence.

"Are we ready to go or what?" he asked.

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"You bet we are neighbor," D. answered. "Was trying to help your boy John pick out a shirt."

"My lips are sealed," Valence said.

"Where is Lane?" I asked him.

"Lane? Lane? He's fast asleep. You want to wake him up or something?"

"Come on Valence, I simply asked you where he was."

"Please guys, don't start that stuff, all right? Don't ruin the mood," D. interrupted.

I took a washcloth from my closet and went to the bathroom to wash my face. A few minutes later, the three of us left Room 702. D. locked the door and put the key in his pants. He had on a baggy T-shirt as usual, but this one seemed much bigger with wide, big sleeves and its light blue colour matched with the bandana he was wearing. He also had on a pair of black jeans trousers or as was commonly referred to in the United States, a pair of "denim pants." Valence on the other hand was more formally dressed than all of us, with a yellow dress shirt, grey pants and dark brown shoes. I noticed that unlike us, D. was wearing a pair of tennis shoes—

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or rather, as most Americans would call them, "sneakers."

"Don't you think they may not let you in there with sneakers?" I asked him as we walked to the elevator.

"Dude, I ain't scared of no one. And I'm different from you. They may not let you in with sneakers but I'll walk in head up and chest high like royalty."

There was no need for me to ask any more questions. I now knew D. somewhat well enough to have been able to anticipate his response to such a question. I probably shouldn't have even bothered to ask. I decided to keep my mouth shut throughout the elevator ride down to the lobby.

When we got to the parking lot, he removed his car keys from his pocket, pressed a button on one of them and I heard the sound of a car's doors being unlocked. It was a red Acura with tinted side windows and it looked relatively new and in fairly good shape. Was it his personal car? It sure looked quite expensive by student standards. I didn't dare

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ask him lest he should assume that I were mocking or insulting him.

Valence took a seat on the passenger side next to D. and I sat behind.

"But D., wait a minute-when you were trying to help me decide what to wear, you said a lot of my clothes were too formal for the club we are about to go to," I said.

"Right-and what's the problem?" he asked, starting the car.

"Well, don't you think Valence is too well dressed for where we are going to?"

D. laughed out loud.

"Valence is a white boy... ain't nobody gonna hold him up to the same standard. You're a black guy...a certain minimum is expected of you."

"Dude, what the hell's your problem? What do you want from me? You just can't stop talking about me, can you?" Valence fired.

"That gives you a picture of how I felt when you made those insensitive comments about Africa to me in the cafeteria."

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D. jumped in:

"Guys! Guys! Enough of that stuff, all right? Let it go. We're going out to have fun. We gotta have each other's backs. Let's move on."

We began our ride. D. pressed one of his front door buttons and each of our windows was automatically lowered. He put a rap CD into the car's CD player and increased the volume to an extremely high level. I felt like asking him to turn down the volume because I was starting to feel a tingling in my ears but the music was so loud that I would have had to raise my voice to a very uncomfortable level just to get him to hear me.

"Yoo-hoo! This is why I love Philly in the summer time!" he screamed, driving at an incredibly high speed.

He was driving so fast it felt as if we were car racing. Whenever we came across a car ahead of us riding at a much slower pace, D. honked over and over, obliging the driver to quickly switch lanes. He was constantly overtaking and switching lanes to get past slower-moving vehicles. I fastened my seat

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belt and so did Valence. I began to fear for our safety as the Acura kept on flying and the constant honking and drifting from lane to lane persisted. And to the few motorists who resisted, D. slowed down, pulled up beside them and with a stern frown, gave them a look that could have turned them into sand. At that point we had driven (actually, "flown" would be a more appropriate word) past City Avenue and based on streets signs I realized that we were now on North Broad Street. The loud music and the craziness with which D. drove didn't leave any pedestrian indifferent along our path.

"Be careful!" I shouted, afraid he would run over a couple standing not too far off in the middle of the street and who were attempting to cross over to the other side.

Valence, probably overcome by nervousness, simply placed his hand on his chest and remained silent as if at a loss for words. I wondered if he used to experience this each time he went out with D. and if so, why he hadn't made any effort to give him some helpful advice.



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D. looked at his rear view mirror.

"Oh, shoot!" he exclaimed.

I heard the sound of sirens and when I looked behind, two police cruisers with flashing red and blue lights were following us. D. pulled over to the side of the road and significantly reduced the volume.

Lights still flashing, the police cruisers parked directly behind and two white male officers emerged from the separate cars. Both of them seemed to be communicating with someone through their walkie-talkies. One officer took position beside the driver's side and the other stood next to the passenger side where Valence sat. The officer standing by the passenger side of the Acura held a flashlight. He pointed it at the dashboard, the two front seats and to the back seat where I sat. I was worried because given the manner in which things seemed to be unfolding the outcome of the encounter was anything but predictable. The officer turned off the flashlight, while his partner standing on D.'s side said:

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"Obviously you know why you got pulled over, right?"

D. nodded.

"Driving 80 plus miles in a controlled speed zone," he continued. "Can I see your license and registration?"

D. stretched out both his hands, placed them on the steering wheel and then said:

"No prob. I'm gonna reach into my pocket so I could take off my wallet and give you my ID...then I'll open up the glove compartment and take out the registration, all right?"

With a stern look on his face, the officer nodded. His partner on Valence's side stood with his hand placed on his holster. It was as much of a troubling experience as being robbed at gun point inside a cab. The only difference here was that these were police officers and not criminals. With much restraint, D. gently reached into his pocket and carefully took out his wallet. From behind, I could see his hand trembling. He pulled out his ID, carefully leaned over toward Valence's direction and

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opened the glove compartment. He took out some documents that I assumed must have been proof of car ownership, put his ID on top of them and gave them to the officer. While the officer returned to his cruiser, his partner remained standing beside the front passenger side of the car.

"You guys have any sharp objects on you or any controlled substances in your vehicle?" he asked.

"No...no," Valence responded, nervously.

"Could you all step out of the car, please?" he continued.

We got out of the car and the officer asked the three of us to turn around with our backs facing him and our arms and legs widely spread out. He carefully felt through our front and back pockets and then all the way down our pants.

"Would you open up the trunk for me?" he added.

When I looked at D.'s face I could sense that he was fuming with anger and was struggling really hard to contain it. I was sure that if this had to do with anyone other than the police he would have gotten into a fight a long time ago. I felt ashamed because

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motorists and pedestrians who went past that route kept looking at us. With the police cruisers parked behind us, the flashing lights and the officer searching us, it gave the impression that we might have been a group of fugitives who had just been caught. D. opened the trunk and the officer used his flashlight to search. Looking behind I noticed his partner was carefully watching from the cruiser in which he was seated. The officer turned off his flashlight and shut the trunk.

"Okay—you can get back in," he said.

Valence, D. and I returned to our seats and the police officer walked up to his partner in the cruiser. From the back seat I saw them speaking to each other but neither of us could hear what they were saying. The officer who had searched us got into his own cruiser as well. There was dead silence in our car. A frowning, speechless and deep-thinking D. stiffly held on to his steering wheel with both hands. A grim-faced Valence bit his lips and looked out the window. And there I was glued to the back seat...silently regretting that I had accepted D.'s

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offer. The silence was finally broken several minutes later when D. exclaimed:

"Damn! I'm sick of this!"

"What are they doing?" I asked.

"The other cop's checking out my license plate and registration on his computer," he frowned.

"What for?"

"To see if it's a stolen car," Valence jumped in.

"They take all the time in the world."

I paused to think for a minute.

"So what happens when their system indicates that a car in front of them is a stolen car?" I inquired.

"What do you expect? The driver of the vehicle gets arrested and his company is considered accomplices until they can prove their innocence," Valence responded.

There was silence again. A little after thirty minutes, the officer who took D.'s license and registration information walked up to his side of the car.

"Okay— Here's your license and registration," he said, handing them to D. "But I'm issuing you a

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ticket for reckless driving. If you can't control yourself behind the wheel, you should be off the streets."

"Could you just excuse me this time? I won't do it again," D. pleaded.

It was quite a sight. This was the first time I had ever seen D. attempting to negotiate with anyone. And his tone sounded surprisingly soft and conciliatory.

"Excuse you? Excuse you? I can't excuse you. You broke the law. And I'm pretty sure this ain't your first time," the officer said, writing in a notebook.

He gave D. a ticket.

"All right...watch out next time," he said.

The officer retreated into his cruiser and drove off, his partner following him behind. With sirens and flashing lights, they disappeared into the thickness of the night.

"Could you put the damn ticket in the glove compartment for me?" D. asked Valence.

"Sure," he replied.

Leaning forward, D. rested his chest on the wheel and held it firmly with both hands. He put his head down

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and closed his eyes. This was the first time I had seen him look so defeated. The incident seemed to have deeply angered him. He hit the steering wheel with a clenched fist, making the car horn.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed.

"Cool down dude...it's over. Relax," Valence said.

D. gently raised his head, sighed and leaned back in his seat. He started the car and put on his turn signal. He drove so slowly and cautiously that almost every motorist following behind ended up overtaking him. The more aggressive ones honked several times and then switched lanes upon realizing he was obstinately maintaining the same speed.

"Idiots," D. said. "If I was driving fast, none y'all would catch up with me."

In the minutes that followed, each of us kept silent while we reminisced about the uncomfortable experience we had just had. In an attempt to defuse the tense atmosphere within the car, D. slightly turned up the volume and began nodding to the music as he drove. Then I recalled something I had meant to ask him:

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"D. you were very careful when the police officer asked you to show him your license and registration. You placed your hands on the steering wheel and told him that you were about to reach into your pocket to pull out your wallet. Was there a particular reason why you were being so careful?"

D. sighed.

"It's a long story, man. You just came...I don't think you're ready. You can't understand. I mean, it must be tough enough for you to fit in already."

"No- tell me, D. I really want to know."

He was silent for a minute or two.

"If I didn't let e'm know I was gonna reach for my wallet...he'd have thought I was trying to pull out a gun."

Those words pricked at me like sharp thorns. I suddenly could understand why D.'s voice was heavy with emotion and why it felt so difficult for him to explain that to me- a student who had just come to America from an African country. He continued:

"And just like that...he could have pulled the trigger. It's happened several times before."



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After a few minutes of silence, D. added:

"Last year a West African immigrant in New York got shot 15 times by the cops in front of his apartment. He was trying to get inside and they asked him for ID. He put his hands into his pocket to take out his ID and Boom! Boom! Boom! That was it. Just like that his whole life was snuffed out. It was all over the damn news. It really don't matter where you come from, dawg. The first and only thing some folks choose to notice about you...is that you're a black guy. And it comes with a whole damn load of stereotypes and assumptions. It's like you're a thief, drug dealer and what not. You always gotta watch your back, man...always."

I was touched by D.'s words and I could feel his pain. The experience we had had was quite troubling and even more disturbing to me was the thought that anyone in America could pass me by on the street and assume all sorts of things about me solely on the basis of my gender and the colour of my skin. Valence jumped in:

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"That's awful—really awful to hear. Now I'm not taking sides D., but you've got to admit though, that you were driving quite recklessly."

"Oh yeah? But that ain't reason enough for them cops to act the way they did. They could have handled that stuff differently," he retorted.

"Look all I'm saying is if you were driving a little slower, that probably wouldn't have happened," Valence insisted.

"Says who! Says who! You don't know what the hell it's like to be a black man in this country—being judged and written off before you even open up your damn mouth! Don't tempt me, man...or I'll throw you out of this freaking car—you got that?"

Valence was silent.

"But then again...who knows? Your presence might have actually saved us. I'd hate to think what could have happened if it was just John and I. Guess you'd better ride with us each time we wanna hang out," D. continued, with a mocking laugh.

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Valence didn't respond. Overcome by a sense of guilt from the hurtful nature of his last comments, D. said in a conciliatory tone:

"Never mind, Val. I was just teasing you. Ain't no hard feelings, my man. We're cool."

We arrived at an area of the city where I noticed several bars and restaurants on both sides of the street. Some people were seated outside eating, while several others stood in line waiting to get into various buildings. The streets were filled with people walking to and fro and everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. We drove past pizza shops, ice cream shops, and several fast food and take-out restaurants.

"Excuse me—what part of town is this?" I asked.

"Second and Market Street," said Valence. "Also known as Old City. It's one of the hottest spots in Philly—lots of party people."

D. made a left turn and entered into a lot where the attendant on duty directed him to a parking spot.

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"Okay! Here we are. It's time to get crazy," he said.

We all got out of the car.

"How much is it again?" D. asked the parking attendant.

"Seven bucks an hour," the man responded.

"Damn! Seven bucks? Feels like y'all raise the price every month. So I gotta pay twenty one bucks for three hours? Y'all some rip offs, man. You better give me a big time discount next time or you ain't never gonna see me back in this joint," D. said, removing some money from his wallet.

"Appreciate that," the parking attendant answered, receiving the payment. "May I have your car keys, please?"

D. gave him his keys and we crossed over to the other side of the street. There were so many lounges, clubs and restaurants on both sides of the street that I wondered how people settled on a choice. I was also impressed by the diversity of the crowd. I noticed a great deal of interracial couples—Asian and Middle Eastern, Black and White,

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Native American and White, Asian and White. Everyone seemed bent on having a great time. And there were several opportunities for flirting. I couldn't count the number of women walking in groups who smiled at us, some of them winking and others saying "Hi" as we walked by.

"How you like it so far?" Valence said.

"Very, very interesting," I said.

"What time do clubs close in your country?" he asked.

"Usually at about 5 a.m.," I replied.

"5 am? Damn! Here if you ain't out of the club by 2:30 them bouncers gonna toss you out," D. said, laughing.

"Where do you think we should take him? Are we still going to 'Crush'?" Valence asked D.

"Hmmm...let me see. Nah...let's go to Splinter, man. It's even better. I think he'll like it," he replied.

Within a few minutes, we arrived in front of a building where about twenty or more people stood in line waiting to get in. The crowd looked as diverse as the groups of people who had been walking past us

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on our way there. Even more distinct was the manner in which each of them was dressed. Some sported a more urban look, while others were dressed in a more business casual manner. We stood at the back of the line since it seemed like a first come, first serve basis. Two male bouncers—one black and the other white—stood at the entrance and controlled who walked in and out.

“Can’t let you get in there with sneakers,” the white male bouncer said to a man who had just shown his ID and was attempting to get in. “No hats, no sneakers—double offense.”

Turning to the crowd, the other bouncer said:

“I’m sorry guys but I don’t think we can let anyone else in right now.” “It’s packed full in there.”

The crowd booed.

“This is ridiculous! We’ve been standing out here for close to an hour!” a woman in line grumbled.

The line gradually began to reduce in length as people began leaving to go to other clubs, bars and lounges nearby.

“Yo John,” you got some ID on you?” D. asked.

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"I have my Rodeoville ID...yes."

"Nope—that ain't gonna do. You don't have a Pennsylvania ID?"

"No. My passport is the only formal ID that I have. I thought it would have been risky for me to bring it along. If it gets lost I would be in trouble," I told him.

"I think he's got a point D.," Valence agreed.

D. nodded.

"All right peeps, follow me," D. said. He walked to the front of the line and we followed from behind.

The reception he got from the bouncers was in no way similar to the treatment the disappointed and frustrated-looking people standing in line had experienced. Each of them was now focusing on us, curiously waiting to see what would happen. The two bouncers gave D. a warm handshake.

"Been a while my brother. Where've you been?" the white male bouncer asked.

"You know how it goes. Schedules change," D. explained. Turning to us, he said: "I'd like you guys to meet my boys Valence and John. We're all on

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the same floor. John's from Africa...he's been here just a couple weeks. He ain't got no state ID yet and he left his passport on campus. Would y'all be kind enough to let e'm come in with me?"

The bouncers looked at me.

"All right boss, we'll let you in like this just for tonight. You show up here again without a state ID or a passport, we won't let you in. You heard that?" the black male bouncer said.

"I did. Thank you very much," I said, with a nod and a smile.

"Cool...welcome to the States," he added.

The other bouncer unhooked the velvet rope to allow us get in.

"That's not fair! You can't let that dude go in there with sneakers!" someone shouted from the crowd.

"VIP, baby! VIP!" D. yelled back.

The crowd booed but the bouncers remained unshakable.

While inside, another bouncer ran a metal detector through our front and back pockets and felt our pants to ensure that we weren't carrying any sharp objects.

When he had finished, Valence and I followed D. to a



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reception desk where a woman with a beautiful, welcoming smile received us.

"Three of you?" she asked.

"That's right," D. answered.

"Thirty bucks," the cashier said.

D. shook his head.

"Ain't happening," he protested. You know I've been a client in this joint for a long time. Can't a brother get a cut for bringing in two people?"

"We appreciate that you're a faithful client but we have to treat everyone the same," she responded defensively. "If we make an exception for one, we'll have to do the same for all."

Valence turned to D:

"Dude, we're not obliged to stick in here. We could go somewhere else," he proposed.

"We ain't budging, man. We ain't budging. Ain't no way we gonna pay thirty bucks," D. protested.

He took out three tickets from one of his pockets, held them up to the cashier and said:

"Unless you're extremely myopic...read what these say: VIP."

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The cashier was silent.

"Mind if I take a look?" she asked.

The cashier examined the tickets carefully.

"Honestly we don't accept these after 11 p.m. but I'll make an exception just for tonight," she said.

"Making an exception? You must be kidding," went D.

"I take it you're new here.. I ain't ever seen your face before. When you get a chance, ask the bouncers if they know me. My name is D. I'm entitled to exceptions," he countered.

He took out his wallet, removed a number of hundred-dollar bills and showed them up to her:

"And by the way, don't get me wrong. I could still get in without them VIP tickets...so don't think it's cause I'm broke," D. added.

The cashier rolled her eyes.

"All right...enjoy your night," she said.

Her words came out with a deep sigh. She had obviously had enough and wanted the three of us—D. especially...to get out of her face so she could attend to other customers standing in line. The bouncers gradually began letting more people in. We left the

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cashier's vicinity and came to a section of the club where loud techno music was being played. The crowd, though fairly mixed, had a majority white population. Most of them were dressed business in casual attire—many men wore khakis with dress shirts and dress pants, while a good number of women wore blouses over skirts. It seemed to be a more corporate crowd. Out of all of us, D. looked like the odd man in. We took a seat at the bar. A female bartender gave D. a tight hug and two kisses on his cheeks. She was wearing a pair of tight black pants with a buttoned-down green top that slightly showed her bra and exposed much of her chest.

"Damn! Baby you look so hot tonight," he yelled in her ear.

Afterward he took out his cell phone:

"Gimme your number again," I lost my contacts.

"This is the second time you've said that to me.

Anyway it's all good..I'll give you again," she said.

D. retook her number and saved it in his phone.

"So what can I get you guys?" she asked.

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"You know the usual—I'll take a Smirnoff Ice," D. replied.

"And you?" she asked Valence.

"A Coors Light," he said.

She then turned to me.

"Hmmm...do you have any orange juice?"

"Nope...just cranberry juice," she said.

"Wait a minute," D. interrupted. "You can't come to a club to drink juice, man. Get another drink."

"I don't drink much alcohol," I said.

"Give him a Smirnoff, man. It's only got five percent alcohol."

"No," I refused. "Cranberry juice will be fine."

While the bartender served the drinks Valence, D. and I watched the group of men and women on the dance floor.

"Check out that dude," D. said, referring to a white male who was jumping and shaking his neck to the beat from left to right in circles. "You white boys just can't dance," he continued, turning to Valence who was sitting in between us.

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Valence raised his can of beer. We did the same with our bottles.

"Cheers buddies," he said.

"Cheers," D. and I responded.

We watched the people dancing as we drank. Several minutes later, D. suggested that we visit the other two floors. He gave the bartender a twenty-dollar bill as payment for the drinks.

"I'll give you a call," he said.

"Yeah right," she answered. "Don't tell me you lost my number again next time. I won't buy that."

D. laughed.

"Hey guys...six people at a time," said a bouncer as we pushed our way through a group of people to get into an elevator.

"Everyone going to the second floor?" asked a group of three whom we met inside.

"Yup," D. said.

Up we rode and the elevator doors soon opened up on the second floor. As soon as we got off, I immediately noticed the contrast between the new crowd and that which we had seen on the previous

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floor. I saw men of various races—black, white and Hispanic—dressed in baggy jeans and T-shirts wearing flashy golden and silver chains and necklaces around their necks. A good number of women there, just like their male counterparts, wore bandanas. Each of them also had on shorts with a variety of colours—white, brown, black, pink, green and red; yellow, blue and purple—that were really short and seemed designed to show off their laps, hips and legs. Some men and women even had sunglasses on and I wondered in what way that helped them see better at night time within such a dark club. The disco balls on the ceiling revolved around and their lights reflected on the dance floor where several people were letting loose to rap music. It was so packed full in there that we had to push our way through the crowds of people standing in the middle or leaning on the walls talking to each other with their drinks in hand.

The DJ played a song that D. seemed to like. He raised both hands; clapped them; jumped; nodded his head; moved his shoulders sideways, then left and right; after that he moved his feet forward and

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backward in a dance move that was as spectacular and unique as in the Hip-hop videos I used to watch on cable TV in my home country. A white male wearing a red baseball hat turned sideways came up to D. and gave him a firm handshake.

"Yo Pete! Good to see you, dawg!" shouted D.

"What's up my man?" the white male said.

"Ain't much going on player, just chillin'. I'd like you to meet my new roommate John Malinke from Africa and my boy Valence."

Valence and I shook hands with Pete. A woman holding a glass of red wine wearing a pink top and a green pair of shorts walked toward our direction. She made eye contact with each of us and then smiled.

"Damn! Look at that!" D. exclaimed. "I'll be right back."

D. walked up to her and held her arm. He began whispering in her ear.

"All right fellas, nice meeting you. I've got to get back to my crew now," Pete said.

D. continued whispering to the lady. Next thing I knew she was nodding and smiling at him while sipping

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some of her red wine. Within seconds, she put her glass on a nearby stand and D. pulled her arm and took her to the dance floor.

Valence turned to me:

"I guess you're getting to know your roommate better, huh? Same old D.! Never ever changes."

We stood by the wall and watched people walking past us and others dancing on the floor. Some couples, firmly holding each other, danced on the spot. I could see D. from a distance. He seemed to be having a great time dancing with the woman he had just met.

"Dude, let's go to the bar and get stuff to drink. If we're gonna keep standing here for a while we may as well drink and watch," Valence said, raising his voice so that it wasn't drowned by the loud music.

"I agree with you but I don't have enough on me to pay for drinks at the moment," I responded.

"Don't sweat it. I got you covered."

We went to the bar. Valence ordered a beer and asked me what I wanted to drink.

"Get what you want, buddy. I'm not D.," he said.



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I couldn't resist laughing. I ordered another of cranberry juice. After he had paid for the drinks, Valence and I returned to the same spot where we were standing. Something didn't seem right. A lot of the men in that part of the club were wearing sneakers and baseball hats. This clearly violated the dress code that was specified by the bouncers in front of the building. So how were they able to get in? Did they get in through some sort of restricted entrance or did they spend a whole bunch of money on tickets to the point where the bouncers chose to give a blind eye to such a blatant violation? There seemed to be a double standard and it appeared to be a world in which access was granted on the basis of who you knew and the more money you were willing to spend, the better you were treated.

"Don't you want to dance?" I asked Valence.

"No. This isn't really my kind of crowd."

"Why don't we go closer to the dance floor so we can get a better view of what's going on? People seem to be having fun," I suggested to him.

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Valence agreed to accompany me. We both mixed in with the crowd of people watching the dancers. D. noticed us. He whispered in his dance partner's ear, left the floor and came toward Valence and I.

"What's up with you guys? Get on the dance floor. Y'all know how much it cost for them VIP tickets?" he complained.

"I don't feel like dancing," Valence explained.

"Man, you suck!" D. responded. "Let's go, John."

"Well...uhm...I'm not very good at dancing this kind of music," I answered evasively.

"Nice try! Ain't buying it," he said.

D. raised his hand and made a signal to his dance partner. She came and joined us.

"Would you take this African brother of mine to the dance floor?" he said.

"My pleasure," she responded.

Smiling, D.'s dance partner stretched her hand toward me and as was expected of a gentleman I didn't have much of a choice but to accept her gesture. I held her hand and we began heading to the dance floor.

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"I told D. that I'm not good at dancing Hip-hop. It's unfortunate that he insisted," I said to her. On the dance floor I found it hard to keep up with her moves. I admired her steps and the way she shook her body and danced to the rhythm with so much energy. Once in a while she drew closer to me and we both held each other's hands...probably in an attempt to coordinate the movement of our feet. Unfortunately that didn't work out too well, so she drew back once again and we danced with a reasonable distance between each other. I didn't want her to conclude that I was a boring dancer. I could see that her face no longer seemed to convey much enthusiasm. I figured it probably would have been just a matter of time before she left the dance floor or grabbed D. once again or perhaps some other potential partner. I had to prove to her that even if I didn't have the same moves, I too had energy and I too could dance. I took a slight step forward with my right leg and raised it up slightly, much to her amazement. Then standing on the same spot I began nodding my head, moving my

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elbows and tapping my feet in an attempt to go along with the beat.

"Yo! Yo! Yo! Y'all check out this crazy dude, man! He's doing some sort of chicken dance or something," shouted a man in the crowd.

Before I knew it, everyone on the dance floor had stopped dancing and had formed a circle around me to watch me dance. I had thought about stopping but one after another, the people around me began applauding—although deep inside me I felt it was probably more of a mocking applause than one of encouragement.

"Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Do your thing, bro!" another man shouted.

I kept on dancing. Probably embarrassed, the woman I had been dancing with vanished into the crowd. Seconds later, D. emerged from the crowd, grabbed my arm and pulled me out of the dance floor.

"Ladies and gentlemen...please give another round of applause for Mr. Chicken Dance!" the D.J. spoke through a microphone from a booth above the dance floor.

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The crowd laughed and gave a mocking applause. I turned around and looked in his direction, wishing I could have had a chance to tell him I didn't appreciate the label, but D. kept pulling me away.

"What the hell's wrong with you, man? Why you making a fool out of yourself?" he asked.

"You refused to listen to me. I told you I wasn't good at dancing this kind of music."

Valence was laughing really hard. I was suddenly getting quite some unexpected attention from the crowd.

"Let's get outta here guys," said D.

We left that part of the club and returned toward the elevator.

"Are we going back to campus? I think I've made enough of a fool out of myself already," I asked.

"Nah man, you've gotta see the third floor," D. replied.

"Why? What makes the third floor different from the other two we just saw? Isn't it the same thing?"

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"Look— you ask too many damn questions! Sometimes you gotta leave the talking and just do stuff, all right? Now let's go."

When we got into the elevator, D. punched button #3. For some reason, the ride to this particular floor felt a little stiff and heavy. The elevator doors opened up to reveal a distinctively dark environment. Two huge, stern-looking bouncers ran security wands through the pockets and down the pants of everyone who got off. To make their task easier, they split everyone into groups of two.

"Spread out your arms," they ordered. "Take out your cell phones, watches, everything in your pockets."

Beep! Beep! Beeeeeeep! Went the security wands.

My first observation about the third floor was that there were virtually no women among the crowd of spectators who surrounded the dance floor, which ironically was the only area that seemed to give off a glimmer of bright light. This was the most mixed crowd I had seen in the entire club. The blending of the urban and corporate male types made for quite a unique sight. Whether holding glasses filled with

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drinks or simply standing with folded arms, each of them had one thing in common: their eyes were focused on the dance floor as if eagerly waiting for someone or something. A man addressed the crowd from the stage:

"This is the moment y'all been waiting for. Ain't nobody gonna let you down. Gentlemen, give it up for the finest! The best! The reason why you're here! Gogo, Cona and the whole damn crew!"

The crowd applauded. The dance floor suddenly filled up with smoke. Six women (three black women and three white women) wearing pink tops, black shorts and long, white boots with black laces emerged from backstage and formed a circle around the floor. Moments later, two women descended on stage from the ceiling by gliding down a pole.

"That's Gogo and Cona!" D. shouted at me with a measure of excitement in his voice.

Valence watched carefully.

"Which one is Gogo and which one is Cona?" I wondered.

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"You see the tall, light skinned joint with short, curly hair? The one that looks biracial?" D. asked.

I nodded.

"That's Gogo," he said. "The other's Cona...the white lady with shoulder-length hair and average height."

Gogo and Cona were dressed in the same way as the six women. When they had glided down, they landed in the middle of the circle which their fellow dancers had formed on the dance floor. Seconds later, the other dancers spread out and then away from the circle and returned backstage. Gogo and Cona remained on the dance floor. Cona climbed up the pole while her partner danced and spanned her body around, shook her head and shoulders continuously to her left and to her right, and spread both legs out on the floor in a stunning display of flexibility. After having reached the top of the pole, Cona glided down and began walking toward the crowd in tune with the rhythm of the music— dance music which the DJ played. She shook her chest at the predominantly male audience and was soon joined by Gogo, who copied the same movement seconds later.



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"Whoooo! Wheeeeeee! ain't that something'!" the DJ exclaimed.

Gogo playfully pointed to the crowd with her left and right index fingers and licked her lips in a rather provocative manner. I was amazed at the degree of boldness reflected in her eyes. It felt as if an invisible force was pushing her forward. With both hands, she motioned the spectators to draw closer to her. Two dancers emerged from backstage and joined Gogo and her partner on the floor. The other dancers began picking up the many one dollar and five dollar bills that the crowd tossed at Gogo and Cona. The number of dollar bills being thrown at Cona was nothing in comparison to what was being collected on Gogo's end. The remaining group of dancers equally emerged from behind the stage. Much to my surprise, they began walking from the stage to the crowd like female fashion models strutting on a runway. The dancers walked in circles around the crowd, randomly selected some spectators, grabbed them by their hands and whispered in their ears. Moments later, their actions evolved into more expressive gestures—

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wrapping their arms around men's shoulders or waists, gently caressing their elbows and once again...whispering. I got the impression that the dancers were soliciting something from the spectators, although I wasn't exactly sure what. Contrary to D. and Valence who seemed to be having a great time watching it all, I felt very uncomfortable being in such an environment. I was obliged to endure through the experience because a proposal on my part to return to Rodeoville Towers would certainly not have received a favourable response. Furthermore, I didn't know Philadelphia well enough to have been able to figure out where to catch a cab or bus from where we were. Neither did I think I was prepared to catch a cab again so soon after the experience I had had upon my arrival. At that hour of the night, catching a bus would have probably been a better option since they often carried lots of people— that is, if any of them were still running at that time in the first place. Moments later and holding each other's hands, some dancers and spectators began walking backstage. Standing in between D. and

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Valence, my greatest concern was that one of the dancers could walk up to me, whisper in my ear and attempt persuading me to do the same thing. Whenever any of them walked toward my direction I quickly looked away and silently said within me:

*Please don't come...please don't come. Find someone else. There's plenty to choose from.*

At one point my eyes crossed paths with the eyes of one of the dancers. It made my heart beat fast. I resigned myself to the thought that she was going to grab my arm. She came really close to doing so before being interrupted by a man who emerged from behind and whispered some words into her ear. Whatever he said appeared to have been persuasive enough to compel her to make a U-turn and with her arm wrapped around his waist, they walked together toward the backstage area. My curiosity increased and I couldn't resist asking Valence:

"Where are all these people going? What exactly is going on back there?"

Valence laughed.

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"They're going to get private lap dances," he answered.

I didn't need any further explanations. D. turned to me and said:

"I think you should get one, man..."

I didn't respond. Within a few minutes, Gogo and Cona left the stage and walked toward the crowd, which gave way as they headed toward the bar behind. Unlike Cona who occasionally smiled and made eye contact with the spectators, Gogo gave off an air of arrogance, ignoring everyone and walking as if she owned the entire territory. No one seemed entitled to as much as a wave of the hand. Yet it failed to deter most men from seeking to gain her attention. Heads kept turning while she walked.

"Gogo! Gogo!" they shouted.

The few who dared grab her hand received a straight, fierce look in their eyes that was sufficient enough to either paralyze or kill. No one else attempted. She simply shrugged her shoulders and kept on walking. But to my greatest surprise, Gogo stopped when she saw D. And not only did she give him a tight

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hug— she kissed him on both cheeks. I could only imagine the envy that must have filled the hearts of the onlookers at that moment.

“Hey, honey! Long time no see,” she said.

I kept looking at the stage, acting as if I neither saw nor heard. At some point in their conversation, D. introduced her to Valence and I. She nodded and gave us— because I’m sure Valence felt the same way too— one of the coldest, most unenthusiastic handshakes I could recall ever receiving. Cona went to the bar while D. and Gogo continued talking. At some point he whispered something in her ear. After that, he winked at her and both of them turned and looked at me.

“D. told me you’d like to get a lap dance?” she asked.

“Who? Me? Not at all— I never said that,” I answered.

Valence laughed.

“Don’t mind him,” D. said. “A lot of guys are intimidated by you. You can’t expect this brother

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from Africa to be any different. Know what I'm saying? Gimme a minute. I'll talk to e'm."

D. pulled me aside.

"Don't mess up, man. Don't mess up. What's wrong with you? I'm trying to hook you up, dawg. You know how many cats be trying to get with that?" he said.

"Why did you lie to her that I wanted a lap dance? I don't need one. I'm not interested. As a matter of fact I'm tired and I think I'd like to go back to campus."

D. was furious.

"You got a damn clue how much it cost me for them VIP ticks and stuff? And drinks for us three? I mean, shoot! Show some respect. Go get a dance. We got folks in here dying for this opportunity."

Gogo came over and her presence interrupted our argument.

"Look I ain't got all night. Is he coming or not?" she inquired impatiently.

"Oh he sure is. Just gimme one more minute," D. said.

Gogo stood aside.

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"You see that? You see what you're doing, man?" D. continued.

"Listen— you keep on complaining but if I do get a dance...who will pay for it?" I asked.

"Ain't a problem. I'll take care of that once you're done."

I sighed. I was feeling very uncomfortable. When my eyes met with Valence's, he winked and nodded at me as a way of saying I should go for it. There was enormous pressure on me. I then decided to work out some sort of compromise with D.

"All right, look— If a lap dance implies what I used to see on TV in my country— where a female dancer sits on a man's lap and begins to dance suggestively...I don't feel comfortable with that. But since you insist, I want to propose that she could do a dance for me but with absolutely no physical contact," I said.

"Okay. Let me talk to her," was D.'s response.

He went toward Gogo and whispered in her ear. Both of them laughed and the sight bothered me because I felt

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D. may have made a comment about me that probably wasn't very flattering.

"So are we ready to go, big daddy?" Gogo asked.

I nodded reluctantly. She took my hand and we both walked together past the dance floor and toward the infamous backstage area. I briefly took a look behind and noticed Valence and D. were clapping, nodding and laughing— probably excited that the latter's plan had worked. We walked past two bouncers and came to a long hallway with several numbered doors on each side. They were covered by multicoloured curtains. Holding my hand, Gogo continued leading me down the hallway. During our walk, I heard strange sounds and voices coming from some of the rooms along our path— men and women arguing, loud music playing, doors slamming and reopening. Gogo stopped in front of door number 10.

"Here we are baby cakes. Excited?" she asked.

I couldn't believe what was happening to me and how in the world I had come to that point. My experience with Abdul— the unassuming, friendly cab driver who later turned out to be a criminal— had made me become



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significantly less trustful of people whom I didn't know personally and to avoid taking them at face value. I had no idea what awaited me beyond that closed door. The "what ifs" were just too many. I may have been on the verge of penetrating into a dark, uncertain world with no guarantee of seeing a reflection of light again afterward.

"I don't think I can do this," I told Gogo. "I don't feel comfortable."

"What's your problem?" she asked. "Relax...I ain't gonna hurt you."

Gogo put her hand on my chest and rubbed it gently as if she were giving me a massage.

"My time's precious, sugar. I get paid hundreds of dollars just to notice a man. But for you I'm willing to make an exception," she said in a soothing voice that conveyed an intensive degree of sensuality.

I took her hand off my chest but I seemed to have fallen prey to the captivating words she uttered. The way she looked into my eyes, the soothing tone that came across when she spoke and her skill at enticing produced a hypnotic effect upon me. Before I knew it,

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I gave her exactly the kind of response she wanted to hear:

"All right...just a dance from a distance, that's all. No physical contact," I emphasized.

Gogo didn't answer. She held my arm, turned the knob and opened the door. The room was dark and smelled of cigarette smoke. It was also quite chilly, as if an air conditioner had been left running for some time. Using a pull down switch, Gogo activated a ceiling light— it was circular in shape and reflected a variety of dim colours: green, red, blue and purple. It spun around the ceiling in the same manner as the disco balls on the previous floors. In the middle of the room was a huge leather sofa and beside it a long ash tray filled with cigarettes.

"Take a seat on the sofa honey," Gogo said.

I took a seat and faced a medium-sized stage with an iron pole in the middle. She locked the door. There were two speakers high up on the wall above the stage. Gogo went into a side room and upon her return a few moments later, I heard loud music playing. Following the rhythm, Gogo danced her way up to the

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stage, winked at me, clapped her hands and shook her chest and shoulders as she went by. On the stage she glided up and down the pole and once again with an amazing flexibility, spun around and around in circles. She then stretched out her legs and using her hands and feet in a slow crab-like movement, crawled from the stage to the sofa where I sat. My heart was beating incredibly fast. Gogo kept on crawling until she reached my feet. Once she had done that she got up, stooped down, drew closer to me and without a single blink, stared directly into my eyes. She held my hands and said:

"Baby this could be more than just a dance if you want. I'm all yours...what happens behind these doors stays between you and me."

Gogo's soothing voice and the intense reflection of desire in her eyes seemed to produce a kind of hypnotic effect on me. I wanted to respond but felt powerless to do so. She drew her face closer to mine as if she were aiming to kiss me on my lips.

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"It's okay sugar...everything's gonna be just fine. Relax...relax," she said, her voice almost sounding as if she were whispering.

*Go for it, John. This is a one-time opportunity. Don't blow it. Be a man... you know how many guys out there would die for a minute with Gogo? I thought to myself.*

Gogo was still holding my hands and began gently caressing them with her fingers as if she were giving me a massage.

*Go for it, man. Grab your chance. You heard Gogo. It's just you and her. Remember what D. said: Don't worry about Emelda. She's thousands of miles away from you. Who the hell knows what she's up to anyway? After all, she always made you feel as if you didn't deserve her... I thought to myself again.*

I slowly drew closer to Gogo so that our lips would meet each other, but got interrupted by a sudden recollection. I felt as if I could see Mum repeating the words she had said to me before I left:

*When you get to America, you will see all kinds of things and experience a lot of temptation. It is in*

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*many ways a country of extremes. But hold on to the values with which your father and I raised you and stay away from trouble as much as you can...*

An immediate sense of guilt took over me and my conscience became deeply troubled. I gently pushed Gogo away.

"I'm sorry. I just can't do this...I really should not be in here."

Gogo couldn't believe her ears. My words seemed to have paralyzed her to the point where she almost could barely get back up on her feet.

"Have you lost your damn mind?" she asked, standing up.

I stood up as well.

"I think I really should be leaving now," I said.

On my way to the door, Gogo grabbed me by the collar of my shirt.

"Oh no, you ain't! Oh no, you ain't! You ain't done with me yet!" she yelled.

She seemed furious and I couldn't quite tell the reason behind her attitude. She pulled me by the collar again so that we now faced each other.

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"Gogo what do you want? I told you I can't do this. Why don't you respect that?" I asked.

"Oh yeah? Well I told you I get paid for my time honey, so give me what you owe me!" she fumed.

I quickly tried to think about what I could do to calm Gogo down. I was beginning to be quite bothered by her sudden outburst of aggressiveness.

"Listen- let's...let's try to reason this out together. First, I plead with you to kindly take your hand off my collar. Is that okay?" I asked.

Frowning, she held on to my collar and looked at me straight in the eyes without saying a word.

"Is that okay?" I insisted.

She let go of my collar and I felt a tremendous sense of relief.

"Thank you for understanding. I have to be honest with you. I...I... really don't have a single amount of money on me. You know better than anyone else that I was pushed here against my will," I tried to explain.

"Don't gimme that bull! You don't come to a club if you ain't got money! That's your freakin' problem!" she yelled.

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Negotiation and compromise seemed to be strange concepts in Gogo's world where competition for male attention and the desire for fast money reigned supreme. I wondered how in the world I was going to get myself out of such a mess. I bemoaned giving in to the enormous pressure from D. and Valence. Unfortunately, there was little room for thought. I faced an enraged woman on the verge of exploding and determined to pounce on me. The only option that came to my mind was to run. I dashed toward the door as quickly as I could and unlocked it.

"What! Where you think you going to? Have you lost your damn mind?" she shouted, chasing after me.

I swung the door open and ran down the hallway as fast as I could, dashing past startled couples of male clients and female dancers exiting and entering the nearby rooms. Gogo gave chase.

"Stop him! Hey! Stop him!" she shouted.

Alerted by Gogo's screams, the two huge bouncers standing at the entrance between the hallway and backstage turned around and ran toward me. A third

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bouncer joined Gogo in the chase from behind. I was surrounded.

"It's okay. We got e'm! We got e'm!" one of them said in a walkie talkie.

Gogo and two bouncers led me into a room while a third bouncer stood guard at the entrance to the hallway. It was a dimly-lit room with beat up furniture tossed around the floor, cracked walls with diminishing paint and a trash can covered with black stains and filled up with so much junk and litter as if it hadn't been emptied in months. In many respects it looked like an interrogation center for troublesome or deviant clients. I was made to sit on an uncomfortable wooden chair beside a desk that was equally made of wood. Staring at me with huge folded arms, it appeared as if I had come face to face with two giant wrestlers rather than bouncers. Gogo narrated the events from a perspective I judged to be biased and inconsiderate.

"So what you got to say, man? You gonna pay or what?" bouncer number one asked.



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In turn I gave an account of how I ended up with Gogo in the first place.

"I honestly would not be here if I had a choice. But I couldn't leave my roommate behind when I can't even find my way around this city," I said, after having given my account.

The two bouncers looked at each other and then at Gogo.

"We understand. But we really can't let you go unless you pay something. Cause you gained from her services either way," bouncer number two explained.

"Gained from her services? That's news to me," I remarked, completely shocked by what I heard.

"Look— if you'd like to chill here for the next five hours or more that's cool with us," bouncer number two continued. "Or we could call the cops to come get ya. So what do you prefer?"

At that moment an idea crossed my mind.

"Can I make a proposal?" I asked.

"Go ahead— what you up to?" bouncer number one asked.

"Could someone please help call my roommate? His name is D. He's somewhere in the crowd and I'm sure he

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must be wondering why it's taking me this long to return to where we were. As I said, I don't have a single dollar on me right now but D. could help me pay."

"Don't fall for that bull!" Gogo exclaimed. "This isn't a game. Make him pay!"

"Stuff happens, Gogo. Let his boy bail e'm out so we can put an end to this," bouncer number two proposed, in a sympathetic tone.

There was a moment of silence.

"All right. I'll get the DJ to make an announcement. Y'all stay back and watch him. Make sure he doesn't move," bouncer number one said.

He left the room and a few moments later, the music coming from the dance floor ceased.

"Yo! Anyone here called D.? Can you come backstage, please? D., would you come backstage, please...thank you," I heard the DJ announce.

After that, the music continued. Within a few minutes, the door opened and in came bouncer number one with D. following closely behind.

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"Oh no! What you got involved in, man?" D. asked, upon discovering me sitting uncomfortably on the wooden chair while Gogo and the second bouncer kept watch as if I was a common criminal.

Once more, Gogo narrated her own version.

"Damn! You got a dance and you ain't pay for it?" D. asked.

I was amazed at his blatant display of hypocrisy and so upset by everything that I felt like getting up from my seat to confront him physically. I honestly hadn't felt that angry in a long time.

"I said I didn't want to go but you forced me to. And by the way, didn't you tell me you would pay for it?"

I retorted.

After I uttered those words, the look in D.'s eyes conveyed to me that he had been gripped by a sense of embarrassment.

"Gentlemen, y'all straighten that out between each other. All we ask is that you do what you gotta do. We ain't got all day," bouncer number two said, in an impatient and angry voice.

D. reached into his pocket and took out a wallet.

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"All right— my bad, my bad...how much we owe you, Gogo?" he asked.

"Twenty dollars," she responded.

D. removed a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and gave it to Gogo.

"That's all I had left on me. It's just cause I know you man," he said, shaking his head. Otherwise I wouldn't."

"What did you say?" asked an infuriated Gogo.

"Nah, nah. I was just teasing you. It's all good..."

D. reassured.

I was so upset with D. that I didn't say a single word to him when all of that unexpected drama was finally over. But much to my astonishment, not only did Gogo accompany us when we left the premises, but she and D. walked and held each other's hands as if nothing had happened. The manner in which they flirted and giggled made me wonder about the exact nature of their relationship.

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"Whoa! You were in there for a minute. Seems like you had too much fun," Valence mocked when we returned to the dance floor area.

I didn't even bother to respond. The club seemed to be in the process of closing for the night because many patrons seemed to be taking their last drinks and several others had already begun exiting through a side door where another bouncer stood controlling the flow of movement. Each of the bouncers, with their big chests, wide necks and big arms, were so huge that I couldn't help wondering where they got recruited from. They all seemed to fit a specific physical description and in many ways reminded me of some of the sumo wrestlers whom I occasionally used to watch on TV in my home country.

"Can we finally leave now?" I asked D.

"Yeah! Matter of fact, hold on, man. Hold on for a minute," he said.

Gogo and D. went to the bar. I saw him talking to the bartender. The bartender nodded and then gave D. a pen and a flashcard. D. gave them to Gogo and she wrote something on it. He gave the pen back to the

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bartender, hugged Gogo and returned to meet Valence and I.

"I got her number for you, dawg. You could give her a call whenever you can," he said, giving me the flashcard.

"I don't need her number," I responded. "I don't think she and I would get along at all. I'd rather not see her again. By the way, why would she want to give me her number after all that?"

D. shook his head.

"You just don't get it, do you? I 'ma hold on to it. You never know. You might need it someday," he said, putting the flashcard in his pocket.

Moments later a bouncer bellowed:

"Gentlemen! Exit through the side door. You can't take the elevator."

On our way toward the exit, a dancer ran in D.'s direction. When she got to him, they hugged each other.

"Simone let me introduce you to my boys this is John...my new roommate. And that's Valence, my neighbor next door."

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Simone was a black female with black shoulder-length hair, several tattoos on her arms and some of the deepest blue eyes I had ever seen. She acted indifferently toward us, for we didn't even receive a simple "hello" from her in response to D.'s introduction.

"Can we go?" she asked him.

"Are you ready?" he responded.

"You bet I am," she said.

I couldn't believe what I heard. Where did they plan to go to? Did it imply that D. intended to take Simone along with us? Obviously, for she accompanied us right up to the lot where he had parked his car.

"Sit in the back," he told her.

Simone took a seat beside Valence while D. and I sat at the front. D. started the car and off we rode. I had wanted to ask D. where he was taking us to, but the dynamics had entirely changed with Simone's presence. Besides, I still felt so hurt and offended by the incident with Gogo that I chose to keep silent. I thought it was better to sit back, be a silent observer and depending on what I would see

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express any comments or concerns to D. much later. I also wondered what Valence, suddenly so quiet there in the back seat, might have been thinking. Did he often witness these things when he hung out with D.? Had he always been familiar with those aspects of D.'s character and did they make him feel uncomfortable at all? I doubted it...because he equally played a role in pressuring me to go backstage with Gogo. It seemed like a perfectly normal night to both of them.

We pulled up to the Rodeoville Towers parking lot. As we got out of the car, a number of questions raced through my mind. What exactly did D. have in mind? Was he trying to get Simone to spend the night in our room? If so, did he stop for a moment to think about the inconvenience this would have caused me? When we got out, D. pressed the middle button of his car key and it locked the four doors automatically. Holding hands, he and Simone led the way ahead of Valence and I when we reached the lobby. On our way past the front desk and toward the elevator, the elderly



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security guard on duty with a pair of thick reading glasses sliding up and down his nose turned around and said:

"Damn! She got a phat ass!"

D. laughed and that was the only time I saw Simone smile. She seemed to love the attention and looks she was getting from the few male students who passed us by during that hour...even from those who appeared to be walking with their girlfriends. During the elevator ride I began to get a bit nervous...wondering what to expect the moment we would get into Room 702. I wished I could have confided in Valence but D. and Simone's presence made it impossible to do so. The ride upward continued as the elevator lights lit up the buttons representing the various floors—4...5...6; at the sixth floor, the doors opened to let a student out. As soon as we reached the seventh floor, Valence got off first.

"Goodnight guys," he said, not looking back and walking incredibly fast as if he was aware of my complicated situation and preferred not to get involved in it at all.

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He quickly locked the door to his room. Meanwhile, I followed D. and Simone behind from a short distance. D. opened the door to Room 702 and turned on the light.

"Wow...nice little room you got here," Simone said, looking around.

When we had all gotten inside, D. locked the door, put on the TV and turned down the volume. Simone and D. took a seat on the sofa. I was starting to feel very uncomfortable. I sat on my bed pretending to concentrate on the music videos that were being broadcast but I couldn't get a good view since the TV screen directly faced D. and Simone.

"Why don't you come sit with us, man?" D. asked, noticing me stretching my neck sideways, straining to see what was being shown.

His question put me on the spot but I felt I had to be honest.

"Well...thanks but I really feel quite drowsy. I think I should be going to bed as soon as possible," I said.

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"Ain't no big deal," D. responded. "You could go to sleep if you need to."

After having said that, he got up from the sofa, turned off the light and returned to sit beside Simone. The mere consciousness of Simone and D. sitting there facing me while I lay in bed coupled to the reflection emanating from the TV screen within the darkness of Room 702 were reasons sufficient enough to prevent me from getting much of any sleep at all.

"Sleep tight while you can hon'," Simone said to me, provocatively. "Cause it's sure gonna be a long night. We gonna be makin' out for hours..."

That just didn't help at all. I had become quite familiar then with American slang and could consequently figure out exactly what Simone meant. I didn't know her personally but her attitude from the club all the way to Rodeoville Towers persuaded me she was arrogant and self-centered. I was amazed at the blunt and insensitive nature of her words. I chose not to respond. I opened my closet, took out my pajamas and went to the restroom to change. When I

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was done, I folded my other clothes and put them in my closet.

"You know...I think I'm going to sit at the TV lounge for some time," I said. "And I'll take my pillow along in case I doze off over there."

D. seemed shocked.

"Are you nuts, man? You got a comfy room. What you gonna do at the TV lounge? I thought you wanted to go to bed right away."

I quickly thought of an answer.

"Well...yes I thought so, but then I think I'd like to watch TV first for a little while."

D. and Simone looked at each other.

"Then why don't you watch TV right here?" he asked.

"Don't worry. I felt I should give both of you some privacy. Thanks a lot...I appreciate it," I replied.

Both of them were silent. Pillow in hand, I opened the door and walked down the hallway toward the TV lounge. Not surprisingly, it was empty. The clock on the wall showed that it was almost 4 a.m. I put my pillow on the sofa, turned on the TV set and quickly pressed the "-vol" button beneath the screen to

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reduce the volume to the lowest level possible. I flipped through the channels and settled on a late night talk show. I took a seat on the sofa and watched television for just a few minutes. I felt so drowsy that I couldn't resist falling asleep much longer. I turned the TV off, lay on the sofa, closed my eyes and dozed off.

My sleep got interrupted a few hours later when I felt someone tapping me persistently on my shoulder. From the position in which I lay, I had to turn around to figure out who it was and the suddenness of it had me quite shaken. It was Markel, the Resident Assistant. He was holding a green laundry bag with clothes and a bottle of liquid detergent.

"Sleeping in the TV lounge, huh?" he said in a low tone.

His question embarrassed me and I didn't want to give him the details of what was happening.

"Well...yes, I couldn't get much sleep so I came here to watch some TV for a few hours and before I knew it I had dozed off."

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Markel laughed.

"Come on man, you've got a TV in your room. Why would you want to do that?" he asked.

I remained silent.

"It's D., right? He brought a guest to your room for the night and you felt uncomfortable. Right?" he continued.

I didn't answer.

"I know who your roommate is. You don't need to explain anything," he said.

I reserved my comments.

"You've got to be more assertive, brother. Room 702 belongs to both of you. If D. does something that pisses you off, tell him. Y'all paid to live on campus. It's your right to feel comfortable. Don't let people do this to you," Markel said, firmly.

I didn't feel as if I could get much sleep anymore and at the same time it probably wasn't the right moment for me to attempt getting back into our room. So I asked Markel if I could accompany him to the laundry room to see how and where students got their laundry done on campus. Although washers and dryers

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had started becoming quite common within many homes in my country, the traditional method of laundry by immersion (soaking clothes deeply in buckets of water and detergent, hand washing them and hanging them on long ropes tied to poles in the backyard (until they got dry beneath the sun) was still commonly practiced.

Markel and I walked silently down the hallway so as not to wake up any floor mates who might have still been sleeping. We followed the exit sign at the end of the hallway and went past the rooms within the 700-720 range; we made a right, went through the doors and came to a room with several washers and dryers. The process wasn't any different from what I had been used to seeing in my home country. Markel pulled out the string on his laundry bag, took out his clothes, put them in the washer and poured some liquid detergent on them. Afterward he shut the washer door.

"In general, you'll need to put in four quarters for either of these machines to wash or dry your clothes," he said, turning to me.

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"What are quarters?" I asked.

Markel laughed. "A quarter's twenty-five cents bro," he said, showing me a coin he took out of his pocket. "Four quarters means four coins of twenty-five cents each," he said, putting them into four slots on the washer cover.

"Okay- I see," I responded.

Pressing a button, he set the machine to wash his clothes for four minutes and it immediately jump-started the rinsing process.

"After a couple minutes I'll come back here and put them in the dryer," he said. "Nothing complicated...same process. You need to have at least two dollars in coins. So tell me John, I'm just a little curious. How do you guys do it back home? Y'all got washers and dryers, right?" Markel asked.

I nodded.

"We do but you won't find them in every home or apartment. It depends on whether the landlord or home owner feels he or she can afford to purchase the machines," I said. "Before we got a washer and dryer in our home, we hand-washed our clothes in buckets of



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water and detergent and then hung them in the backyard. We still do that every now and then and it's still the most commonly used method of laundry."

"Wow-I doubt if I'd have the time to hand wash my clothes. Y'all got patience and endurance in the motherland," Markel remarked.

He put his laundry bag over his shoulder and shut the bottle of detergent.

"I think I'll go chill in my room for a minute," he said. "What are you gonna do? Go back to the TV lounge?"

"I don't think I have much of a choice. I'll probably sit there and watch TV for a little while before I get back into my room," I responded.

"Ha, ha, ha- I wish you luck," he laughed, on his way out.

I lay down once again on the sofa at the TV lounge. I was only going to take a nap for a few minutes, I thought. I was wrong, for not too long after I had closed my eyes I fell fast asleep..

**CHAPTER NINE****Orientation Day**

It was almost 10 a.m. when I fully woke up again. Prior to that I could hear some of the doors along the hallway opening and shutting, and it somewhat disturbed the bit of sleep I was attempting to get. There was also an increase in the number of footsteps I heard along the carpet in the hallway. But it was mainly a remark from two female floor mates trying to get into the TV lounge that persuaded me it was more than time to get up from where I was.

"Oops! Someone's napping on the sofa," one of them whispered.

I got up, stretched myself, took my pillow along and walked down the hall to Room 702. I knocked when I got to the door. No one answered. I knocked again.

"Who the hell is it?" D. asked.

"It's me," I said.

"You who?" he inquired.

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"John Malinke, your roommate."

There was silence. I could hear him unlock the door.

"Come in," he said.

When I opened the door, Simone was hurriedly putting some makeup on and looking at her face in a mirror. She didn't acknowledge me and I wasn't surprised, for she was simply being herself. I had no reason to expect the barest minimum of courtesy from her and I concluded that ignoring her from then on would be the best solution.

"D. you really mean you couldn't recognize my voice when I knocked on the door the first time? How many people on this floor sound like me?" I asked, masking anger with sarcasm.

He laughed.

"My bad, I just didn't hear you very well."

D. turned to Simone.

"All done?" he asked.

"Yep," she answered, nodding her head and rubbing some powder around her cheeks.

"All right cuz, let me go drop her off. I'll be back in a bit," D. said, walking to the door with Simone.

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At that moment I remembered Dad had sent me some money and that he expected me to pick it up that day. I mentioned that to D. on his way out.

"You could go with Valence," he said.

"But we can't leave the door unlocked," I noted.

"See? I told you to remind me you gotta get your own key," went D. "All right, let's do this. I 'ma leave you my key. I'll be back kinda late so y'all don't worry about me. You'd probably be here long before I get back. Just make sure you take the key with you when you step out. Peace."

I had just finished taking a shower and dressing up when the phone rang.

"Hello?" I said.

"Can I speak to Mr. Malinke please?" a woman asked.

"Speaking," I responded.

"Oh hi John, this is Danielle from the Office of International Services. How are you?"

"Not bad."

"Cool just wanted to remind you the orientation for international students takes place this afternoon

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from 3-4:30pm at the Glenson Hall Auditorium. The Assistant Director will be assisting with registration for those of you taking intensive English courses. Look forward to seeing you there," she said.

I had completely forgotten about my TOEFL scores that didn't reflect my level of proficiency. That was something I was going to have to demonstrate to whomever was going to teach the courses I was scheduled to take. I went over to Room 701 and knocked on the door. Valence opened.

"Hey! Look who's here. Our good neighbor in Room 702," he said with a broad smile. "Come right in, buddy."

There were T-shirts, pants, socks, shorts, empty cans and bottles all over the floor. Valence was holding some French fries in his hands. He munched them quickly, licked his fingers and took a bite out of a double burger that was in a plastic tray on his bed.

"Yo! You eat yet, man?" he asked. "Whoops! Guess I shouldn't have asked that. Don't want you to get pissed," he said, recalling how offended I was when

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he had asked me that question before for stereotypical reasons.

I discerned that he was simply offering to share some of his burger with me for courtesy purposes and I sensed a genuine sincerity coming from his body language.

"No thanks," I said. "I was wondering if you could accompany me to Center City if you're not too busy. I have to go to a World Wide Express to pick up some money sent from home.

Valence took a moment to think.

"That sucks dude, I would have loved to go with you but I got some errands to run," he said.

"What about Lane?" I asked.

"Nah...you can't go with Lane man," Valence said emphatically.

"Why can't I?"

"Come on don't act like you don't know the answer to your question. You definitely don't wanna hang with someone who's gonna make you repeat the same stuff over and over again," he explained.

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Valence proposed accompanying me to the bus stop to show me where to catch the bus and where to get off on my return.

"You got tokens?" he asked.

"What do you mean by that? I wondered.

My question almost made him burst out laughing but he was able to control himself and maintain his composure.

"They're tiny coins you use as fare on a bus. You drop them in a hole or slot that's right beside where the bus driver sits. All you've got to do is watch what everyone else does. You'll be fine. Let me get you some tokens."

Valence pulled open a drawer beside his bed, took out two tokens and gave them to me. I verified that the door to our room was locked and put the key and my passport in my pocket. That was to prevent any embarrassment in case the cashier at World Wide Express would have required me to present a piece of ID that was more formal than that which had been issued to me by Rodeoville University. Minutes later, Valence accompanied me to catch the bus. We

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walked until we got to the City Avenue crosswalk that I had noticed when Chuck was giving me a ride to campus from the police station upon my arrival. On the sidewalk where we stood, there were signs for three buses.

"See the sign post? If you stand here, you could either catch the 42, the 78 or the 93. They all stop here but only the 93 would take you to where you wanna go. 8<sup>th</sup> and Market is its last stop. Don't get in any other bus except the 93. You got it?" Valence asked.

I nodded.

"Matter of fact I'm gonna stand right here until you get on the bus," he added.

"Thank you so much," I said.

The first bus to arrive was the 78. When it stopped, the bus driver pressed a button and the doors slid open to let us in. "No we're waiting for the 93," Valence shouted at the bus driver.

Its doors shut and off it rode. The 42 came a couple minutes later. This particular bus driver seemed to guess that it wasn't his bus we were waiting for.



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Upon reaching our stop, he stretched his neck toward our direction but didn't open the door probably because we didn't move forward to get in but rather remained on the same spot. He stopped for less than three minutes and took off. After that we waited, waited and waited for a couple of minutes.

"Did the 93 get here yet?" asked a man running behind us.

"Not yet. That's what we've been waiting for," Valence responded.

"Ah! Guess I must have brought you guys some luck. Here it comes," he said, pointing.

The bus pulled over. The number 93 flashed on and off some sort of dashboard above the windshield.

"Just follow the gentleman ahead of you. You'll be all right, man. Good luck..." said Valence.

As he suggested, I followed the gentleman. The double doors opened.

"Welcome to Route 93. City Avenue to 3<sup>rd</sup> and Market Street" went the automated broadcast as we entered the bus.

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The man ahead of me put a token in the coin slot beside the bus driver's seat. The bus driver pressed a button afterward and it made a beeping sound. I did the same thing, heard the same sound and the driver repeated the same action. The 93 was full and I sensed it was going to be difficult to find a place to sit. The driver took off and in the suddenness of his acceleration I lost my balance and almost fell.

"Hold the railing, sir!" he exclaimed.

I quickly grabbed on to the railing beside the bus driver. Afterward I joined the other passengers standing up holding one of two, long railings that extended all the way to the back of the bus. Some of them held the railings with one hand, others with both hands. For such a heavy bus, the driver was going at quite a high speed and I could see that it bothered a lot of the passengers who were standing. When I regained my balance I held the railing with one hand and walked to the back of the bus. I felt it would have been too much of an inconvenience to keep on shifting and adjusting the way I stood to prevent

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inconveniencing every passenger who got on the bus and who sought a spot where he or she could stand.

SBOOOOOM! A briefcase dropped on the floor. The owner, one of those who stood up for lack of available seats, tried to bend down and grab it with one hand while continuing to hold the railing with the other.

"Yo! Could you slow down, please? This ain't a rocket, for goodness sake!" he yelled.

During the course of our ride, a number of seats were liberated as more people got off at the various stops.

"Back door!" yelled a woman sitting behind when the bus reached her stop.

The double doors in the back opened. There was now just one seat left unoccupied in the area where I had been standing. It was by the window and I liked that position because it enabled me get a wonderful view of the motorists and pedestrians getting about their business on the busy streets of downtown Philadelphia. I rushed and took the seat in question before someone else could. From the moment I got on

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the bus there was a persistent scramble to occupy any seats that became available. Through the corner of their eyes, the passengers standing up kept a constant, active watch on their counterparts who were sitting down.

"Next stop...15<sup>th</sup> Street," announced the automated broadcast.

As was routine, a passenger pulled down one of two long ropes situated above the seats on the left and right walls of the bus. It rang the bell alerting the driver to drop him off at the upcoming stop. The bus stopped at 15<sup>th</sup> Street, the double doors opened and the passenger got off. Our ride continued. Looking through the window enabled me to discover additional coffee shops, bakeries, restaurants, hotels, grocery stores and shopping centers besides those within Rodeoville University and its environs. The bus didn't stop again until we got to 14<sup>th</sup> Street and this time it wasn't to drop off any passenger but rather to let one in. The double doors opened up to let the passenger in and I heard the sound of shoes with high heels climbing up the bus steps. I continued looking

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through the window but the passenger's shoes were making a distractingly loud noise.

"Good almost afternoon everyone," a deep male voice said.

No one responded. A white male wearing a red blouse, a pair of huge silver earrings and a long, black skirt put a token in the coin slot. I had never seen anyone do such a thing in my home country. Although I had watched American talk shows that occasionally featured men dressed like women, this was the first time I had come across any such person in real life. I never would have imagined it was going to be a man in high heels climbing the steps that led into the bus. Smiling broadly and walking confidently, he seemed to have no reservations about what he was wearing despite the many stares and subtle murmurs along the way. I felt quite uneasy when the man in the skirt began walking toward the back where I was sitting. Then I realized the only seat left unoccupied was the one right next to me. It would have taken a miracle for him to choose to stand when the seat beside me was clearly available. I felt

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quite uncomfortable at the thought of this strange man sitting beside me. I tried to think of something that could discourage him from doing so. I sat in between both seats so that one leg touched the seat by the window and the other leg touched the seat that was vacant, pretending not to notice him coming. Everyone had now turned their attention to where I was sitting.

"Mind if I sit here?" asked the man in the skirt, his voice sounding even deeper.

For a moment I paused. The passengers kept looking at me as if eagerly awaiting my response. I didn't want him to sit next to me but in the heat of the moment there wasn't much time to think of a reason why he shouldn't.

"Uhm...uhm...no you can't," I said. "I always have to use two seats on trains and buses. I have a knee problem that makes me limp significantly. I use whatever support I can," I continued, tapping my hand on my left knee.

I knew no one on the bus believed me certainly not the man trying to take a seat next to me but at that

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point anything was worth the effort if it could dissuade him from doing so.

"Well, big deal! My feet hurt too. Heck, I walked 10 blocks in these shoes. This is a public bus. I can sit wherever I want!" he exclaimed.

The bus driver jumped in:

"Sir, would you kindly move so the gentleman could take a seat?"

I unwillingly yielded.

"Ahhhh...feels good to relax after a long walk," the skirt man said as he sat down.

During our ride, he kept turning around and looking in my direction, which made me very uncomfortable. And each time I looked back at him, he looked away.

"Excuse me do you have some kind of problem?" I asked.

"Problem? Absolutely not!" he answered.

"Well, I asked because you keep looking at me."

"Ah! I didn't realize that. What time do you have? That's what I wanted to ask."

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"I don't have a watch on me. Why don't you ask out loud if anyone on the bus could tell you what time it is?"

He didn't and I perceived his behaviour to be just as strange as the manner in which he was dressed up.

"Next stop...11<sup>th</sup> Street," announced the automated broadcast.

A passenger pulled down one of the long ropes by the window, the bus bell rang and the driver stopped at 11<sup>th</sup> Street. The double doors opened, let out the passenger and our ride continued. I had thought the passenger sitting next to me was going to keep quiet for the rest of the ride but I was wrong.

"You know...folks are so weird," he said, turning to me.

I had hoped it wasn't me he was talking to but by all accounts it was. I ignored him and kept on looking straight but that didn't stop him from continuing.

"Lived with this guy once and he'd keep listenin' in on my voicemail. Caught him in the act one day when I walked in. I was like dude why don't you respect my privacy?" he said.



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I was so shocked by what he was saying that I turned around and gave him a look that expressed it all.

"Next stop...9<sup>th</sup> Street," went the automated broadcast system.

For what reason was this strange fellow opening up to me? What made him think I cared to know about his life? He continued talking:

"So where you from buddy? You have an accent."

I didn't respond.

"Next stop...8<sup>th</sup> Street."

Wait a minute—8<sup>th</sup> Street. That was where Valence said I was supposed to get off. That was my stop, I recalled. I pulled down the rope.

"If you would excuse me I need to get out here," I said.

He sighed but gave way. Getting up from my seat, I remembered having previously stated that I had a knee problem which made me limp significantly. It was possible that the skirt man would be paying close attention to how I walked to determine if it was just an excuse to prevent him from sitting next to me. I was forced to pretend so I limped on my way to the

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front of the bus, firmly clutching on to the railings to my left and right as if desperately needing them to maintain my balance. The few passengers left who had watched me get on the bus could tell I was faking it. One of them was an elderly woman sitting upfront. When she looked at me I thought she was going to laugh out loud but she controlled herself and forced out a pretentious cough instead.

"Gentleman I don't get why you'd wanna sit next to me when there's two, empty seats where you were at," a male passenger complained in a loud voice.

Everyone looked behind. The man in the skirt had been trying to sit next to another male passenger in the back but he got rebuffed and quickly returned to his seat. I shook my head in disgust at the thought that he had perhaps entered the bus for a reason that I didn't even want to imagine. On my way out, the bus driver mocked at me with a smile on his face:

"Sir, I didn't see you limp when you got in. You climbed up the stairs quite perfectly."

He must have thought it was the right moment to blow my cover to the passengers on the bus who had come in

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after me. He put me on the spot but at that point I had nothing to lose, so I equally thought of a smart response:

"What can I tell you? I wasn't limping then but I'm limping now unforeseen circumstances."

The driver laughed and wished me a good day when the double doors opened. And as he drove off, I saw no reason to keep faking it because not only had the charade been exposed, but I really had no reason to care about how the man in the skirt might have felt about it. Therefore with much pleasure, I walked normally.

Finding a World Wide Express Service Center was not complicated at all. It was just a block away from where I got off. There were two people in line when I walked in. The process seemed quite organized. Each individual filled out a form, presented some form of ID to the cashier, received an expected amount of money, signed the receipt and got finger printed probably for record-keeping and investigative purposes. There were two surveillance cameras on the

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walls on both sides of the room. When it was my turn I showed the cashier my passport after having filled out the receiver's form since I didn't yet have a Pennsylvania state ID. Furthermore my university ID probably wasn't formal enough. She looked at the picture on it and then up at me to ensure that I was the same person.

"What's your occupation, sir?" the cashier asked.

"I'm a student."

"What school do you go to?" she continued.

"Rodeoville University," I answered.

I was quite surprised at the cashier's questions because my visa contained all of that information. However, I concluded she must have been double checking considering the affirmative nod that ensued and also the fact that she was typing my information on a computer. She slid my passport back to me through the opening beneath her big glass window.

"50...100...150...200...250...300," she counted.

The cashier gave me the money and then I signed the receipt and put my finger print on it just like those who had gone before me.

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On my way out I stopped at a convenience store across the street to get a phone card. I was so impressed by the manner in which the people standing in line respected the 'first come, first serve' order. The last person in line had to wait for his or her turn to be served. No one tried to cut ahead of the other as was sometimes the case in my home country...where in banks, grocery stores and other customer service-oriented environments, a person standing at the end of a long line expected to be served first and to receive special treatment for merely being friends with a cashier or bank teller. Back home, such behaviour often led to several arguments in public places. Lacking in humility, the offenders often persisted by brandishing arguments why they unfairly deserved to be served prior to those who had been standing in line for long periods of time.

"Do you know who I am?" some of them often would say, rudely.

I initially got a phone card for 10 dollars but the cashier proposed that with a hundred-dollar bill, I might as well have gotten a phone card that cost a

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little more but which could enable me talk longer during long distance calls. So I got one for 20 dollars and I was quite impressed by the cashier's politeness upon my return:

"Sir, do you mind if I take care of this gentleman first?" she asked the next person who had come up to the counter with items to purchase. "He was in line earlier but had to rush back to get something else," she pleaded.

Having displayed such respectfulness, I wasn't surprised that the person she was talking to yielded. When I paid for the phone card and received my change, I thanked her sincerely. I was anxious to speak to Emelda. I hadn't talked to her since I got to the United States. I was quite excited at the possibility of doing so.

After that, I stood at the bus stop and caught the 93 bus going in the opposite direction. As usual, I sat behind where I could observe most of the passengers. The ride seemed to be devoid of unnecessary drama. No man came in wearing a skirt and the people in it appeared to be quieter. However, a black male

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sitting in front wearing a hooded-sweat shirt over a baseball hat caught my attention. Not only did he cough frequently, but he seemed quite restless for some reason. Every ten minutes or so, he scratched his right shoulder and then shivered on and off like someone who had a high fever. On the floor in between his feet was a rather big, dark blue trash bag that had been tied up. Once in a while he tapped on it and something blew up into the air that looked like ash or some kind of white dust...I wasn't very sure what it was. He began scratching his shoulder more intensively and could barely sit still. A much older black male who was sitting next to him reading a magazine got up and moved to a different seat. By the time the bus got to 11<sup>th</sup> Street, each of the passengers had noticed him but everyone chose to mind their own business. It was quite an interesting ride. Upon returning to Rodeoville Towers, I ran into Valence in the hallway trying to get into the elevator.

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"Piece of cake wasn't it?" he said. "You came back as quickly as you left. I'm about to head out now for a couple more errands."

I told him about my experiences on the bus. He laughed.

"That's how it is. You got all kinds of folks on the bus—crazy people, people who don't shower, you name it."

I unlocked the door to our room. D. had still not returned. I figured I had three phone calls to make—one to Dad to confirm having received the money and the other two to Kenneth and Emelda. I started off with Dad.

"I am happy the transaction was successful," he said. "Manage your money well. Work hard and look for acceptable ways to make ends meet. I will tell your mother you called. She went to visit Minetta."

After I spoke to Dad, it dawned on me that I would need to get an on-campus job that would supplement whatever I had received as pocket money. My parents had already made tremendous sacrifices to afford both the cost of my plane ticket and tuition for the



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several semesters left at Rodeoville University. I had to take a little bit of the pressure off their shoulders even if it meant doing so in my own modest way. They had already done so much just to get me to where I was. I had already spent part of my one hundred-dollar allowance on a twenty-dollar phone card and had to resist the temptation of digging into the money set aside for opening up a bank account. Getting a job and opening up a bank account were the next two very important things I had to do.

I called Kenneth's home. The phone rang for a couple of minutes.

"Allo?" his Mum answered.

"Hello Mrs. Ikini. This is John Malinke. How are you doing?"

"John! We are doing quite well. How are you my son? How are things over there?"

"I am trying. Everything is fine so far. Is Kenneth there?"

"Yes. He's in the kitchen. Just hold on."

Kenneth picked up the phone a few minutes later.

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"Prince of Philadelphia!" he shouted. "I thought you had forgotten about the people you left behind. At least you thought about me today."

"Is that what you call me now?" I asked.

"Come on be happy! You have made a big step forward. Barboursa City is now looking for a new prince," Kenneth stated.

He still spoke with the same sarcasm that I honestly found quite annoying at times.

"So how have you been and how is Emelda?"

"There is nothing new on my side. I still feel like an outsider in this neighbourhood. Nobody informs me when our peers throw parties and come together for social gatherings. Imagine being asked at the door to show your invitation when everyone else seems to be walking in freely? I'm sick and tired of this nonsense! I can't wait to leave this neighbourhood someday!"

I tried to encourage Kenneth and calm him down. When he had calmed down, I continued:

"What about Emelda? How is she?"

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"It is the main reason why you called, right? She is doing fine. I try to see her at least two days a week to make sure your memory remains fresh in her mind," he said.

"I appreciate what you are doing, Kenneth. Thank you for being a faithful friend. Does she have a cell phone number now?" I asked.

"Yes she does. I wrote it down on a piece of paper. Can you hold on for some time? Let me go to my room and get it."

I was excited. For once I would be able to communicate with her directly without having to pass through a middle man. I wondered how she was going to react when she would hear my voice. I hoped she would equally be excited. I got a pen and paper from D.'s desk and waited anxiously for Kenneth to return.

"All right, let me give you the number," he said.

"It is 43 12 00 84."

I repeated the number.

"That is correct...there you go," he answered.

"Thanks, Kenneth. Please continue to look after her for me," I pleaded.

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"I will do the best I can," he said.

I had gotten two calls out of the way. It was now time for me to brace myself for the last call which was going to be quite different in nature. I dialed my home country's code and then punched in the numbers I had received from Kenneth. The phone rang but no one picked it up. It rang again.

"Allo?" went a female voice.

Unfortunately I got disconnected before I could utter a word. I hung up and tried again a few moments later.

"Sorry, your correspondent cannot be reached right now. Please hang up and try again," stated a recorded message.

I was forced to hang up. I couldn't understand why the cell phone lines back home were suddenly acting funny at that particular moment when the last two calls had gone through perfectly. I took a seat on my bed and waited for ten minutes. After that, I got the phone again and tried a third time. If it still didn't work this time around, the rest of my day

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would have been messed up, I thought. I was so anxious to speak to Emelda. I soon had to rush for my student orientation and it would have probably been too late to try calling home after that. Barboursa City was five hours ahead of Philadelphia time.

The phone rang one time; two times; three times. No one picked up. At the fourth ring, I heard that same female voice again.

"Allo?" the woman said.

"Emelda?" I asked.

"Speaking," she answered.

"Emelda I am so glad to hear your voice! This is John."

There was silence.

"Hello? Did you hear me? Emelda, are you still there?" I asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"You sound so cold and indifferent. I assumed you would be just as happy to hear from me," I said.

She laughed.

"You know...you never cease to amaze me. What did you want me to do? Shout for joy?" she asked.

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I was silent.

"It's been weeks since you got to America and have not been communicating. Just because you happened to call today makes you think I should be excited?" she asked again.

"That's not what happened, Emelda. I was still trying to find my way around and get used to the city. I don't yet have a cell phone. I had to buy a phone card to make this call and I'm using my roommate's fixed phone. You have constantly been on my mind from the moment I got here," I expounded.

She was silent.

"I knew it would take me a while to adapt to my new city and that's why I pleaded with Kenneth to remind you you're always on my mind and to check on you often. He's the one who gave me your cell phone number," I continued.

"That's nice," she said, with a mocking laugh. "Mind you Kenneth and I have only talked about you one time just one time...and that was last week. He passes by our house all the time. Not once has he ever stopped to talk to me about you. Every time our eyes meet, he

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just waves and continues his way. It was I who called him last week and asked him to take my cell phone number so that if you ever call him he could give it to you."

Emelda's revelations shocked me. I couldn't believe Kenneth would do such a thing. It therefore meant he was lying to me that he used to meet with her at least two days a week. I knew that I occasionally used to have doubts about his loyalty as a friend but I never would have imagined he would consider doing anything to hurt my feelings.

"Allo? Are you still there?" Emelda asked, making me realize I had been silent for a while.

"I am, Emelda. Sorry about that. I was just thinking about everything you said and I am truly at a loss for words. Well, thank you for still having kept me in your mind. From the way Kenneth sounded when I talked to him several minutes ago, he indirectly seemed to suggest that he played a major role in getting you to give him your cell phone number."

She laughed.

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"Listen, I have to rush to my orientation. I now have your cell phone number, so I will do the best I can to call you as often as possible. When I get a cell phone, I'll give you my number as well. I have just two minutes left on my phone card so I have to hang up now before I get disconnected," I said.

"All right, good luck and keep in touch," she replied.

It felt very soothing to hear her voice after such a long period of time and it reminded me so much of our last time together. Although we were hundreds upon thousands of miles away separated by lakes, seas, oceans, mountains and the vastness of the sky...I was amazed that a single phone call could make it feel as if she were yet so near.

The alarm clock beside D.'s bed read 2:45 p.m. I had to hurry to my orientation. I took a piece of paper and wrote a note to D. so he would know where to find the key when he returned. It simply read:

*Under the door*

Just when I was about to lock up, I remembered the promise I had made to Danielle and how she'd vowed



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never to speak to me again if I didn't keep it this time around. I quickly re-opened the door and from within my closet, took some pictures of my family, our family home, Barbours City and the plantation in Calonari. I locked the door, slid the key underneath it and put the note on top of it. D. should be able to find it easily, I thought.

I spent the next few minutes getting directions to Glenson Hall. It was quite easy to find. As soon as I entered the building, I noticed Veronica distributing some flyers.

"Hi!" she exclaimed with a broad smile upon seeing me.

She drew forward and gave me a hug but I had strong reservations about the sincerity of her gesture. Her attitude at that moment greatly contrasted with the experience I had at the cafeteria a while ago. I felt she was being a hypocrite.

"You're here for the orientation, right?" Veronica asked.

I nodded.

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"Cool. Just follow those two students ahead of you. It'll be in the auditorium on your right," she said.

I followed the students to the auditorium. I heard classical music being played and could see from the door that the auditorium seats—red in colour— were filled with students and were set up like what you would find in a movie theatre. There was a podium and a big screen that was probably often used for PowerPoint presentations and video projections. A man and a woman sat close to each other on separate desks on the podium. There was a microphone on each desk as well as folders, application forms, books and several flyers. I recognized the man quite easily. It was Tom Clifton. I didn't recall having ever met the woman who sat next to him. Judging from her legs and the way she was sitting, she had to be very tall. I wasn't sure but I guessed she had to be Amisu Banda, the Assistant Director at the Office of International Services. Considering her complexion and features I also surmised that she was probably of Native American ethnicity. She seemed to be at least in her

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late thirties and had long, black hair that she wore in a ponytail with colourful beads tied around it.

Danielle stood behind a table beside the door with a sign-in sheet upon which every international student wrote down his or her name and what academic program they would be pursuing.

"Hey! What's up?" she said to me, smiling. "Glad you could make it. Just sign in right here," she pointed.

I wrote my first and last name on the sheet of paper and then realized I wouldn't be able to list anything under "academic program" because as a result of my TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores the University felt I needed to bring up my level of proficiency. I explained that to Danielle.

"Yeah I remember that," she said. "No problem. Just write 'undeclared'", she suggested.

So I wrote "undeclared" under "academic program."

From the way Danielle looked at me I suspected she was about to say something and I felt I could guess what it was.

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"Yes, I brought some pictures," I quickly said, before she could utter a word.

"Seems like you read my mind. Consider yourself lucky this afternoon," she joked.

I gave her the pictures and walked down the aisle to take a seat. That was the most diverse crowd I had so far seen at Rodeoville University. There were at least 30 students spread out in groups of 10 within each row of seats. There was quite some murmuring while they interacted with each other. The majority seemed to be from the Middle East, Asia and Europe. I also saw three black students whom I guessed were probably African. I took a seat next to one of the Middle-Eastern looking students who smiled and nodded in my direction as a sign of acknowledgement. Moments later, Veronica emerged and walked toward the podium. Turning around I noticed Danielle shutting the auditorium door and looking at some of my pictures at the same time. The music ceased and at the podium, Veronica grabbed another microphone that lay on a small table behind Tom Clifton. With his arms folded and a slight smile, Mr. Clifton watched the students

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interacting from his seat, while his associate was laboriously stapling and writing notes on sheets of papers stacked up on her desk. She didn't look up until Veronica began speaking to the crowd:

"Good Afternoon ladies and gentlemen, may I please have your attention?" she said.

The murmuring ceased.

"Thank you," she continued. "On behalf of all of us at the Office of International Services, permit me to welcome each of you to the city of Philadelphia and most of all, to our great University. In just a few minutes, you're gonna be watching a short video on the history of Philadelphia. After that, our orientation session will begin. We hope you'll enjoy the video and thank you for your attention."

The documentary ran for about twenty minutes and I found it very informative. I learned about some of the mayors and governors who had left positive imprints on the city, the historical background of the main ethnic groups of specific parts of the city and some places where every tourist or visitor was encouraged to visit: the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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such as the Liberty Bell, the National Constitution Center, Reading Terminal and several others. There was tremendous applause when the video was over, highlighting a sense of excitement that appeared to have reached its peak among the group of newly-arrived international students.

"At this moment I'd like to introduce you to someone whom each of you could consider not only a peer but also a friend, advisor and older brother. He's from Egypt and has been a student here at Rodeoville for seven years. Saleh, could you come up, please?"

Amidst applause a slightly overweight male with a fair complexion got up from his seat and walked up to the podium. Although no one in the crowd openly confirmed this, I had the feeling that the applause was more in awe over the fact that this particular foreign student had been at Rodeovile for that long. I could imagine some of the questions that probably ran through the other students' minds:

*What was his secret?*

*How did he pull off paying his tuition for all those years?*

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*He probably doesn't have the same worries and concerns as other international students, does he?*

Before uttering a word, the attention he was getting and the stares of admiration that converged in his direction persuaded me Saleh had already become a star to his audience.

"I don't think I say much," he said in an extremely strong accent, responding to a question on whether he had a few remarks for the incoming group of international students.

"But I am available if questions," he added.

The crowd applauded while he returned to his seat. With a broad smile, Veronica continued:

"Dear students, it is our profound hope that all of you would enjoy your stay in our beautiful city. Your comfort and personal safety through the duration of your respective academic programs is absolutely important to us. Our Office is always ready to serve you."

She paused for several seconds. When she spoke again, the expression on her face was much sterner:

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"One of the most important ways of enjoying your stay in the United States is by respecting to the letter, each of the rules that govern F-1 international students. I'm sure most of you are aware that as full time students, you're required to take a full course load each semester to maintain your status."

There was a mixture of silence and suspense in the auditorium. The enthusiasm and excitement that had been previously demonstrated in the beginning seemed to have been replaced by a degree of fear... an eagerness to learn how to abide by the rules and keep away from trouble. Veronica proceeded with her presentation:

"A graduate student seeking to maintain his or her immigration status as a full time student must take nine credits a semester; an undergraduate student must take twelve credits a semester. Failure to do so would be considered a violation of your status and you'd need to have a valid reason why you chose to sign up for less than the required amount of credits during any given semester," she explicated.



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"You're going pretty fast but don't forget to ask them if they have any questions!" Tom Clifton interrupted, in his typically loud voice.

"Oh sure...I was gonna do just that," Veronica responded. "Any questions?"

No one said a word. Just when Veronica was about to speak again, a student raised her hand. Veronica walked from the podium to where the student was seated, gave her the microphone and stood facing her.

"Yes my question is...are there any exceptions when international students may be allowed to sign up for less than the required number of credits?" she asked.

"Amisu, why don't you answer that?" Mr. Clifton suggested.

Amisu stood up and picked up the microphone on her desk. She was very tall and slender, towering several inches over Veronica.

"That's a very good question," Amisu said, in an accent that sounded like a mixture of American and Indian. "Yes, there is an exception. International students in their last semester or second to last semester can take less than nine or twelve credits as

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the case may be. However, in order to do so, students must fill out an application for 'reduced course load' and update their files within our system. The corresponding changes are sent to federal and local immigration authorities. Once students receive approval from our Office to do so, it's not a problem if they sign up for one course or two courses."

There was silence.

"Are there any more questions?" Amisu asked.

I thought I should ask a question about employment opportunities for international students. Although no one else raised their hand, I was certain a lot of them had many questions but were both scared and overwhelmed by the strict details of the information they had received. I raised my hand and Veronica came to my seat to give me the microphone.

"Thank you very much. My name is John Malinke, I'm a new student from the Republic of Boluaké in Central Africa," I said. "Is it true that international students are not allowed to work off campus?"

"That is correct," Amisu nodded. "International students may only work on campus and for no more than

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twenty hours a week during the fall and spring semesters. The exception is during the summer, when they can put in more than twenty hours a week with authorization from our Office. As Veronica mentioned, aside from those within the final stages of their programs, international students are expected to take a full course load each semester to maintain their immigration status. The law states that students who engage in off-campus employment without legal authorization from immigration authorities violate their status and are consequently at risk for deportation."

The previously excited faces in the crowd now looked stiff and frozen. I felt I could read the minds of most of my peers. There were so many rules to abide by and it had become obvious to each of us that we would need the Office of International Services to guide us every step of the way. I was certain that just like me, their families had equally made enormous sacrifices to send them—their sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews and cousins to America for college. It was important for

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each of us to know the rules by heart to avoid blowing away the opportunity that our loved ones had given us.

"Permit me to conclude however, by saying that exceptional circumstances such as financial hardship or the loss of an educational sponsor permit international students to partake of employment opportunities off campus to help them meet up with their needs. But in this case as well, there's a procedure to follow and an application needs to be submitted to immigration authorities in collaboration with our Office," Amisu continued.

When Amisu had finished speaking, Veronica asked if there were any questions but once again there was stiff silence.

"Dear students, the information we've passed on to you is in no way designed to frighten you or make you feel uncomfortable," assured Veronica. "We're here to serve you, protect you and ensure that each of you has a smooth and positive educational experience. Your wellbeing is our utmost concern. It's for that reason that we need to make sure you're familiar with

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the rules each of you have to follow. Obeying these rules would prevent you from getting in situations that may compromise your continued presence in the United States. All right...since there are no questions I'd like to invite you all to get some juice, cookies and sandwiches at the lobby just outside the auditorium. Thank you and once again on behalf of the entire team at the Office of International Services, welcome to Rodeoville University."

The crowd applauded but I was quite certain everyone's mind was heavy with the dense information that had been provided on to us. There was a bit of murmuring as we got up from our seats and proceeded to leave the auditorium.

"Excuse me John Malinke, can you come to the podium, please? John Malinke to the podium, please?" Veronica announced.

I was quite surprised because this was completely unexpected. I turned around and began making my way toward the podium. When I got there, Amisu walked up to me and shook my hand.

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"Mr. Malinke? Very nice to meet you...I'm Amisu Banda, Assistant Director at the Office of International Services. We hadn't formally met yet. How are you adjusting to your new campus and to life in the city?" she asked.

"Quite well I live at Rodeoville Towers. I have been to a few places but overall I'm still trying to discover the city. I think I like it, anyway. It's a beautiful city with lots of touristic sites," I responded.

"Very good...I'm glad to hear that," she smiled. "I'm curious, though. Your name's on a list of students scheduled to be taking an Intensive English language course for non-native speakers tomorrow. Yet you seem to speak English very well," she remarked. "What's that all about?"

I once again narrated my story and Amisu sympathized with me and encouraged me to hang on and prove to my new teacher that I wasn't supposed to be in the course. I then read through the course details carefully.

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"The course begins tomorrow?" I asked, rather marveled.

"I think it does, if I'm not mistaken. Can you come with me please?"

I followed Amisu to her desk on the podium. She moved a couple of papers around and pulled one up toward her. It was a list of new international students and what courses they were scheduled to be taking.

"That's you," she said, pointing at the seventeenth name on the list. "Intensive English Language from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. at Langley Hall, Room 310."

"Thank you so much," I responded.

"You're very welcome. Come on— why don't you go join the rest of the crowd at the lobby and get acquainted. I'll meet you guys shortly."

I wasn't enthusiastic about the course I was scheduled to take but at the same time I was excited at the opportunity to officially start school at a university in the United States of America. The immigration rules governing international students were so strict but Mr. Clifton and Amisu were so nice. Considering the manner in which I was received

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upon my arrival and the informative presentation at the auditorium, the staff at the Office of International Services seemed to have a genuine concern for students. Knowing the rules and consequences, I wondered why any student would deliberately engage in activity that would be perceived to be a violation of status.

At the lobby there was much interaction between students. I got two cookies and a napkin and cafeteria staff poured some lemonade into my glass. I felt very much at home in the diverse crowd. For once I didn't feel like the lone individual who had just arrived and was trying to fit in. I wasn't the only person who was a product of a different culture that others felt an interest in discovering. I had as much to learn from the many students who shook hands with me.

"Lovely. Your country's so beautiful. I wish I could visit the Motherland someday. Thanks so much for sharing," Danielle said, returning the pictures to me.



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"I'm happy you liked the pictures. You see? I kept my promise," I joked.

Danielle smiled and went on to join Veronica who was standing far away by the wall eating a sandwich.

"Excuse me. We not yet met," someone said behind me.

I turned around and it was Saleh. I introduced myself to him and we shook hands.

"Why you did not choose a major?" he asked, in a thick Middle Eastern accent.

I didn't understand him clearly the first time, so I asked him if he could kindly repeat his question.

"Why you did not choose a major?" he said a second time. "You choose 'undeclared.' You are one of new students taking intensive language, no?"

At that moment I understood what he was trying to say. However, I was quite fared up of constantly explaining to people what happened to me when I took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL).

"Well, I just haven't made up my mind yet. I'm still undecided as far as choosing a major," I answered.

In the course of our conversation, Saleh told me he was in the process of almost completing a second

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Bachelor's degree program. His first Bachelor's degree was in Biology and he was hoping to get the second degree in Environmental Studies.

"After that I go for Master in Business Administration," he added.

"Are you going to pursue your Master's degree program here or at another university?" I asked.

"Of course I do it here," he stated confidently. "I am attached to Rodeoville. Second house to me."

I hoped I could someday get to the same point as Saleh. With hard work, I believed it was possible. On my way back to Rodeoville Towers I was once again filled with excitement at the thought of beginning my first course in an American university in just a matter of hours. However, I did the best I could not to think about the course I would be taking so as not to lose my enthusiasm. Upon returning to Room 702, I met D. sitting on the sofa listening to music.

"How'd your orientation go, man?" he asked.

"Not bad. Very informative," I responded.

"Lots of honeys, huh?"

"Uhm...I'm not quite sure what you mean," I said.

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D. laughed.

"Let me put it this way: lots of good looking women?" he repeated.

"Well, I was so focused on learning about the country's foreign student immigration laws that I really didn't pay much attention to that."

D. shook his head.

"You're something else," he said. "So you're all fired up for class tomorrow?"

"Sure. I'm very excited," I affirmed.

"What courses are you taking?" he asked.

It would have sounded shocking and ridiculous to D. if I told him I would be taking just an intensive English language course for proficiency-deficient students.

"I haven't declared a major yet and still have a number of courses to add to my roster, so my schedule hasn't been confirmed yet," I said.

"I hear ya. Good luck with that, though. I think I'll go grab something to eat at the caf for a minute. I'll see you in a bit. You ain't stepping out, are you?"

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"No I've had such a long day. I'll stay right here,"  
I responded.

"Cool, 'cause I was scared you'd lock me out if you were. We need to get you your own key before the weekend's over."

D. left for the cafeteria. I took a seat on the sofa, picked up the remote and flipped through the cable channels, determined to prove to my course instructor the following day that my level of English proficiency was acceptable enough for Rodeoville University.

## CHAPTER TEN

### **English as a Third Language**

It was my first day of class and I was so excited. I had been waiting to experience it for a while. I woke up at about 7.30 a.m., took a shower thirty minutes later and went down with D. to eat in the cafeteria at about 8.20. I admired the discipline the students conveyed because everyone seemed determined not to fall behind their routine schedules. That early, the

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cafeteria was already filled up with students, while several others walked to and fro around campus and in and out of buildings. Based on what D. told me, first days of class were often characterized by a rush to add or drop courses from individual rosters. With respect to electives, students often decided whether or not to drop them based on their assessment of the teacher's performance in class. By 8.50 a.m. there was a lot of affluence around the campus bookstore, an unmistakable sign that the fall semester had officially begun.

It was about 9.15 when I took the stairs to the third floor of Langley Hall and entered Room 310. There were three Asian students inside—two males and one female. When I got in, they smiled and nodded, and so did I. I took a seat three desks behind them. I began to wish I were taking a more exciting class that would have permitted me to meet with and interact with more American students. I absolutely had to prove that making me sign up for this intensive English language course was a big mistake. Once in a while, the group of three Asian students

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turned, looked at me and smiled. I wasn't sure what else to do besides nod. It was safe for me to conclude that neither of them spoke English because they were speaking in their language the entire time. That was further confirmed to me when one of the two males turned to me and using two of his fingers, made a sign of someone smoking a cigarette. I guess he was trying to ask me if I had a light because he wanted to smoke. I shook my head in response to his non-verbal inquiry, hoping he would understand it implied that I didn't have a light. He nodded twice, so I guessed he got it. He probably wasn't aware smoking was forbidden within university buildings. Even if I had a light I wouldn't have given him because smoking within a building, let alone inside a classroom wasn't only wrong, but the smell of cigarette flowing from ours into other classrooms in the hallway would have made many teachers and students uncomfortable.

I heard some teachers in the classrooms next door proceeding on with their introductory courses but our instructor was yet to show up. Considering the natural excitement of the first day of class, my

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anxiety had reached its peak. Moments later, a very depressed-looking white male with curly, shoulder length hair and a pair of glasses walked in. As soon as he walked in, he took a seat on the teachers' table in front of the board and stared at each of us individually without saying a word. He shook his head, sighed, looked down, looked up at us again and rubbed his fingers.

He was wearing a white T-shirt with a pair of khaki shorts, long, white socks and black shoes. There was a red pen tucked within his left-foot sock and a blue pen tucked inside his right one. Moments later, he picked up a piece of chalk and wrote the words "English as a Third Language" on the board. I couldn't believe what I saw. Did the University really believe my English was so bad that I wasn't even worthy to be considered for an English as a Second Language course? I had never before heard of a course called "English as a Third Language." Throughout that period, my classmates had been murmuring in their language.

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"Okay guys, silence in the room! Silence in the room!" he yelled, clapping his hands. "I know you guys can't speak a lick of English but would you please be quiet at the very least?"

There was silence. Everyone's attention was now fully directed at the teacher.

"My name's Carlson, by the way. Now, I'm going to say this with the full assurance that none of you would understand a word. Gosh! I've been at this school for three years and this is the first time I've heard of a course called 'English as a Third Language.' That suggests to me that your English must be horrible...just horrible! Why in the world I got chosen to teach such a freaking course is beyond comprehension!"

I understood everything he said but my classmates kept looking at each other and back at Carlson with blank expressions on their faces as if seeking for clues to figure out what he had said. I played along and pretended to have the same problem. Carlson spoke so passionately and his face demonstrated that he wasn't pleased to be teaching the course at all. But



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then with a sudden, somewhat mischievous smile, he continued:

"Tell you what. Here's what we'll do. I'll start off calling your names. If you can't figure out it's you when I call your name, you'll be in serious trouble. Got that? Raise your hand when you hear your name."

Carlson pulled out the blue pen that was tucked inside his right-foot sock and looked down at what seemed to be a list. The three Asian students murmured to each other in a language I guessed must have been Chinese.

"Kong Dung!" Carlson yelled.

The two male students looked at each other.

"One last time: Kong Dung!" he repeated.

One of the two male students raised his hand.

"Gosh! Don't you know your freaking name?" Carlson asked, shaking his head.

He marked off Kong Dung's name.

"Lee Pong!" he continued.

The other Asian male student looked up at Carlson as if surprised.

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"Here we go again...one last time: Lee Pong!" he repeated.

The student raised his hand and emphasized the correct pronunciation of his name:

"Lee Chong-Li Pong."

Carlson's glasses slid slightly down his nose.

"I don't give a damn. Lee Pong sounds easy enough for me," he mocked, marking off his name on the attendance sheet.

Lee Pong and Kong Dung looked at each other, surely attempting to figure out what Carlson said. In the meantime, the female student in the group appeared to be rather nervous and agitated throughout the process, probably anxious about her own turn.

"John Malinke!" he shouted.

I raised my hand.

"Oh wow! Isn't it nice that at least one person recognized his name at the first call!" he remarked.

To Carlson, it perhaps seemed too good to be true that unlike my peers I was able to understand and follow instructions so easily and without strain. He looked at me with a sense of disbelief and with a

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trembling hand, marked off my name on his sheet.

After that, he called the fourth student's name:

"Akiko Takimura!"

She stood up.

"Oh my goodness; oh my goodness! I'm not asking you to stand up. Sit down! I said raise your hand when you hear your name or anything that sounds like it," he said, waving his hand.

Akiko sat down. Carlson looked at her, shook his head and then looked down at his attendance sheet.

"All right, let's give this a shot one last time. Akiko Takimura!" he repeated.

"Sorry, sah. No Englib," she answered.

Carlson dropped his pen on the table with his eyes wide open and put both hands on his waist.

"What?" he asked.

"No Englib sah," she repeated.

"No Englib? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Akiko was silent. Carlson shook his head, marked off her name on his sheet and took a deep breath. He got up from the table where he had been sitting and

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handed a sheet of paper with questions to each of us. Afterward he stood in the middle of the classroom.

"All right folks, I've just given each of you a sheet of paper with various sentences. Ignore and I repeat, ignore everything else that's written on the paper. We will only be reading the first sentence. Do I make myself clear?"

Kong Dung and Lee Pong murmured to each other in Chinese.

"Kong Dung and your buddy, we only speak English in this classroom, is that clear?" Carlson said.

The murmuring ceased.

"All right, here we go. I will read the first sentence and then each of you will take turns at it, okay?" he continued.

My peers nodded but I wasn't sure if they actually understood what Carlson said.

"Eric has a silver car. Kong Dung, do you want to start us off?"

Kong Dung squinted at his piece of paper. He looked up at Carlson and then down at the paper. He looked up and down again. Carlson was losing his patience:

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"Would you say something? Just say any freaking thing, for goodness sake!"

"Errriuuuk...Errriuuk...hah. Errrriuuk hah," Kong Dung responded.

"Ha, ha, ha—Erriuuk hah. So much for creating languages. Wrong! Lee Pong!"

Lee Pong's hand trembled while he held his paper.

"Rahaaamm...di. Rahamdi," he said.

"Wow. Rahamdi. Another word I guess I never knew existed," Carlson mocked. "Akiko, you're next."

"Sorry sah, no Englib," she answered.

Carlson rolled his eyes and shook his head:

"Wow! I guess that would be your standard robotic response in every class, huh?"

"John Malinke!" he continued.

"Eric has a silver car," I read.

"Oh wow! Isn't that different; unfortunately not enough to persuade me your English is good enough, John. This is probably just some coincidence."

At that point I decided to prove him wrong by reading the entire sentence:

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"Eric has a silver car. To hell with foolishville university. Damn this stupid course and the dumb, inarticulate students within it."

Carlson panicked. Lee Pong, Akiko and Kong Dung looked at each other in surprise, wondering what I had figured out.

"Hey! Give me that!" Carlson shouted, seizing the paper.

He took a deep sigh and put his hand on his chest as a sign of relief. Then waving his hand, he said:

"Okay guys-that's it for today. I'll see you tomorrow."

I followed my peers behind and began making my way toward the door when Carlson stopped me.

"John Malinke may I speak with you, please?"

I walked up to him.

"You scared the hell out of me. How in the world did you find yourself in this class?" he wondered.

For perhaps the millionth time, I recounted my story.

When I had finished, Carlson responded:

"I must tell you I'm quite impressed with your English. Based on your surprising performance this

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morning I don't think you deserve to be in this course at all. Hold on."

Carlson took out a sheet of paper from a folder and wrote a rather long note on it. He signed the note and when he had finished he handed it to me.

"Take this to the Office of International Services. It's a recommendation stating that I think you're qualified to begin taking regular courses," he said. When he had finished writing, he put the pen inside one of his socks. I thanked him, he shook my hand and I continued walking toward the door.

"Hold on you won't tell anyone about the rest of what you read on that paper, would you?" Carlson asked.

"Not at all," I assured him.

"Awesome."

In the hallway I met Akiko, Kong Dung and Lee Pong speaking in their language. Akiko left both of them and walked up to me with a broad smile on her face. She just kept on staring at me straight in the eyes and smiling without saying a word. I wasn't sure how

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to interpret that or what to say, especially given the fact that Akiko couldn't communicate in English and I couldn't speak Chinese either. Nonetheless, I nodded and smiled back. She removed a packet of chewing gum from her handbag and offered a piece to me.

"Thank you very much," I said.

Those were three basic words whose meaning I was confident would have been obvious to most non-native English speakers. When I had thanked her, Akiko smiled and giggled. Lee Pong and Kong Dung were watching us from afar. At one point, Kong Dung began whispering in Lee Pong's ear and before long, both of them were frowning at me for reasons I couldn't comprehend. To my greatest surprise, the two of them walked up to Akiko and me. Lee Pong grabbed her by the arm and pulled her away, while Kong Dung stared at me with a frown on his face. He didn't say anything but I sensed both of them were trying to protect Akiko. They probably didn't want her coming too close to the stranger they perceived me to be. I wondered if they all knew each other before they got



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to Philadelphia. If so, that would have probably explained why they were being protective of Akiko. Otherwise, there was also the possibility that perhaps one or maybe both of them may have been romantically interested in her and were unwilling to tolerate any unnecessary competition. I was quite amazed at their attitude and found it rather strange. I wasn't expecting such an experience at all.

When Kong Dung left to join his friends, I rushed to the Office of International Services with my special authorization from Carlson. To maintain my status I had to sign up for twelve credits as soon as possible before the available courses got filled up. I explained the urgency to Danielle, who quickly accompanied me upstairs to Amisu's office.

"Amisu this student needs immediate assistance," she said, after having knocked on the door which was slightly half open.

"Come right in Mr. Malinke," Amisu said.

She was wearing a long, white outfit over a pair of blue pants and brown sandals. She stood up and shook my hand.

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"Have a seat and make yourself comfortable," she said. "How may I assist you?"

I sat down beside her and gave an account of what happened at the English as a Third Language course. When I had finished, she laughed.

"I don't mean any offense but after I had spoken to you I really didn't think you belonged in that course. It was quite surprising to me that your name was on the list," Amisu said.

She moved her seat closer to the computer on her office table.

"What's your student ID number?" she asked.

"I don't know it off head. Let me take a look at my ID. It's in my wallet," I said.

"Sure, take your time. There's no rush," Amisu said.

I took out my student ID card and read the number on the top left hand corner:

"R7258368," I said.

"Got it...thanks," she said, typing the letter and figures in her computer.

Amisu waited for a few minutes and then her screen pulled out some information.

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"Okay, so I see you're up to date with your tuition and room and board payments for this semester," she said, based on what showed up on the screen. "So now we've got to sign you up for some classes and take off English as a Third Language from your roster. You didn't declare a major. Are you still uncertain or do you now have an idea of what you'd like to study?" Amisu asked.

I thought for a minute.

"Intensive writing courses were among my favourites in secondary and high school," I said. "I loved to write essays, poems and analyze characters in books." Amisu nodded.

"That says quite a lot already. It means you're probably more inclined to be an English or Creative Writing Major."

"I'm not quite sure yet," I sighed. "I don't want to limit myself to creative writing or English courses. I would also like to get some experience writing articles. You know...news, feature and opinion articles and produce reports for radio and television."

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"You mean journalism," Amisu said. "Well, the good thing about Rodeoville's Journalism Program is that it encourages students to take elective courses in English or creative writing. It's very flexible. So would you like me to list journalism as your major?"

"Yes please, if that is possible," I responded.

"No problem at all."

Amisu typed. A few moments later, it pulled up some information on her computer screen.

"There we go. Now let's see what introductory journalism courses might still be open," she said.

We both took a look at what showed up on screen:

***JOURN251-An Introduction to the Mass Media*** *Tues/Thurs*  
*(8:00-8:45am Langley Hall, Room 132)-closed*

***JOURN251-An Introduction to the Mass Media*** *Mon/Wed*  
*(9:00-9:45am Langley Hall, Room 240)-open (3 seats*  
*left)*

***JOURN252-Writing for the Media*** *Fri (9:40-10:40am*  
*Belton Building, Room 17)-open (2 seats left)*

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"Lucky you," Amisu said. "Those courses are often filled up by the first two days of class. What we need to do is get you into the courses that are still open as soon as possible...especially the Writing for the Media course with only two seats left."

Amisu quickly typed up one of the course reference numbers.

"Great-I just got you into the Writing for the Media course," she remarked.

She typed up another course reference number.

"Perfect-got you into the Introduction to Mass Media course as well," she added.

"That's wonderful. Thank you so much," I said, with much relief.

"Hold on-we can't get excited just yet. We still have a problem to resolve," Amisu warned, but in a playful tone.

"What might that be?" I wondered.

"We need to add two more courses to your roster in order for you to be considered full time. At the moment you only have six credits. You need twelve

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credits to maintain your student status for immigration purposes, remember?"

"That's true. I almost forgot," I said.

Amisu sighed. She tapped her pen on her office desk as she struggled to think of what other courses I could add to my roster that could give me the required twelve credits.

"Ah! I have an idea. Could you pull open the drawer to your right and take out the fall semester course schedule for me, please?" she asked.

After I had done so she carefully looked through the booklet.

"I propose that you take two, core courses. You need to complete the University's core courses requirement before you graduate, anyway. So the earlier you start doing that the better it would be."

She turned the pages carefully.

"Hmmm...so let's see, it would probably make sense for you to take one science course and another course in the Arts and Humanities. Let me punch in the course reference numbers for these Philosophy and Math courses," Amisu continued.

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After she had typed, we both waited anxiously to see what would come up on her screen and whether or not there were still any seats available. The computer pulled up the information we were waiting for.

"Seems like we've got good and bad news," she said, pointing at the screen. "See? The computer shows I could sign you up for *Philosophy 011-The Human Personality*; however, for *Math 58-Intermediate Algebra*, you'll need to get special authorization from the teacher because the course is full."

"But if the course is full, shouldn't I just forget about it, then? What difference could the teacher make in this case?" I asked.

Amisu paused and thought for a moment to be able to provide me with an accurate response.

"Not necessarily. In your case you have a valid reason to ask for an exception. You need the course to get twelve credits and maintain your status," she clarified. "Hold on. I'm going to write you a note for Dr. Wilson, the teacher of that course. It would explain why he needs to help you get into the course. I'm also going to give you an 'add/drop course slip'

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that he'll sign when he authorizes you to take the course. As soon as he signs it, bring the slip back to us. We'll need to put it in your file as evidence that the course made up your twelfth credit."

"How are you so sure that the teacher in question will let me take the course?" I wondered.

Amisu smiled.

"Trust me, I've been at this University long enough to know what works and what doesn't."

She hand-wrote on an official white sheet of paper containing the University logo and her position. Afterward, she gave me one of the yellow add/drop slips on her desk and said:

"Go to Caldwell Hall immediately and ask to speak with Dr. Wilson. He's the Chair of the Math Department. You need to add this course to your roster as soon as possible. I'll take care of the Philosophy course, don't worry. Hurry up, go!"

I rushed out of her office and down the stairs with barely enough time to respond to Danielle, who



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interrupted her conversation with Veronica at the front desk to enquire on how my meeting went.

"Hey John, slow down!" she shouted. "You're getting too ahead of yourself."

"I have to go to Caldwell Hall. I will be back in a few minutes" I waved, dashing out.

"Okay don't get hit by a car or something. Look before you cross the street," she teased, laughing.

After asking a few students for directions I found my way to Caldwell Hall. Dr. Wilson's office was on the third floor, door 315. It was slightly open and when I looked I saw someone sitting on a desk with a lamp on it. He seemed to be reading but I couldn't see his face. I knocked.

"Dr. Wilson?" I asked.

"Yes-who is it?" said a voice from within.

"My name is John Malinke, I'm a new student. Can I please speak with you?"

"Sure. Come on in," Dr. Wilson said.

When I opened the door, it revealed an African-American male probably in his mid-fifties with a

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mixture of black and grey hair. He wore a dark suit with a white shirt and red tie.

"Have a seat," he said with a smile.

I sat down on the seat facing him. Before I came knocking, Dr. Wilson seemed to have been focused on reading from a huge textbook on his desk. I assumed he might have been preparing for one of his next lessons. It was a spacious office with nice looking furniture and several shelves stacked up with books. Its walls were made out of a combination of stone and granite.

"Go ahead, young man. I'm all ears."

"Sorry to interrupt you Dr. Wilson. I was wondering if you could please let me sign up for your course."

"It's a bit too late now. We've already reached the maximum number of students for the fall semester. Why don't you take it in the spring?" he proposed.

"I would if it was possible but I desperately need your help. I'm not a U.S. citizen and I need to take twelve credits each semester to be considered full time for immigration purposes. At the moment I have six credits pending another course that is about to

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be added to my roster. I just need another three-credit course to have twelve."

Dr. Wilson was silent. He put his hand on his chin for a moment.

"Hmmm...you're the first person who's come to my office with such a complicated problem. Is this your first semester?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And you couldn't find another course to fill the gap?"

"No because much of what was left were courses for students in their junior and senior years."

Dr. Wilson nodded as a sign that he understood the complexity of my circumstance.

"Well, I generally don't do this. Do you have the slip?" he asked.

"I do sir, thank you very much," I said, handing it to him.

He wrote the course reference number for *Math 58-Intermediate Algebra* and the date, signed it and returned it to me. I thanked him again.

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"Well, you'd better be good in Math," he said.

"Otherwise we'd both be wasting our time."

"It worked, right?" was the question Amisu asked me as soon as I returned to her office. "Excellent. I knew it would. More good news: I was able to fit that Philosophy course into your schedule. Congratulations. Your worries are now over. May I have the slip, please?"

Amisu typed the course reference number for the Math 58 course on her computer and added it to my roster. Moments later, she printed out my course schedule and gave me a copy.

"Don't hesitate to stop by or call me if you have any questions. I accept walk-ins on Mondays and Tuesdays from 2-3pm. Here...let me give you my card."

After she had done so, she shook my hand and wished me success in my courses. On my way back to Rodeoville Towers I couldn't help thinking about what a positive and memorable impression Amisu had left on me. I felt she was by far the most approachable and professional of each of the staff at the Office of

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International Services. They all seemed to have a genuine willingness to help but in Amisu's case I saw a kindness and dedication to go out of the way to assist non-domestic students and make them feel at home.

Based on my roster, I had class just three days a week: Monday, Wednesday and Friday morning. This implied that I could use Tuesday and Thursday to study, work on projects and assignments and take care of my other needs. With my roster now settled, the next challenge was getting a job on campus. I should have asked Amisu but I was so preoccupied with maintaining my F-1 student immigration status that I had completely forgotten in the process. I had already missed my first Monday class and even though I was going to be free the next day (Tuesday) I felt like taking a break from the Office of International Services. I decided that I would worry about that on Thursday.

When I returned to Room 702, D. equally had some good news for me. He was able to make a duplicate of our key and he gave it to me as soon as I walked in.

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"School's started, man. I ain't got patience to share keys," he said.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### My Real First Day of Class

On Wednesday morning of the first week of class I ate breakfast with Valence and Lane in the cafeteria. It was about 8:30 a.m. and I felt mentally prepared for my *Introduction to the Mass Media* course which was scheduled to take place from 9:00-9:45 a.m.

"I have thirty minutes left to go to class. I should be getting ready to go to Langley Hall soon," I said.

"Dude, chill...this is just the first week. What's the rush? It won't hurt to be a few minutes late," Valence replied.

"It's not my habit to show up late for class. Not unless there was a specific reason that might have caused me to do so," I explained.

Valence drank from a plastic bottle of raisin juice.

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"I'm impressed. There's got to be a lot of discipline in the educational system where you came from," he supposed.

"You guessed right. Throughout my secondary and high school days, students had to adhere to a very strict dress code. Our uniforms had to be clean and we had to sew our first and last names on our shirt pockets so that school officials who didn't know us personally could easily identify us. We all could only wear black shoes and boys were only permitted to wear black socks and black shoes. If you wore a T-shirt underneath your uniform shirt, it had to be white in colour. Failure to respect any of those rules led to immediate punishment either from members of the elected student government or from any of our numerous disciplinary officials. We had to show up at school by 7:30 a.m. five days a week. Late coming wasn't tolerated. Anyone who came late found that the school gate was closed and when you were allowed to get in, you were first of all punished before you could go to class. That alone was sufficient enough

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to encourage you to show up on time the next day," I reminisced with much nostalgia.

Valence nodded again.

"What kind of punishment do you mean?" he asked.

"Punishment varied from sweeping the wide, front porches of classrooms or weeding and cutting grass on the school yard. When the grass was high and thick it was particularly strenuous. Unlike you guys who are more used to lawn mowers, we used machetes, and many of them were blunt and often rusty. At the end most of us ended up with blisters on our palms. But more often, Saturdays were reserved for punishing students who had committed various offenses. This prevented them from being taken out of class on weekdays when their peers were learning. In the end I think it was good training because it taught me to be respectful to those in authority and to my elders," I elaborated.

Valence finished his drink.

"Dude I'm quite impressed. Enforcing those rules at a middle or high school in the States would be tough. We're so used to our freedom."



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"What time do you have?" I asked him.

"8:45. I've got a nine o'clock class too, so I guess we'd better get going," he said, standing up to empty his tray.

I got up from my seat as well. Lane remained seated at the table eating an omelet.

"How many credits are you taking?" he asked me.

"Twelve," I said.

"You're nuts! Eighteen credits? You must be joking!"

Lane exclaimed.

I thought about speaking louder and explaining to him that he heard wrong but Valence interrupted me before I could respond:

"Don't waste your time, buddy. If that's what you're trying to get at, you might as well be here all day going back and forth with him like you'd do in a game of ping pong."

It was about 8:56 a.m. when I arrived at Room 240 of Langley Hall. The class was packed full and there was just one empty seat all the way in the back.

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"Excuse me-is this *An Introduction to the Mass Media*?" I asked a student seated on one of the front desks.

She nodded. I walked all the way to the back of the third row to occupy the only available seat left. On the last seat by the wall beside me, a male student was eating a cheese steak and onion rings. He dipped his onion rings into a plastic container of ketchup and munched hard. I was amazed anyone would eat a cheese steak so early in the morning, let alone in a classroom, which I thought was quite disrespectful to whoever would be teaching.

Moments later, a man wearing a navy blue dress shirt, a black tie and a pair of brown pants walked in holding a briefcase. His frontal hair looked abnormally thicker and fuller than the hair on the rest of his hair, leaving me wondering if it was natural.

"Morning gang," he said.

In my home country, students stood up as a sign of respect when a teacher walked into the classroom and they remained standing until he or she told them to

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sit down. For that reason I stood up, thinking it was common practice at Rodeoville University as well. The teacher didn't notice me at first, for he seemed to be concentrated on a piece of paper that he had placed on his table up front. However, I was getting a lot of stares from my classmates who probably wondered what I was standing up for. Seconds later, the teacher looked up and saw me standing.

"Excuse me gentleman, is there a problem? May I help you with something?"

"Not at all, I stood up because that's what we do in my country as a sign of respect when the teacher walks in," I explained.

There was quite a bit of laughter in the class and the teacher himself appeared to be taken by surprise.

"Wow, that's very nice of you. It's all right, you may sit down. It's not necessary to do that here. But that's very polite of you...thanks a lot," the teacher said.

He quickly went through his attendance sheet and read the names of respective students.

"Present," each of them said, raising their hands.

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"And is there a John Malinke in this course as well?"  
the teacher asked.

I raised my hand.

"Oh! The gentleman who stood up! Welcome again. Your name's the last on my sheet, so I take it you just added this course to your roster," he remarked. "I hope you're here to stay. If you're not sure you want to be in this class or if you think there's a chance you might drop the course, please leave now," the teacher continued.

"No I'm confident that I am here to stay," I answered.

"Very well then," he nodded.

I raised my hand.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Excuse me but this student is eating in the classroom," I said, pointing at the guy sitting beside the wall on my left.

The teacher seemed embarrassed. I seemed to have ventured into a territory that made him uncomfortable. I couldn't understand why he would choose to ignore or be indifferent to what I

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perceived to be an unbelievable display of rudeness. The student stopped chewing and turned to me with a menacing look.

"Uhm...uhm...gentleman I can't let you keep on eating," the teacher said in a trembling, hesitant voice. He cleared his throat: "You either uhm... wrap up your sandwich and eat it later or walk out of class and continue eating."

The student wrapped up his sandwich and put it inside his bag. He turned to me again with a frown on his face.

"For those of you who've just joined the course, let me tell you a little bit about myself," the teacher said.

"Oh boy...here we go again," sighed a male student sitting in front of me.

"I'm Dr. Ian Smith. I graduated from Red Lion State University in 1982 with a Bachelor's degree in Journalism. In 1986 I earned a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Clarinet Owl Cove College. In 1988 I returned to Red Lion State and obtained a PhD in Education. Throughout my undergrad and grad years

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I never went below a 3.9 GPA. Also, I was the leader of countless clubs and organizations and was often sought after by faculty for my ideas and contributions," he continued.

"I can't believe this guy's repeating the same thing he said to us two days ago," a student sitting a few seats to my left remarked in a low tone to his counterpart beside him. It's all about 'me, me, and me.' I think I'm gonna drop this course and take it next semester with someone else."

At that point I remembered something I had read on one of the restroom walls a few weeks before the fall semester had begun:

*Dr. Smith, shark teeth-an idiot with a PhD.*

Considering how students reacted when he continued highlighting his list of achievements; sighs, whispers, rolling of eyes and shaking of heads—I was certain this was the Dr. Smith in question. However I wondered why the note on the wall referred to him as having shark teeth, for there was nothing that seemed unusual about them. Perhaps the description 'shark

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teeth' was a way of saying he talked too much about himself or was too full of himself, I wondered.

"Does everyone have a copy of the syllabus?" Dr. Smith asked. "Raise your hand if you don't."

I raised my hand and he walked up to my seat and gave me a copy.

"So gang, here's what I'd like you to do for Monday's class. Read all of chapter one and answer the ten questions in the back. In the meantime, I want each of you to take out a sheet of paper and write down what you expect to learn from this course. Give a brief summary of your academic background-for instance, if you're an arts or science major-and don't forget to write down your phone number and e-mail address if you have one."

The class grumbled. Everyone tore off a sheet of paper from his or her notebook.

"I'm not gonna do that," the student at the desk in front of me said to his peer sitting beside him. "He's spent the whole time talking about him and look what he reserves for us with just a few minutes

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left," he said. "I'm out. I'll see you at the coffee shop."

The student got up from his seat, walked past the teacher and left the class. That was the most striking manifestation of liberty that I had witnessed on campus so far. Dr. Smith seemed to recognize and respect the student's right to walk out of his class because there was absolutely no opposition on his part. In my country a student couldn't walk out of class unless he or she was sent out by the teacher and we didn't have the luxury of dropping classes and replacing them with others as we wished.

When we finished writing what we expected out of the course, each of us handed our sheets of paper to the teacher and left the class. After I had done so and was walking down the hallway, I heard someone say behind me:

"Yo! Hold on right there, fella."

I turned around. It was the student who had been eating in the classroom.



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"I don't know where the hell you're from or who you think you are but you better mind your damn business, you got that?" he said. "This is a free country. I can eat or drink in class if I want to...so stay the hell out of my business because I ain't gonna repeat myself," he warned.

"What you did was very disrespectful. I don't think it is right for you to be eating a sandwich in class while the teacher is teaching," I emphasized. "This has nothing to do with freedom. It is basic courtesy."

"Once again, mind your own business. If I stop eating in class it's gonna be because the teacher said so, not because you complained about it. I've got no lessons to learn from you. As I said, stay out of my business."

The manner in which he talked to me caused quite a scene and didn't leave anyone walking by indifferent. I decided not to insist, conscious of the fact that a simple verbal disagreement of that nature could degenerate into unnecessary violence. I kept my cool and walked away.

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I sat at the TV lounge in the student activities center for a few minutes before my next class that was scheduled to begin from 10:30-11:30 a.m. I joined the group of students watching TV while others in the game room next door played pool and various electronic games. The game room was an interesting discovery to me and considering the variety of activities it offered, I felt it was a good place to spend a couple of minutes in between classes.

At 10:16, I left the student activities center and made my way toward Caldwell Hall, where I was scheduled to attend Dr. Wilson's *Math 58* course in Room 109. When I got to class, there were only about five students inside. By 10:24, about six other students came in separately, bringing the total number of students to eleven. At exactly 10:30, Dr. Wilson showed up with a broad smile on his face.

"Hullo! Everyone here for *Math 58*?" he asked in a friendly and playful tone.

The majority of them nodded as a sign of affirmation.

"Very good then," he continued. "So are there any Math haters in the room?"

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That was a tricky question. Honesty would have required me to raise my hand but I didn't want to draw the wrong kind of attention to myself and be put on the spot for the rest of the course. Hence, like everyone else, I chose to play it safe by not raising my hand although I was certain there had to be a few people who were equally taking the course to fulfill certain core requirements and not necessarily out of love.

Dr. Wilson wrote a series of equations on the board and we copied them into our notebooks.

"I need someone to walk up to the board and write the answer to the first equation. If  $X=26+17$ , then  $X=?$ "

I was afraid Dr. Wilson might ask me to walk up to the board if no one offered to do so. I silently hoped that he wouldn't remember my name. My last name was probably not easy for him to remember but 'John' was a relatively common name. Consequently, I bent my head down and hid my face behind the back of the student sitting in front of me. Everyone kept silent and stared at the board.

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"All right, if no one wants to come forward I'll pick someone," Dr. Wilson said. "Let's see..."

My heart began beating fast. Dr. Wilson stretched his neck and looked around from left to right. I bent my head even lower, continuing to hide behind the student sitting in front of me so that I wouldn't easily be seen. Dr. Wilson walked up to the middle row where I was sitting and stretched his neck once again. He seemed to have noticed me hiding. Quite predictably, he walked up to me and gave me a piece of chalk. With much reluctance, I got up from my seat and went up to the board. I paused and looked carefully at the equation. I wrote down my answer:  $X=20$ .

"Wrong. Don't you know basic Math?" Dr. Wilson said, crossing off the answer.

Some students laughed and I returned to my seat a bit embarrassed by this rather unfortunate and predictable outcome.

"Someone else," he said.

As student sitting two rows away from me raised her hand.

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"Come up," Dr. Wilson said.

She was dark in complexion with short natural hair and lips that conveyed a degree of sensuality that I could not sufficiently describe in words. She had on an orange dress with a flowery design that fit so smoothly over her curvy figure. I couldn't stop looking at her when she walked up to the board. In many ways she reminded me of Emelda, but for the fact that she was taller, darker and much more full-figured.

On the board, she wrote:  $X=43$ .

"Very good! Correct!" Dr. Wilson exclaimed.

My eyes met with hers when she walked back to her seat. I smiled at her and she did the same, although we may not have been doing so for the same reasons. After that, the teacher randomly gave pieces of chalk to students and asked them to walk up to the board to solve some additional equations.

"As from now on, participation will count significantly toward your final grade. I won't be pleading with you guys to walk up to the board or answer questions. It's up to you to choose to

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participate or not. I'm available during office hours if you have any questions. If you need a copy of the syllabus see me after class," he said.

When class was over, I walked up to Dr. Wilson and got a copy of the syllabus.

"You'll need to practice solving a lot of these equations," he said. "By the end of next week we'll move up a level higher."

"I'll do the best I can," I responded.

In the hallway I caught up with the student who had walked up to the board and solved the equation correctly after me. She was holding two notebooks in her right hand.

" $X=43$ ," I said, with a smile.

She turned around.

"Oops! You scared me. Hi. How are you?"

"Well, I honestly would have felt better if you gave a wrong answer to the equation."

"You're crazy," she said, laughing. "I'm Mpule and you are..."

"John Malinke."

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We shook hands.

"If you don't mind me making this observation, the name Mpule doesn't sound exactly American."

"You're right," she nodded. "My parents are originally from South Africa. I was born in Philly but I grew up in Cape Town. We moved back to the United States just before I started high school."

That explained a lot because when she spoke I felt some sort of Tanzanian or South African element in her voice and even if she hadn't told me her name I probably would have asked her where she was from. And yes, I liked the way she sounded.

"And you, where are you from?" Mpule asked.

"I am from New York," I joked.

"Come on. New Yorkers don't sound like you do. I can tell you're not from the States."

"Okay...take a guess," I said.

"Uhhh... I'm not exactly sure but I'll say somewhere in the Caribbean or Central Africa?"

I nodded.

"You guessed well. I am from the Republic of Boluaké in Central Africa."

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"Nice to meet you again, John. I hope you like it here."

"I think it is an interesting country, although I think I still have a lot to discover and explore. It is a tremendous pleasure for me to get to meet one of the ladies of the United States on a more personal level," I said.

"I feel the same," she answered.

Mpule leaned on the wall and faced me with her arms folded, firmly clutching her notebooks. We were now standing beside the double doors that led in and out of the hallway. Judging from her posture, I concluded it was an indirect manner of saying: *Hey...I've got to get going, so if you've got something else to say, you better do that because I don't have all day.*

For a few seconds, we looked at each other without saying a word while people walked in and out through the double doors. I broke the silence:

"Well Mpule, I really enjoyed our conversation and I think you are very interesting and attractive. You have some of the most sensual-looking lips I have



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ever seen and I like your short, natural hair," I said.

"Oh, stop it. I've heard that so many times. I bet I'm not the only woman you've said that to. Thanks for the compliment, anyway."

"Why would you say that? I am always very sincere with my compliments. When I saw you walking up to the board I couldn't help saying to myself in my native language, '*Zumbala, Zumbala, Zumbala*'."

Mpule laughed.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" she asked.

"It means: Sexy, sexy, and sexy; I want you baby, baby."

We both laughed.

"So...can we go for lunch or coffee sometime?"

"I would love to, John. You seem like a very interesting guy," Mpule said.

She sighed.

"But I have a boyfriend and he gets very jealous," she continued.

Mpule paused. She looked down at the floor.

"And violent too," she added.

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She paused again. She looked at her watch.

"Matter of fact John, you might want to start leaving. He's supposed to be meeting me here in a few minutes. I'll see you in class next time."

Her last words pierced deeply into the innermost parts of my soul. She seemed deeply troubled when she talked about her boyfriend. I wondered who this person could have been who made her instantly become so nervous, worried and afraid.

"I understand, Mpule. It was really nice talking to you. Maybe you could teach me a thing or two in Math. I can barely add or subtract."

"Get outta here!" she laughed.

The double doors opened. Mpule and I looked in their direction. A man emerged from them. She walked toward him and spread out her arms. They hugged each other. By all accounts, this was the person she was waiting for. Was she hugging him out of genuine affection or was it an attempt to prevent a possible outburst of violence on his part after seeing her hanging around another man? I wondered. She pulled his arm, brought him to where I was standing and said:

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"John, I'd like you to meet my boyfriend."

It was D., my roommate.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### **The Black Male, Continental Africans and African- Americans**

The following day was a Thursday. I didn't have class, so I used much of it to figure out the steps I needed to take to get a job on campus and obtain some information about possible places where I could drop off some applications. I also needed to open up a bank account based on Dad's suggestion. I didn't get a chance to speak with D. after he ran into me with Mpule. I had expected him to return to our dorm room and ask me a whole bunch of questions about how I met her and so on. However, he didn't show up until very late the previous night when I was already asleep. I heard him unlock the door, gently turn the knob and lock the door again.

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Moments later, he went to bed as well. I think I sort of heard him taking a shower the next morning but he left our room very early, which wasn't a regular habit of his. I would have preferred him to ask me any questions that may have been on his mind. That could have helped erase any unnecessary suspicions he might have had. I didn't know what he was thinking and the circumstance had created a sense of silent tension between us.

"Before you try to get a job the first thing you'll need to do is get a social security number. That's what identifies you," Veronica said to me when I made a stop at the Office of International Services later that morning. "You're gonna have to go to the Social Security Office on 7<sup>th</sup> and Arch Street and fill out an application form. You'll definitely need to get a social security number to get in our payroll system," she added.

"I'm also trying to open up a bank account. Do I need to have a social security number before I try to do that?" I asked.

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"I would advise you to hold off on that until you get a social security number," she said.

So I caught the bus from City Avenue and while on it, I asked the passengers sitting in front of me how I could get to the Social Security Office. They told me I could actually get off on Market Street, connect to Arch Street and walk just a few blocks to my intended destination. Getting from Market Street to Arch Street wasn't complicated at all. Just a couple moments later, there I was facing the tall Social Security Office building. I signed in at the lobby and informed the guard at the desk that I had come to apply for a social security number.

"Fifth floor," he said. "ID, please."

I gave him my student ID in exchange for a visitor's card. The elevator doors opened to let a few people out. I walked in and came face to face with an elderly white lady.

"Good Morning," I said, upon entering.

She didn't respond but as soon as I walked in she held firmly onto her handbag and seemed to purposefully avoid making eye contact with me. At

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some point she dropped her pen and I tried to stoop down and pick it up for her but she grabbed it instantly, as if overcome by an intense degree of panic. Her attitude deeply hurt and amazed me. During the remainder of the ride, she kept looking up at the ceiling and occasionally at me, but not directly. She did so through the corner of her eye in a manner which seemed to convey a mixture of fear and contempt. Despite feeling offended I kept my cool but silently wished someone else could walk into the elevator and help diffuse the tension. Unfortunately, no one did. And what if someone did walk in and it turned out to be another black male? How would she have reacted? Based on her attitude there were three possibilities: she would have either turned into a massive block of ice (if that were an option), caught a heart attack or ran out of the elevator. When she got off at the fourth floor I felt so relieved. It was obvious that despite not knowing me personally or having any idea about my character, she had a negative impression of me on the sole basis of my skin colour. If that was part of the black male

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experience in America, then I just may have had a foretaste.

As soon as the elevator doors opened to let me out, the receptionist on the fifth floor welcomed me with a warm smile:

"Good morning sir, how may I help you today?"

After I told her that I had come to apply for a social security number, she gave me a form to fill out and asked me to take a seat.

"Just hold on for a little bit while one of our staff reviews your application," she said, retreating into the back after I had finished filling out the form.

Moments later, a woman emerged from one of the offices behind.

"Mr. Malinke? I'm Linda Bray," she said, shaking my hand when I stood up to greet her.

She sat facing me and looked at my application.

"We have received your application. What I'd like to know is, are you a U.S. citizen?" she asked.

"No, I'm not," I answered.

"May I ask you what your status is?"

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"I'm a student. I'm from the Republic of Boluaké, Central Africa."

"I noticed that on your form. Well, I'm sorry to tell you that we can't issue social security numbers to non-U.S. citizens," she said.

"But I was told that I can't get a job on campus without a social security number," I explained, feeling very frustrated by her response.

"There's unfortunately not much I can do at my level. You'll need a letter from your school explaining why you need one. I feel for you but at the moment there's honestly not much I can do," Linda Bray said.

I left the Social Security Office disappointed and discouraged. Immigration rules forbade me from working off campus without authorization. Without a social security number, I wouldn't be able to get a job within my University's premises either. Furthermore, working on campus was the only available option to me as an international student seeking to earn an income. I went back to see Amisu in her office as soon as I returned to Rodeoville



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University. She picked up her phone and called Ed Philips, the Director of Undergraduate Admissions.

"Mr. Philips? This is Amisu. Sorry to bother you but our Office urgently needs your assistance."

She paused, so I imagined the Director must have been asking her a question or two.

"Yes sir," she nodded. "One of our new international students desperately needs a job but the Social Security Office says he can't get a social security number."

Amisu paused again and seemed to be listening carefully.

"I'll certainly send him to you right away. Thank you so much," she continued, and hung up.

I rushed to Belforth Hall, a massive castle-shaped building with sparkling glass windows and spotless white walls. It was well fenced and out on its surrounding lawn was a sign post that read: OFFICES OF THE PRESIDENT, VICE PRESIDENT OF STUDENT AFFAIRS AND THE DIRECTORS OF GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSIONS. A motorist drove past me and honked when

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she got to the tall, black gate that led into the building. A security guard emerged from a side gate and walked up to her. The lady lowered her window and showed him a piece of ID. He nodded and then asked:

"Do you have an appointment?"

"I do. I'm actually fifteen minutes late. Could you let me in please?"

"Hold on. Let me check in the register real quick."

The lady sighed. I stood by the side gate and watched.

"I'm sorry ma'am, but I couldn't find your name," the guard said upon his return.

She blushed.

"Look...is there a number you can call to verify? This is urgent. I do have an appointment," she persisted, running out of patience.

"Hey, hey-now hold on there ma'am, I'm just doing my job. Give me a minute," the guard responded defensively.

On his way back to the side gate, he looked at me.

"How may I help you?" he asked.

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"The director of undergraduate admissions is expecting me," I said.

"Be right with ya. Give me a second," he said.

The woman in the car turned off her engine, got out and lit a cigarette. She leaned on the driver's side door and shook her head, frowning. At the gate, the guard dialed a number and within seconds he was talking to someone on the phone and giving out some information based on the lady's ID which he had been holding in his hand.

"Okay...sure, sure. I'll do that right away," I heard him say.

From within the side gate, he pressed a button and the main gate began opening automatically.

"Are you gonna give me back my ID or what?" the woman asked, turning on the engine once more.

The guard rushed out of the side gate.

"There you go. So sorry about that," he said, handing it to her.

She shook her head, sighed and drove in.

"What's your name, sir?" the guard asked me.

"John Malinke."

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"Yeah I remember hearing a name like that. Someone from the undergrad office said you'd be stopping by to see Mr. Philips. May I have your ID?"

The guard wrote down my name, student ID number and time of entry within his register. After that he ran a wand down my front and back pockets and also down my pants prior to letting me get into the building. On my way, I walked through a vast garden with beautiful red flowers and well-trimmed hedges. I also walked past a gated parking lot with several rows of cars that in my opinion were probably more affordable to higher level University administrators. I turned the knob to open the main door of the tall white building, but it was locked. I rang the bell.

"Who is it?" asked a male voice from an outdoor intercom on the wall.

"I have an appointment with the director of undergraduate admissions," I answered, slightly shaken by the suddenness of his intervention. "My name is John Malinke," I added.

There was silence. A few moments later someone buzzed me in. I turned the knob and this time around the

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door opened. I found myself in a spacious waiting room with numerous leather couches. Portraits of former Rodeoville University administrators (presidents, vice presidents, directors and assistant directors) and the dates of their terms in office hung up on the wall. Seeing no one to talk to or a door to knock on, I took a seat on one of the leather couches and waited for a few minutes.

"Sir...could you come with me, please? Mr. Philips will receive you now," said a well-dressed woman who emerged from a separate section of the waiting room area.

She led me to an office where a smiling, middle-aged white male sitting at a desk stood up to shake my hand when I walked in. A pile of documents was neatly stacked up on his desk. A suit jacket hung on his chair and the walls had several of his family photos as well as some individual portraits.

"Ed Philips here...I'm glad to meet you Mr. Malinke," he said, firmly shaking my hand. "Have a seat. So how's your Intensive English Language course coming along?" he asked.

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The question reminded me that it was him who signed the letter I had received in my home country stating that the University was willing to help me attain the required level of proficiency in English. I didn't want to get into that long story about how nervous I was when I took the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and as a result forgot to answer a whole bunch of questions behind my sheet of paper.

"The course was okay but I wasn't in that class for long. The teacher felt my English was good enough and that I could sign up for regular courses like other students," I answered.

"Well that's very good because the admissions committee saw much promise in you beyond your TOEFL scores. I had strong reservations that those scores reflected your true potential," Mr. Philips said.

I couldn't help admiring how well decorated his office was. He also had a microwave, a refrigerator, a coffee maker and a semi-living room with a flat screen TV.

"Just give me a minute," Mr. Philips said, typing fast on his laptop computer.

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Moments later, he printed out a document and gave it to me saying:

"Here's what you're gonna do. You're gonna return to the Social Security Office with this letter. Hopefully this would make a difference. I want you to read it first. If you're comfortable with what it says, we can proceed. Understood?"

I nodded. It read:

**To Whom It May Concern:**

*I am writing on behalf of John Malinke, an international student from the Republic of Boluaké, Central Africa. Mr. Malinke is in his first semester at Rodeoville University and plans to major in journalism. To meet up with his financial needs, the student in question is actively seeking on-campus employment at this time and cannot accept any potential offer without a social security number and card. I would like to emphasize that as an international student, Mr. Malinke is forbidden from accepting any form of off-campus employment without authorization from the National Immigration Service.*

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*He is therefore strictly restricted to working on campus, thereby adding a sense of urgency to his current condition.*

*In that respect and in an effort to maintain the positive relationship between Rodeoville University and its international student population, I would appreciate any prompt assistance that could be provided in this case.*

*Sincerely,*

**Ed Philips**

**Director of Undergraduate Admissions**

**Rodeoville University**

I was deeply touched by Mr. Philips's letter. It was straight to the point and demonstrated an excellent knowledge of one of the primary challenges continually faced by international students. It was obvious that he probably had intervened in a similar case at some point in time.

"So what's your take on this?" he asked.



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"Mr. Philips I lack the words to tell you how grateful I am for what you have written. It reflects exactly what I am experiencing right now," I replied.

"It's my pleasure. I'm just doing my job. It's our responsibility to ensure that our international students feel as comfortable as possible. And you can call me Ed, by the way."

I nodded, although I didn't see myself ever calling such a senior administrator by his first name. In my opinion that would have been disrespectful and unlike the values with which I was raised. I could only have done so if he insisted on that point. Mr. Philips printed out another copy of the letter. He signed it, stamped it, folded it neatly, put it in an envelope addressed to the Social Security Office and sealed it.

"Good luck," he said, handing it to me. "Everything's gonna be just fine. I'm talking based on experience."

He walked me to the door, shook my hand and gave me his business card.

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"Don't hesitate to call if you ever have a problem that you think my office could resolve," Mr. Philips added, shaking my hand.

He was being nice but I knew it wouldn't be polite for me to bypass the Office of International Services and contact him directly if it were a case that mainly concerned students from foreign countries or that could be handled by an administrator of a slightly lower rank than him. I almost got lost in the waiting room area but the lady who led me to his office was kind enough to walk me to the door.

Getting into Belforth Hall was quite an experience. It stood apart in a world of its own like an isolated island. Upon leaving the building through the side gate reserved for non-motorists, I wished that I wouldn't have to return there again anytime soon.

When I returned to our dorm room, D. was talking to someone on the phone.

"Ain't that right? I hear you. You gotta do your thing babe," he said.

He looked at me and winked.

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"Oh by the way, John says hello," he continued.

I was shocked and immediately wondered who he was talking to. Was he perhaps talking to Mpule and taking advantage of my absence to present me in an unfavourable light? I took a seat on my bed.

"Yeah he's right here. What? You want to talk to him?" D. asked.

What could I possibly say to Mpule in front of D.? Were both of them trying to make me look like a fool or what?

"Sure-just hold on. Let me pass the phone to him real quick."

D. gave me the phone.

"Who is it?" I asked, in a very low tone.

"It's Gogo," he said.

I shook my head and gave him back the phone.

"Tell her I'm in the middle of something and can't talk to her right now," I whispered.

D. looked at me as if I was crazy. He tried to insist but I stuck to my decision.

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"Uhm...the dude feels kinda constipated, so he can't talk to you right now. He'll call you later, though. Is that all right?"

I couldn't believe what D. said. I just looked at him with my eyes and mouth open in shock and amazement. I wasn't sure what Gogo said in response to what he told her but immediately afterward I heard him laughing aloud before he hung up. After he had done that, he took a seat on the sofa.

"D. what's wrong with you? Why didn't you think of something else to say instead of making up a story that the reason I can't talk to her is because I feel constipated? Why didn't you just hold on to what I said to you?" I asked him.

"You're nuts, man. A lady as irresistible, sexy and enticing as Gogo wants to talk to you and you say no because you're in the middle of something? Come on! You better call her, though. I gave you her number, right?"

"You did but if I do call her it would just be for courtesy sake. I honestly doubt that I will, anyway."

"There you go again," D. said, sighing.

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D. was silent as he flipped through a number of cable channels with his remote. He settled on one of the local news channels and moments later, I noticed his facial expression gradually transformed from light hearted to more serious. I got the sense there was something he wanted to say to me. He took a slight deep breath and without looking at me, said:

"I see you're making new friends. Adjusting pretty well, huh?"

I immediately got a sense of the direction in which he was trying to steer our conversation but I decided to play along and act as if I didn't have a clue where it was leading to.

"I'm not quite sure what you are trying to get at," I replied.

"I'm saying you seem to be making new friends quite fast," he repeated.

"You think so? Well, other than you, Valence, Lane and to some degree Markel," I don't think there's anyone else whom I could consider as a friend.

D. was silent for a moment. Then turning to me, he asked:

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"What about Mpule? Are you friends with her?"

That was the name I had been expecting him to mention to me all this while.

"I don't know her well at all. We had a brief conversation once but that was it. She's in my Math class."

He nodded.

"She's my girl," he said.

"I know...she told me that. And she said it in front of you and me."

There was silence once again.

"So what's your impression of her?" D. asked moments later.

I was beginning to get tired of the constant questions.

"As I said, I really don't know her very well. However, based on what I've seen so far, I think she's a friendly person."

"That's nice. I think so too," he said.

At that point I felt as if the conversation had lingered on enough. I decided to express my concerns

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to D. bluntly so as to put an end to all of the unnecessary playing with words.

"Wait a minute, D. I hope you don't think I intend to ask your girlfriend out, do you?"

"Hell no, dawg! What made you think that?" he asked, laughing. "You won't wanna do that anyway, 'cause in America that would get you into some serious trouble. Never get too close to another man's woman. Gotta keep the friendship on a strictly platonic basis, get what I'm saying?"

"I sure do," I replied.

How relieved I felt that D. and I finally had that much dreaded discussion about Mpule. It had potential to be a lot tenser than I thought. At last there was a sense of closure. D. kept flipping through the channels and settled on one that seemed to have caught his attention. A reporter with a British accent seemed to be covering an international event. That was the first time I had seen D. appear so interested in what was happening in some other part of the world. From where I was seated, I got the sense that the unfolding event was taking place in an

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African country. For that reason and to satisfy my curiosity, I took a seat next to D. on the couch and watched attentively.

"In addition to the acts of vandalism and terrorism being perpetrated by rebel forces, the inhabitants of this region are desperate and hopeless. This village is practically desolate as a majority of its population continues to migrate in search of better living conditions," the reporter said.

I watched the reporter use his microphone to attempt interviewing a man who by all accounts didn't want to be bothered. He sat there with his mouth wide open with a fly on his eye and on his lower lip. His hair looked as if it had neither been washed nor combed in several months. After that the producers cut to pictures of some miserable-looking children. They seemed very malnourished, frail and skeletal in terms of physical build. Yet, each of them had big stomachs. I watched the reporter make a stop at one hut after the other to highlight the inhabitants' woes. To make a point about their living conditions, the camera zoomed in on the huge piles of refuse that



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surrounded the huts in which the people lived and the flies and bugs that hovered around them.

"Reporting from Africa," I'm Terry J. Daniels, the journalist said, at the end of his presentation.

D. seemed quite touched by the report but for some reason dared not look at me in the eye nor say a word.

"D. do you mind if I ask you a question?" I said.

"Not at all, cuz. Go ahead."

"Are these the sort of pictures you often see when there are reports on Africa?"

D. sighed.

"It's a whole damn long and complicated story, man. But yeah...that's all we see. If it ain't war, it's famine; if it ain't that, it's HIV/AIDS and all kinds of horrible diseases. I mean, shoot! You name it-anything negative. That's why folks like Valence find it so hard to believe y'all got cities in Africa."

I was touched by D.'s frankness. The only other time I had heard him speak so passionately about a subject was on that night when we got pulled over by the

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police and he talked about the black male's unofficial code of conduct under those circumstances.

"And D. you probably didn't make a big deal out of this but the journalist didn't even bother mentioning what country in Africa he was reporting from. At the end of his report, he said, 'reporting from Africa, I'm Terry Daniels.' Africa is a continent with about 47 different countries but a lot of people here seem to think of it as one very big country. What the reporter did was wrong because his audience would assume what they saw was reflective of the entire African continent," I remarked.

"There you go dawg, you said it all," D. concurred.

"So tell me, would you like to visit Africa if you had an opportunity to do so?" I asked him.

"Why not? I sure would. I probably can't afford the cost of a round trip ticket to do that right now but I'd love to check it out if I could. I'm sure a lot of African-Americans feel the same way," he answered.

The phone rang.

"Yeah, what's up?" D. asked as he picked it up.

He nodded and then hung up.

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"Got a call from the lobby-sorry I've got to cut our discussion short. Mpule's downstairs. She and I gonna step out for a bit. Here-you can have the remote," he said, handing it to me.

There was a quick knock on the door. Mpule opened it and walked in. She had on a yellow top with black pants. Mpule and D. hugged each other.

"Damn, you look hot..." D. said.

"Appreciate the compliment," Mpule responded, with a nod.

She came up to me and shook my hand:

"Hi, John! What have you been up to? Getting ready for Math class?" she joked.

"Not at all. I actually can't wait for it to be over," I said.

"Oh really? Wow. You've only been in that class for a day. So are you coming with us or what?"

"Maybe some other time. I had a really busy day and I think I'll just stay in the room and watch TV."

D. wrapped his arm around her shoulder and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"All right, see you later," she said.

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"Have a good time," I responded.

"You've got your keys, right?" D. asked me on their way out.

"I do."

I didn't feel comfortable joining D. and Mpule. It wouldn't have been easy to sit with them at a restaurant or dinner table while they physically demonstrated their affection for each other. I was also surprised to hear Mpule propose that to me. But then again, perhaps she did so out of a genuine concern that I was going to be left alone in our dorm room. She probably meant well, I thought. I greatly missed Emelda, but how could we have effectively maintained our relationship so many thousands of miles away from each other? I flipped through some of the cable channels. I decided to settle on *Comedy Planet*, a channel that seemed to feature stand-up comedy presentations from primarily African-American comedians.

The comedian standing on stage at that moment with a microphone in hand was a black male. The theater

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where he spoke was packed full of people. I noticed a few white people in the audience but it was a primarily black crowd. The comedian's audience was laughing loudly and applauding enthusiastically.

"I've got to admit it. The U.S. is hard, ain't no doubt 'bout that. Especially if you're a brother," he said. "But you know what? Despite how hard it is, ain't no freakin' way I'm gonna go back to Africa. If I go back to Africa, where the hell am I gonna do standup comedy? On trees?" he asked.

I found his joke quite offensive and it hurt me to see so many black people in the crowd applauding and laughing out loud. I had a feeling that the comedian would have probably taken another cheap shot or two at Africa or Africans, so I chose to turn the TV off. My impression of the black community in America was of a people united by mutual love, respect and admiration for one another regardless of nationality or background. Although I hadn't been in the United States long enough to develop a solid opinion on the subject, I was starting to get a sense based on the comedian's presentation, that there wasn't enough

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communication between Continental Africans and African-Americans and that many people in both groups tended to stereotype each other.

I locked the door and took the elevator down to the lobby and stood out in front of Rodeoville Towers to get some fresh air. It was already almost evening time. I decided to go for a walk around campus. On my way toward Ruthford Hall, I noticed a familiar face sitting outside reading on some of the steps in front of the building. My eyes didn't play tricks on me. It was Akiko Takimura. It had been quite a while since I ran into any of my peers from the English as a Third Language course. I was excited because I would have liked to ask her how things were going with the course and Carlson, but then I remembered she probably would have a hard time understanding me. Nonetheless, I decided that I would attempt speaking to her in English. And if she responded, it would be an obvious indication that she had made quite some progress.

"Hello, Akiko! How are you doing?" I asked, walking toward her.

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I seemed to have interrupted her because she was so focused on what she was reading. She looked up at me and nodded but didn't say a word. She continued reading. Out of curiosity, I tried to find out the title of the book she was reading. It was a book entitled *Easy Sentence Construction for Non-English speakers*. I thought about Kong Dung and Lee Pong but I felt that I probably couldn't ask Akiko anything about them for the reasons I had mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, in an effort to better get her attention, I stooped down, faced her and with a wave and smile, asked:

"Hey, do you remember me? I'm John Malinke. I used to be in your class."

Akiko had been using a pen to underline a number of sentences in the book. She nodded again, probably in response to the question I asked. I felt I had asked enough questions and didn't want to distract her any further.

"Well, I wish you much success in the class. Work as hard as you can, okay? Everything will be fine," I said.

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I got up and got ready to proceed with my walk around campus when I heard Akiko say in my direction:

"Intanantunan pita. Situda."

I stopped right in the middle of my walk and simply froze. I hoped it wasn't me she was talking to but there was a ninety percent chance that it was. How in the world was I going to be able to decipher what she was trying to say? I dreaded the thought of engaging in a back and forth question and answer game with Akiko. Yet, out of common courtesy I couldn't pretend not to have heard her. What if Akiko indeed had something important to say or if there was an emergency but she couldn't find the right words with which to express herself? I didn't have a choice but to turn around and walk back toward her. I stooped down again, faced her and listened carefully.

"I'm sorry Akiko, but I didn't quite understand what you said. Could you kindly repeat it?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Intanantunan. Pita. Situda," she repeated.

I still wasn't sure what to make out of what she was saying. Then I thought to myself:



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*Wait a minute. 'Intanantuna'-what word in English may be remotely close to that? I wondered. Then I had an idea.*

"Akiko did you perhaps mean 'international?' some sort of international event?"

She nodded.

"Pita. Situda. Eleben pidem," she added, then continued reading.

Now I had to attempt interpreting the next things she said. First was the word *Pita*. I took a quick moment to think but I wasn't sure what she implied. Then I remembered that something stood out from what Akiko said: "*Eleben pidem.*" Did she perhaps mean 11 p.m.? And then the next complicated word was "*Situda.*" I had an additional idea and felt I should give it a shot.

"Did you mean 11 p.m.? An international event scheduled to take place at 11 p.m. perhaps?"

Akiko nodded once again and this time she smiled, which suggested to me that I was getting close.

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"So let's see...could it be some sort of international party at 11 p.m.? Someone is organizing a party for international students on Saturday?" I asked.

She nodded about three times, so the puzzle had finally been solved. Then I asked:

"But where is it scheduled to take place?"

At that point Akiko quickly flipped through the pages of her book, took out a sheet of paper and gave it to me. It read:

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ANNUAL PARTY**

**THIS SATURDAY, 10:30 p.m.-2 a.m.**

**1817 Wilcord Street (four blocks away from the campus bookstore)**

**NO COVER CHARGE-PAY FOR DRINKS ONLY**

**BRING STUDENT ID**

**COME ONE, COME ALL!**

After having read it I realized how much easier it would have been for me if Akiko had simply let me read that sheet of paper from the start. It was possible that she may not have been aware of the wealth of information that it contained. I guessed that a non-U.S. student who was more proficient in

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English gave her the sheet of paper, talked to her briefly about the event and then she simply put it in between some of the pages of her book. I thanked her, gave her back the paper and continued my walk.

I stopped at a deli on campus to buy a hoagie and a drink. I was pleased with the speed and professionalism of the smiling, cheerful employees. Based on my order, I watched them put the pickles, cucumber, lettuce, tomatoes, olive oil, green and red peppers, black olives and black pepper in my hoagie and then warm it up in the toaster for just a few minutes.

"Enjoy your hoagie, sir. Come back again soon," the cashier said, upon receiving my payment and issuing me my change and receipt.

After that, she gave me a tray with a plastic plate and some napkins. I took a seat at one of the tables, drank some of my drink and began eating a bit of my sandwich. There were quite a good number of students sitting and eating at the tables around me. A few sat alone and typed on laptops or wrote in their notebooks. Their trays were empty, which implied they

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had placed their orders and eaten earlier. It was unlikely the deli staff would let them sit at their tables to get their work done without having at least ordered a drink. I watched the people sitting around me including those who came in and out while I ate. Markel walked in and stood in line to place his order. I had taken a seat a bit far in the back, so he couldn't have noticed me easily. After he had paid for his sandwich and was about to leave with his order, he looked in my direction and I waved at him from where I sat. He nodded as a sign of acknowledgement and walked up to my table.

"Hey! Look at this fella. What have you been up to?" he asked.

"Not much, I was a bit tired of sitting at Rodeoville Towers, so I thought I should come out and get some fresh air and perhaps get a feel for what it's like in some of the places where students hang out."

"That's good. You need to get out more often," he said. "Hold on a minute. Let me get a tray and a

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plate at the counter. I was on my way back to the dorm but I may as well join you."

Markel got up from his seat and walked toward the section by the cash register to get a tray and a plate, then returned within a couple of seconds.

"So how do you enjoy being a Resident Assistant?" I asked.

"Whew. It's a lot of work," he said, unwrapping his sandwich. "A tough balancing act, if you know what I mean. You've got to give your school and administrative work almost about an equal amount of time or else one of them suffers.."

I nodded because I perfectly understood what he meant.

A well-dressed black male entered the deli. He was wearing a dark brown suit with a light blue tie and a white shirt. But I noticed something unusual. In spite of how well he was dressed, he had on a bandana and that seemed quite out of place to me. He stood in line just like everyone else. Moments later, the relative silence within the deli got interrupted when someone shouted in a loud tone:

"What's up, nigger?"

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I couldn't believe my ears. I wondered who could have publicly used a word that represented so much hatred, denigration and racial and social injustice. The deli suddenly became even quieter and everyone turned around to see who had used the word. I expected to perhaps see some angry-looking white male with piercings in his nostrils and a bunch of crazy tattoos walking in determined to pick a fight with some black person. Much to my surprise, the person who said those words was not a white person but a black male. And he didn't seem bothered at all about the many eyes that zoomed in on him at that moment. He shook hands with the other black male who had on a suit and a bandana.

"Look sharp, man. Where are you from? An interview or something?" he asked his friend.

"You got that right," the man in the suit responded. "But you know how it is-gotta keep it gangsta."

Both men spoke to each other briefly again and then parted ways. Not only did it bother me to hear a black male use the word 'nigger' to describe another male of his own race within a predominantly white

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crowd, but I also felt embarrassed that when both men spoke, they did so in such a loud manner that distracted almost everyone at the deli. Markel sighed and took a bite out of his sandwich but there was an immediate change in the expression on his face. It was obvious that he wasn't pleased with what he had witnessed.

"I'm so sorry you saw that John," he said, in a heavily apologetic tone.

"You don't have to apologize," I replied. "I am just as profoundly hurt but we need to keep in mind those were two adults who chose to have a conversation using language that is offensive to most people. I don't think anyone else should be blamed for their actions."

Markel ate at a much slower pace and seemed to be engaged in deep thought.

"How do we hope to earn respect as black people when we use the 'N' word to refer to ourselves in public? Racists often use it to make a mockery of us behind our backs. When we use such an offensive word to

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describe each other, it suggests that we don't think much of ourselves," Markel regretted.

I perceived that he was very hurt, so I decided to hold off for a little while before making any additional comments. There was a moment of silence on our table as we ate. A few minutes later, I talked to Markel about how offended I was with the TV report I had seen about Africa. I talked to him about the man with the high, unkempt hair upon which flies had settled and who sat looking helpless in front of a hut with his mouth wide open while a reporter tried to interview him.

Markel laughed, but it didn't come across to me as the kind of laughter that resulted from listening to something funny. Instead, it reflected an immeasurable degree of pain and hurt and seemed to reopen wounds stemming from several years of suppressed emotions.

"Ever since I was a child I barely recall seeing anything positive about Africa on TV," he said. "Be it in documentaries, on the news or in magazines, you name it-it's always the same negative slant. I've got



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to admit it...I know a lot of African-Americans who want to travel to Africa and see what it's like for themselves. "

Markel paused and then continued:

"On the other end of the spectrum are those who have been so brainwashed by this constant negative portrayal of Africa that out of a sense of shame, they deliberately seek not to identify themselves with that part of their cultural heritage. People in this group would travel anywhere else in the world except to Africa. They would associate with anyone else except Africans."

I got the impression that talking to me-a continental African-about some of these issues provided somewhat of a therapeutic experience for Markel and it made me get quite emotional. We both had a genuine desire to connect with each other but yet it seemed as if a lack of communication between his community and mine and a perpetuation of negative stereotypes about our respective cultural and ethnic groups had created a gap that consistently widened over the years. We sounded differently when we spoke, but shared the

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same skin colour and could probably relate to a number of the same struggles and challenges in America.

"I'm not trying to suggest that the places you saw on television do not exist in those countries. But my impression is that there seems to be a tendency to focus on the least developed areas within those countries and use them to represent the entire African continent," I pointed out.

"I get your point. I thought so too," Markel agreed.

"In other words what you're saying is it would be like going to a specific state or city in America, filming the lesser developed parts and using that to represent the entire country to the rest of the world?"

"Exactly," I answered.

He shook his head.

"And how's the States portrayed in your country?" he asked.

"Well, as a land of great opportunity where anyone who works hard can make it. I learned a lot about

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American history in school and grew up watching many American films and TV shows.”

Markel nodded.

“There’s definitely opportunity—a lot of opportunity...I won’t deny that. However, here’s the question: is that opportunity equally spread out to all people? The answer—and you’ll get to find that out in due time based on experience—is ‘no.’ Connections, skin colour and social background determine how much opportunity comes your way in this country. As a black male, you’ve got to struggle a lot harder than other people to be considered for any major opportunity. You need to constantly prove yourself to fight off the assumption that you’re a criminal, lazy, or a non-conformist to societal rules. If you do get a job in a corporate environment, you’re under constant pressure to demonstrate that your hard work and qualifications helped you get your foot in the door and not just perhaps consideration of your minority status.”

Markel paused and drank a little.

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"I'm not a racist by any means but you've got to know this. I've got to tell you the plain truth. When a racist sees you walking down the street, he or she doesn't think of you as an African. That person sees you as a black male and judges you based on the colour of your skin and all of the stereotypes associated with it. Imagining you as someone with clear goals or as a focused Rodeoville University student who can speak good English would probably be one of the last things on their minds. So learn to accept it brother, when folks sometimes cross over to the other side of the street when they see you walking toward them especially at night time. You've got to stay strong and keep your head up. It's part of being a black male in America. Of course it hurts, but you've got to learn to live with it."

Markel's words had a profound impact on me. They made me realize that in America I would be facing three main challenges: as an African male it was going to be a natural responsibility to defend my identity and continent from the stereotypes people had been holding on to for several years; as a black male I

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would have to prove that I have a right to an equal opportunity like everyone else and that the best way to judge me would be by getting to know my character; and finally, as an international student attempting to survive so far away from home, I had to ensure that every activity I got involved in fell within the guidelines of established immigration rules.

"But tell me Markel, how do you think African-Americans honestly feel about Continental Africans?"

I asked.

He reached for the napkin beside his tray and wiped his hands.

"I can't speak for all African-Americans. Do a good number of African-Americans consider Africans as their brothers and sisters? Yes, a lot of them do. Although we've developed different cultures over time, I noticed some similarities when it comes to music-you know, certain beats and instruments and also how some artists dance in African music videos and Hip-Hop videos. I can say with certainty that a lot of African-Americans feel attached to Africa because of the historical link and many of them have

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a burning desire to know what countries their ancestors came from."

Markel paused and then continued:

"I can't say though, that every African-American feels the same way. It's a subject that generates a lot of passion and tends to create a lot of division. If I told you every black person in America would be warm to you and embrace you when they find out you're African, I wouldn't be speaking the truth," he continued. "The historical role of Africans in the slave trade is still a highly controversial and divisive topic in the black community. The painful memories of that dark past and the wounds it reopens have caused many black people to choose not to identify themselves with Africa. Those who do share this perspective prefer to be identified as "black" rather than African because they see nothing in common between Africa and what they are today. Of course, the stereotypes don't help either. Let me give you an example: if you asked most African-American students on campus, they would tell you that the general impression is that African students stick

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with each other and tend to look down on them. Honestly, you're the first African student with whom I've had an opportunity to not only sit down with and have a conversation...but also to hold one that has lasted as long," Markel explained.

"Well, I think all of this is due to a lack of communication. I bet you there are some African students who hold that same view of their African-American counterparts," I emphasized. "What can I do to help change some of those impressions?"

Markel took a moment to reflect.

"My brother, that's going to be an arduous task, you won't be able to change everyone's perspective and you sure can't do it on your own. Most people would keep holding on firmly to their impressions no matter what you try to do," he responded. "But I believe you could make a difference in your own little way just like you're doing right now. Did your roommate take you to any African-American bookstores or to the African-American Museum?"

"Not yet," I said.

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"Forget about it-he won't. That's expecting too much from him anyway. If I don't get a chance to do so, you should definitely check it out someday when you have some time."

Markel whistled while we walked back to Rodeoville Towers. At one point he turned to me and said:

"Did that idiot really think showing up for a job interview with a suit and a bandana would work in his favour? That's a no-no. He probably scared the hell out of his interviewer. He better not even dream about getting called back. Someone was about to give him a chance and he blew it. When he doesn't get the job he'll blame racism. Of course, there's racism in corporate America. But maybe-just maybe things might have turned out differently if he presented himself more professionally."

We caught the elevator at the Rodeoville Towers lobby and got off on the seventh floor.

"Good talking to you, John. My schedule's tight but we should be meeting once in a while," Markel said, before we separated. I walked down the hallway to



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Room 702. The door was halfway open. I knocked on it and pushed it open very gently. I hoped an intruder hadn't entered into our room. Not at all, there was no cause for concern because D. and Mpule were right there sitting on the couch.

"Now look who sneaked out! Thought you wanted to stay indoors," Mpule said.

"I did but at some point I felt like going outside for a breath of fresh air, so I went for a walk around campus."

Beep! Beep! Beeeeeeep! The microwave signaled.

D. opened it and took out a bowl of popcorn and they both ate from it while they sat on the couch. She looked at me and then turned to D.:

"Aren't you gonna offer some to your roommate as well?" she asked.

"Come on girl, the dude said he just ate, for goodness sake! Chill out!"

Mpule sighed, grabbed the remote and turned on the TV. I sat on my bed. She browsed through a number of channels and then exclaimed in excitement:

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"Ah! 'Jennifer's World' is on already. I wonder what's on tonight's show."

She held up the remote, pointed it toward the screen and pressed one of the middle buttons.

"Hey! What you doin'? You ain't ask me if there was something I'd like to see, did ya?" D. asked with his mouth full of popcorn.

Mpule didn't respond. He looked at her and shook his head.

On TV an African-American female talk show host stood holding a microphone. A black male and female sitting next to each other on stage were facing her.

"I just don't get what the fuss is all about," the black male said. "It's my right to date whomever I want. I'm not attracted to dark-skinned black women. I don't see what's wrong with that."

"I get your point Eddie, but what about character? I mean, aren't there other things to consider in looking for a mate?" the talk show host asked him, speaking through her microphone. "What if you met a woman who happened to be everything you dreamed of—loving, faithful, sensitive, good sense of humour,

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great personality-but yet happened to be dark skinned?"

The camera slightly zoomed in on Eddie as he took a moment to think.

"I regret having to repeat this Jennifer but I ask that you all respect my preference. Regardless of how great her character may be, I'd rather go for what I'm attracted to. What's the point trying to get to know someone you don't feel attracted to in the first place?" he asked.

Eddie turned to the woman sitting by his side. She was using tissue to wipe off some tears that were running down her eyes.

"I'm really sorry, but I don't share the same feelings that you have for me and I'd appreciate you respecting that," Eddie said in a cold, blunt tone.

Weeping, the woman beside him got up from her seat on the podium and headed toward the crowd of spectators where she seemed to have initially come from. The predominantly African-American audience booed at Eddie's unbelievable display of insensitivity. I felt for the woman who left the

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stage. I felt she was a very pretty lady and ironically, Eddie looked even darker than she was...at least to me. How could he possibly have rejected her on the sole basis of her complexion? How many black men on television besides Eddie had made such ignorant, insensitive comments and what impact did that have on black women of dark complexion? What effect could Eddie's words have had on young black girls who after listening to his comments could grow up with an inferiority complex vis-à-vis their light-skinned counterparts? In attempting to devalue black women with dark skin tones, Eddie was offending not just those of them within the African-American community but also dark-skinned black women all over the world.

Mpule was silent and so was D. From the expression on her face I could see she was hurt by Eddie's comments. D. was equally watching but didn't seem to be as concentrated on the show as his girlfriend. He had a detached, absent-minded look on his face. I could bet he would have loved to change the channel

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if it were possible, but Mpule appeared to be hooked on the show.

"So what's your opinion on this, Mr. D?" Mpule asked.

"Ain't got nothing to say," he responded, putting some popcorn in his mouth.

The talk show host passed the microphone around to enable the audience express their respective views on the subject.

"You've got to be ashamed of yourself for exposing such ignorance and stupidity on television," a black male said in response to Eddie's comments. "You need to take time out and do a serious self-examination."

The audience applauded.

"So much for me-guess I should be leaving now," Mpule said, getting up.

"I'll walk you to your car," D. responded, turning off the TV.

"Well John, see you in class. Have a good night," she said to me.

"You too. I think I'm actually ready to go to bed," I answered.

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When Mpule and D. had left, I changed into a pair of shorts and a T-shirt, turned off the light and lay down on my bed. In the process I thought about some of the things I had witnessed throughout the day. It bothered me to have discovered a black community that was so divided. I had come to America believing that all black people acknowledged each other as brothers and sisters and were united by a sense of mutual love. Little did I know everyone was divided into specific groups-Continental Africans and African-Americans; light-skinned blacks and dark-skinned blacks; intellectual blacks and the so-called "street-smart" types who felt primarily at ease within the Hip-Hop cultural movement. In that respect, limiting the black male to an often narrow, prejudiced and stereotypical description was wrong because the term in itself represented several individuals of diverse cultural values and beliefs.

I returned to the Social Security Office the next day after class to drop off the letter Mr. Philips had written on my behalf. It was the same lady-Linda

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Bray—who came out once again to receive me after I had talked to the receptionist. She opened the envelope in front of me and read it carefully. When she had finished she nodded, looked up at me and said:

“You’ll get your social security card in the mail in about three business days. Have a good day.”

The letter seemed to have had a disarming effect. I found it hard to believe this was the same person who had firmly explained to me the reason why I didn’t qualify to get a social security number. I immediately remembered Mr. Philips’s words:

*Everything’s gonna be just fine. I’m talking out of experience.*

I guess he was right.

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN****Fired Up**

Saturday was an unofficial ‘party day’ at Rodeoville Towers. From midday you could hear semi-loud music

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coming out of dorm rooms and see the elevators opening up to let out students carrying bags full of groceries in anticipation of dinner time when friends and family often came over. In general there was much calm and discipline on the seventh floor ever since Markel had held the stern meeting on the consequences of irresponsible behaviour and reminded us about his 'no tolerance policy.' He was known to make rounds and pound on doors whenever he heard people playing loud music. As a result, there was significantly less rowdiness on my floor.

Did students get to sneak alcohol into the dorm rooms on the seventh floor? Yes, they were able to do so somehow. I recall having seen empty beer cans more than once in Lane and Valence's room. They often hid them far by the wall behind their couch which led toward the restroom area. Markel rarely came into anyone's room unless he felt there was a compelling reason to do so. He often stopped at the door and the students were aware of that.

This Saturday was particularly unique. The event Akiko had talked to me about-the annual party for



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international students-was scheduled to take place at night time. I yearned to see a crowd a bit different from what D. was accustomed to. He had gone out, so I felt I could use that opportunity to call Emelda with the few minutes that remained on my phone card. I dialed her cell phone number. The phone rang a couple of times.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hey Emelda, it's me."

"You who?" she asked.

I wasn't expecting that sort of reaction.

"John. How can you ask me that? Don't you recognize my voice?"

"Oh. Longtime...I take it you're doing fine."

"I'm adapting, Emelda. Listen, I know I haven't been able to communicate as often as I would have liked but I just wanted you to know that I always think about you. I'm trying to get a job on campus-as a matter of fact I hope to begin within a couple of days. Once that works out I will be able to call you more often."

"Call me more often?" she laughed.

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"Well...what's so funny about that?" I wondered.

"Look-I'm a woman. I have needs, okay? Do you know how many people ask me out on a weekly basis? A woman needs to show her man off to her friends. You haven't even sent me a pencil since you got to America. Meanwhile my friends have bags, shoes and jewelry to show just how much their boyfriends overseas love them."

"I understand Emelda, but please listen to me. I'm going to start a job soon. I won't get paid much-it's just an on-campus job but I'll try to save whatever I can to-"

*You have one minute left,* the automated recording stated.

"I've been very patient. I won't wait forever," Emelda said.

"Why are you refusing to listen to me? Try to picture yourself in my situation. I said I-"

The line got disconnected. I had run out of airtime and couldn't afford to buy another phone card. A sense of frustration took over me while I held the phone in my hand and listened to the busy dial tone.

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I really would have loved to continue the conversation but Emelda was as uncompromising as ever. Well, perhaps she was indirectly giving me a hint that it was time for both of us to consider moving on. She already seemed to have concluded that I wasn't sufficiently playing the role of a provider. The distant, indifferent and insensitive manner reflected in her responses bothered me and I felt I had been patient enough. Maybe D. was right. How could I have known what she was up to back home?

I went to get a haircut that Saturday afternoon at "Wally's," a barbershop within walking distance from campus. There were three barbers, each of them black males. I realized upon walking in that the seats were all filled up and four people were waiting anxiously for their turn. I contemplated whether or not to keep standing until one of the four seats was no longer occupied.

"Need a cut, brother?" one of the barbers asked me.

"Yes, please."

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"Don't sweat it. I'll get you a chair," he said.

"Gimme just a second I'll be right back," he said to the man whose hair he was cutting.

The barber retreated into the back area and returned moments later with a chair, which he placed next to the other four that were occupied. I thanked him and took a seat. I was sincerely moved by how warmly I was received. I noticed there was a separate area in the back where female employees did women's' hair and washed and braided them. Three of the four men sitting next to me watched a Hip-hop video that was being featured on one of the cable TV channels of the television set at the barbershop. The other male, very much older and with a load of grey hair, was reading a magazine. The door opened a few minutes later and a white male walked in.

"How many folks y'all got?" he asked, shaking one of the barbers' hands.

"Two more," the barber responded.

"Aight, I'ma come back in an hour. Peace..." the white male responded.

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I was not only amazed at the way he spoke but also at what he wore—a pair of baggy denim pants that hung below his waist and an extra-large white T-shirt and sneakers. He walked sideways with a certain swagger and had a very low haircut.

“Who’s next?” asked the barber standing closest to the door when he had finished cutting a client’s hair.

The older black male who had been reading the magazine raised his hand, got up and took a seat. One of the hairdressers emerged from the back and came up to the front section where the men were waiting to get their hair cut.

“Anybody needs a shampoo?” she asked.

No one raised a hand or said anything. She persisted:

“What about you?” she asked one of the two men sitting ahead of me.

“No thanks, I’m cool...” he said.

“And you?” she asked the next person.

“Nah, it’s all good,” he responded.

When she got to me, she didn’t repeat the question, correctly assuming that I could read her mind.

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"No, thank you. I washed my hair before I got here," I said.

The hairdresser returned to the ladies' section. I watched one of the barbers combing the older male's hair. In the process, a lot of dandruff was coming out of it and being dispersed into the air. His hair released so much dandruff that one of the men waiting for his turn was forced to get up and move to an empty seat farther away.

"Your hair's dirty, man. Can't cut e'm like it is. You need a shampoo," the barber told him, blowing off the dandruff from his comb.

"I don't need a shampoo," the man protested.

"You do need one. Melissa!" he shouted.

The hairdresser who had been making the rounds earlier emerged from the ladies' section.

"Please take this gentleman to the shampoo room," the barber said.

"I don't need a shampoo! I don't need a shampoo! Stop bugging me! Each time I come here get a cut y'all send me to the shampoo room! Get your hands off me!"

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You think your hair's cleaner than mine?" the older man yelled.

"Yo! Get off the seat. I ain't got all day!" the barber said, losing patience and slightly pushing the rotating chair forward.

The man on the seat jolted forward, turned around and faced the barber. In amazement I watched both men almost come to blows.

"Been coming to Wally's for mad years! Mad years! And y'all ain't ever treated me right. It ain't supposed to be like that. It ain't supposed to be like that," he said, with a clenched fist.

One of the other barbers stepped forward and separated them. The man reluctantly followed the hairdresser to the shampoo room.

"I hate cutting that nigga's hair," the barber said. "It's always so messy and his scalp's so dry. I don't get what makes it so hard to get a shampoo."

One of the clients sitting beside me jumped in:

"Chris you talk like it's easy. What do you expect a brother to do when he comes to a barbershop with just 10 bucks for a cut and then all of a sudden he's

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asked to pay an extra five bucks for a shampoo he wasn't prepared for?"

The barber nodded.

"I hear you, player. But ever since I've known that cat his hair's always been the same. I don't recall it looking clean a single time," Chris argued.

He looked around the room.

"Why don't I cut one of y'all while the other guy gets his shampoo? Brother, you're ready for your cut?" he asked me.

"Yep," I answered.

I went up and took a seat and the barber covered me with one of his capes.

"Just gimme a sec," Chris said. "Let me run some hot water and soap on this comb. I've never seen a dude with that much dandruff on his hair. I hate cutting that nigga's hair, man. It's off the chain. Be right back."

It bothered me to hear yet another black male using the word "n word" to describe someone just like himself. The only difference was that in that case it wasn't being used out of prejudice. I also felt



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uncomfortable at the thought of Chris using that same comb on my hair, so I interrupted him on his way toward the restroom area behind.

"Excuse me is there another comb we could use?" I asked.

"There sure is. Why?"

"I was just wondering if that's the same comb you're going to use on my hair."

"Well that's why I'm trying to go get it washed," Chris said. "As long as it's washed there shouldn't be a problem."

"Could we please use another comb? I don't feel comfortable about it being used on my hair."

"All right, man. As you wish...you're the boss. I'll get it cleaned later," he sighed.

From my seat I took a look at the various haircut samples that hung up on the wall.

"So what kind of cut would you like, my man?" Chris asked, smiling.

I thought for a moment.

"Uhm...uhm...punk," I said.

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The smile on Chris's face quickly vanished and gave way to a stern frown and an expression of disapproval but I couldn't tell why.

"What did you say?" he asked again.

"Punk," I repeated, my voice shivering as a result of the expression on his face.

Chris sighed.

"Hey look man, I don't appreciate you calling me a punk, you heard me? You can't come into my shop and disrespect me. All I did was ask what kind of cut you want. That don't mean I'm a punk."

Everyone was now focusing on me-Chris, his co-workers and the rest of the customers.

"I don't think I can cut your hair with that attitude," Chris said. "Might be better off someplace else."

I realized Chris had misinterpreted my use of the word.

"I'm truly sorry," I apologized. "I wasn't trying to disrespect you. 'Punk' is a term used to describe a specific hair cut that a lot of men used to do in my

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country-high on the top and skin close on the sides,"

I explained, with a hand gesture.

Chris and his co-workers laughed after becoming aware

I was using the word in a completely innocent and harmless manner.

"Oh my," Chris said, wiping off tears of laughter from his eyes. "It's all good, my brother. And I'm sorry as well for misunderstanding. Anyway, I ain't gonna cut it like that. This ain't the 80's, know what I mean? You'll get a nice, clean modern cut. Let's do a dark fade with some cool, light side burns. You'll love the way you look. I guarantee it."

Chris put the cape around me and began combing my hair.

"So where are you from? Jamaica? Trinidad or something?" one of the barbers asked. "I'm Kevin, by the way."

"My name is John. I'm from the Republic of Boluaké in Central Africa."

"That's cool. I never heard of Bolua-Bolua-what did you say the name of your country was again, bro?"

Kevin asked.

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"Boluaké," I repeated.

"That's right...Bo-lug-a-Ki," he stressed. "But I know of South Africa, Nigeria and Ethiopia."

He paused to think for a minute and then continued:

"I also know Rwanda, Ghana, Congo, Kenya and Somalia. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Me too," I responded, impressed by the list of African nations he mentioned.

There was a moment of silence, and then the white male with the baggy T-shirt and hanging pants that had come in earlier walked in and took a seat.

"The reason you never heard about his country's cause them other countries are the main ones we all hear about," Chris jumped in. "Folk starving in Ethiopia and Somalia and killing each other in Congo and Rwanda. Know what I'm saying? It's the usual stuff."

The older black male who had been getting his hair washed emerged from the shampoo room fuming in anger. His shoes made a thumping noise as he walked with incredible speed toward Chris, ready to pounce on him. I was ready to jump off my seat and get out of

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the way but the cape was firmly wrapped around me. Kevin and one of the customers rushed up, grabbed both his hands and pulled him back.

"I'm sick and tired of this! How the hell you gonna let someone else get seated when you're the reason I went to go get my hair washed? Couldn't you wait?"

"Yo, calm down paps, calm down..." Kevin said, pulling his arm.

"Don't you ever-and I mean it-ever cut my hair again! And the next time you try to force me to get a shampoo, I'll sue you and your damn barbershop and get the story all over the news! You don't know who you're messing with. You know I could get you guys shut down?" he threatened.

"All right, paps. That's enough. Do you want to get a haircut or not?" the third barber asked, whose name I didn't yet know.

"Of course I do, but not from him," the older male said, pointing at Chris.

"It's all good. Sit down and I'll give you a cut once I'm done with this customer," the barber replied.

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Chris remained silent this time around and demonstrated much self-restraint. He kept on cutting my hair like a perfect gentleman and didn't say a word. The older male stamped his foot on the ground in anger a couple of times and then took a seat. There was a brief moment of silence.

"So tell me my man, how do I explain this?" the third barber asked me from a distance in the process of getting done with a client's hair. "I mean, I ain't no big traveler but I got a chance to go to North Africa a few years back. And when people found out I was American, a lot of them referred to me as a black white man. I don't think that's right, do you?"

"Come on Kev, you ain't even introduced yourself to the brother," Chris said.

"Oh-sorry about that," he apologized. "I'm Andre."

I wasn't sure how best to respond to Kevin's remark and I got the sense that he expected a reasonable interpretation from me by virtue of being an African male. Here was yet another example where circumstances pushed me to put on the cloak of an ambassador to my entire continent.

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"Well, I can't speak for the people you met in North Africa," I said. "I have never been there, so I can't attempt to explain why they labeled you that way. However, it would be wrong to assume that all Africans whom you might meet would react the same way. I'm sure that even right there in North Africa, a majority of the people considered you as one of theirs."

"Understood," Andre said.

There was a moment of silence.

"I heard a lot of e'm North Africans don't even like to be considered African," Chris said. "It's like Sub-Saharan Africans and North Africans live in two separate worlds on the same continent."

"Yeah...they probably think they're better than the others 'cause they've got lighter skin," said Kevin, the second barber, shaking his head.

I gave Chris twelve dollars (ten dollars for the cut and two dollars as a tip) when he had finished. I gave him a thumbs up after looking at myself in the mirror.

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"I knew you'd love the way you look," he said, putting the money in his pocket. "Now you got a nice, fresh haircut. We don't do the 'punk' haircut here, brother. This ain't the 80's. And you don't wanna use that word at no barbershop, by the way. It ain't worth it-could get you in some serious trouble."

"Thank you very much...I understand. I'll be back again," I promised.

Chris gave me his business card and the older male got up from his seat and sat on the chair reserved for Kevin's clients.

"Uhm...uhm... so I guess I could comb your hair without fear, right?" Kevin asked him on my way out.

I could only imagine how furiously that man must have responded to his question. I guessed he probably would never return to that barbershop anymore.

At about 10:45 p.m., I began getting ready to go to the party on Wilcord Street. I put on a pair of denim pants, black shoes and a dark blue T-shirt.

"Wow...ain't that something! I see you're starting to roll on your own at night time, playa. You're soon



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gonna know this city better than I do. So who's the lucky lady?" D. asked.

I couldn't resist laughing.

"I'm going to a party for international students on 18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord," I said.

"Sounds interesting. Who you going with? You know how to get there?"

"I'm going alone. I don't yet know that many international students on campus. The party takes place just four blocks from the campus bookstore, so I think I could walk."

"Well, you gotta be careful. Students been mugged in the past walking down Wilcord at night time. You're better off going with a friend or two. Could have walked with you but my girl's coming over in like fifteen to twenty minutes. Why don't you ask Valence, man?" D. proposed.

"I doubt if he'll accept but I'll try," I responded.

On my way out I knocked on our neighbours' door.

"Who is it?" Valence asked.

"It's John," I answered.

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Valence opened the door slightly, stretched out his neck and looked out as if to be certain that it was actually me who knocked. When that was confirmed he opened it wide, welcomed me in and shut the door. He was holding a can of beer, which immediately explained why he was cautious. It just may have been Markel. Lane waved at me from the couch where he was seated. There were three empty cans of beer on a glass table just in front of it.

"What brings you here at this hour, buddy? Care to join us for a beer?" Valence asked.

"No thanks, I came to ask if you would mind accompanying me to a party."

"A party? Hey, why not? Where at?"

"18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord Street. It's an annual party for international students."

"Nah-ain't my kinda crowd," Valence said, quite predictably.

"I understand. I'd just like someone to accompany me there if possible. I heard it's not very safe for students to walk alone on that street at night time."

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"True. But can't D. give you a ride or take a walk with you?" he asked.

"He told me his girlfriend's coming over."

"Yeah, right. He just didn't wanna go with you."

"Well, if you don't think you want to walk with me, perhaps I could go with Lane."

Valence laughed.

"You wanna go walking at night time with someone who wouldn't even be able to hear u scream if you were getting mugged?"

Lane seemed to have had a sense Valence was talking about him. He stopped watching TV, looked in our direction and frowned. He didn't take his eyes off us from that moment on. He just kept on frowning.

"I think you've made Lane angry," I whispered.

"Who cares?" Valence responded, with a brush of the hand. "I was simply speaking the truth."

"Val, how many times do I have to tell you I don't eat French fries at 11 p.m.? I mean, when does it end? Stop testing me. I've been tested by the best," Lane shouted.

Valence rolled his eyes and shook his head.

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"See? That's exactly the point I was trying to get to you," he said. "Tell you what. I'll try to see if I could get Lane to come with me so we could both walk you down to 18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord Street."

Valence sat down on one of the seats beside Lane, who was doing his best to ignore him, pretending to be concentrating on what was being broadcast on television. He still seemed to be fuming inside and his face had turned red. In order to ensure that his roommate could hear him clearly, Valence clapped his hands when he spoke:

"Hey Lane, what you say, man? Would you mind walking with John and me to 18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord?"

Lane didn't respond.

"Hello, did you get what I said?" Valence asked, clapping his hands once again.

Lane turned to him:

"Don't test me. It's way past dinner time."

"Nope-what I said had nothing to do with dinner. I was asking if you'd mind accompanying John and me to 18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord, for goodness sake!"

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Lane was silent. We had no clue what he was thinking, what he might say next or whether he heard what Valence had said.

"18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord, huh? Cool...let's go for it," he answered moments later, much to our surprise.

I returned to Room 702 to give Valence and Lane some time to get dressed. Mpule and D. we're sitting on the sofa.

"He agreed to go with you? What magic did you perform, dawg?" said a surprised D.

"I just asked if he would mind accompanying me down the street. I didn't pressure him to attend the party."

"Ah, I see. 'Cause the Valence I know with his impression of foreigners ain't ever gonna show up for an event like that."

Mpule turned to me:

"Are you excited, though? Is this your first party on campus?"

"It is. I look forward to going to an American student party sometime soon as well," I said.

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"That's what's up. I bet you will soon," she smiled.

"Ain't nothing different at on campus parties than what you saw at the club I took you to," D. said.

"Matter of fact, clubs is even better."

"Come on, D. How could you say that? It all depends on what kind of person he's looking to meet. We didn't meet at a club, did we?" Mpule said.

"You're getting me wrong, babe. I ain't talking about meeting people. I'm talking about the party atmosphere-you know... the animation, the music, and stuff like that."

"I hear you then," she said.

There was a knock on the door.

"That must be Valence," I said.

I opened the door and Lane and Valence came in.

"Wow! Ain't that something? Lane's going too?" D. remarked.

Lane was wearing a dark brown baseball hat and a brown jacket that looked way too thick and out of place considering the summerlike temperature. He also had on a pair of grey pants with dark green socks and light brown shoes. Valence on the other hand wore a

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shiny, white dress shirt with navy blue pants and black shoes. The roommates shook Mpule's hand.

"Y'all look like you're going for more than just a walk," D. said.

"Doesn't hurt to get a feel for what it's like in there," Valence responded. "Are we ready to go or what?"

Lane, Valence and I took the elevator down to the lobby. Outside Rodeoville Towers, the three of us walked at pretty much the same space. The campus street lights shone brightly and even at that late hour, the coffee shops, delis and campus restaurants were booming with activity. We walked a couple blocks past several campus buildings on both sides of the street. There were still a good number of cars along City Avenue. We went right toward the campus bookstore and walked a few more blocks.

"Okay...here we go," Valence said with a nervous sigh. "The next few blocks are gonna be a lot darker. We're getting close to 18<sup>th</sup> and Wilcord. Let's walk real fast and not look behind."

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Valence looked at Lane and made a gesture with his hand to help him understand what he had just suggested. It apparently worked because Lane began walking as fast as the two of us. He already seemed aware that we were approaching a red zone.

We arrived at a very dark street with abandoned homes on either side. The thick bushy hedges, tall trees and high grass sharply contrasted with the luminosity of Rodeoville's campus.

"W-w-wilcord," Valence stuttered, almost running out of breath.

The three of us walked so fast that the silence of our environment quickly became absorbed by the noise of our shoes. Suddenly, we heard a sound as if someone was emerging from the surrounding hedges.

Valence sprinted off and left Lane and I behind.

"Hey! Wait for us!" I shouted.

Valence kept running and didn't look backward. Lane and I followed and I never would have imagined he could run as fast as he did. We ran and ran, finally catching up with Valence a few blocks later at the next street that was well lit.



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"You didn't tell us we were almost going to run a marathon," I said to him. "I'm amazed at how quickly you took off and left us behind. That means you would have left us to ourselves in case of an emergency."

"Couldn't-couldn't-just couldn't risk it," he panted.

"That's an extremely dangerous area."

Valence paused and took a deep breath.

"Another thing, dude...you shouldn't have yelled like you did. In such a circumstance, you keep your mouth shut and just run. Deal with the rest later. Could save your life," he added.

"I get your point," I responded.

Lane was equally breathing fast although he said nothing. He nonetheless must have understood there had been danger, or else he wouldn't have joined us in running. I pointed up at the street sign. It read *1813 Wilcord St.*

"Four more blocks I guess," Valence said.

We kept on walking. At *1815 Wilcord*, we heard some fairly loud music coming from two blocks ahead of us.

"Here we are. 1817 Wilcord Street," I said, excited.

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A long line of students waited their turn to be let past a velvet rope.

"Ladies first...ladies first," said one of two bouncers standing in front of a high rise building.

Valence, Lane and I showed our student IDs got searched and were then permitted to go past the velvet rope. We took the stairs just like everyone else and came to a hall that was packed full with students drinking and dancing. The three of us made our way around. It was a diverse crowd of all sorts of people and ethnicities, some of them speaking in their native languages.

On stage, a team of three people-two men and one woman-played guitar, while two other men sat in the corner playing drums. Behind the stage was a long hallway with several doors and it sort of reminded me of the club D. had taken me to.

"Wow, I wasn't expecting this! Lots of pretty girls! Not at all what I thought I'd see in a party reserved for-"

At that point I gave Valence a look that was sufficient enough to express my profound disapproval

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for the prejudiced direction in which he was steering his comments. That made him shut up immediately. Lane put his index fingers inside both ears.

"Too loud! Too loud! Can't handle this madness, folks! Can't handle it!" he yelled.

"Hey man, take it easy. Are you all right? You're gonna be fine," Valence reassured him.

"Wrrriiiiiii...wrrriiiiiii...wrrriiiiiiiii..." Lane screamed.

He covered his ears with his palms and in the process of screaming, distracted the crowd around us. He pushed his way through and ran toward the exit, rushing down the stairs.

"See? That's why I don't even bother hanging out with Lane," Valence said, as we ran after him.

"What's going on up there?" asked one of the bouncers standing beside the stairs.

"Ain't no problem. Just trying to persuade our good friend there to come back in but he's terrified," Valence said, pointing at Lane.

One of the bouncers laughed, but his partner saw no reason to take it lightly. He quickly hung the velvet

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rope back on its hook to prevent anyone else from coming in.

"Okay...you all hold it right there. Nobody comes in until we figure out what's going on," he said in a stern voice.

The bouncer ran up the stairs while his partner stood guard in front of the velvet rope.

"Lane! Lane! What are you doing, man? Come on! Get yourself a good time for a change."

"Stop testing me, Val. We've been roommates for three years and you've always felt the need to do that stuff. It's too noisy in there! I can't stand it!" he exclaimed, rubbing both ears with his palms.

"So what does he want to do? Go back on Wilcord Street all by himself?" I asked.

"I doubt he'd do that," Valence said.

He was right because within seconds, we saw Lane stopping a cab.

"Rodeoville Towers, please! Quick!" he said, opening the door, jumping in and slamming it really hard before the cab driver even got a chance to accept or reject his proposal.

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The cab drove off.

"Crazy dude," Valence said. "Running out of a party as if the building were on fire."

We faced stiff resistance from the bouncers when we tried to get back in.

"I think you guys would be better off someplace else," said the bouncer who had ran up the stairs to check if everything was okay. "We expect you to act like adults when you come in here. Do you guys realize what impression you gave from running down the stairs like you did? You're scaring people away. We're not letting any more people in."

"We're truly, truly sorry. We didn't intend for things to turn out that way. It's just my roommate's a really bizarre kind of guy. I mean, we brought e'm here to have a good time and he you know...flipped-lost his damn mind. Happens to him from time to time."

The other bouncer stepped in and pleaded our case:

"I think we should cut them some slack. This hasn't happened here before. Plus I bet you saw what the other guy was wearing-a freaking winter-type jacket

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with thick socks and a baseball hat. He's definitely got some kind of problem."

"All right, I'm giving you one last chance. You guys blow it up again, I'll throw you out myself. I've got my eyes on you. I swear I'll tear you apart," he threatened, taking the velvet rope off its hook.

"You have our word, boss...you have our word," Valence said.

When we went back in, Saleh was on stage talking to the crowd. He truly seemed to be a superstar among the international student community on campus. The music had momentarily ceased and everyone stood there listening to him, some with their arms folded, others holding glasses of beverages or alcoholic drinks, and the rest (mainly couples) holding each other's hands.

"Dear international people I greet you to this annual gathering," Saleh said, in his very thick accent. "Also I welcome our American colleague who kind enough to join us here."

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"American colleagues, huh? That would be me, I guess..." Valence said, pounding his chest with his arm.

I gave him my usual look once again because I was concerned he was starting to once again give in to his internal prejudices. He got the picture, because he kept silent and immediately refocused on what was happening on stage.

"Even we are international people does not mean that we cannot find time to party, no?" Saleh continued.

"Yeah!!" the crowd shouted in unison.

"And even we are international people, does not mean that we don't know how to party, no?"

"Yeah!!" the crowd responded.

"We know how to have a good time, yes?"

"Yeah!!"

"Have fun, ladies and gentlemen!"

The crowd applauded and Saleh stood the microphone on its stand and got off the stage. He walked around shaking hands and the three people who were playing guitar earlier returned to the stage and continued entertaining the crowd.

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"Hey! I remember you. John something, right..." Saleh said when he got to me.

"Malinke-that's right," I answered. "And this is Valence. We live on the same floor at Rodeoville Towers."

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking Valence's hand.

"Are you an American student?"

"Hell yeah! Do I look like I've got that foreign student demeanour?" he responded.

"Valence what's wrong with you! How could you say such a thing?" I yelled.

Saleh walked away, profoundly offended by Valence's comments.

"Hey don't blame me, buddy. He asked me a dumb question. You don't walk around in an event like this asking who's American and who's not," Valence said.

"Makes me feel like I ain't welcome here. Guys like that are so quick to speak out against stereotyping but they do the same thing behind closed doors. What a hypocrite."

I understood Valence's point of view. Saleh shouldn't have asked him that question. Such an event in my



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opinion should have been used to encourage tolerance and promote cultural diversity, not to further divide individuals along ethnic and national lines. Valence and I went to the bar.

"I'd like a Mohito," he told the bartender. "What about you John? What would you like?"

"A glass of cranberry juice," I said.

"Absolutely not-you drink that stuff all the time," Valence remarked. "Why don't you try Vodka mixed with a soda or lemonade?"

"No, Vodka is too strong. I'll just get lemonade if there's any."

"These drinks are free, right?" Valence asked.

"You must be joking," the bartender said. "We already let you in for free. Isn't that good enough?"

The bartender poured the drinks in two separate glasses.

"That would be fifteen dollars," he said.

"What? Freaking rip offs!" Valence exclaimed.

Someone tapped me on my shoulder. I turned around. It was Akiko. To my surprise, she gave me a tight hug

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and a kiss on my cheek. Afterward, she pointed at some of the drinks at the bar.

"I'm not quite sure what she's trying to say," I said to Valence.

"She's asking you to buy her a drink," he said.

"I can't afford to buy anyone a drink right now," I responded.

"Fool-why would you come to a party when you know you're broke?" Valence mocked. "Ask her what she wants."

"She doesn't speak English."

"Ask her anyway," he insisted.

In the meantime the bartender had just served our drinks and was expecting the fifteen-dollar payment.

"Hold on a sec, buddy. Think we'd be adding one more drink to our order," Valence told him.

"Speed it up, man. You're not the only customer," he said.

"What would you like to drink?" I asked Akiko, using my hand to illustrate.

She nodded.

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"Would you prefer some juice, a soda or what?" I asked again.

She nodded.

"Dude, just add another lemonade and let's get it over with," Valence said, taking out his wallet.

"Twenty dollars," the bartender said.

Valence paid for the drinks and although Akiko didn't say thanks, she gave us one of the broadest imaginable smiles, so I interpreted that as an expression of gratitude. The crowd applauded when the guitarists were done playing. The performers left the stage and the DJ began playing Reggae music. Akiko grabbed my arm.

"What is she trying to do?" I asked Valence.

"I don't know-what does it seem to you like she's trying to do? It's obvious she wants you to dance with her," he yelled, since the music was quite loud.

"I don't think I can do that. I have a girlfriend in my country," I said.

"How dumb," Valence responded. "Have you got any clue what she may have been doing since you left? Do you know what she could be doing right now? Dance with

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her. Men don't turn down dance requests from ladies. I think I'll take a chance and hit on that pretty face at the corner with the red dress. She looks exotic...must be Italian or Eastern European," he said, leaving the bar to walk toward the woman in question. Akiko literally dragged me away from the bar and toward the dance floor. I was amazed at her aggressiveness because it didn't seem at all like the Akiko I thought I knew from my English as a Third Language class. When I looked behind, Valence was busy chatting with his exotic-looking lady. Akiko had a crazy way of dancing. She went backward, forward, raised both hands over her head like a basketball player aiming for a basket, nodded her head over and over and tapped her feet. I tried to make sure my steps were in tune with the rhythm but keeping up with Akiko's moves was quite a challenge. She went left, right, forward and backward, shaking her head and entire body crazily with absolutely no sense of direction. Someone in the crowd bumped me on my shoulder, making me so upset that I almost was ready to go to blows. I turned around to figure out

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who it was. It was Kong Dung. He had just walked past me and stood a few steps away watching Akiko and me dance with a deep frown on his face. Akiko leaned backward, whispered something in his ear and he went away.

"What was that all about?" I asked her, forgetting that she didn't speak much English.

I got to a point where I felt as if I needed to pause for a moment.

"I'm a bit tired of dancing," I said, pointing down at my shoes and making a few hand gestures that I felt could help her understand what I was saying. "I think I need a bit of a break if you don't mind," I added.

Akiko nodded, although I wasn't sure if she did so because she understood what I was saying. I returned to take a seat at the bar and noticed her still dancing from a distance...shaking her head, hands and feet in all imaginable directions. I could also see Valence dancing in the corner with the woman he had walked up to. If she was indeed from a foreign country and he ended up dating her, I wished she

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could help him become more open-minded and get rid of his prejudices. I thought he was a genuinely nice person, but his lack of exposure to people of other cultures and nationalities led him to develop several unfortunate stereotypes and assumptions.

Akiko walked up to me.

"Followed," she said.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"Followed," she repeated.

That was one of the rare moments I had heard her say a word in English so confidently. I guessed she was asking me to follow her but it would have made no sense to ask her any further questions and in the process end up unintentionally breaking into some grammar that would have been too much for her to handle. But where could she possibly be asking me to follow her to? I wondered.

Akiko grabbed my arm and pulled me along. I turned around and looked at Valence, who had noticed us and was laughing hard in the corner, much to the amazement of his dance partner. He winked at me as if he understood what was going on, but Akiko didn't

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give me a chance to walk up to him and explain anything. She held my hand and we both walked through the crowd and toward the backstage area.

"Akiko! Akiko! Where are you taking us to?" I kept asking, but she didn't respond.

When we got to the hallway I demanded an explanation because I was starting to get nervous.

"Hold on Akiko, you need to tell me where we are going," I insisted.

"I show you," she said, and pulled me along again.

Akiko and I walked through the hallway and past the many doors on either side. At the end of the hallway, a bouncer stood in front of a brown curtain. He nodded when he saw Akiko and immediately unhooked the velvet rope to let us go through the curtain. It revealed a spacious living room with an oriental decor. The carpet was green and had several red leather couches with cushions of various colours-yellow, blue, green, red, brown and purple. The cushions were uniquely designed-each of them featured an outline of a tree, a flower or a garden.

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Several oval-shaped, radiant lamps adorned the wooden tables in front of the couches and brightly-coloured flower vases leaned on every wall of this vast living room. There was also a bar shelf with countless bowls and several bottled drinks that I wasn't familiar with. I could hear oriental-type music being played in the background and two female hostesses wearing red, Chinese traditional garments with yellow, flowery designs welcomed us. One of them, a white lady, had blonde, shoulder length hair that she wore in a ponytail; the other was an Asian female. With a tremendous degree of deference and to my greatest surprise, they both bowed down before Akiko and led us to take a seat on one of the couches. The white female came toward us with a tray of white wash cloths. I could see steam coming out of them from where we sat. Akiko took one and I took the other. We wiped our hands and faces and put the wash cloths back onto the trays. The white female bowed in front of Akiko, walked past the bar and then opened and shut a side door. It must have been a kitchen because I heard the sound of cutlery and tap water running as



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if someone was doing dishes. I could barely recognize Akiko anymore. There was a serious look on her face and she radiated a confidence that I had never before noticed in her.

The Asian female hostess emerged from the same door her counterpart had walked into moments earlier. She was holding a tray as well and upon it were two bowls containing some sort of steaming liquid, two spoons and two napkins. With her tray still in hand, she knelt in front of Akiko and didn't rise up on her feet again until when the latter had taken one of the bowls, a spoon and a napkin. After Akiko had done so, the hostess bowed down. When it was my turn to be served, she bowed down again but this time didn't go down on her knees.

"Would you like some soup, sir?" she asked, with a broad smile.

"Soup? I don't think so. First of all I'm not sure what kind of soup it is and by the way, who's going to pay for it?" I wondered.

The look in Akiko's eyes seemed to say to me: '*How dare you*'. The hostess equally seemed shocked by my

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response. It appeared as if that was the first time any of their clients had responded like I had done.

"Try it. It's good for your health. Your lady friend will take care of everything, sir. Don't worry," she assured me.

"Okay...I appreciate that but you still haven't told me what kind of soup it is," I insisted.

"It's okay to say no, sir. We won't take it personal," the hostess said, and then returned with the tray.

Meanwhile, Akiko had been drinking from her bowl. I had wanted to ask her what exactly was going on but recalled she couldn't sufficiently express herself in English. As a matter of fact, I began wondering about a lot of things. Was this some sort of surprise date or something? If that was the case, why wasn't she being more direct? Why were those women treating her with so much respect? In my opinion, something wasn't right.

"Akiko I thank you so much for all of this but I think I should go back and meet my friend now. He has

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been waiting for me for quite a while and we will be leaving soon," I said, standing up.

"No, no, no. You wait, you wait. I come, I come," she said, tapping her hand on the couch.

"Akiko I'm sorry but I really can't--"

"You wait, you wait. I come, I come," she repeated.

I sat down, deciding with much reluctance to take her plea into consideration.

Akiko got up and walked toward the bar. While behind it, she went through a side door that was directly opposite the one out of which the hostesses came. Just moments later, the white female hostess reemerged and took a seat at the bar.

"Excuse me, are you American?" I asked, from where I sat.

I had remarked-at least within that setting- that there was absolutely nothing American in the way she carried herself and in what she was wearing. She didn't answer my question but the "mind your business" angry look she gave was sufficient enough to dissuade me from attempting to repeat the question or to ask any additional ones. I waited for a couple

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more minutes but Akiko was nowhere in sight. A few moments later, the lights slowly began to dim and the music's volume slightly increased. The lights dimmed further.

Akiko emerged in full-fledged dominatrix gear—black leather gloves, black leather boots, a black leather top and a brown dominatrix mask that she wore around her eyes. She hung a pair of handcuffs behind a belt she was wearing and also held a whip in her hand. The two hostesses immediately went on their knees and bowed their heads so low that they almost reached Akiko's boots. When she walked toward me and stopped just a few steps away from the couch, it dawned on me that this wasn't at all the Akiko I thought I knew. Facing me stood a stern-looking woman with a whip in her hand, determined to bring everyone and everything in that setting under her absolute control.

"Akiko what's wrong with you? What are you trying to do?" I asked, too astonished to bother whether she understood me or not.

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She swung the whip in my direction and I dodged. In the process, I slid off the couch and fell on my back. She put her foot on one of the wooden tables and pointed at her boot.

"You kiss!" she ordered.

Swoosh! Swoosh! She swung the whip. I dodged again and quickly rolled over to another side of the carpet. I took a quick look at the bar and was quite surprised to realize both hostesses were still on their knees as if awaiting an order for them to get back on their feet. With one hand, Akiko pulled out the pair of cuffs behind her belt and lifted her leg as if she was about to stamp it on my chest and pin me down on the carpet. I dodged and rolled back to the other side of it. She tried to swing the whip in my direction again but I quickly got on my feet and grabbed her hand. The two hostesses got up and rushed to where we stood.

"Stop it! Stop it! Listen, I don't mean any harm but I really need to get out of here. Do you understand me?" I said.

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I heard someone pull open the curtain. It was Kong Dung and Lee Pong.

"Akiko!" yelled Kong Dung, darting to the scene.

I let go of her arm. Lee Pong rushed and took position in front of the curtain to prevent me from leaving, while Kong Dung quickly pulled Akiko by the arm and led her to take a seat on the couch. They both spoke to each other in their native language.

"Would you kindly let me pass?" I asked Lee Pong when I got to the curtain.

He spread out his hands and feet in an attempt to better prevent me from walking past him. He waved his hands in the air over and over and made a strange humming sound. When I turned around, I saw frowning Kong Dung coming after me from afar with the whip in his hand. I had to find a way to defend myself. I quickly grabbed a soft cushion from one of the couches nearby and threw it at him. It hit his face and he exclaimed in Chinese, falling on the carpet. Akiko and the two hostesses rushed to pull him up. Kong Dung tried to come after me but the three women held him back. Lee Pong rolled up his sleeves and

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came up to me, his fists firmly clenched like a boxer ready for a first round against his opponent.

"Please listen, my brother," I said. "I hope you would somehow understand what I'm going to say: I have no problem with you guys. Akiko brought me here and I think I'm ready to leave. Is that slightly clear?"

He looked at me with a blank expression on his face but still with clenched fists. I walked past him and he turned around, as if confused and unsure about what to say. From behind, Kong Dung yelled in his native language and kept trying to insist coming after me but Akiko and the hostesses persistently pulled him back. I felt tremendously relieved when I went past the unsuspecting bouncer in the long hallway and made my way back to the dance floor. I ran into Valence as soon as I left the backstage premises.

"Seems like you didn't want to leave. Having too much fun, huh?" he asked. "I actually thought about going back there to find out what was going on."

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"It was anything but fun. It's a long story. I guess I'll tell you when we get back to Rodeoville Towers."

Valence turned around.

"Where in the world is she?" he asked.

"Who are you looking for?"

"The Eastern European chick I was dancing with...ah! There she is," he pointed. "I'll be right back. I need to get her number."

Valence walked through the crowd and up to where his new acquaintance stood with a group of friends. He wrapped his arm around her and whispered in her ear. I took a seat at the bar.

"What may I serve you?" the bartender asked me.

"Uhm...don't worry, I'm not thirsty. I'm just waiting for someone," I responded.

"Well I'm sorry you're gonna have to wait somewhere else. I can't let you sit here unless you're getting a drink," she said, sternly.

I left the bar quite embarrassed and made my way through the crowd. I picked a spot in the middle and stood there. Valence was still talking to his new acquaintance and I realized her arms were wrapped



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around his shoulders. In the heat of that moment he obviously must have forgotten we were supposed to be getting ready to leave. I began thinking about Emelda. Despite her flaws, I missed her greatly. I remembered the times when we used to sneak out late at night from our homes to meet each other at parties and how we used to dance...how I used to hold her so tight and not want to let go. I remembered the argument I had with her at The Aquatic when I saw her dancing with someone else.

From a distance, I saw Kong Dung emerging from backstage. He looked around, slowly making his way through the crowd. As soon as his eyes met with mine, he frowned and stretched out his neck as if to be certain that it was me. He began walking quickly toward my direction. He came after me no matter in what direction I went. In an attempt to escape from him and to avoid a publicly embarrassing situation, I was left with no choice but to bump my way past a couple of people. I had to think of something really fast before things got out of hand... and an idea came to mind. I ran up the stage and picked up the

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microphone, stopping Kong Dung in his tracks. He had come after me so fast that he ended up standing right in front of the stage and facing me directly. I was sure he would have loved to dive on stage if it wouldn't have caused quite a scene.

"Ladies and gentlemen, may I please have your attention?" I said, much to the consternation of the musicians behind me who had been playing guitar.

"My name is John Malinke. I am one of the many new international students who got into Rodeoville University this semester."

The crowd applauded.

"Thank you, thank you," I continued. "Well, pardon me for this sudden interruption but I felt that considering the uniqueness of this event-an event which takes place just once a year-it should not only be an opportunity to drink, dance and celebrate but also to discover those among us who may have special talents."

Valence drew closer to the stage with his eyes wide open as if he could neither believe his ears nor what he was saying.

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"In that respect I would like to present to each of you a gentleman who just like me, happens to be a freshman. He has a tremendous passion for singing and dancing and from the moment I walked in he kept pleading if I would be kind enough to stand before you and ask if he could perform on stage."

"Call him up! Call him up! Call him up!" the crowd shouted.

"He speaks limited English but knows how to move an audience," I continued.

At that moment I noticed Kong Dung trying to walk away from the stage area to where the bar was situated.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to present to you...Kong Dung!" I quickly shouted, pointing at him.

He suddenly found himself facing an applauding crowd and was forced to turn around and walk to the stage. He bit his lips but he didn't say a word. From the way he looked at me I imagined him cursing at me in his native language.

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"I can feel his body tingling inside with unbelievable excitement!" I shouted to the crowd, giving him the microphone.

The crowd applauded again. Kong Dung's hand trembled when he took the microphone and his face reflected much anger and reluctance. He cleared his throat. He gently tapped the microphone with his left palm. He cleared his throat again. The crowd seemed to be getting impatient. Then he blurted out:

*I clap music*

*I good music*

*I fiibe music*

*I hab music*

There was a mixture of laughter and applause.

"One more time! One more time! One more time! One more time!" the crowd shouted.

Kong Dung frowned at me but the pressure and demands of his audience seemed to have forced him to momentarily hold in his anger. Nodding his head several times and tapping his right foot, he continued:

*I clap music*

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*I dan music*

*I hab music*

*I fibe music*

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's put our hands together for Kong Dung!" I said, after taking the mic from him.

I joined the crowd in applauding. While getting off the stage, he gave me a look that seemed to suggest that the battle between us was not yet over.

"John, what the hell happened to you tonight? I could barely make you out up there," Valence said, on our way out of the building. "Felt like a complete transformation. Looks like you're starting to be more relaxed, man. That's good."

"As I said, it's a long and unbelievable story. I'll tell you what happened when we get back." "So did you get the number of the lady you danced with?" I asked

"Sure did. I think I like her, she's cool."

"Wow, I'm happy to hear that. I hope--"

Valence interrupted me:

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"I know what you're trying to get at, John. I know I've made a lot of ignorant comments and I wish to apologize. I've learned a lot from meeting you and hanging out with her has opened my mind to a world I never cared to know existed. It's a bit too soon but I don't think I've ever met a girl like her before. She's awesome. Diversity is indeed what makes our world so beautiful."

I was so moved by Valence's words. An innocent knock on his door to ask if he would be willing to accompany me to a party had led him to meet someone who could perhaps help him change his outlook on life, particularly his impressions of people who were different from him.

"I'm proud of you Valence, and I had been hoping for a long time that you would come to realize what you have just confessed to me," I said. "I have learned a lot from you as well and I am happy to be able to call you my friend."

A cab pulled over.

"Rodeoville Towers," Valence said.

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The driver honked to signal that he accepted to take us to our destination.

"Don't worry about it. I got you covered," Valence said as we got in, cognizant of the fact that I probably didn't have enough on me to pay for the cab fare for both of us. "Ain't no way I'm gonna risk walking back on that street," he added.

As we rode I thought about how impressed I was at Valence's transformation. But that fact was soon overshadowed by another detail: Akiko Takimura was not as naïve and innocent as I thought.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN****Let love Find You**

Amisu sighed. She quickly glanced through the sheet of paper on her desk, picked up her phone and dialed again.

"I'm starting to get tired of the same responses," she said to me while I sat facing her.

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"Hi. Joan? Yes, it's Amisu from OIS. Tell me, I was wondering-are there any student job openings at all in your department? One of our international students desperately needs to get something."

She nodded attentively while listening to the person on the other line.

"The Food Marketing Center, you mean? Sure, I'll give it a shot."

Amisu hung up again. My social security card had come in the mail a few days ago and with my new social security number and some of the money my parents had sent, I was able to open up a bank account at Chesterfield bank in Center City. But now I faced quite a major challenge: Immigration laws forbade international students from working off-campus without authorization and based on the seven or eight phone calls Amisu had made, there were barely any more student job opportunities available. It would have been risky for me to attempt cutting into the 150-dollar deposit I gave to Chesterfield bank to open up an account with them. I needed a steady source of income in order to survive like my



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counterparts from other countries. I felt for Amisu because the calls and the unfortunately unfavourable responses were taking a toll on her. Nonetheless I admired her sense of professionalism because she wasn't bent on giving up at all.

"Hold on tight. We'll get something, I know it. You're not the first student I've had to make multiple calls for...and you won't be the last. We've had departments turn around in the past and create special openings for some of our students when everything else failed," she reassured me, after several unfruitful calls.

Amisu dialed another extension.

"Hi. Is this the Food Marketing Center? Hassan? This is Amisu. How's it going? I'm fine, thank you. Tell me...would you guys by any chance have any more student positions open? We've got a student here who really needs a job."

She listened carefully. Seconds later, she smiled and winked at me, so I interpreted that as a good sign.

"I appreciate it. Thanks Hassan," she said, and hung up. "Go immediately to the Food Marketing Center on

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the fifth floor of Caldwell Hall and ask for Hassan. There's a student position open. He'll have you fill out a form. When you're done filling out the form, bring us a copy. We'll need to put it in your file. Also take your passport along with you so they can make a copy if necessary."

"Do you mind if I ask what exactly would be my responsibilities at this job?"

"Mr. Malinke, you aren't in a position to choose jobs right now. Just take whatever comes your way. Your case has more to do with survival than anything else. When you get to the Food Marketing Center, they'll tell you everything you need to know," Amisu said. "Hurry up before the position gets filled."

In my eagerness to secure one of the only available student positions left, I pushed through the revolving doors of Caldwell Hall's Main entrance and ran through the lobby, forgetting to show my student ID card to the security guard at the front desk.

"Hey! Hey! ID, babe!" she shouted, while I ran to catch the elevator.

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I had no time to turn around. The elevator doors were in the process of shutting.

"Somebody hold it, please!" I shouted at the group of people inside as the double doors began to close.

The elevator doors reopened. Someone from within had pressed one of the buttons to let me in. Just as I was about to get in, the security guard yelled behind me:

"ID! You are not getting in there until you show me your student ID!"

She shouted so loud that it caused quite a scene and must have frightened the elevator occupants, who suddenly had reason to worry about the possibility of an intruder gaining access into the building. Predictably, the elevator doors quickly shut and I deliberately got left out. The next group of people standing behind me awaiting their turn to get into the elevator carefully watched the drama unfold between the security guard and me.

"How can you be so disrespectful? You think you're an exception to the rule?" she complained.

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"I am very sorry. I would like to ask you to excuse me. I'm new here and I desperately need to get a job on campus. I was rushing to the fifth floor to honour an appointment regarding one of the few student positions currently available."

Within seconds, the anger reflected in her face gave way to a look of compassion and understanding.

"I apologize for interrupting you sir," she said, in a sympathetic tone. "I was just doing my job. It's always a good idea to show your ID each time you enter a building. You're not from here, are you?"

The up and down arrows beside the elevator flashed and the monitor showed that it was in the process of descending from the fourth floor to the lobby.

"How did you know I'm not from here? My accent, I guess?"

I turned around and gave a quick look at the monitor above the elevator, which indicated that it was in the process of descending from the third floor.

"Not only that," she smiled. "You just seem so polite. Nice talking to you. Got to get back to work...have a good day."

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With those words, she turned around and began walking back to the front desk. I never imagined that my conversation with this older white lady who followed me all the way from the main entrance to the elevator would have ended so peacefully. In the process of talking to her, I discovered an individual who appeared to be sympathetic and understanding.

The monitor signaled that the elevator had now reached the first floor.

"So does it mean I have to keep showing you my ID even if I walked in here five times today?" I joked.

She laughed and turned around:

"Don't act like you don't know the answer. Of course not...I sure would have remarked you by the second time."

Lots of people emerged from the elevator when its doors opened up at the lobby-students with their backpacks on, professors holding folders and briefcases rushed left and right. No one seemed to have much time to stop and talk to anyone. It was such a fast-paced environment and I had become used to it. Dr. Wilson was among some of the people who got

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off the elevator. On his way out, he waved at me and smiled when I got in with the group of people behind me. As usual, everyone pushed and bumped to get a spot inside.

"Good Afternoon. I have an appointment with Mr. Hassan," I told the receptionist at the front desk of the Food Marketing Center.

"Have a seat. What's your name?" he asked.

"John Malinke."

"Ah! I remember that."

The receptionist picked up his phone and dialed a number.

"Hassan? Your appointment is here," he said.

Behind the receptionist was a hall with many students who sat relatively close to each other in booths. There were computers on each of their desks and they all wore headsets with tiny microphones that were connected to their respective computers. Moments later, a balding, Middle-Eastern-looking male of very average height walked toward the front desk from one

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of the offices in the hallway. I stood up to greet him.

"I'm pleased to meet you Mr. Malinke," he said, shaking my hand. "Come with me. I'll show you around."

Mr. Hassan and I walked down the hallway and past several doors. Some of them were open and I could see administrative staff typing on computers, holding meetings, using copy machines and making phone calls. We made a right and Hassan opened a door that led us to the hall with rows upon rows of booths where students wearing headsets sat next to each other in front of computer screens.

"So this is our Call Center," he said, giving me a tour. "And these are your soon to be co-workers."

"What exactly do you do here?" I asked.

"Our employees make phone calls to help us identify business, residential, and non-working numbers. This information is automatically stored into our database after each call."

A female student took off her headset and got up from her seat.

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"Candace can I bother you for just two minutes?" Mr. Hassan asked. "I know you must be getting ready to go for your lunch break but if you don't mind, I'd like you to take a brief moment to show this student what we do."

"Sure, no problem at all," the student said. "Are you gonna join our team?" she asked me.

"Yes, I intend to," I responded.

"Cool! Come over..."

"On your way out, knock on door number 201. I'd like us to talk for a few minutes before you leave," Hassan said to me, and left.

Although this was my first visit to the Call Center, I saw in the rows of its student employees, a remarkable representation of the University's diversity. I heard people speaking in all sorts of accents, some of them even doing so in their native languages. International students were easy to make out; not only did many of them sound different from their American counterparts when they spoke, but a lot of them also wore traditional outfits from their home countries.



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It looked like such a unique mixture of different cultures. In spite of their cultural differences, they all appeared to be united by a desire to succeed in the tasks to which they had been assigned. Everyone was concentrated on his or her computer screen and no one spoke in a loud tone to avoid distracting the person sitting next to or behind them.

I stood beside Candace while she sat on her desk.

"These computers permit us to send information directly to the Food Marketing Center's database," she said, pointing at her screen. "The computers dial numbers automatically and based on the interaction we have with our correspondents, we are able to label the numbers in one of four categories," Candace continued.

She pointed at a box on her computer screen which demonstrated the four categories of phone numbers she was referring to. These were listed as:

- Business
- Residential

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- Non-working
- No answer/undefined

Afterward, she connected an extra headset to her computer and asked me to put it on so I could watch and listen to her interactions with people on the phone. Candace clicked on a button on her screen and the word "dialing" appeared within the box. A random phone number appeared on the screen. I heard a phone ring.

"Hello?" someone said.

"Hi. Is this a business number?" she asked.

"No, this is not a business number. This is a house," the person responded.

"I'm sorry, I dialed the wrong number," she said, and clicked on a button to proceed to the next call.

Another random number appeared on screen. This time the phone didn't ring but we got a busy signal instead. Candace clicked on the "No Answer/Undefined" option. After that, she clicked on "Pause," and it temporarily prevented the computer from proceeding

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with the automatic dialing. She took off her headset and turned to me:

"That's pretty much it. Now you have a feel for it. It's not complicated at all. Remember this: Whether or not the person tells you it's a business number, your response must always be: 'I'm sorry, I dialed the wrong number.'"

I thanked her and walked down the hall to door number 201. It read: *Ahmed Hassan, Assistant Manager, Call Center*. I knocked.

"Come in please," Mr. Hassan answered.

Upon opening the door I noticed that he seemed to be taking part in a working session with one of his co-workers. He sat at his desk typing quickly on a laptop while his co-worker read to him from a sheet of paper.

"Should I come back later? I didn't mean to interrupt," I said.

"Ah! Mr. Malinke! Not at all-come on in. Have a sit right there," he answered, pointing to a chair at the corner. "I'll be right back," he told his co-worker, as he got up from his seat.

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Mr. Hassan sat facing me.

"So-I believe Candace showed you everything?"

"Yes, she did. I am very grateful."

"We need to fill that spot as soon as possible. Can you begin tomorrow?"

"I think I can," I said.

"Good. We pay nine dollars an hour for beginners. Depending on your performance and professionalism at work, the Call Center could progressively increase your pay to 10 and then eventually to 11 dollars within six to eight months. Longevity at the job also makes a difference as far as pay. Candace is one of our longest-serving employees."

Mr. Hassan got up, took a folder from a nearby shelf and brought it to me. There were a few sheets of paper inside.

"I'll need you to fill out this form and bring it to me when you start tomorrow. We'll need your social security number, your address on or off campus and all that stuff. Our shifts run from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 2-6 p.m. Monday through Friday. On Saturdays

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we're open from 9:30 a.m.-1 p.m. When can you start tomorrow?"

"Well, I have class in the morning, so I'll probably only be able to do the 2-6pm shift," I said.

"Good...fill in your work schedule on the form and bring it with you tomorrow. If I'm not available, leave it with the receptionist. Have a good day, then. And welcome onboard!"

With those words, Mr. Hassan shook my hand and I left his office.

"John! John!" someone shouted behind me.

It was Saleh. He accompanied me toward the exit. When we got to a certain point, we stopped walking so that we could talk for some time.

"Why you come to the Call Center?" he asked.

"I've been looking for a job. I'm scheduled to begin working here tomorrow," I said.

"Oh wow. Nice, no? All international student start at Call Center. Excited, yes? Guess I should say 'welcome to our team, no?'"

"You work here too?" I asked.

"Yap, almost two and a half years now."

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"Almost two and a half years? Then you must be among the Center's longest-serving employees. It seems like a relatively easy job. I think I'm fully aware of what is expected of me. It must be quite a popular job on campus too. Mr. Hassan told me they always need people."

Saleh laughed.

"Of course it feels easy in the beginning. Wait if you'll tell same story in two months. If you can handle psychological pressures of the job...then you really a man. And yes, they always need people-resignation rate very high: about three people every other month."

Saleh was giving me information about my new job that had me quite concerned and I felt like hearing more from him.

"Then why are you still there?" I asked.

"What a question. Call Center's the only stable job for international student. How you will pay your bills? How you will eat? Have to find a way to survive, no?"

I thought for a moment.

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"Saleh, I would like to get your honest opinion. Do you think this job alone would be sufficient as far as helping me meet up with my needs?"

"You want honest opinion, you say? Truly, as international student you cannot survive eight dollars an hour. You only receive paycheck after two weeks."

I had dreaded his response and he told me exactly what I was scared to hear.

"So do you mean most international students often have to look for other means to survive?" I asked.

Saleh laughed.

"Of course-you will never find job that will satisfy you financially on this campus. Even you work 15 hours a week, it will not be enough to help you pay all your bills."

"But immigration rules prevent us from--"

Saleh interrupted me.

"You haven't yet reached that point, no? It's your decision. If you think you can survive with pay on campus, good for you. But believe me...soon you will

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start to see red. I have to go back to work now. See you next time, okay?"

*But believe me...very soon you will start to see red.*

Those words kept on echoing in my mind when I left the building. Was Saleh suggesting that circumstances would eventually push me to consider taking part in an unauthorized employment opportunity outside of the University's campus? Why would I want to take such a risk? There would be grave consequences. I wanted to believe I could survive with whatever employment I obtained on campus. I would have liked to talk more with Saleh about the subject but it was unfortunate he was rushing off to work.

I returned to Room 702, picked up the phone and dialed our home number in my country to inform my parents about the good news. When my bank account became operational, I withdrew 20 dollars out of the 150 dollars I had deposited so I could buy a phone card to call my parents and Emelda.

The phone rang three times and then Dad picked up.

"Hello?" he said.



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"Dad? It's John."

"Hey! How's my boy doing? It's been quite a while. I hope you are working hard in all of your classes."

"I am doing the best I can, Dad. I am working as hard as I can," I responded.

"Very good."

"I would like to share some good news with you, Dad."

"Go ahead. What is that? I'm anxious."

"I got a job on campus and I will start working tomorrow."

"That is the way to go! I am proud of you, son. Keep it up!" Dad exclaimed in excitement.

He paused for a moment and then asked:

"So what exactly are you going to be doing?"

"I'm going to be getting paid to make phone calls."

"You'll be getting paid to make phone calls? What kind of job is that? I hope you didn't get yourself involved in anything funny. You know how that country is. If you aren't strong enough to hold on

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to your values, you could get carried away and find yourself in a big mess."

"It's nothing illegal, Dad. I am going to be working for the Food Marketing Center. I will be making calls to help them identify residential, business and non-working numbers."

Dad was silent.

"That sounds fairly interesting but I wish you could have found something better," he said.

"I feel the same way too but this was the only available student position on campus."

"Well son, continue working hard. Remember to stay focused. Your mother and I are very proud of you. She went to a meeting a few minutes ago. I'll give her the good news when she returns. Take care."

After my conversation with Dad was over, I took a chance and called Emelda. This time she picked up after two rings.

"Hopefully I don't need to identify myself," I joked.

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"John! How are you? Of course I can recognize your voice," she said.

"I have some good news."

"Really? And what might that be?" Emelda asked.

"I'm starting a job on campus tomorrow."

"Wow! That's nice...I hope they'll pay you well?"

"At the moment I will be getting paid less than 10 dollars an hour, but it will permit me to be able to send you some money from time to time."

"Ha, ha, ha-less than 10 dollars an hour and you think that would be enough to help me meet up with my needs? That's not even sufficient for you to be able to take care of yourself!"

I had become fared up and I felt it was about time for me to express my feelings.

"Listen, Emelda. Life is about hard work and sacrifice. Ever since I've known you the only things that you seem to be interested in are fast money and immediate results. I've tried extremely hard to make this relationship work, but you apparently have more important priorities."

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"You've tried to make this relationship work? John, you're in America. I'm in Africa. I can't see you, touch you or feel you. Tell me how this is going to work," she said.

*Tell me how this is going to work.* Those words deeply resonated because despite our many conflicts and disagreements, Emelda and I had avoided bluntly telling each other that the time had come for us to part. But this time around we seemed to share a common goal: a desire to move on and explore other alternatives and to free ourselves from the unwelcome chains that held us in bondage against our will. It hurt deeply, and for a moment she and I were silent on the phone as we both tried to digest the immediate, emotional impact of our rupture.

"Well, I guess this is it, Emelda. I disagree with your perspective on many issues but I want you to know that I appreciate having had the opportunity to know you. I hope that as we move on we do so on a friendly basis and I wish you the best," I said.

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"I hope so too and I wish you the same," she responded, in a voice heavy with emotion.

I hung up. I could feel my broken heart bleeding inside but I had to stay strong and develop the courage to move on. I had to accept that my relationship with Emelda now represented the past and that the distance between us coupled with the differences in our individual goals and priorities would always create avenues for conflict. The pain was deep...very deep. She had been a stable figure in my love life for a long time and my heart needed time to heal from its wounds. Although our personalities were so different, I wondered if anyone else-particularly in another country with a different culture-would have been able to make me feel the same way Emelda did.

Education in the United States of America was a completely different experience from what I was accustomed to in my home country. In my former school in the Republic of Boluaké, my classmates and I hand-wrote all of our tests and assignments

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on sheets of papers that we tore from our notebooks. There were no computers in our classrooms, no computer labs and only a few teachers and administrative staff had typewriters in their offices. Those typewriters were used to type test questions on sheets of paper which were distributed in class on examination day.

Unlike at Rodeoville University, there were no PowerPoint presentations and teachers were restricted to speaking to classrooms of sixty or more students and writing on blackboards with chalk sticks. It was common to hear some of them say once in a while:

"I've been writing on the board all day and my hand hurts, so you people will have to listen very carefully to what I say."

In spite of the tremendously filled-up classes they taught, my former teachers always got to know the names of each of their students, their strengths and weaknesses, and who was or wasn't participating in class. And although they didn't have the same resources and learning facilities as

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their American counterparts, they were often the best and brightest in their field, with a great mastery of the courses they were assigned to teach. Being so far away from home filled my heart with appreciation for my former teachers who significantly contributed to help me get to where I was.

I had a particularly hard time in Dr. Ian Smith's *Introduction to Mass Media* course. His assignments were very intense and he required each of us to have written seven reaction papers on various topics by the end of the semester. Anyone who wrote less than seven papers risked paying the price in terms of final grade at the end of the course. I had to explain to him (and to each of my teachers that semester) that I didn't yet feel comfortable typing my papers on a computer and that I would need some time to be able to learn how to do so. Each of them was considerate, but the downside was that it probably worked in favour of some of the stereotypes of Africans they were used to seeing on television.

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It didn't get any easier after the Campus Tech Center helped me set up a student e-mail account. Each time I tried to get into the University's computer lab, I felt discouraged by the presence of a particular male student who often sat at a desk by the door. He wore a pair of very big glasses and typed extremely fast with an amazing degree of confidence on his computer, unintentionally reminding me of just how much I had to learn. Whenever I saw him, I made an immediate U-turn. It took Valence accompanying me a few times before I eventually got comfortable.

I also noticed that my professors were quite strict in terms of spelling. Most schools in my country taught their students British English, and this was reflected in the way certain words were written. But I realized that in American English, the letter "u" was often taken off of words that ended in "our." For instance, each time I wrote the word "colour," my professors drew a circle around it with a red pen and rewrote it as "color." It was the same case with words like "favour," "honor" and



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"splendor," which were all encircled and rewritten in red when I used the British spelling.

Each time Dr. Ian Smith graded and returned my papers, I could expect to see several red circles on every page where I had typed any of the "our" words. It took me a little while to get used to writing those words the American way, but within a short period of time I developed the natural reflexes and it soon became second nature.

The day after my interview with Mr. Hassan, I signed in at the front desk of the Call Center and sat at one of the unoccupied booths at the back of the hall. It was exactly 1:58 p.m. I was done with my morning classes and the afternoon shift at the Call Center was just about to begin. Candace stood in front of the hall and faced all of us. She looked at her watch.

"All right guys, it is 2 p.m. Put on your headsets, log in and let's get started. Good luck," she said, and took a seat at one of the booths up front.

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I wore my headset and adjusted the speaker attached to it so that it wasn't too close to my lips. A message appeared on screen asking me to type in my full names and booth number. I typed "John Malinke, Booth 25," and hit "ENTER" on my keyboard. The computer took about a minute to load, and then the box Candace had shown me with the four different categories appeared on screen. The computer began dialing and I was quite excited to take my first call.

"Hullo?" someone answered.

"Hi. Is this a business number?" I asked.

"No, this is not a business number. This is a house."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. I dialed the wrong number," I said.

In the box, I clicked on "residential," and then on the mouse, and quickly moved on to the next call.

Another phone number appeared on screen, and the computer dialed.

"Hi. Is this a business number?" I asked when someone took the call.

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"Say whaaaaaat?" asked an elderly-sounding male with a strong, Southern accent.

"Is this a business number?" I repeated.

The man sighed.

"Hold on...hold on...I can't understand you," he said.

A call timer on the top right hand corner of my screen was counting how long my call was taking. I had wanted to quickly click on "residential" and move on to the next call but I didn't think that would have been polite considering the fact that my correspondent had asked me to hold on. It felt like a no-win situation. I had heard that the calls we made were randomly monitored by our supervisors and I was also concerned that if I wasted too much time on one call, it could work against me.

"Carla? Could you get the phone, please? There's some fellow on the phone asking if this is a business number or something. Couldn't understand him...sounds like some damn Pakistani or Indian," I heard the man say, to a woman whom I assumed must have been his wife.

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The call timer showed that I had already taken one minute and forty five seconds. I didn't think it necessary to waste additional time asking the same question to his wife and I felt quite offended by his stereotypical description of me.

"I'm sorry, I dialed the wrong number," I said, as soon as his wife got to the phone.

I clicked on "residential" and moved on to the next call. The phone rang three times, but no one picked up, so on the box, I clicked on "no answer." By the fourth call, I was starting to get tired of repeating the same question over and over and the repetition was slowly beginning to take a toll on my voice. The computer dialed the next number that showed up on screen. I repeated the same question.

"You called me a couple minutes ago and I told you this isn't a business number," the person responded, in an angry tone. "Don't call this number again, you got that?"

The person obviously had no clue that I wasn't even the one who redialed the number. I quickly clicked on "residential" and once again moved on to the

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next call. Every hour, I took ten to fifteen-minute breaks to stretch my legs and walk a little bit around the hallways of the fourth floor. There were vending machines in that area that sold snacks, juice and beverages, so once in a while I joined some of my new co-workers and sat on one of the seats in the hallway to get a quick drink and snack before returning to work.

Candace met me sitting on the bench one time when I was taking a break.

"So! How's the job going?" she asked.

"It's easy, but I see it requires everyone to be really thick skinned," I said. "You have to put up with insults, misinterpretations, anger, and even prejudice and stereotypes."

Candace laughed.

"Hey, it's better than not having anything to do, right? Especially for you who desperately needed a job. Just hang in there, you're gonna do just fine."

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I felt so drained and exhausted after my first four hours of work at the Call Center. When my shift was over, I walked to *Spiro*, an Italian restaurant on campus where I had agreed to meet D., Valence and Lane for dinner. It was about 6:30 p.m. When I got in, the three of them were already seated at table and had ordered drinks.

"Yo, John! Right here," Valence waved.

I walked up to the middle table where they were seated and took a seat beside Lane, while Valence and D. sat on the other two seats facing us.

"What's going on, big guy? How was the first day?" D. asked.

"Not easy but I managed to pull it off," I said.

A waiter gave each of us a menu and asked me what I would like to drink.

"I think I'll just have a bottle of water," I said.

"You're drinking water at a restaurant? That's kinda new," Valence remarked.

"Well, I spent four hours asking people on the phone if I had reached a business number and I feel as if I'm about to lose my voice."

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Valence and D. laughed, but Lane didn't react. He seemed focused on reading through the menu.

"Guess we gotta check out the menu as well. Lane's leading the way," D. said, in a mocking tone.

We looked through the menu and moments later, the waiter returned with my bottle of water and took our orders.

"Spaghetti with meat balls," Valence said.

"Garlic bread...just garlic bread," Lane said.

"Hmmm...I think I'll go for three medium-sized Pepperoni Pizzas," D. said.

"And you, sir?" the waiter asked.

"Well, a meatball sandwich," I said.

"Very good," said the waiter, taking our menus.

There was a moment of silence, and then Valence said:

"Wow, you won't believe this. Look who's here, John. Turn around..."

I turned around and saw Akiko sitting with a white male dressed in a suit and tie. As if feeling uncomfortable or embarrassed, she quickly looked away as soon as her eyes met with mine.

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"Ain't that the Asian chick who pulled you backstage at the party and came out dressed like a dominatrix?"

Valence asked, in a low tone.

I nodded.

"I haven't yet had a chance to ask her what that was all about," I said.

"Looks like she got herself a big fish...snatched one of them corporate dudes or something," D. laughed.

"What about the Eastern European lady you met?" I asked.

"Oh...she's awesome. We went for a picnic at the park this afternoon," Valence responded.

There was a moment of silence.

"You ain't tell me, John. What's up with you and your girl back home?" D. asked.

The waiter returned with my meatball sandwich and Lane's garlic bread.

"Just be a little patient, folks. Your pizza and spaghetti will be right up," he said.

There was a brief moment of silence again.

"You ain't answer my question, dawg," D. insisted.

I sighed.



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"Well, we broke up yesterday," I said.

"Oh no! I'm so sorry to hear that," Valence said.

"What you mean you're sorry to hear that? Let the man move on with his life! There's a wide range of ladies in America to choose from," D. reacted.

Lane said nothing. He broke up his garlic bread into two pieces and began eating.

"That's beside the point, D. I mean...this dude's from a foreign country. It ain't that easy to find someone sensitive and open-minded enough to different cultural values," Valence argued.

D. was silent for a moment, and then he said:

"I hear you. But no matter where he's from, there's stuff he can do that could make a big difference, know what I'm saying?"

The waiter came back with Valence and D.'s orders.

"Enjoy your meals, gentlemen," he said, and then went off to take an order from another table.

"Wait a minute. Are you suggesting he'll have to put aside some aspects of his culture?" Valence asked.

"You're getting there. Not all, but some of e'm..." D. responded.

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I turned around and looked in the direction of Akiko's table again.

"Hey, stop turning around man, that's kinda rude. You're gonna make her uncomfortable," Valence said, laughing.

"I was just curious. She was in my English as a Third Language course, so I wonder how well she's communicating with the man she's with," I said.

"You see? You're stereotyping yourself," Valence said.

"No, I'm not...I was just wondering," I argued.

"Listen guys, who the hell cares if she can't speak a lick of English? The dude obviously thinks she's attractive. Know what I mean? Heck, he found a way to get his message across. That's what counts," D. said.

There was yet another moment of silence.

"I think we should try to get Lane into the conversation," I proposed.

"Hah! Good luck with that," D. mocked.

"What topics does he tend to be interested in?" I asked.

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"Definitely not anything we've talked about so far," Valence responded. "He's been trying to write a book, though. Every night he types up a page or two before he goes to bed. He says he's very interested in doing research on agricultural issues."

"Really? That's interesting. My Dad's very involved in the agricultural business back home," I said.

I turned to Lane. He had finished eating his garlic bread and was drumming slightly on the table. He was looking to his left, seeming very unconcerned and in an entirely different world.

"Hey Lane, I hear you're writing a book?" I asked.

"What did you say, buddy?"

"I hear you're writing a book?" I repeated, louder.

"Book? Ah, yeah! Well, sort of..." he answered.

"What's the title going to be?" I asked.

He looked at me with a blank expression on his face.

"Sorry I didn't quite get that. If you're asking about the garlic bread, I think I had enough...thank you."

His response through me off and I wasn't sure if I should have kept on insisting.

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"He wants to know what the title of your book's gonna be," Valence said, a bit louder.

Lane paused.

"I only eat potatoes in summer," he said.

Valence, D. and I looked at each other, wondering if he had actually understood our question. When we had eaten and paid our bill, I looked at Akiko one last time on our way out. Predictably, she avoided making any form of eye contact with me but I was confident that I would eventually get a chance to ask her a couple of questions about that night. I just wasn't ready to forget the incident anytime soon.

"As I was saying at dinner time cuz, you gotta change up a couple things," D. said, when we returned to our room.

I was sitting on the couch watching the news on one of the local TV stations. He sat down on one of the chairs facing me.

"I know you broke up with your girl but I mean...shoot! Life goes on, right?"

I nodded.

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"Yeah, right-that wasn't a confident nod, man. Listen to me. You seem like a really decent, hardworking, professional, serious kinda dude and ain't nothing wrong with that, brother. But I gotta tell you-most undergrad girls ain't ready for that. They just wanna have fun-go to clubs, parties, hang out, do crazy stuff. Know what I mean? Don't get me wrong...I ain't saying you can't find someone that appreciates somebody serious. But if you go talk to a sophomore, junior or a first semester senior, I'd bet you she'd still very much wanna have fun," D. said.

"Okay...so what are you suggesting?" I asked.

"For starters, you gotta spice up your look a little bit. You know, be adventurous! Get a hat...wear it sideways. Put on some baggy pants and a Hip-hop T-shirt. Get some bling, some ice! You know what I mean, man?"

"I get your point, D. But that's honestly not my style. I don't see a reason to go out of my way to please other people at the expense of my own comfort. And I don't agree that all undergraduate women prefer a man who comes across that way. I believe there are

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some who wish to be with men who have goals and are focused and well grounded. It's better to think about tomorrow than to live for today," I responded.

D. sighed.

"You're looking at it the wrong way, dawg. Consider it an experiment, that's all. I think it's worth a try," he insisted. "Matter of fact, there's something I'd like you to do."

D. opened his closet, looked through a collection of baseball hats on the top shelf and offered one to me.

"Here-try this on," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"I just wanna see how you'll look."

I put the hat on.

"No! Sideways," D. specified.

I turned the hat to the side.

"There you go, man. If I saw you walking down the street, I'd think you was one of my homes-not a brother from the motherland," D. said.

He opened his closet again and took out a beaming silver chain.

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"Wow, this really sparkles. Where did you get it from?" I asked.

"See? I got taste," D. said. "But I ain't telling ya. Put it on and let's see."

I wore the chain on my neck.

"That's what I'm talking about!" he exclaimed.

I took off the chain and the hat and returned them to D.

"Tell you what. Why don't we go shop for some T-shirts and baggy pants Saturday afternoon?" he proposed.

"Well, as I said D., I don't feel comfortable dressing like that. Besides, I haven't been paid yet. I can't afford to do any shopping right now."

"Never mind, I'll take care of that. I know a place down town with cool stuff that ain't gonna cost us more than 20 bucks. We're just gonna get two, T-shirts and a pair of baggy jeans," D. said.

"But why waste your money?" I wondered. "I've told you I don't feel comfortable wearing that."

"Man, please! Please! Just try it. Just give it a shot. It don't hurt. Turn into someone else for a

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day- or two-or even a damn week! See how the world reacts. But anyway, you got my word...I ain't gonna hold it against you if you try and don't like it."

I felt very uneasy about D.'s proposal, but I didn't want to get into an unnecessary argument with him on the issue. It was something I never would have considered doing.

And so on Saturday afternoon that week, D. gave me a ride down Center City. He parked his car beside a parking meter on South Street and put a few coins into the meter when we got out. We walked about three blocks and entered a store that appeared to specialize in selling urban clothing. From the moment we walked in, I heard Hip-hop music being played.

"Welcome guys," a white female said, smiling broadly.

What struck me most was the fact that most of the store's employees were white, and most of the white male employees were dressed in Hip-hop gear: Some of them had baggy pants and T-shirts on, while others simply wore baseball hats backward or sideways with chains around their necks and bracelets on their



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wrists. It was a relatively large store with posters of rap artists on each of the walls. There were multiple shelves with a variety of T-shirts that reflected something about Hip-hop: portraits of rap artists, Hip-hop slang and vocabulary, and all sorts of drawings and illustrations that had something to do with that particular genre of music. There were surveillance cameras on the ceilings in every section and customers who came in with bags were asked to leave them on shelves at the entrance. The security guard standing by the door then gave them numbered index cards which they had to give back to him on their way out of the store in order for their bags to be returned.

"Sup, playa? It's been a while," said one of the white male employees who walked up to D. and shook his hand.

"Ain't complaining, brother...same old, same old. Where them plain T-shirts at?" he asked.

"At the usual spot-straight in the back," the employee responded.

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We walked past a section filled with sneakers on multiple shelves, and D. shook hands and chatted with the employees who crossed his path as we went along.

"What's your shirt size, man?" he asked, when we got to the section with plain T-shirts.

"Large," I answered.

D. looked through the T-shirts on the shelf and pulled one of them out.

"Here we go. This is a large," he said. "Why don't you try this on?" he suggested.

With barely any enthusiasm, I asked one of the employees to show me the dressing room section. I went in and I tried the shirt on. It fit perfectly, but I felt very uncomfortable with how wide and baggy it was. I could barely recognize myself when I looked in the mirror.

"It fit," I told D. when I got out of the dressing room.

"Cool!" he exclaimed. "That was a black shirt, so let's get you a white one as well."

He looked through the pile of white T-shirts on the shelf and pulled out a large-sized one.

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"And your waist size?" D. asked.

"34/32," I said.

On our way toward the cash register, he looked through a pile of baggy, denim pants and picked out one with my waist size.

"What color do you prefer? Black or regular?" he asked.

"You know, I'd rather not have you bother. But since you keep on insisting, I'll go with a regular colour."

We walked up to the counter.

"That would be \$18.65," the cashier said.

"See? Told you this stuff ain't that expensive," D. said in a low tone while the cashier gave him his change. "You just gotta know when it's right to shop for it. All right, dawg... Let's roll."

When we got back in D.'s car, everything seemed so unreal and like a joke to me. I couldn't believe I had given in to his proposal. But it wasn't a joke at all. Not only was D. very serious, but there I was sitting on the passenger side holding a plastic bag with baggy denim pants and two, baggy T-shirts.

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It wasn't until Monday morning of the following week that D. began pressuring me to put on one of the shirts and the pair of pants he had bought for me. All attempts to once again get him to consider my point of view failed.

"Nope...I didn't waste eighteen bucks dawg," he said. "Take it as an experiment. It don't hurt."

So I put on the white T-shirt with the baggy denim pants and a pair of sneakers, and then wore a blue baseball hat sideways that D. had given me that morning.

"The hat's yours for the week if you need, man." "You look sharp," he said, slightly adjusting the hat and turning it a little more to the side.

That was the first time I had seen him smile so broadly.

"I swear I'd take you for an American if you walked past me down the street. Let me see you walk for a minute. Just walk like you were going to my desk," D. suggested.

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I was standing beside my bed. I walked from there, went past the sofa and then all the way to D.'s desk by the wall.

"Nah, you walk too fast. And it's kinda stiff. That ain't the way. You gotta walk with style, man...with a certain swagger. From this moment on, you ain't John from Africa. Walk like you're from Philly. Hold on, let me show you."

D. walked the same distance in a manner that was hard for me to describe in words. It almost looked as if he was limping, but he wasn't. And when he walked, his left and right shoulders seemed to alternate in a coordinated movement with his feet. I couldn't have said I wasn't familiar with that manner of walking, anyway. In my home country I had seen a few male rap artists walk that way within certain video scenes. It was often referred to as the "gangsta walk."

"Try it," he said.

"I can't do that. It's too complicated. Why not just be natural?" I asked.

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"You're a brother from Philly now. Remember? Not John from Africa. Put that in your head. Come on, man. Give it a shot."

I walked back in the direction from which I came, trying to imitate D. as best I could.

"All right, all right...that ain't too bad, but it ain't perfect either. Come on cuz, one last time," he said.

"You're embarrassing me, D. Let this really be the last time."

I did one last walk to D.'s desk at the end of the wall and much to my surprise, he applauded.

"There you go! That's gangsta," he said.

"Okay. Can I go out now?" I asked.

"No doubt. Tell you something real quick. I want you to get out there and talk to as many ladies as possible, you heard? Black, White, Latino, whatever. Break some ice. You gotta move on with your life, man. Forget about the past."

"Hold on. You seem to forget that I'm a lot older than the typical average freshman. I'm almost 26 years old. Besides, in my home country, most women

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appreciate men who approach them like gentlemen. The gangster thing isn't my style at all," I said.

I paused for a minute.

"And by the way can I ask you a question out of curiosity?"

"Ain't no prob...go ahead," D. responded.

"How do you expect me to react when any of them tells me she has a boyfriend?" I asked.

"Hey you tell her, 'what's your man got to do with me?' She may be testing you."

"Perhaps, but it would be wrong to assume that for all of them. I wouldn't insist if a woman tells me she see's seeing someone or is in a serious relationship."

"It's all good, John. That's you. As I said man, take it as an experiment. Just get out there and have fun. Test the field for a day. Be adventurous! Act gangsta for a week."

"Well, I just hope everyone won't be able to tell I'm faking it," I responded.

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And so I left Room 702 with the baseball hat turned sideways, the baggy T-shirt, the baggy denim pants and a pair of sneakers. In the hallway, I tried to do my best imitation of the gangsta walk. I ran into Lane waiting to get into the elevator. He was looking straight at the wall and by all accounts seemed to be in deep thought and in his own world. When he noticed me standing behind him, he squinted, as if to be certain his eyes weren't being deceived. Then opening them wide, he looked at me from head to toe as if utterly astonished. The elevator doors opened and I waved at him.

"Hey! How's it going, buddy? Almost didn't make you out," he remarked, with a smile.

But behind Lane's smile I sensed a lot of uneasiness. Throughout our ride down to the lobby, he clenched and unclenched his fists, scratched his shoulder, whistled and looked up, tapped his feet and avoided eye contact with me. He seemed not to see "John Malinke from Africa" in the man standing next to him, but rather a black male dressed in a stereotypical



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manner that gave room for all kinds of impressions, judgments and assumptions about his character.

"Okay, buddy-see ya..." he said, rushing out through the elevator doors when they opened up at the lobby.

I got a sandwich and a bottle of water at the cafeteria and took a seat at one of the tables before I went to class. Sitting about three tables away from me was a white female. My eyes met with hers a couple of times while we ate, and so I waved at her as a sign of courtesy. She nodded but kept staring at me from where she sat, making me a bit uncomfortable. Much to my surprise, she got up from her seat, picked up her tray of food and came to my table.

"Mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Oh-not at all," I answered.

I was amazed at the boldness she demonstrated. First, she looked very naïve and innocent. Secondly it was extremely rare to see a black male walking with, let alone talking to a white female on Rodeoville's campus. There seemed to be an unofficial rule that forbade those two groups of people from engaging in any form of social interaction with one another. I

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turned around and looked to my left and right to verify if anyone may have been staring at our table, but the majority of them were unoccupied and those who were in the cafeteria seemed to mind their own business.

"Hi. I'm Nikki," she said.

I was quite embarrassed.

"Nice to meet you Nikki," I responded.

With a shy smile, Nikki looked at me straight in the eye and then with a straw, sipped a bit of the soda she was drinking from a big, plastic cup. This wasn't at all an experience I would have anticipated on a campus that was still racially divided in terms of social interaction. But the red-haired young woman with deep blue eyes seemed bent on holding a conversation with me and I was moved by her gesture.

"Are you in the football team by any chance?" she asked.

"No," I answered.

"Play basketball?"

"Not at all."

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"Wow, that's kinda weird. Your face looked sort of familiar," she explained.

"I see. Well, this is my first semester. My name is John. I'm new here...I didn't even know Rodeoville has a football team. My roommate watches a lot of sports but he never mentioned that to me."

"That's 'cause they suck," she laughed.

Nikki took a long sip through her straw. A few moments later, she took out a pen and sheet of paper from her bag.

"Got a cell phone number, John?"

"Not yet, but I hope to get one in about a week and a half."

"Cool," she said. "You sound so different. Where are you from?"

"Boluaké, Central Africa."

"Wow, and you came all the way here for college?"

"That's right," I nodded.

Nikki wrote something on the sheet of paper and gave it to me.

"Here's my e-mail and phone number. Call me during the week. Let's talk some more," she said, in a

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boldness that sharply contrasted with her physical appearance. "I'm on my way to class now."

I had pretty much finished eating as well and would have loved to accompany Nikki, but the possibility of dealing with unwanted attention and curious, unfriendly stares along the way constituted a major deterrent. I remained on my table for a few minutes and only left the cafeteria when I was certain she was quite far away from the area. I decided to make a brief stop at the campus bookstore on my way to class. Inside, a group of students ahead of me dropped their backpacks and hand bags on a carpet by the wall, and the security guard standing in front of the main door gave each of them index cards with numbers. I also dropped my backpack in the same area when it was my turn and the guard gave me a number as well. But when I tried to walk past him and go through the door, he interrupted me.

"Wait!" he said, with a frown on his face.

He pulled out a security wand from his belt and ran it through my pockets and all the way down my pants.

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"Turn around for me please," he continued. "Spread out your arms and legs."

I obeyed him and he ran the wand all the way down my clothes again. As if that wasn't enough, he proceeded to feel through my pockets with his fingers. I felt humiliated and embarrassed. The guard was so busy searching me that he didn't seem to think it a priority to serve those who stood in line behind me. I couldn't understand in what way my attempt to get into the bookstore constituted such a threat to him. I felt so violated and what he was doing began to cause quite a scene, as everyone exiting the bookstore kept looking in our direction.

"Okay. You can go in," he said, in a tone that seemed to reflect a combination of arrogance and disappointment.

Arrogant in the sense that he felt I deserved to be treated with less dignity than others who walked in and out; disappointment at the fact that in the end his search perhaps failed to produce whatever results he might have expected. My heart so overflowed with rage that I felt tempted to grab him by the collar

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and give him a hard slap on his face. But on second thought, I concluded that such an action would only have given him further reason to justify his prejudices. To him, being a black male was a sufficient problem on its own and what I was wearing didn't plead well for my case either. I felt so wounded and I looked at him straight in the eye with a stern frown on my face. Predictably, he avoided making eye contact and focused on giving numbers to students entering the bookstore and returning the bags of those who were exiting. I couldn't have imagined the guard taking a moment to consider if there was anything wrong with what he did. In strictly controlling men who looked and dressed like me, he must have thought he was doing a tremendous favour to the bookstore's employees.

While inside, I walked around the shelves and took a look at the collection of books in various genres. There were a diverse collection of fictional and academic publications, as well as health and entertainment journals and magazines. There was also a café where people could get tea, coffee, muffins,

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juice, water and other beverages and sit down to read or glance through books before or in between courses. The interior was so impressively designed that for a moment I forgot about my experience with the guard outside. However, as I walked from one section to the next, I noticed from the mirrors on the wall, that a particular store employee seemed to be following me wherever I went. I first noticed her watching me from a distance with her arms folded when I made a stop at the entertainment magazine section. Moments later, she showed up again at the political science section and then at the academic section which featured books written by some of the University's professors.

"Excuse me sir, may I help you with anything in particular?" a voice said behind me.

I turned around and there she stood.

"Not at all; I'm just looking around," I answered.

"Well, we usually require our clients to purchase the stuff they wanna read rather than just walk around," she said.

I was shocked and greatly offended.

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"Listen, I'm a student here and I'm just making up for time in between classes. Don't I have the right to discover what books you have just like everyone else?" I asked.

"Ah! You're one of our students? I'm so sorry.. I didn't realize that," she apologized. "I've never seen you in here before. Well, hope you like the store and enjoy your discovery. Look forward to seeing you more often."

She then returned to the section from where she came, while I stood there amazed at such an unbelievable display of hypocrisy. On my way out, I noticed the security guard was standing alone. I felt like confronting him for what he did and it seemed like a perfect opportunity. This time his eyes met with mine. For a few seconds I gave him the sternest, angriest look that was possible. Probably in guilt, he quickly looked away. I wanted to walk up to him and confront him but I was concerned that doing so could cause a bad situation to generate into something even worse. Consequently I decided to let go despite the rage that burned within me like a



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fire. On my way to class, I got unexpected attention from groups of individuals who seldom noticed me when I was just my regular self: John Malinke from Central Africa. On one hand were the black males who seemed to carry out the bulk of the menial jobs on campus: gardeners, cafeteria employees, drivers, sanitation workers and security guards. Most of those in that category who walked past me nodded as if as a sign of acknowledgement and solidarity. Some of them went beyond simply nodding and said: "What's up, brother?" or "How's it going, family?" I seemed to come across to them as a non-conformist, a black male who was "keeping it real" and proudly displaying his cultural identity on a campus where a good number of teachers, students and administrators were perceived to be racially prejudiced.

The other group consisted of some white females; especially those whom I guessed were in their late teens and early twenties. A lot of them turned around when I walked by, some of them saying "hi" with smiles and winks along the way. Their boldness amazed me because it all of a sudden looked as if my skin

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colour was not so much an issue anymore. On the contrary and quite unfortunately, I seemed to fit the description of a particular "type" of black male-the bad boy, the rebel. Based upon personal observation, this group could immediately detect whenever a new guy came around who fit that description.

The third group (white males) constituted quite a contrast. A few of them who were dressed up exactly like me (and that reminded me of the white male who had walked into the barbershop a while ago while I sat there waiting to get a haircut) nodded at me; some waved and others stopped briefly to give me quick, warm handshakes or simply said "What's up, man?" along the way. I interpreted that as a well-meaning attempt to connect with me despite the different racial groups to which we belonged. But not all of them were that warm. While I continued my walk, I received some contemptuous "you don't belong here" looks, while others quickly looked away to prevent me from making eye contact with them.

Other reactions comprised of utter shock and disbelief. Such was the case in Dr. Wilson's Math

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class, where heads turned as soon as I walked in and everyone looked in my direction as if needing assurance that the man sitting at my desk was indeed John Malinke. Dr. Wilson showed up in class several minutes later than usual. After apologizing to us for being late, he routinely began reading through his attendance sheet and marking off names.

"John Malinke!" he called, when he got to my name.

I raised my hand.

From the look in his eyes I could see a profound degree of shock and disbelief. He held on to his pen and seemed hesitant to mark off my name on his list.

Dr. Wilson repeated:

"John Malinke!"

I raised my hand once again.

"Wow! Talk about a sudden transformation," he joked, amidst laughter from some of my classmates.

I quickly walked out of class when it was over to avoid any questions from Mpule, but she caught right up with me in the hallway.

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"Hey! How's it going, John? What in the world's happened to you?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" I responded, pretending not to have a clue as to what she was getting at.

"Of course you know what I mean. What made you want to dress like that today? Trying to be a gangster or something?"

It was obviously an embarrassing question for which I had to think of a quick response.

"Oh no...not at all-I just thought I'd take a chance and wear this for a change," I answered.

"Well, I don't think those clothes represent who you are. That's just my opinion," Mpule continued.

"Really? So what do you think better represents me?" I asked.

"I'm not exactly sure but you come across as a perfect gentleman. You know...polite, respectful, someone who's got his act together and plays by the rules. With what you have on I wouldn't have thought so if I didn't know you personally."

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"Aren't you stereotyping? By the way, it seems to me most of the girls at Rodeoville seem to go for those sorts of guys," I remarked.

"You used the right word: 'girls.' I'm a woman and I'm not impressed by that. There's got to be more to a man than the clothes he wears."

I paused for a moment as Mpule and I kept on walking.

"I'm just curious. You say that, but my roommate dresses exactly the same way and he's your boyfriend. Aren't you contradicting yourself?" I asked.

"Trust me; D. was different when we first met. I've known him for a while. It's only been three years since he got deep into the whole Hip-hop thing. I've tried so hard to get him to change but he wouldn't listen. All I'm saying is don't try to be something you're not. Be yourself and your real friends will accept you for who you are. You might want to think about it," she said.

And Mpule's words indeed got me thinking. When I showed up for work after class that afternoon in my Hip-hop gear and doing the "gangsta" walk, I

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experienced the same turning of heads and the "is that really him or are my eyes playing a trick on me" type expressions. Everyone from the receptionist to Mr. Hassan, seemed to wonder what had suddenly happened to this seemingly courteous, innocent African male who came to the Call Center several days ago desperately looking for a job. Yet, no one—neither among the managerial staff nor among my co-workers—asked me any questions.

At the end of my 2-6 p.m. work shift, I returned to Rodeoville Towers, walked past the lobby and quickly got in the elevator. I was so anxious to change my clothes and once again become the person everyone thought they knew and whom I felt more comfortable with. I was quite upset that I had put myself through yet another inconvenience because of D. I felt a tremendous sense of relief when the elevator's double doors opened up on the seventh floor. Unfortunately, that feeling quickly dissolved like salt in water when on my way past the TV lounge, Markel and I ran into each other.

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"Oh no, you didn't! Oh no, you didn't!" he exclaimed with both hands on his head, completely oblivious to the presence of the other floor mates who walked past him.

"It's not what you think, Markel. I just felt like changing my look," I responded, conscious of the fact I wasn't in the best environment to give a lengthy explanation.

"Trying to look different? Have you lost your damn mind? At what cost? I wasn't expecting this from you. I'm deeply disappointed. I'll talk to you later, man. I've got errands to run."

Yes, the hurt and disappointment was sufficiently communicated to me via Markel's voice. I certainly did expect that the clothes I had on would produce mixed reactions and diverse interpretations but I underestimated the toll it was going to take on me. For a day, I experienced what it felt like to be a law-abiding black male who was nonetheless judged and stereotyped on the basis of both the colour of his skin and the clothes he was wearing. Enduring through such difficult experiences on a consistent basis

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required tremendous self-restraint and strength of character.

D. and Valence were in our room drinking and watching TV when I returned.

"Here's our man!" Valence exclaimed, with a bottle of beer in his hand.

"What's good, roomy? Spill it out. Can't wait to hear," D. said.

"Give me a break, D. I had a horrible day and it was a horrible experience. This was the first time I ever dressed like that and it's going to be the last. I don't want to deal with it," I complained.

Valence laughed, which suggested to me he must have been made aware of D.'s experiment.

"Hey, wait a minute, cuz. What you trying to say? You mean I spent close to twenty bucks for nothing?" D. asked.

"I didn't ask you to do that, D. You insisted. I went in for your experiment and the consequences were a bit too unfavourable for my liking."

D. took a moment to think.



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"All right...all right, I hear ya," he answered, nodding. "Come on, though. You can at least tell us what you experienced," he said.

I took a seat and shared with them my major experiences while carrying out D.'s experiment. Valence drank a bit of his beer, placed the bottle on the table and turned to me:

"What that guard did at the bookstore was just plain wrong. You shouldn't have let it go. I'd have confronted him if I were you."

"I thought about that. But what if he provoked me and we both got into a fight? I'm only an international student. Even if I were right, I could get locked up and that could mark the end of my academic pursuits," I explained.

"That's good old America, man. Good old America. At least something good came out of it, dawg. Chick walked up to you in the cafeteria. You gonna call her, right?" D. asked.

"I don't think so. The only reason she talked to me was because she thought I fit a certain stereotype. I'm skeptical about women who do that," I said.

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"She gave you her number, though. So why don't you just take a chance and call her? And you don't need to act like someone you're not. You might be surprised-she could like you just the way you are," Valence jumped in.

"Okay, I'll think about it. But I don't know how tolerant this campus is when it comes to interracial-"

"You'll never know unless you try," D. interrupted.

"Y'all may be the first couple to start a new trend."

"On this campus? That's gonna be hard to pull off," Valence remarked.

He paused to drink the rest of his beer and then added:

"But like you said, if the dude don't try, ain't no way he's gonna know what kind of person she is."

There was a brief moment of silence.

"So what you say, neighbor? You ready to go or what?" D. asked Valence.

"Just give me a few minutes. Let me go put on my shoes and at least change my shirt and I'll be right back," he answered, getting up to go to his room.

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"John, you gonna tag along with us, right?" D. asked.

"Where to?" I wondered.

"We're getting dinner at the Burger Factory on 8<sup>th</sup> and Walnut," he said.

"Sounds good but you know I just got a job on campus and haven't been paid yet. I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

"Chill out, man. We got you covered. Ain't a big deal," D. said.

I opened my closet, took out a polo shirt and a regular-sized pair of denim pants. I folded the baggy T-shirt and pants D. had given me, put them on his bed and went to change in our bathroom. I got the sense he had finally realized there was no point in continuing to press the button over an issue that made me uncomfortable. Saying nothing was probably the best thing to do under those circumstances. I felt so relieved at the opportunity to once again become my true self. Changing my clothes was in no way going to exempt me from being stereotyped, racially profiled or experiencing prejudice and discrimination, but I nonetheless felt as if an

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unnecessary additional burden was about to be taken off my shoulders.

"I see you don't speed much anymore," I remarked to D., as he gave Valence and I a ride to the Burger Factory. I sat in the backseat, while Valence and D. sat at the front.

"You bet," he responded, in a mocking tone. "After the experience we had, who wouldn't?"

"I'm so, so excited!" Valence exclaimed.

"What's behind the good news?" I wondered.

"My girl's joining us for dinner."

"Shoot! He's been talking about her all day. Think he might be falling in love. Know what I'm saying?" D. remarked.

"Where is Lane? He didn't want to join us?" I asked.

"He's typing a new chapter of his manuscript. Dude's been on his laptop for the past two hours," Valence responded.

"I can't figure that guy out, man...seriously," D. complained. "What the hell did he say was the title of his book again?"

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"If I recall, it had something to do with not eating potatoes in the summer," I reminded him.

"Ah yeah! Some crazy stuff like that. And what kind of potatoes does anyone write about for two hours anyway? Irish potatoes or something? What a strange title for a book by the way," D. continued.

There's something I gotta tell you," he said to me, as we rode.

"Yes?"

"Gogo's gonna join us at the Burger Factory this evening."

I froze.

"Gogo? The dancer from the club you took me to?"

"Yeah."

"To see who?" I asked.

"You."

"What for?"

D. didn't respond. For a few minutes, there was stiff silence as we rode. Moments later, he said:

"She wants y'all to get acquainted."

"Come on, D. You set me up, right?"

"Chill out, man. Not at all! She called me."

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"You can't be innocent in this, D. You know something about it. First you tried to get me to act like someone I'm not...and then you set me up for a date with a night dancer behind my back. I just hope you're not trying to get her to come up to our room because that's not going to work."

D. laughed.

"Look...you're pushing it too hard. It's just dinner," he said.

"Really? And who's paying for it by the way?" I wondered.

"You ask too many questions, man. One step at a time. I'll give Valence some money. He'll pay for you both. I'll be there with y'all for a couple minutes anyway," he said.

I paused for a moment to think and then asked D.:

"So you couldn't think of anyone else to introduce me to besides Gogo?"

"Shoot, I told you she called. Sometimes you just gotta go with the flow and take whatever comes your way. Know what I'm saying?"

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We arrived at the Burger Factory several minutes later. D. parked beside one of two parking meters.

"Damn! Anybody got a quarter? Looks like I ran outta coins," he said, looking at the seventy five cents he had in his palm. I removed twenty five cents from my pocket and gave it to him.

"Thanks a mil. That helps a whole lot," he said, putting the coins into the meter.

We got in, took a seat and ordered some drinks. Valence's cell phone rang.

"Hello? Hello? Yes? How far are ya? Yep, we're already there. See you soon then," he answered.

"Was that Gogo?" I asked.

"Nah, it was my girl Oksana-the Eastern European chick I met at your party. She'll be here in a couple minutes."

"Wow, I see. Why didn't you invite Mpule, D.?" I wondered.

"She ain't gotta be with me wherever I go. I live my life on my own terms," he responded, defensively.

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The waiter served us our drinks and the three of us chatted for several minutes. We sat by the window, and it permitted us to have a good view of the cars that pulled over to park on the side of the street. Moments later, a dark brown SUV with tinted side windows pulled over and parallel parked in between two cars.

"Gogo's here," D. said, turning to me.

A tall, light in complexion black female with short, curly hair and long legs emerged from the SUV. Although I hadn't seen Gogo in a long while, I recognized her instantly. She put some coins into one of the meters, crossed the street and walked in the direction of the restaurant.

"You're all right, man?" D. asked.

"I'm fine," I said.

"That's cool. Sit tight cuz," he said.

Valence laughed.

When Gogo came in she stood by the door, looked around and then took out her cell from her bag and dialed a number. Within seconds, D.'s phone rang.



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"What you calling me for? I'm right here," he said, standing up and waving at her from where we were seated.

She walked straight to our table and joined us. We all stood up to greet her. D. and Valence hugged her and I shook her hand.

"What's with that formal handshake? Why don't you give me a hug like everyone else?" she asked.

D. winked at me.

"All right...if you say so," I responded, giving her a hug and surprised by her sudden friendliness.

Gogo was wearing a buttoned-down black top that showed quite a bit of cleavage, alongside a dark brown skirt and black high-heeled shoes. She took a seat in the middle of the table, facing Valence and I.

"Damn, you look like you're getting prettier every single day," D. said.

"Appreciate the compliment," Gogo said, with a smile.

The waiter came over to take her order and then minutes later, Valence's phone rang.

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"Where are you? You're outside?" he asked. "Cool, I'll be right out."

Valence stood up.

"I'll be right back guys, my date's waiting for me outside," he said.

Moments later, Valence returned with Oksana, who looked so elegant in a red dress and golden necklace.

"Hi everybody," she said, with a broad smile and a thick Eastern European accent as she shook everyone's hands and took a seat beside Gogo.

"Uhm...John, you don't mind switching places with Valence so Oksana could sit next to him, do you?" D. asked.

The plan was unfolding just as I had suspected. It was obvious that Valence and D. were attempting to get me to sit closer to Gogo so she could pursue whatever agenda she had in mind. Nonetheless I accepted D.'s proposal, got up from my seat and switched places with Oksana. Gogo and I now sat very close to each other.

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"Oksana, I didn't get to introduce you to my floor mates. This is D., and that's John," Valence said. "John's from Africa. We're neighbors."

"Nice to meet you-again...," Oksana giggled.

The waiter returned to take Oksana's order. While he did so, Gogo whispered in my ear:

"Why don't we take our drinks along and move to another table?" she asked.

I felt like asking her for what reason but figured it would have been embarrassing, so I agreed to move with her to another table nearby. We now sat facing each other and for a few seconds, neither of us seemed willing to be the first one to start the conversation. She simply stared at me with these deep, expressive eyes while gently sipping through her drink with a straw. Her look was so intense and suggestive that it could melt a heart of stone. In case that was all part of a well-calculated strategy to get me to speak first, Gogo's plan succeeded because that's exactly what happened.

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"So D.'s been telling me for some time that you wanted to talk to me. Well, here I am. What is it that you wish to tell me?" I asked.

A sudden degree of shyness overcame the bold, exotic dancer. Smiling, she looked down at the table and nervously rubbed her hands. Then she looked up at me and with a somewhat timid nod, said:

"I don't know...I just felt like I'd like to get to know you better."

I was deeply touched by Gogo's words but I had doubts about her sincerity.

"I'm at a loss for words," I responded. "I'm honestly quite surprised. Why me in particular? I mean, there are lots of guys out there who seem ready to pay hundreds of dollars for a chance to have a drink with you or to watch you dance."

"For sure, but they don't care to know who I am as an individual. They're just infatuated with the woman they see gliding up and down the poles."

"So what makes you think I may be different? I don't mean to offend you but when I remember how aggressively you got the bouncers to come after me

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for your money that night...I'm quite surprised to hear you talking about wanting to get to know me better," I said.

Gogo was silent. With her straw, she sipped through some of her drink.

"I can't blame you for asking questions," she sighed. "People judge women like me all the time. But if they could look beyond the pole and behind the stage, they'll find everyone's got a story."

Her response shocked me and also made me anxious to hear more. In a voice heavy with emotion, she continued:

"I lost my parents when I was only three years old. I don't remember much about e'm. I spent my whole life moving from one foster home to another," she said, in a tone that reflected so much pain.

Gogo paused and sipped what was left of her drink. She looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath as if in an attempt to contain her emotions.

"Gosh...I remember those days like it was yesterday. Being verbally and physically abused...being called 'hopeless,' 'worthless.' Being told that I wouldn't

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amount to anything. I couldn't take it anymore. In the end I felt like I found more love on the street than in all the homes I lived at," she said.

Gogo's revelations moved me deeply. My heart was so overwhelmed by a mixture of sorrow and anger for the painful experiences she had endured in her life. And yet I had trouble finding any words that would have been sufficient enough to comfort her.

"I dropped out of college in my freshman year. I've got a nine-year-old daughter to take care of. I need to survive somehow. It's hard to meet a decent guy in my line of work. But when I met you I saw something more than just a guy asking for a dance. I saw innocence, simplicity, genuineness and courtesy that's so rare these days...especially to women like me."

For a brief moment I was speechless. Here was a woman who gave off the impression she could get any man she wanted. On stage she was aggressive and arrogant and the bouncers who surrounded her provided a profound sense of security. But that night I didn't seem to be speaking with Gogo the dancer. Instead, I

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saw a woman who was deeply hurting inside—someone who for a night had chosen to take off the masks of self-confidence, happiness and self-sufficiency so that I could get a glimpse of who she truly was. Tears began running down Gogo's eyes and she reached for her handbag, took out a handkerchief and used it to wipe away her tears and blow her nose. My heart was heavy with emotion.

"I am truly humbled that you chose to share such personal details of your life with me," I said. "I am deeply hurt to learn about what you've been through and I promise you that your secret is safe with me," I assured her. "I haven't been in America for up to a year and I may not be qualified enough to give you advise but Gogo in my honest opinion, I don't think this is the kind of life you should live. Until you met with me today, I always assumed what you do was a conscious career choice. I think you should get a different job. You seem like a very friendly and intelligent person and I don't feel your current work environment reflects who you are. You deserve the best...you're a woman of value. I perfectly understand

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your past circumstances but I don't believe you should be earning a living out of giving men lap dances for money."

With her straw, she took one last long sip of her drink and then looked up at me.

"I can't tell you how blessed I feel to have met you tonight. I really appreciate your encouragement. I'll seriously consider your suggestions. I thank you so much John," Gogo sighed.

"You shouldn't be thanking me for anything. Instead, I apologize for having been hesitant to meet you. It's easy to judge people when you're on the outside looking in. I am guilty of having done that and I'm sorry," I said. "Consider me a friend. I don't have a cell phone yet but you can always reach me through my roommate. I would like to know how things work out."

"That's so kind of you...I appreciate it. And don't sweat it, I understand where you're coming from," she responded. "If I were a guy I'd have the same reservations about dating a woman in my line of work. At least not until I got to know her better."

Gogo looked at her watch.



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"Well, I guess I should be leaving now," she said, standing up.

"Let me at least walk you to your car," I proposed.

"Are y'all done?" D. asked from their table.

"Yes," I answered.

"Why don't you guys wait for us? We're pretty much done too," he said.

The waiter emerged with the bill.

"There you go. Keep the change," D. said, giving him a sum of money.

Upon leaving the restaurant, Valence seemed in an entirely different world. His hand was firmly wrapped around Oksana's waist and she smiled and giggled continuously.

"The night ain't over for us, folks. You guys go right ahead. I think we'll catch a cab and go someplace else," Valence said.

"Have fun," Gogo answered.

"I've got a couple errands to run. You mind if Gogo drops you off at Rodeoville Towers?" D. asked me.

I didn't see that coming at all, so I was quite embarrassed.

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"Well, I guess if she's not in a rush to go somewhere else at the moment. I'm surprised to hear you suggest that. I thought we were scheduled to return together," I said.

"Yeah cuz, but I realized there's a couple things I forgot to do," D. argued.

I didn't believe him. Deep down in me I suspected it was just a trick to get me to spend more time with Gogo.

"It's all right, I'll drop him off," Gogo happily proposed.

"Appreciate that. See y'all later," D. said, crossing the street in a rush.

He got in his car and I walked Gogo to hers.

"Come right in," she said. "Don't be a stranger. We're friends now, right?"

I didn't feel comfortable about her giving me a ride to Rodeoville Towers but without money to catch a cab and Valence or D. available to tag along, I didn't have much of a choice. I took a seat on the passenger side and wore my seat belt. Her car seats were made

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out of leather and its interior smelled like a sweet, strong perfume.

"Mind if I roll down the windows a bit or would you prefer the A.C.?" she asked as we rode.

"No problem at all. You could roll them down," I responded.

She turned on her CD player and nodded along to the jazz music that played.

"May I ask you a question?" I said.

"Of course you can," she responded.

"Is Gogo your real name?"

"Of course it ain't," she laughed.

"So what's your real name, then?" I asked.

"I think I've told you quite enough about my life for a night. Don't you think so?" she responded.

I was considerate of the fact that it was her absolute right to keep certain details of her life private. Consequently, I didn't press the issue any further.

It was yet another emotional moment when Gogo's SUV pulled up in front of Rodeoville Towers. I could tell her heart was heavy. She sat still, looked straight

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in the direction of her car's windshield and held the steering wheel stiffly with both hands. We both knew it was unlikely we would ever cross paths again and saying goodbye to one another at that moment was particularly difficult. Yet we were smart enough to part ways by saying the things each of us wanted to hear from the other:

"I thank you so much for this kind gesture, Gogo. If you ever wish to reach me, just call our room number or D.'s cell phone. As I said, we are friends now."

"You're a perfect gentleman. I really enjoyed talking to you. I wish you well," she said.

"I wish you the same and please remember what I suggested. I think you should seriously consider getting a different job if you can. You seem like a truly nice person and many people don't seem to know that about you. It would be good to get involved in something that brings out that side of you."

"I'll seriously think about it, John. Take care of you," she said, gently tapping me on my lap.

Gogo and I shook hands and then I got out of the car. We waved at each other and as she drove away into the

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depths of the night, I tried to picture how things could have turned out if we had met under different circumstances.

D. and Valence relentlessly put me under pressure to consider beginning a new relationship following my split with Emelda. It was an opportunity they said, to be adventurous; to go out, play the numbers game and meet several interesting people. Eventually, they insisted, someone would stand out of the bunch. I received my first paycheck at the Call Center a couple of days after my date with Gogo and I felt both relieved and satisfied when I went to the bank to deposit my check; relieved in the sense that I now had a somewhat steady source of income, and satisfied because it was the product of my labour.

One Friday night following a suggestion from Valence, I decided to experiment with speed dating. I caught a cab to "Jescoe's," a restaurant on 3<sup>rd</sup> and Market Street. The entry fee for people within my age range (25-39) was \$25. For someone who didn't yet have a "real job," I found it a bit expensive for an

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event where there was no guarantee of matchmaking in the first place. Nonetheless, I stood in line like the other excited males and females of various races and paid to get in when it was my turn. When I got in, a woman sitting at one of the tables by the door asked me for my age and first name, and with a bold marker, wrote down a number as well as my information on a small sheet of paper attached to a pin. She told me to attach the pin to my shirt pocket and take a seat on one of several numbered tables spread about the restaurant. The room was slightly dim and each table had a candle. Meanwhile, a man sitting at a separate table collected similar information from women who stood in line and randomly assigned them to various tables. When everyone had been seated, a woman holding a microphone took position in front of us and with a broad smile, said:

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to another fun night at Jescoe's. I don't think any of you's clueless about speed dating. It's the same old concept: I'll blow the whistle and for seven minutes, you're all gonna move from one table to another to get

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acquainted. Remember you've got seven minutes to make your best impression. When I blow the whistle a second time, you must stop the conversation and move on to the next table. Also take note of names and numbers. It's very important. Are we ready?"

"Yeah!" the crowd applauded, in unison.

"Awesome! Let's go!" the woman exclaimed, blowing her whistle.

The first person who walked to my table sent chills down my spine. From afar I wondered if it was a man or a woman. It wasn't until the person took a seat and faced me that I realized it was actually a man.

"Hi! I'm pineapple," he said, brushing his long, red, thick shoulder-length hair backward.

He wore a yellow T-shirt over very tight-looking black pants and a pair of green shoes that I recall having seen only on women.

"Excuse me-what did you say your name was again?"

"Pineapple," he repeated.

As he spoke, he kept on looking at his watch, probably conscious of the limited time that was allotted for each discussion.

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"And you, what's your name?" he asked.

"I'm honestly not in a very good mood. I think I will be leaving soon," I responded.

"Ohhh...that sucks," Pineapple answered. "People really can piss others off sometimes. Know what? It reminds me of my college days. Had a roommate who just loved snooping in on my voicemail messages-made me have to move the answering machine to my room."

Rather than get the hint, Pineapple was pushing the button further by delving into details I wasn't interested in knowing about and which made me feel even more uncomfortable. I decided not to respond to anything he said. Whenever he spoke, I simply remained silent. I wasn't surprised at how quickly he left the table as soon as the whistle was blown.

The next person who took a seat at my table was a heavy-set, multiracial-looking female whom I guessed could have been in her late thirties. While attempting to take a seat, she lost her balance and almost fell on the ground.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"I'm fine-I'm fine," she answered, breathing deeply.



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Her voice was quite deep and there were lots of hair strands beneath her chin, as if she were about to grow a beard. Without introducing herself or asking any questions, she looked straight into my eyes and said in a firm tone:

"If you make it, I'll eat it."

I was shocked.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"If you make it, I'll eat it," she repeated.

"I'm not sure what you mean," I said.

"Just make it and I'll eat it, damn it!" she yelled, hitting the table with a clenched fist.

The monitor blew her whistle at just the perfect moment.

For a couple of seconds I wondered who would show up next. A few moments later, a pretty black female wearing a purple dress came and took a seat. She had a beautiful smile and a pair of long, unique eyebrows.

"Hi," she said, in an amazingly tender voice that had an almost enticing effect.

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"How are you doing?" I happily answered, feeling somewhat optimistic there might be some chemistry between us.

Then all of a sudden the expression on her face changed and her voice became threatening:

"I hope you're not one of them," she said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh yeah, you know what I'm talking about! You brothers are all the same. Can't appreciate a good woman, can't keep a job, always thinking about your own damn selves!" she exclaimed.

"Hey, hey...wait a minute. Don't you think you're generalizing? It's wrong to say that about all black men. There are good and bad seeds in every community. I'm from Central Africa, by the way. I'm new to the American dating scene," I answered.

"I bet you are! Like it's so hard to come in here and fake an accent. Same old tired games! I'm sick of this stuff! I'm gonna get me a good, hunky white boy!"

Once again the monitor blew her whistle at just the appropriate moment. I was about ready to get up from

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my seat and leave the restaurant, because the third speed-dater seemed ready to explode and was absolutely unwilling to listen to anything I said. It was a fun night and the first time I had come across three separate individuals with such crazy personalities within a space of several minutes. Although I felt no chemistry with either of the two women and speed dating was something I normally wouldn't have considered doing, it was nonetheless an interesting and adventurous experience.

After I had given D. and Valence an account of what happened at "Jescoe's," the next thing they pushed me to do was to call Nikki.

"Forget she's white man, damn! She's a grown lady-dig what I'm sayin'?" went D.

"You said she gave him his number?" Valence asked.

"Yeah playa, she walked right up to his table and sat with him at the caf-wrote down her number and I repeat, 'and' her e-mail."

"Dude, you'd be a fool if you don't call her," Valence said.

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Thus, when D. and Valence had left and I had a private moment in our dorm room, I picked up the phone and called Nikki's three-digit extension. My heart beat with suspense when her phone rang. It fell on her answering machine:

"Hi, this is Nikki. I'm sorry I can't take your call right now but leave me a message and I'll call you back as soon as possible. Thanks! Bye..." went the recording, in an extremely tender voice that instantly made me recall how innocent she looked.

I waited for her answering machine to beep twice, signaling that I could leave a message.

"Hello Nikki, I'm not sure if you'll remember me. My name is John, I'm from Central Africa. We met at the cafeteria a few days ago and you gave me your number and e-mail address. I was wondering if we could meet sometime and do lunch. You can call me back at extension 529. If I'm not available, feel free to leave me a message. Talk to you soon."

Moments after I left my message, the phone rang. It was Nikki.

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"Hey! What you doing tonight?" she asked, in a tone of excitement.

"Nothing in particular," I answered.

"Why don't you come to my place, then? I'm having a little get together with friends at nine o' clock- Ashton Hall, Room 412. Press 412 at the door and I'll buzz you in."

"Okay...I have class early tomorrow morning and a tight schedule in the afternoon but I'll try to swing by and spend some time."

"You better do," she insisted.

I got to Ashton Hall at about 9:15 p.m. After Nikki had buzzed me in, I showed my ID to the two guards at the front desk. From a distance, a white female wearing a sky blue T-shirt and a pair of grey sweat pants with black sandals walked toward the lobby. I recognized the innocent-looking, baby face. It was Nikki. She hugged me like we had known each other for a long time and then signed me in at the lobby. I felt a change within me. I was able to ignore and withstand the unflinching stares of the

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guards when Nikki held my hand and walked with me toward the elevator. At that moment, I suddenly became conscious of some of my most basic rights: the right to date people and choose friends beyond the human-constructed barriers of racial lines.

In Room 412 I came across three women sitting in Nikki's living room. Two of them were white, and one was black. The table was loaded with alcoholic drinks-beer, whisky, and wine. It struck me that I seemed to be the only male present out of the five of us. Furthermore, there was an extremely strong smell in the room. It sort of smelled like incense, but I wasn't exactly sure what it was. Nikki introduced me to her three friends but only mentioned one of them by name-Barbara, her roommate. She described the other two vaguely as Barbara's friends. I sat on the couch facing the three women and Nikki took a seat right next to me.

"What do you wanna drink?" she asked. "Serve yourself...there's an embarrassment of choice."

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"Do you have anything non-alcoholic, like juice for example? I have class early tomorrow morning," I said.

Nikki and her friends laughed hard.

"We only drink alcohol," Barbara said. "You either drink with us or you go get yourself a glass of water."

Nikki took a bottle of red wine and poured some of it into two, big wine glasses. She filled both glasses to the brim, took one and offered me the other.

"Cheers," she said.

"This is a bit too much wine for me," I told Nikki.

"But I guess I could make an exception for tonight," I said, drinking.

"Of course you should," she answered, wrapping her arm around my shoulder.

Nikki's friends joined us to drink as well. Barbara opened up another bottle of red wine and much to my amazement, drank from it as though she were drinking from a bottle of water. Something unusual caught my attention when I looked at the three women who sat facing Nikki and me. When they looked in our

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direction, they seemed a bit dazed and their eyes-red for the most part- gave the impression they were in an entirely different world. When they spoke, they did so with such an unimaginable degree of boldness as if they feared no one and didn't care about anything. Only Nikki's eyes seemed normal-reflecting their natural blue despite the dimness of the lights. Nikki poured more wine in my glass after I had finished drinking.

"I'm gonna be right back," she said, in her soft tone.

When Nikki left, her three friends' eyes instantly zoomed in on me at the same moment like birds of prey. Neither of them said a word and their eyes looked so fierce that the glass of wine slightly trembled in my hand. Much to my surprise, Nikki returned with five little sachets containing a powdery substance. She spread three of them across the table to Barbara and her friends, and then gave me one and took the other. She also took out a tiny knife from her pocket and something that looked like a small flute or pipe. My heart began beating fast.



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It reminded me of certain things I used to see while watching American movies in my home country. Yet, what was happening in front of me was by no means a movie but rather stark reality. I now understood the reason for the strong, incense-like smell that prevailed within the room.

"Barb-as usual, we give you the honors," Nikki said, handing her the knife.

"My pleasure," she responded.

Barbara gently pierced through the sachet and began snorting the powdery substance with the flute-like instrument. Each time she was done snorting it she took a deep breath, paused for a few minutes, sniffed it and snorted again. Her eyes looked red and deeply dry. Everyone at the table took turns. After Barbara it was the lone black female; when she was done she passed the flute-like instrument to the other white female who sat with them. Like her peers, she used the knife to rip into her own plastic bag and then sniffed and snorted, inhaling deeply. When it was Nikki's turn, she did the same and then passed the instrument on to me. I looked at the powdery

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substance that lay on the table in front of me. I was so shocked and stiffened by the entire experience that I didn't even realize it when she was stretching out her arm to give me the knife.

"Here-this is gonna help you out," Nikki said while she handed me the knife, her voice sounding abnormally high-pitched than usual.

The knife trembled slightly in my hand as the four women focused on me. I clenched it firmly, my heart beating extremely fast. I once again looked down at the table and at the powdery, white substance within the tiny plastic bag. When I looked up at Barbara and her two friends it was almost as if they had blood in their eyes. They looked so stern and it appeared as if my hesitance had momentarily ruined the erstwhile festive atmosphere. My hand trembled again as I slowly picked up the plastic bag and pierced it with the knife. Nikki rubbed my back and the three women cheered me on as I gently began bringing my nostrils closer to the table to sniff and inhale the powdery substance using the flute-like instrument.

"Come on baby, you can do it," Nikki said.

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There was enormous pressure on me and being the only male in the room, Nikki and her friends seemed to be using it as a challenge to my manhood. Nikki, Barbara and their friends were silent and the eyes of the four women all focused on me. While I was about to take a deep inhalation of the substance to satisfy my invitees, my Mother's words immediately echoed within my head like in an instant flashback:

*When you get to America, you will see all kinds of things and experience a lot of temptation. It is in many ways a country of extremes. But hold on to the values with which your father and I raised you and stay away from trouble as much as you can.*

Those words pricked sharply at my conscience. I immediately let go of the plastic bag, the knife and the flute-like instrument, dropping them on the table. Some of the powdery substance spilled on the carpet.

"Hey! What's gotten into your damn mind?" Nikki yelled.

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"I...I can't do this," I sighed, shaking my head. "I don't do drugs. I never have and I promised myself that I never will."

"Come on, don't embarrass yourself. A little taste ain't gonna hurt you," Nikki insisted, her innocent-looking face unable to contain the depth of her anger.

"I just can't," I said, getting up from my seat. "If you would please excuse me, I think I should leave now. I have an early class tomorrow morning."

"I don't get the fuss, Nikki. He's more than welcome to leave," Barbara said. "I sure ain't gonna miss e'm, I'll tell you that."

I felt it in my heart to respond, so when I got to the door I turned around and said:

"This is not about me, Barbara. It's about making responsible decisions. Recognizing danger and avoiding it when it comes your way. That's what real men do."

Having said those words, I shut the door. I felt quite shaken by the experience and I realized Nikki wasn't as innocent as she looked. Even though neither

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she nor her friends said it directly, I got the sense they were profoundly shocked by my refusal to take part in their ritual. Watching a college black male saying "no" to drugs in a room where everyone was busy sniffing, inhaling and snorting seemed out of the ordinary. The scene in Room 412-the table filled with alcoholic drinks and the strong, incense-like odour it gave off-was designed to break the resilience of even the most strongly-willed person. I had practically given in to the intense pressure, but deep in my heart I thanked God for enabling me remember the words Mum spoke to me before I left my country.

Following my bizarre experience with Nikkki, I told D. and Valence not to bother making further plans to set me up with anyone or to propose additional places where they felt I could meet people. I told them I appreciated their initiatives but felt I needed some time to myself and a break from attempting to get involved in a relationship with anyone.

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"I believe the right person will come along at the appropriate moment," I said.

"I hear ya. But if you ain't look, how you gonna find her? Ain't no woman gonna knock on your door saying 'Hey John, I think I'm your Miss Right.' Anyway, whatever works for you," D. said.

I had made up my mind I would never call Nikki again. However, I was worried that if she were a frequent drug user, she was leading her life down the path to self-destruction. I never would have expected that from someone who looked so harmless and innocent. A few days after that experience, I decided to write her an e-mail expressing my concerns. I wrote:

*Dear Nikki, this is John. It is my sincere wish that this e-mail finds you well. Thank you for inviting me over to your party several days ago. I truly appreciate it. Please Nikki, this isn't in any way an attempt to get into your private life-you are a grown woman and I respect your right to make your own decisions. I don't know you well enough, but I think you're a very nice person. However, considering what*

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*I saw at your party, I'm worried some of the decisions you're currently making and the influence of some of your friends may be leading you down a path you normally would not have taken. I am more than willing to meet with you on campus to talk in a bit more detail about this if that's fine with you. You can always count on me anytime you may feel like talking. Hope to read from you soon.*

*-John*

During that period, my relationship with D. slowly began to deteriorate. I had to give up sleeping in our room at least three days a week because Simone or some other unknown woman suddenly showed up late in the evening and ended up spending the night. And even though D. never directly asked me to leave the room, I always could tell when his comments were aimed at me. Whenever he and his dates were done with their semi parties of drinks and snacks, he would say to them:

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"I can feel we gonna have a good time tonight," or "You ain't in a rush, right? We got plenty of time. There's a full night ahead."

That often left me with no other alternative but to respond:

"I think I'm going to sit at the TV lounge for a while. There's a show I really would like to watch. I'll see you guys much later."

Having to do that so frequently was beginning to get on my nerves and it was a pain to keep doing the long walk down the hallway to the TV lounge with my pillow in hand. I had become quite known for sleeping at the TV lounge to the extent that many floor mates developed the habit of quickly turning off the television set and returning to their rooms as soon as I came along. Others who sat there during late hours to study did the same and I recall once hearing some students whispering when they felt I was asleep:

"This dude sleeps here like three days a week. What's up with that? That's kinda strange."

I never could get why D. appeared so unwilling to reciprocate the same commitment Mpule seemed to have



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toward their relationship. I felt uncomfortable having to lie to her at times that D. wasn't in the room when she called, just because he didn't feel like speaking to her and was expecting someone else to show up.

"You know the deal. If my girl calls I ain't here," he would often say, deliberately refusing to answer his cell phone when she tried to reach him.

Many times I wondered what he felt was lacking in Mpule, an African beauty with her sensual-looking lips, short, natural black hair and brown complexion. I got the feeling she suspected or knew D. was cheating on her but was either choosing to close her eyes to the signs or hoping to change him. It was so rare to see Mpule come over to Rodeoville Towers that I felt I could use my fingers to count how many times she did so. If there was one rule I had learned in American culture, it was that a man should never get involved with someone else's woman-especially not a friend's woman or a roommate's girlfriend. That was absolutely out of the question. Men often reacted violently over that-and in America where everyone had

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the legal right to carry a gun, there was a tendency for several men to take such violent reactions to extreme levels.

Yet, something was happening to me that I couldn't quite explain. My feelings of admiration for Mpule grew so strong that I always looked forward to going to Dr. Wilson's Math class not because I liked it, but rather because I hoped to see her. On occasions when she didn't show up for class for one reason or another, I wondered if she was all right and hoped she would show up for the next class. However, in honour of the gentleman's code-or better yet, the roommate's code-I never shared my concerns with D., lest he misinterpret the reason behind my inquiry. I persuaded myself at every turn that these were merely harmless feelings of concern for a fellow classmate whom I got along with and who just so happened to be my roommate's girlfriend.

It had been a bit of a while since Mpule and I talked to each other after class, hence I was taken by surprise when one morning after the course was over she walked up to me and said:

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"Hi John, how are you doing? D. told me he's been trying to introduce you to a few people. How's that coming along?"

I felt embarrassed by her question given it wasn't something I had anticipated at all. I was also amazed that though he avoided her phone calls and seemed to place her at the bottom of his list of options, D. nonetheless found time to talk to her about me. Based on what I knew of his character, I could imagine him telling her a bunch of unflattering and exaggerated stories about me with details that were probably either untrue or unnecessary for her to know. But I perceived Mpule as an open-minded woman who preferred to make her own judgments; hence I didn't feel the need to be too defensive in my response.

"Well, yes...I've met a few people through him and Valence but we really didn't connect much at all. I've decided to take a break from that for some time," I said.

Leaning against the wall, Mpule stood in front of me with her arms folded, holding her notebook against

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her chest. I couldn't help noticing how appealing she looked in her pair of black pants which flaunted her wide hips and curvy body.

"I told D. we should take you to open mic night. It's so much fun. You'll get to meet lots of students. There are poetry readings, there's music, dancing and all that good stuff. D. performs quite often."

"That sounds interesting. When does it take place?" I asked.

"It takes place tonight at the Student Center. If you'd like to come, I've got three tickets. D.'s gonna be on stage tonight."

"I'll definitely like to come," I said.

"Cool-I'll come pick you up at Rodeoville Towers at 9.30. It starts at 10 p.m."

After Math class and my conversation with Mpule that morning, I made a quick stop at the computer lab prior to showing up for work at the Call Center. I took a few minutes to check my e-mail and was curious to find out if Nikki had responded to the message I had sent to her a few days ago. None of the messages

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in my inbox appeared to have come from her, but one of them particularly caught my attention. The subject read: "Mind your Business," and the sender was a certain "Bill Wellingby." *That message could not have been destined for me. It must have been an error, I thought to myself.* Nonetheless, I double clicked on it to read its content. It stated:

*John, who the hell do you think you are and what gives you the right to meddle into my relationship? It's none of your business how my girlfriend chooses to live her life. So aside from talking to Nikki, she actually tells me you're a nigger? You're better off sticking to your own kind.*

I read and re-read the message several times and its effect was instantaneous. Speechless, I stared at my computer for a couple of minutes, my fingers too stiff to press any buttons on the keyboard in front of me. My heart was broken and deeply wounded and a tremendous sense of rage took hold of me—a rage similar to that which I had experienced when the guard in front of the bookstore took it upon himself to frisk me with such disrespect. Never in my life

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had anyone used a word so loaded with prejudice, so hurtful and offensive, to describe me. There I was-an African student sent to America for college-being forced to endure through an offensive e-mail from a man who knew nothing about me or my character and who blinded by his prejudices, concluded I was inferior to him by virtue of my skin colour.

I considered responding to the message and pouring out my emotions of anger, rage, and hurt. But on second thought, I felt such a narrow-minded person didn't even deserve a response. I realized Nikki wasn't the naïve, innocent person that she seemed to enjoy coming across as, but rather a manipulative, self-centered person who not only loved getting things done her way, but also probably enjoyed stirring up strife between people. Nikki obviously didn't tell Bill Wellingby that it was she who came up to me at the cafeteria and who invited me over for drinks at her dorm room.

"You messed up. I would have replied to that e-mail if I were you," Valence said, when I had dinner with him and Markel at the cafeteria that evening.

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Markel took a moment to think and then responded:

"I don't agree with you, Valence."

He turned to me and continued:

"John, I've told you a couple times that in this country you've got to be more assertive with your rights, brother. I know you're from an environment where being polite and respectful is important. But here in the States man, you don't have to be polite when people disrespect you. When you do that, everybody takes advantage of you. Valence I don't agree with you, though. I think he did well not to respond to that fool's e-mail."

"Dude, you're contradicting yourself. You're telling him he's got to be more assertive and at the same time you think he did good not to write back to that coward?" Valence answered.

Markel spoke as if he could read my mind:

"Valence, impulsiveness isn't necessarily a sign of strength. This guy came to Philly to get a college degree. You know how violent people can get in this country. I mean, think about it: he wrote to her and her boyfriend responded instead. In the heat of his

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emotions-which of course would have been quite understandable-he could have fired an angry e-mail back at the guy. The question then is what might have happened next?" Markel said.

"I think I understand where you're trying to get at. Go ahead...I'm all ears," Valence answered, nodding.

"Great! I'm glad to have your attention because you rarely consider other people's perspectives. As I said, let's assume John wrote back to this person without taking some time to calm down and think. Well, this might sound far-fetched but with folks like that, anything's possible. If Nikki's boyfriend isn't a student here, all he needs to do is accompany her someday, hang around for a while and ask her to identify John or give a good description of him and the places he goes to frequently. He'd probably tell her he just wanted to threaten him, whereas he may intend to do much more than that.."

"I understand exactly what you mean and you don't need to go any further," Valence said. "I agree with you, no matter how brave anyone may be, it would be dumb to put yourself in unnecessary danger."



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"Yep...imagine the pain and sorrow his family would have to endure through if something happened to him because of some idiot's way of reasoning. Think about the sacrifices his parents made to get him here and invest in his education. Would it have been worth the risk? Absolutely not! It's better to stay calm in such circumstances."

Valence nodded his head again. For a moment there was silence on our table. Then I brought up my experience with the security guard in front of the bookstore.

"In that case I wouldn't have been quiet, man. I would have given him a piece of my mind. You can't let people do that to you. You had the right to get in there just like everyone else. I would have made so much noise out there that the manager would have come running out. And I would have seen the Vice President of Student Affairs. I would have raised hell until he got fired. We can't keep letting stuff like this happen," Markel said.

"I can't tell what it feels like to experience that but Markel's right...I wouldn't have let it go either. Well, now you know, buddy. You've gotta fight for

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your rights. You ain't gotta settle for less," went Valence.

"How long ago did this happen?" Markel asked.

"About a week and a half ago," I said.

Markel shook his head and then added:

"Before I forget-it's more than time you stood up to D. As I told you before, Room 702 belongs to both of you. You shouldn't have to give up your space every week because your roommate feels like partying."

Valence laughed.

"Guys, forgive me for digressing but I just thought about something and it's kinda serious," he said.

"What's up?" Markel asked.

"What if the message our boy John received came from Nikki herself? What if she was just pretending to be someone else? I mean, based on what he said about their first meeting, she didn't seem like the prejudiced type at all. She actually came up and sat with him in the cafeteria."

"Hmmm...I see your point, man. Who the hell knows? You may be right. On the Internet, any Lucy can become Tom and any Tom can become Lucy," Markel answered.

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"That doesn't change the fact that whoever wrote to him used the N word and that's very offensive and disrespectful. I'd stay away from people like that. My advice to you is stay strong, brother. Don't let that break you down. Whether we like it or not, racism still exists in America. But we've got to stay strong and live with it. It's the unfortunate reality of the black experience. You're gonna be fine. I just want you to promise me one thing, though."

"Okay...what is that?" I asked.

"Promise me I'll never run into you again with a do rag and baggy T-shirt and all that stuff. You seriously let me down. I wasn't expecting that from you," Markel continued.

I couldn't resist laughing.

"You have my word," I promised.

After we parted ways, I returned to our dorm room, sat on the sofa and turned on the TV set. I watched TV for a while and at exactly 9:35 p.m., the phone rang. It was Mpule.

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"John, are you ready? I'll be there in 15 minutes. You might wanna wait for me in front of Rodeoville Towers if you can."

I quickly turned off the TV set, changed and put on a pair of shoes. I rushed down to the lobby and moments later, a red Pontiac pulled over in front of the building. There were two women in the car but I couldn't see their faces clearly. As I walked toward the car, one of them waved at me and I immediately recognized Mpule seated on the driver's side.

"Sorry I'm a few minutes late. I had to get my friend," she said, as I shut the door and sat in the back seat. "Wanda, this is John. John, meet Wanda," Mpule continued, introducing her friend to me.

Wanda and I shook hands. Her nails were extremely long and the tattoos on her body went from her hands all the way up to her neck. She also had a piercing in her nostril and her hair was dyed thick red.

"So how do you like living on campus, John?" Mpule asked.

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"It gets quite boring at times but I've been able to make new friends and meet some truly wonderful people."

"That's great. I was a bit concerned. There's really not much going on at Rodeoville Towers," she said.

We rode for a while and then Wanda spoke:

"How come you didn't ask me to tell you the rest of the story?"

"Oh! I completely forgot, girl. My bad...go right ahead. I'd like to know how it turned out."

"So this sore loser sees me walking on campus in the rain. He comes up to me, covers me with his umbrella and thinks I owe him my number 'cause he walked me to Caldwell Hall? Hell no!"

"That's not fair, Wanda. You could have at least been nice to the guy and taken his number even if you didn't want to give him yours. At least he was being a gentleman. Give the brother some credit-ain't that many out there these days."

"Well, I ain't gotta be fair. I don't owe nothing to nobody. You know my rules: no car and no cash means

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no game—you wanna talk to Wanda? You've gotta be somebody."

"You're not being realistic. Your expectations are always way too high," Mpule said, shaking her head.

Mpule stopped her car in front of the automatic gate at the parking lot directly opposite the Student Activities Center.

"You guys can get off here. I'll meet you all in front of the Center."

Wanda and I crossed the street and walked over to the Student Activities Center. Several students stood in line waiting their turn to pay for their entry tickets. From where we stood, I watched Mpule enter the lot when the gate opened and then drive around to find parking space. I had felt like making a remark to Wanda that judging from the number of people we saw standing in line, it probably was going to be packed full inside as well but as soon as I turned and looked at her, she quickly looked away, took out her cell phone from her pocket and began pressing some of its buttons as if attempting to make a call.

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I perceived that to be a rather strange coincidence, but wasn't surprised because her conversation with Mpule already gave me a bit of a hint as to her character. As soon as Mpule joined us, Wanda predictably put her cell phone back into her pocket. Mpule showed our tickets at the door and the three of us went inside.

"Where's D.?" I asked Mpule, when we got in.

"Probably backstage rehearsing," she said. "Let's hurry. The show should be starting soon."

The seats seemed all filled up and we stood in the middle for some time and looked around hoping to find a place where we could sit.

"I see four empty seats on the second row all the way up front," Mpule said. "Let's go get them before it's too late."

We rushed up front, pushed our way through and sat down on the vacant seats. Wanda sat in between Mpule and me. It was quite soothing to the heart to see such a mixed crowd of different ethnicities on a campus where much progress was still needed in the domain of race relations. Everyone seemed very

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relaxed and anxious for the show to begin. Mpule stretched out her neck and used her finger to motion me to come closer:

"Be ready for the surprise of your life," she whispered to me. "You may be shocked at some of the folks you'll see performing on stage."

"Hum...sounds interesting," I said, with increased anxiety and enthusiasm.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it's a pleasure to present to you once again...your hosts Gary and Danielle!" someone announced from the stage.

The curtains opened up to reveal a white male and much to my surprise, walking with him in a dazzling red dress, was Danielle of the Office of International Services. The audience applauded while the pair of hosts walked to the middle of the stage where two microphones had been placed.

"Thank you! Thank you very much!" Gary acknowledged, with a smile of gratitude. "Hello and welcome to this fall's edition of Open Mic Night. The rules haven't changed. Each of you will have an opportunity to



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watch and judge a number of talented performers."

Then Danielle continued:

"As usual, applause would be considered as a sign of satisfaction and encouragement. On the other hand, if a performer gets booed, he or she will have to leave the stage. In poetry readings, silence from the audience is perceived as a sign of approval. At the end of the show, each of the contestants will return to the stage with a number and the audience will vote for the best performer. Prior to the last performance, ushers will walk around each aisle and provide you with pieces of paper. Stay glued to your seats-the show's about to begin," Danielle said.

The crowd applauded, the curtains closed in on Gary and Danielle, and the lights in the amphitheater dimmed. Our sitting position up front enabled us to have a great view of everything that unfolded on stage. When the curtains reopened a few moments later, Gary was alone on stage.

"Our first performer goes by the stage name 'Confidence,'" he said," and she's gonna do a

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presentation entitled 'I don't give a damn what you all think.'"

The crowd laughed.

"Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to present to you: 'Confidence'!"

The crowd applauded. A heavysset white female wearing a T-shirt with suspenders and a pair of very wide, grey pants reaching all the way up to her stomach emerged on stage.

"Oh no," Mpule said, shaking her head and using her hand to slightly cover her eyes.

"This is hilarious," Wanda agreed, joining the crowd in laughter.

The woman on stage pointed at the crowd.

"I don't give a damn what you all think. Yeah, I said it: I don't give a damn what you all think. What you looking at? Who the hell do you think you guys are? I'm a queen. I demand respect. I don't look for admiration. I deserve it."

The crowd booed. Feeling humiliated, 'Confidence' pointed randomly at individuals in the audience:

"I hate you! And you! And you!" she exclaimed.

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The audience booed even more.

"That's enough, Confidence...that's enough. Thank you," Gary said. "Before you leave the stage though, I'd like to know...what made you choose that title for your presentation and what inspires you?"

"Baby, I'm a queen, okay? I don't need a man running after me to make me feel good. I'm special. I'm unique. And that's why I came here to say I don't give a damn what you all think!"

"Let's put our hands together for Confidence, folks," Gary pleaded.

The crowd unfortunately didn't yield to his proposal and booed Confidence off the stage. The curtains closed up again. I was enjoying the experience and wondered who the next performer would be. When the curtains reopened, it was Danielle's turn to present. She looked at the paper she was reading and suddenly began laughing, leaving the crowd without much choice but to join her in laughter as well.

"I-I'm so sorry," she apologized, still laughing. "Whew! I guess that's what Open Mic Night does. Our next performer would be doing something rather

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unique. He's gonna...permit me to hold my breath for a minute; I'm trying so hard not to laugh."

Danielle laughed so hard that she held her stomach. The crowd laughed out loud as well despite having no clue what she found so funny. She continued:

"Our next performer's gonna do a presentation on the importance of potatoes. Potatoes have played a great role in his life and he--"

The crowd immediately began laughing booing before she could finish what she was saying. The only person I could imagine who could do a presentation on such a subject was Lane. I felt embarrassed but waited anxiously for Danielle to provide more details to determine if I had guessed correctly. Her voice was starting to get drowned by the booing, so she spoke much louder to regain control of her audience:

"Hold on guys, let's please be tolerant. Okay...as I was saying, potatoes played an important role in our next performer's life and his presentation is about the beauty and irresistibility of potatoes. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my pleasure to present to you: Lane Schultz!"

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My worst fears were confirmed. I didn't know his last name but Danielle had just mentioned Lane's first name and he was the only one I knew who was actually writing a book on the subject. There was no reason for me to doubt anymore. Out he came, dressed in traditional Scottish attire and long, green socks with a pair of black shoes.

"My goodness-isn't that Valence's roommate?" Mpule whispered to me.

I nodded in response. Lane held a violin in his hand, an instrument I never knew he played. The crowd laughed but that didn't seem to deter him at all. Playing his violin, he sang:

*Hick! Hick! Potatoes!*

*Hick! Hick! Potatoes!*

*Sweet! Irish! Call e'm what you want*

*One for you and one for me and four for the price of  
two*

Much to my surprise, the crowd didn't boo but rather laughed out loud and applauded, cheering him to keep on. He tapped his right foot along as he continued playing his violin:

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*Hick! Hick! Potatoes!*

*Hick! Hick! Potatoes!*

*Sweet! Irish! Call e'm what you want*

*One for you and one for me and four for the price of  
two*

When he had finished singing, he bowed to the audience and received tremendous applause.

"Wow, Lane Schultz! What a rare performance," Danielle said. "Talk to me about your interest in potatoes. Where did this passion come from?"

"What?" he asked.

"What inspired you? Where did your passion come from?" she repeated.

"Of course; I'll be on I-76 first thing in the morning," he answered.

The crowd laughed.

"Thank you, Lane. Let's give him another round of applause for that off the chain performance," Danielle said.

The crowd applauded once more and the curtains closed for a few minutes. The previously silent audience was still reeling and murmuring over Lane's

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presentation. I never imagined Lane would have considered participating in such a show. I now perfectly understood what Mpule was referring to when she told me to be ready for the surprise of my life. The curtains opened up again and Gary reappeared on stage.

"Four more performances and we'll call it a night," he said. "Our next performer isn't a contestant tonight but is a two-time Open Mic winner in the rap category. He's gonna do a really short, free-style presentation for us entitled 'Street Culture.' Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for 'D.'!"

Mpule and several people in a number of the aisles welcomed D. on stage with thunderous applause. He had on something that almost looked like a prison jumpsuit, but it was grey in colour. He wore it with a pair of dark blue sneakers, a white T-shirt on the inside, and a black do rag. D. waved at the crowd and those who had stood up to welcome him on stage took their seats. He took the microphone:

*Feel my swag*

*Feel my swag*

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*Yeah you know how I roll*

*I spit rhymes like a bee that's hummin' on honey*

*Check me out in two years-I'll be swimmin' in money*

*Ain't nobody in this joint that can step up to me*

*I'm the king of Open Mic-yeah I do what I please*

*So y'all keep them cheers comin'*

*Cause I'm right here to stay*

Some people applauded, but many others didn't. Mpule seemed to have applauded louder and harder than everyone else. I guessed most of those who did not applaud-me included-were quite turned off by the display of arrogance in D.'s performance. It was a widely accepted (though unofficial) rule in most contests that participants needed to demonstrate a sense of humility toward their audience even if they happened to be the reigning champions in their categories.

"That's what's up! Thanks a lot... I appreciate that," D. said to the crowd. "As y'all know, we do this once in a while. I'd like to call on a special friend of mine to join me here on stage."



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Wanda and I immediately turned to Mpule, who was so focused on D., smiling and observing his every move. It was going to be an emotional moment for her if D. were to decide to honour her and profess his love for her in front of the audience. It surely was going to be a profoundly touching and captivating moment that could have made up for D.'s preceding performance and perhaps enabled him to win over those in the audience whom he had turned off.

"His name is John Malinke, my roommate from Central Africa. John! Where you at, man? Come up here!"

I couldn't believe my ears and only imagined how equally shocking it must have been to Mpule and her friend. At that moment the crowd began looking around in an attempt to figure out who among them was the John Malinke D. was referring to. D. got a perfect view of the three of us from where we sat, and that in my opinion didn't make things any better. For a brief moment I considered getting up from my seat and quickly leaving the amphitheater to escape from that sudden embarrassment, but doing so would have only drawn suspicion from the audience. When he pointed at

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me from the stage, it reconfirmed there was absolutely no way for me to escape. I got up from my seat and the crowd applauded as I walked up the stage with much anger and reluctance.

"This is John Malinke, y'all. My roommate from Central Africa," he said.

I waved at the crowd and the audience applauded once again. The hypocrisy in D.'s next comments amazed me:

"My roommate's got skills. He's a multitalented man. I asked him to come up here so y'all could see for yourselves. John and I are gonna take turns rapping tonight. Let's get this show going on. Ready, John?"

It felt like a bad dream, but with all eyes focused on D. and me, there wasn't much time for thinking. I had to respond and act quickly. Before I could say a word, someone on stage gave me one of the microphones.

"Uhm...yes, I guess I am," I responded, taken completely off guard.

"All right, peeps! Let's do this!" D. shouted.

He repeated the same lyrics:

*Feel my swag*

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*Feel my swag*

*Yeah you know how I roll*

*I spit rhymes like a bee that's hummin' on honey*

*Check me out in two years-I'll be swimmin' in money*

*Ain't nobody in this joint that can step up to me*

*I'm the king of Open Mic-yeah I do what I please*

*So y'all keep them cheers comin'*

*Cause I'm right here to stay*

When he had finished rapping, he turned to me, signaling it was now my turn to take over. I still found it difficult to believe that was happening, and I couldn't find any appropriate words in such an embarrassing circumstance. Contrary to D.'s lies, I had never rapped in front of anyone in my life and wasn't in any way skilled in the art. This was clearly another attempt by him to put me in the spotlight against my will. I brought the microphone closer to my mouth in an attempt to think of what to say. The feedback it produced was so loud that most people in the audience covered their ears.

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"Uhm...uhm...", I said, struggling to come up with something.

There was complete silence.

WRRRIIIIIIIINNNGG... went the loud feedback from the microphone.

An idea quickly came to my mind. I cleared my throat and then said:

*Uhm...uhm...the man...the man with the big head clapped three times*

Some people in the crowd began murmuring and laughing.

"What? What the hell did he say?" I heard some of them say from where I was standing.

I continued:

*The man with the big head clapped three times*

*The man with the big head clapped three times*

*His head was so big they called him super-sized yam*

*His head was so big they called him super-sized yam*

*Super-sized yam*

*Super-sized yam*

*His head was so big they called him super-sized yam*

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Much to my surprise, the audience laughed and applauded, contrary to the reaction D. was probably expecting. From the look in his eyes, I bet he would have loved to seize the microphone from me if it were possible. The tide seemed to have turned in my favour. D. now seemed to be the one feeling uncomfortable.

"Excuse me, y'all. I seem to have forgotten my lyrics," D. announced to the crowd, putting one hand on his forehead and holding the microphone with the other. "Just gimme a couple secs."

The audience booed. D. became furious:

"The hell's wrong with you boneheads? Y'all don't respect me? Somebody wanna take this outside?" he threatened.

There was a loud murmur in the audience and things looked as if they were about to spiral out of control. I quickly jumped in:

*The man with the big head clapped three times*

*The man with the big head clapped three times*

*His head was so big they called him super-sized yam*

*His head was so big they called him super-sized yam*

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*Super-sized yam*

*Super-sized yam*

*His head was so big they called him super-sized yam*

The crowd burst out laughing amid tremendous applause. An experience that I so dreaded had suddenly produced an unexpected outcome. Much to my surprise, I seemed to have become the revelation of the night. Danielle and Gary quickly returned to the stage to officially put an end to D.'s performance.

"Ladies and gentlemen, let's have another round of applause for D. and John!" Gary exclaimed.

The crowd applauded.

"Super-sized yam! I've never heard such a term in my life," Danielle laughed, coming closer to me with her microphone in hand. "Your performance was off the chain. Tell me about that, John."

"Well, I have never seen a super-sized yam either. I've seen really big yams-huge ones...long ones. Not super-sized ones. But since my roommate gave me the surprise honour to stand and perform before your audience tonight, I had to think of something to say within a short period of time," I responded.

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The audience laughed, and so did Danielle.

"I hear you. You sure gave a memorable performance. We wish you much luck in the future," she said.

"D., we're sorry to tell you that your performance tonight wasn't sufficient enough to once again be considered as the reigning champ in the rap category," Gary said. "That position is now open to competition. Thank you for your time," Gary said, in his closing remarks.

D. shrugged his shoulders.

"Remain seated ladies and gentleman, as we present to you our last performers," Danielle said.

The curtains closed.

"The exit is that way," Gary said, pointing to a side door that led to the exterior of the building.

"Does that mean I have to go out and come back in?" I asked.

"Yeah but you shouldn't have a problem cause you have your ticket and the stamp on your thumb. I never knew you could be so funny John," Danielle said. "I can't wait to tell Veronica and Amisu about it."

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D. was so silent that I had actually forgotten he was standing behind us.

"Are you all right?" I asked him.

"I'm cool-ain't no problem," D. responded. "Yo, can you do me a favor? When we go out through the exit, can you go back in and tell my girl and Wanda that I think we could leave?"

After we had exited from backstage, I showed my ticket to the bouncer at the entrance and returned to the amphitheater to tell Mpule D. was waiting outside for us and that he felt we could leave.

When Wanda, Mpule and I left the building, D. was standing outside with his hands in his pockets.

"What the deal, folks? Why don't we go someplace else?" he asked.

"Some place like what, honey?" Mpule wondered.

"I don't know...a lounge or something," D. proposed, shrugging his shoulders.

We decided to go to Old City. D. sat in front beside Mpule, while Wanda and I sat behind. There was



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silence for several minutes as we rode. I was extremely upset with D. for his unpleasant surprise that I believed was aimed at embarrassing me in front of an unfamiliar audience. I also boiled inside when I thought of how many nights I had to sacrifice sleeping in our room because D. felt he needed to have it all to himself. I couldn't read Mpule's mind but as she drove, I imagined her feeling disappointed by the fact that she wasn't the one he called to join him up on the stage. It felt so tense inside the car. Everyone appeared to be thinking about something, but no one seemed willing to speak. A few moments later, D. broke the silence:

"I can't believe you ain't tell me you were gonna come to the show tonight," he complained to Mpule.

"Babe, why are you acting like it's my fault? I called your cell phone a million times but you didn't pick up. What was I supposed to do?" she responded.

There was silence.

"You didn't ride with anyone else in the car that I should know of, did you?" D. continued.

"Baby, of course not! What's the deal?"

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There was once again a brief moment of silence, and then as if she knew what I had been imagining, Mpule added:

"And by the way, you didn't think I deserved to be on stage with you, right?"

D. didn't answer.

"Answer me!" she exclaimed.

"Hey! Hey! Shut the hell up! You heard? Shut the hell up! You don't tell me how I need to act. I've got the right to do what I want!" D. yelled.

It was heating up so bad inside the car that I was certain Wanda and I would have loved to jump out before it caught fire.

"You're telling me to shut up? You're telling me to shut up? Have you lost your mind? Listen, Mister! I'm not gonna put up with your stupid games and immature attitude anymore, you got that?" Mpule yelled back.

She pulled over to the side of the street and turned to D:

"Guess what! We're going to Old City, but you know what? You're getting out right here!"

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"Don't talk to me like that, you heard? Don't play around with me. I could hurt you-I could hurt you real bad!" D. threatened.

"Get out now!" Mpule insisted.

D. opened the door and got out of the car. It was a complicated moment. There were many aspects of his character that I didn't approve of, but roommate solidarity required me to get out of Mpule's car and stand by him. He didn't shut the door but rather stood on the curb and waited, which was an obvious sign that he was expecting me to join him. I was going to have to make a decision.

"What you gonna do, man? Stay in the car and hang out with the girls? You gonna leave me out here on the street? Get out!" D. shouted.

I didn't appreciate his approach at all. I was fared up with making sacrifices to satisfy him at my own expense. Mpule was becoming impatient. She turned to me from the driver's seat and yelled:

"You better make up your mind, okay?"

I sighed.

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"I'm not getting out," I responded to D. "I'm an adult-I have the right to make my own decisions."

With those words, I slammed the door. As we drove off I could see D. through the passenger side mirror looking at the car from a distance. I tried to imagine what he could have been thinking as he stood there in solitude with both hands in his pockets, seeming to be in a different world and struggling to come to terms with what had just happened. But to me, speaking those words had a liberating effect. I now felt I could stand up to D. or to anyone else-if it had to do with obtaining justice and fighting for my rights. I no longer was going to tolerate sacrificing my personal space almost every week to satisfy D.'s selfish interests. The room belonged to both of us.

"Girl, you were hard!" Wanda said. "You could have cut e'm some slack."

"Oh no-I ain't putting up with that anymore. Been dealing with that long enough," Mpule responded.

"I like him, though. I like it when a man's got thug appeal."

Mpule shook her head.

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"You still don't get it, do you? Look at all the brothers in jail. Young black men breaking laws to get street credibility in the neighborhoods. Being a man doesn't mean you've got to act like a fool and make a whole bunch of noise wherever you go. If that's thug appeal to you, I'll pass. A real man's got to have class, dignity and charm," Mpule said.

Wanda was silent for a short while.

"Then why did y'all hook up?" she asked.

Mpule sighed and then responded:

"Look: if you want him, you can have him."

"My bad...my lips are sealed," her friend answered.

Mpule, Wanda and I decided to stop at a club called "Rain," located on the corner of Second and Market Street in Old City.

"Is this place always so full of party people?" I asked Mpule, as we crossed the street and walked toward our destination.

"Oh yeah...especially on weekends; it's one of the hottest spots to hang out in Philly," she laughed.

"So you've been here a couple times?"

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"Well, about twice or so with D. and Valence."

We walked past people dressed in all sorts of flashy outfits, some of them looking particularly outrageous. One of them who caught my attention was a male with a huge afro wearing pajamas and a pair of glittery sunglasses. He emerged from a limousine in between two women whose hands he was holding. The three of us sat at the bar when we arrived at Club Rain. It was quite a full crowd inside and we had to bump our way through several people to get to the bar stand.

"Ever tried a Mojito?" Mpule asked when it was time to take our orders.

"No, but I've watched it being served in a lot of American movies."

"Ha, ha, ha," she laughed. "I think you should try one. You'll like it."

Mpule ordered two glasses of Mojito and a glass of wine for Wanda. She was right, the drink tasted really good. The mixture of lime juice, sugar, a bit of rum and mint was in my opinion a very creative recipe. Moments after we had begun drinking, Wanda

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proposed that we walk toward the dance floor. And so we did, with our glasses in hand. Every now and then a few men came over to where we stood, tapped on Mpule or Wanda's shoulders, whispered in their ears and attempted to take them to the dance floor. Unfortunately, their advances were rejected most of the time. In Mpule's case I felt I could understand her reluctance. Not having officially broken up with D., she must have felt uncomfortable dancing with other men. We all knew how controlling, jealous and uncompromising D. could get. It was Wanda whom my curiosity led me to watch more closely. And when a man with a do rag on, a baggy T-shirt and tons of flashy jewelry came up to her and whispered in her ear, I wasn't surprised by her reaction. She smiled, put her glass on a side table nearby, grabbed his hand and pulled him to the dance floor.

"Same old Wanda," Mpule remarked. "It looks like she just can't help it."

"I noticed that about her," I said. "I'm not sure why but for some reason I think she doesn't feel very comfortable around me."

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Mpule laughed.

"Hey, I don't know what to say," she shrugged her shoulders. "I mean, you're a pretty decent guy. You speak good English, you're very scholarly...maybe she feels insecure. Guys like you aren't what she's used to."

"Wow, I didn't look at it that way. Well, maybe you're right," I nodded, as I took a bit of my drink. "You might need to tell her to soften up just a little bit."

For the next few moments, Mpule and I stood fairly close to each other watching people dance on the floor. I wondered what could have been going through her mind as I looked at her through the corner of my eye. She stood there like a forbidden fruit surrounded by numerous invisible barriers. Still, I couldn't resist once again admiring the qualities that made me find her attractive: Her short, natural hair; her wide hips that looked so unique in the pair of jeans she was wearing; her lips, her complexion. I forced myself to quickly erase those thoughts from my mind. *She belongs to someone else*, I reminded myself.



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And that person wasn't just "someone else." He was my roommate. Mpule was a forbidden fruit. I couldn't possibly become interested in her. It wouldn't have been right. Yet, despite how hard I tried to conceal the emotions that lay deep inside of me, the more my heart made me realize I wasn't being true to myself.

I felt like asking her if she would like to dance with me. But each time I thought about that, D. came to mind and I hesitated. And then a man came forth, held her hand and whispered in her ear. Mpule turned to me:

"You know what? I think I'm gonna dance. I'm gonna go to the floor and have a good time. I'm tired of standing on the spot watching all these people have fun. I'll be right back," she sighed.

With a heavy heart, I watched this man pull her by the arm and lead her to the dance floor. I deeply regretted not having taken a chance. But then again, how could I possibly have predicted her reaction? Moments later, the man put his hands around her waist and she drew closer to him and wrapped her arm around his shoulder. Looking at her, I saw a woman with a

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deep desire for romance and intimacy; yet, watching her dance with the stranger pricked me to the innermost core of my being. I looked around and soon realized I was now the only one standing outside the dance floor. My glass was empty, the bar was overcrowded and I didn't have enough on me to get another drink.

An immediate flashback came to mind: I remembered the night Emelda and I had danced at The Aquatic. Although they had different personalities, there was so much about Mpule that reminded me of her. I tried to imagine what a good relationship I might have had with Emelda if only she had been a bit more humble. Standing there with my arms folded, I felt hurt that perhaps another chance at love had slipped away. Consequently, the heat within Club Rain was starting to become unbearable to me and I felt I needed to walk out and get some fresh air.

"Excuse me...if I walk out, would I be able to come back in?" I asked one of the bouncers at the exit.

"Of course you can. As long as you show the red stamp we put on your finger before you walked in," he said.

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I went outside and stood in front of the club with both hands in my pockets. Across the street, a group of women were helping a drunken friend get back on her feet. She was staggering so badly that two people in the group were forced to grab both her arms and pull her along. Others yelled for no good reason as they walked down the street, motorists honked from within their cars, and some pedestrians walked around with plastic plates of pizzas and gyros. Yet, those sights only provided a momentary period of distraction. My mind wavered back to Mpule. I wondered if it may have ever crossed her mind that I could have been interested in getting to know her better. I pictured the guy who danced with her taking advantage of the heat of the moment to ask for her number. But then again, nothing was certain. Perhaps she might have been open to reconciling with D.

"Sir, you got a light?" a man asked me.

"No, I'm sorry...I don't smoke."

He whistled and went his way.

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To passersby, it may have looked as if I was enjoying standing outside watching all sorts of people walking by, crossing the street or entering into nearby bars and restaurants. Yet, the truth of the matter was that I was actually in my own world-reminiscing about the past and attempting to measure how much progress I had made since my arrival in the United States several months ago.

"Hey! Are you all right?" I heard someone say behind me.

I turned. It was Mpule. I was taken off guard by her sudden appearance.

"Am I all right? Of course I am. Don't worry about me. I'm fine," I responded.

"How come you're standing out here all by yourself? You didn't wanna dance with anyone?" she asked.

"Not really. Everyone in the area where we stood had found someone to dance with, anyway. I was basically the only one left standing there, you know. So I thought I'd rather walk outside and get some air."

"I hear you," Mpule said.

She paused for a moment and then continued:

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"John, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"Do you have a girlfriend?"

It was one of those tricky, double-edged questions to which a man couldn't resist giving a shy smile when it came from a woman. And yes, that was exactly what I did before I responded:

"Wow...I really wasn't expecting that. Well, uhm...at the moment, no. I'm not seeing anybody."

"What about back home?" she asked.

I sighed. It wasn't an easy question to answer.

"Yes I did," I said, my voice heavy with emotion.

Mpule paused. From the way she looked at me I could tell she was deeply touched and her face and eyes reflected much compassion.

"Do you all keep in touch?" she asked again.

Her question made me remember my last phone conversation with Emelda.

"It's okay if you don't feel comfortable," Mpule continued. "I perfectly understand."

"Well, we broke up. We had a phone conversation a few weeks ago and she told me she preferred to be with

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someone physically closer and more financially stable."

Mpule paused and nodded.

"That must have been pretty hard...especially if it was someone you felt much attached to," she said.

"You are right. I did have feelings for her."

"Do you miss her?"

"I have since moved on. I have no desire to revisit my past," I responded.

"As they say, don't look for love. Let it find you. Sometimes love could be staring at you right in your face and you may not even know it. Crazy, isn't it?"

Mpule said.

I nodded, wondering if perhaps those words were a sign she may have gotten a sense that I would have liked to know her better had such an opportunity come my way. For a quick second, we looked into each other's eyes but didn't say a word.

"Here-take my hand...let's go dance," she said.

I was taken by surprise, considering I had given up on that possibility already.

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"But wait a minute. I saw you dancing with someone. I don't think I want to get into any unnecessary trouble," I remarked.

"You're right. It was just a dance-no feelings, no emotional attachment. Come on, let's go."

Mpule pulled me by the arm. We went past the bouncer standing outside and back into the club. It felt like a dream. I couldn't tell if she was doing that just to cheer me up or if something deeper lay underneath. Had that been the case, it implied we both were playing a game of cat and mouse, shying away from expressing each other's feelings through words so that our actions alone could do the talking.

On the floor, we started off dancing a relatively safe distance apart from each other, but she soon pulled me toward her and wrapped her arms around me. I did the same and in the process, gently ran my fingers down her unique, wide hips. She smiled and we both looked into each other's eyes. My heart felt so warm as if it were on fire. It was a feeling I hadn't experienced in an incredibly long time. From a distance I could see Wanda watching us with an

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expression of shock and disapproval on her face but I didn't let that bother me. Considering her attitude, I couldn't have cared less about getting her approval for anything. The focus of my entire heart and mind lay upon the woman with whom I danced.

It was the last dance of the night and the club was about to close. There was a steady flow of people rushing toward both exits. When we had finished dancing, I noticed a change in Mpule's attitude. She tapped me three times on my shoulder; looked at me straight in the eye; sighed; looked down at the floor and walked quickly to the bar. I sensed she was overcome by a combination of guilt and embarrassment over our dance. She probably was imagining how D. might have reacted if he had come across both of us dancing. It certainly would have caused quite a scene. I decided to go to the bar to check on her. "We're closed," the shocked bartender said, watching Mpule take a seat despite the sign he had put up stating service was over for the night.



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"I know," she sighed. "I'm just really tired. I'm waiting for my friend Wanda," I overheard her say as I drew closer.

"Are you all right?" I asked when our eyes met each other.

"I don't know...I guess..." she sighed. "You know, I really shouldn't have--"

"Done what? Danced with me, you mean?"

"Uhm...well, yeah."

"In that case you should have felt the same way about doing the same thing with the other guy before me," I responded.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I guess. Honestly, I don't know what to think."

I reflected for a moment.

"You remember what you said to me when I was standing outside?" I asked.

"Right now...not really."

"You said: 'Don't look for love. Let it find you.'"

"Okay...so?"

"I would like to add: 'Follow your heart and listen when it speaks to you.' You're an adult and you have

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the right to make your own choices based on how you feel. In other words I would say go for whatever makes you happy. It's your decision to make," I said.

Wanda emerged.

"Girl, I'm ready to roll. What you doin' at the bar? We gotta get going'."

Mpule got up from her seat. She and Wanda walked toward the exit while I followed them a couple of steps behind.

Our ride was tense and silent. Mpule was conscious she had an important decision to make and appeared to be in deep thought as she drove; in my presence, Wanda seemed reluctant to openly express her disapproval of our dance and hence chose to keep her mouth shut; meanwhile, I couldn't help thinking about what an awesome night it had been and one of the best I had had in a while.

Mpule turned to me from the driver's seat when she pulled up in front of Rodeoville Towers:

"Well, thanks for your company, John. Guess I'll see you in class."

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"I should be the one thanking you, Mpule. I had a great time. Goodnight, Wanda."

"Unhum," she responded, coldly.

I opened the door to Room 702 fully prepared for a conflict with D. but he wasn't there. The room was dark, the windows were slightly open and a strong wind blew the curtains around. I was so exhausted that I couldn't think of anything else besides taking off my shoes and lying down on my bed. Something in my life was about to change...I could feel it.

**TO BE CONTINUED...**















