I Do Not Come to You by Chance

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Extract

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Prologue

People in the villages seemed to know everything. They knew whose great-grandmother had been a prostitute; they knew which families were once slaves of which; they knew who and who were *osu* outcasts whose ancestors had been consecrated to the pagan shrines of generations ago. It was, therefore, not surprising that they knew exactly what had happened in the hospital on that day.

From what Augustina had been told, as soon as she came into the world and the midwife smacked her buttocks so that she could cry and force air into her lungs, her mother took in a deep breath and died. The dead woman was the most recent of five wives, the youngest, and the most beloved. But because she had died a bad death, a death that was considered as much an abomination as a suicide, she was buried immediately, quietly, without official mourning.

When Augustina's father took her home, everybody complained that the child cried too much, as if it knew that it had killed its mother. So her grandmother came and took her away. At age seven, when it was confirmed that her right hand could reach across her head and touch her left ear, Augustina moved back to her father's house and started attending primary school. Being long and skinny had worked to her advantage.

Six years later, the same village experts said it was foolish for her father to consider sending a female child to secondary school. It was a waste of time; women did not need to know too much 'book'. Reverend Sister Xavier was outraged and came all the way to talk it out with Augustina's father.

'Good afternoon, Mr Mbamalu,' she began.

'Welcome,' he said, and offered her a seat.

The white woman sat and stared right into his eyes.

‘I hear you’re not allowing Ozoemena to attend secondary school.’

Ugorji, Augustina’s elder brother, who had been assigned as interpreter for the day, repeated the woman’s words in Igbo. It was not as if their father did not understand English, but when he received word that the headmistress was coming, he had panicked, fearing that his feeble grasp of the foreign language would not withstand the turbulence of the white woman’s nasal accent and fast talking.

‘I want her to learn how to cook and take care of a home,’ Augustina’s father replied. ‘She has gone to primary school. She can read and write. That is enough.’

The white woman smiled and shook her head.

‘I’m sorry to disagree with you, but I don’t think it’s enough. Ozoemena is such a smart girl. She can go a very long way.’

Ugorji did his thing. The white woman sped on.

‘I’ve been living in Africa since the thirties. In all my over twenty years of missionary work here, I’ve come across very few young women as smart as your daughter.’

Sister Xavier sat upright, hands clasped as if she was in a constant state of preparedness for prayer.

‘All over the world,’ she continued, ‘women are achieving great things. Some are doctors who treat all types of diseases, others have big positions with the government. You might be surprised to hear this, but in some countries, the person who rules over them is a woman.’

From her position behind the door, Augustina noticed that her brother did not give the correct interpretation for the word ‘rules’. It was little things like this that made her the smart one.

‘Mr Mbamalu, I would like you to reconsider your stand on this matter,’ Sister Xavier concluded.

To date, nobody is sure if it was the sister’s words, or the rapid way she fired her sentences, or simply the shock of a woman telling him what to do, but Augustina’s father consented. She would attend secondary school with her brothers. Another five years of the white man’s wisdom.

Augustina was thrilled.

In the end, though, it did not matter that she had made the highest scores in her class during the final-year exams, or that she spoke English almost with the same speed as the reverend sisters themselves. After secondary school, the topic of formal education was officially closed and Augustina was sent as an apprentice to her father's sister who was a successful tailor. Her aunty was married to a highly esteemed teacher. So highly esteemed, in fact, that everybody called him Teacher. That was how she left Isiukwuato and moved to Umuahia.

Augustina had been living with Teacher and Aunty for some months when news reached them that one of Teacher's friends was coming to visit. The friend had studied Engineering in the United Kingdom, was now working with the government in Enugu, and was returning to Umuahia for his annual leave. As soon as his letter arrived, Aunty went about broadcasting the news to all the neighbours. Most of them knew the expected guest from reputation. They said he was good-looking. They said he always wore shoes, even when he was just sitting inside the house reading. They said he behaved like a white man, that he spoke English through his nose and ate with a fork. Some even swore that they had never known him to fart.

When Engineer turned up in his white Peugeot 403, Augustina, Aunty, Teacher, and the five children were dolled up in their Sunday best and waiting on the veranda. As soon as Augustina caught that first glimpse of him, she decided that even if Engineer's steps had not been leading to their courtyard, she would have crawled over broken glass, swum across seven oceans, and climbed seven mountains to see him that day. He was as handsome as paint. His back was straight, his hands stayed deep inside his pockets, and his steps were short and quick as if he had an urgent appointment at the end of the world. Anybody passing him on the way to the stream could have mistaken him for an emissary from the spirit world on special assignment to the land of mere mortals.

After lunch, they all sat in the living room. Engineer crossed his right leg over his left knee and reeled out tales of the white man's land.

'There are times when the sun doesn't shine,' he said. 'The

weather is so cold that even the plants are afraid to come out of the ground. That's why their skin is so white. Our own skin is much darker because the sun has smiled too long on us.'

They opened their mouths and opened their eyes, and looked at themselves from one to the other.

'During those times, the clothes they wear are even thicker than the hairs on a sheep. And if they don't dress that way, the cold can even kill.'

They opened their mouths and opened their eyes, and looked at themselves from one to the other.

'The way their streets are, you can be walking about for miles and miles and you won't even see one speck of sand. In fact, you can even wear the same clothes for more than one week and they won't get dirty.'

They opened their eyes and opened their mouths, and looked at themselves from one to the other. If anybody else had narrated these stories, they would have known immediately that he had spent far too much time in the palm wine tapper's company.

'That's why education is so important,' Engineer concluded. 'These people have learnt how to change their world to suit them. They know how to make it cold when the weather is too hot and they know how to make it hot when the weather is too cold.'

He paused and leaned back in his chair. Then he beamed the starlight on someone else.

'So how have the children been doing in school?' he asked.

Teacher shifted in his seat to adjust the extra weight that pride had suddenly attached to him.

'Oh, very, very well,' he replied. 'All of them made very high scores in Arithmetic.'

Engineer smiled.

'Go on . . . bring your exercise books. Show him,' Teacher said.

The children trooped out like a battalion of soldier ants, the eldest leading the way. They returned in the same order, each holding an orange exercise book. Engineer perused each book page by page and smiled like an apostle whose new converts were reciting the creed. Finally, he got to the last child, who was about

four years old. As soon as he held out his exercise book, his mother leaned over and landed a stout knock on the little boy's head.

'How many times have I told you to stop giving your elders things with your left hand?' she glared. 'Next time, I'm going to use a knife to cut it off.'

Engineer jumped in.

'Teacher,' he said, 'it's not really the boy's fault if he uses his left hand sometimes.'

'Children are born foolish,' Teacher replied sorrowfully. 'If one doesn't teach them properly from an early age, they grow up and continue that way. He'll soon learn.'

'No, no, no . . . What I'm saying is that the way his brain is arranged, he uses his left hand to do things that other people normally do with their right hands.'

Teacher laughed.

'I'm very serious,' Engineer said. 'It's the white people who found that out.'

'Engineer, it doesn't matter what the white people have found out. The white people may not mind what hand they use to eat and do other things, but in our culture, it's disrespectful for a child to give something to his elders with his left hand. You know that.'

'I know. But what I'm saying is that, no matter what culture says, it's not the fault of any child who does this.'

'Engineer, I think you're taking things too far. You need to be careful that the ways of the white man don't make you mad. The way it is, people are already saying that you're no longer an African man.'

'How can they say I'm not African?' Engineer chuckled. 'My skin is dark, my nostrils are wide, my hair is thick and curly. What other evidence do they need? Or do I have to wear a grass skirt and start dancing around like a chimpanzee?'

Teacher looked wounded.

'Don't forget I've also gone to school,' he said. 'But that doesn't make me believe I have to drop everything about my culture in favour of another man's own.'

Yes, both men had been classmates in secondary school, but only

one of them had gone on to university – to university in the white man's land.

'My learned friend,' Engineer replied, 'we are the ones who should know better. Any part of our culture that is backwards should be dumped! When I was in London, there was a time I was having my bath and my landlord's son came to peep at me because he wanted to see if I had a tail. Do you think it's his fault? I don't blame the people who are saying that monkeys are our ancestors. It's customs like this that give rise to that conclusion.'

At that point Augustina lost control of her mouth and broke all protocol by speaking.

'Monkeys? Do they say that men and women are the children of monkeys?'

Both Teacher and Wife turned and looked at her as if she had broken the eleventh commandment. The children looked at her as if she had no right to interrupt their day's entertainment. Engineer looked at her curiously, as if he were peering through his microscope at a specimen in the laboratory. This girl was trespassing – a conversation between men.

'What is your name, again?' Engineer asked.

By that time, Augustina had repented of her sin. She cast her gaze to the floor.

'Young woman, what is your name?' he repeated.

'My name is Ozoemena,' she replied solemnly.

'Go and bring in the clothes,' Aunty said, as if she wished she were near enough to fling Augustina against the wall.

Regretting all the exotic tales she was going to miss, Augustina went outside and gathered the dry clothes from the cherry fruit hedges. Afterwards she felt awkward about rejoining the group and remained inside the bedroom until Aunty called her to carry out the sack of yams and plantains they had prepared as a gift for Engineer. Engineer saw her heading outside, excused himself, and followed. He opened the car boot and helped her place the items inside.

'You have very beautiful hair,' he said.

She knew that was probably all that he could say. As a child, Augustina's family had jokingly called her *Nna ga-alu*, 'father will marry', because she had been so ugly that the experts had said her

father would be the one who ended up marrying her. But Nature had compensated her adequately. She had a full head of hair that went all the way to the nape of her neck when plaited into narrow stems with black thread.

'Thank you,' she replied with head bent and a smile on one side of her face.

'Why did they call you Ozoemena?' he asked. 'What happened when you were born?'

She was not surprised at the question. Ozoemena means 'let another one not happen'. The only shocker was that he had actually cared to ask.

'My mother died when she was giving birth to me,' Augustina replied.

'Do you have a Christian name?'

She nodded.

'Augustina.'

She was born on the twenty-seventh of May, on St Augustine's Day. It was the nurse at the missionary hospital who had written the name on her birth certificate.

Engineer bent and peeped into her face. Then, he smiled.

'I think a child should be named for his destiny so that whenever he hears his name, he has an idea of the sort of future that is expected of him. Not according to the circumstances of his birth. The past is constraining but the future has no limits.' He smiled again. 'I shall call you Augustina.'

Augustina meditated on his words as she walked back inside. One of her cousins was named Onwubiko, 'death please', because his mother had lost seven children before he was born. She had another relative called Ahamefule, 'my name should not get lost', because he was the first son after six girls. And then her classmate in secondary school was called Nkemakolam, 'my own should not lack from me', because she was the first child after several years of childlessness. This method of choosing names was quite common but this Engineer man was a wonder. He said things and thought things like no other person she had ever met.

A few days later, Engineer returned for lunch. Afterwards, he asked Teacher if it was OK to sit and chat with Augustina in

the garden. Teacher and Wife looked at themselves and back at Engineer. He repeated his request.

Augustina completed her tasks and went to meet him outside. He was sitting on a pile of firewood by the back fence and had pulled a smaller pile close to his side. As she approached, he looked her over from top to toe, like a glutton beholding a spread of fried foods.

'What of your slippers?' he asked softly.

Augustina looked at her feet.

'Why not go and wear your slippers,' he said.

She was used to walking around barefoot. But the way he spoke made her rush back in and fetch the slippers she usually wore to the market on Nkwo Day.

'Augustina, you shouldn't go around with your bare feet,' he said, after she had sat down on the smaller pile of wood.

Augustina kept quiet and stared ahead at a large family of fowls advancing towards them. A bold member of the brood stretched its neck and pecked at some invisible snack by Engineer's feet. A more audacious member marched towards her toe area and attempted to feed. Augustina jerked her leg quickly. The abrupt motion sent the fowls sprinting towards the other side of the compound in a tsunami of fright.

'You know,' he continued, 'when the white man first came, a lot of people thought he didn't have any toes. They thought that his shoes were his actual feet.'

He laughed in a jolly, drowsy way that made her smile a drowsy, jolly smile. She also had heard all sorts of amusing stories about when the white man first turned up. Her grandmother had told her that the very first time she saw a white man, she and her friends had run away, thinking it was an evil spirit.

'You have such beautiful hair,' Engineer continued. 'Have you gone to school?'

'Yes, I've finished secondary school.'

'What of university? Don't you want to read further?'

'I'm learning how to sew.'

'Ah. Learning how to sew and going to university are not the same thing. Look at all these people you see going to the farm every

day.' With his right hand, he drew a slow semi-circle in the air. 'Do you know what they could have been if they had gone to school?'

She did not.

'Some of them could have been great inventors, great doctors or engineers. Some of them would have been known in other parts of the world. Have you ever heard of the nature/nurture controversy?'

She had not.

'These people,' he said, turning to face her, 'if they were taken away from this environment and placed somewhere else for a while . . . just a little while . . . they would all be very different.'

He kept quiet to allow her to digest his words. Then she remembered the discussion of the other day.

'Is it true that monkeys are our ancestors?' she asked.

Engineer smiled with gladness.

'Augustina, I like you. You're a smart girl. I like the way you listen and ask questions.'

One of her father's wives had complained that this was her main problem in life, that she asked too many questions for a girl.

'They call it evolution,' he said, and then told her how scientists said that men were once monkeys, that the monkeys had gradually turned into human beings. He said that Christians were angry about this because the Bible says God created man.

'Why was the world originally without form and void? Could God have created it that way?' He shook his head vehemently, as if he were resetting the bones in his skull. 'I don't think so. There must have been another earth that existed before Genesis, which was destroyed. Some parts of the Bible make mention of it. That old earth must have had another man who looked like a monkey. But when creating the new earth, God decided to make the new type of man in His own image.'

Augustina's head swung from side to side like someone in a mini trance. He talked more about dinosaurs and other strange animals that must have existed in that old earth, about how scientists had even been finding their bones. Right there and then, Augustina fell in love with his brain. Throughout that night, his voice led a procession of his words all around her mind. She wondered how

all this information could be contained in one head, how all this confidence could be exuding from one breath.

Afterwards, he came more and more often to see her. Eventually, he raised the issue again.

'Augustina, why don't you go to university?'

She smiled on one side of her face and kicked at a passing earthworm. Each time Augustina was tempted to consider the issue, she remembered her father. He would never approve. The sensible thing for a girl to focus on at this time of her life was getting married and building a home.

'I don't want to go back to school,' she said firmly. 'I've decided that I want to sew and that's what I'm going to do. Please stop asking me.'

They sat in silence while she watched the earthworm wriggle away to a better life. This was the first time she had spoken to him sternly. She hoped he was not put off, and she was already composing a suitable apology in her mind when he uncrossed his legs and sat superintendent straight.

'If you go to university,' he said, 'I will marry you.'

Augustina gaped like a trout.

'Augustina, if you agree to go back to school, I'll assist with your fees, and when you finish, I'll marry you.'

That was how he proposed.

On the day that her admission letter to study Clothing and Textile at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, arrived, Engineer leapt over the moon and back.

'Augustina,' he said feverishly, 'our children are going to be great. They're going to have the best education. They're going to be engineers and doctors and lawyers and scientists. They're going to have English names and they're going to speak English like the queen. And from now on, stop calling me Engineer. Call me Paulinus.'

Then he lost control of himself and did something that he had never done before. He ran his fingers through her hair and told her that he loved her.

Part 1

Ọkụkọ sị na ya anaghị eti ka egbe ji ya haa ya; kama na ya na-eti ka ọha nụrụ olu ya.

The chicken carried away by a hawk says that it is crying not so that the thing carrying it will let it go, but so that the public will hear its voice and be witness.

One

My taste buds had been hearing the smell of my mother's cooking and my stomach had started talking. Finally, she called out from the kitchen and my siblings rushed in to fetch their meals. Being the *opara* of the family, I was entitled to certain privileges. As first son, I sat at the dining table and waited. My mother soon appeared carrying a broad plastic tray with an enamel bowl of water, a flat aluminium plate of *garri*, and a dainty ceramic bowl of *egusi* soup.

I washed my hands and began to eat slowly. The soup should have been a thick concoction of *ukazi* leaves, chunks of dried fish and boiled meat, red palm oil, maggi cubes – all boiled together until they formed a juicy paste. But what I had in front me were a midget-sized piece of meat, bits of vegetable, and random specks of *egusi*, floating around in a thin fluid that looked like a polluted stream.

The piece of meat looked up at me and laughed. I would have laughed back but there was nothing funny about the situation at all. My mother was not a novice in the kitchen. This pitiful presentation was a reflection of the circumstances in our home. Life was hard. Times were bad. Things had not always been like this.

After her Clothing and Textile degree, my mother had travelled to the United Kingdom with my father. They returned armed with Masters degrees. He was posted to the Ministry of Works and Transport in Umuahia; she acquired a sizeable tailoring shop that still stood at the exact same spot where it had been founded all those years ago. My father's earnings alone had been more than enough, but years of rising inflation without any corresponding increase in civil servant wages had gradually rendered the amount insignificant.

Then came my father's diagnosis. For a poorly paid civil servant to dabble in an affliction like diabetes was the very height of

ambitious misfortune. The expenditure on his tablets and insulin alone was enough for the upkeep of another grown child. And since his special diet banned him from large quantities of the high-carbohydrate staple foods in our part of the world, he was now constrained to healthier, less affordable alternatives. The little income from the tailoring shop plus my father's pension were what we were now surviving on.

My mother reappeared at the dining table, laden with another tray, which had my father's melancholic lunch on it. The front of her dress was stained with the sticky, black fluid from the unripe plantains that she had used to make her husband's porridge. She arranged the tray at the head of the table and sat in her place next to his.

'Paulinus, come and eat,' she called out.

My father stood up from his favourite armchair. He shuffled to the dining table, bringing with him the combined odour of medication and illness and age. My siblings joined us. Charity sat between me and my mother on my right; Godfrey and Eugene sat to my left. The noise of tongues sucking, teeth chomping, and throats swallowing soon floated about in the air like ghosts. My father's voice joined in.

'Augustina, I need a little bit more salt.'

My mother considered his request for a while. Because he also suffered from high blood pressure, every day she reduced the quantity of salt she added to his food, hoping that he would not notice. Reluctantly, she succumbed.

'Odinkemmelu,' she called out.

There was no reply.

Odinkemmelu!'

Silence was the answer.

'Odinkemmelu! Odinkemmelu!'

'Yes, Ma!' a voice responded from the kitchen.

The air in the room was suddenly invaded by the feral stench of pubescent sweat. Odinkemmelu entered wearing a rusty white T-shirt and a pair of khaki shorts that had jagged holes in several inappropriate places. He and the other girl, Chikaodinaka, had

come from the village to live with us. Neither of them was allowed to sit at the dining table.

'How come it took you so long to answer?' my mother asked.

'Mama Kingsley, sorry, Ma. I am put off the fire for the kerosene stove by the time you call and I doesn't heard you.'

My mother ran her eyes up and down Odinkemmelu's body in a way that must have tied knots in his spinal cord. But the boy was not telling a lie; the fumes floated in right on time. We had stopped using the gas cooker because cooking gas was too expensive, and had switched to the kerosene stove that contaminated the air in the house with thick, toxic clouds whenever it was quenched with either a sprinkling of water or the blasts of someone's breath.

'Bring me some salt,' my mother said.

Odinkemmelu took his body odour away to the kitchen and returned with a teaspoon of salt.

'Godfrey, I don't want to hear that you forgot to bring the university entrance forms back from school tomorrow,' my father said to my brother.

Godfrey grunted quietly.

'For almost a week now, I've been reminding you,' my father continued. 'You don't always have to wait till the last minute.'

When it was my turn about seven years ago, I had brought my forms home promptly. My father had sat down with me and we filled them out together. We divided the task equally: he decided that I should study Chemical Engineering, he decided that I should attend the Federal University of Technology, Owerri, and he decided that I must not take the exams more than once. My own part was to fill in his instructions with biro and ink, study for the exams, and make one of the highest Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board exam scores into the university's Chemical Engineering Department. Godfrey did not appear too keen on any such joint venture.

'And I hope you've been studying,' my father added. 'Because any child of mine who decides to be useless and not go to university has his own self to blame for however his life turns out.'

A sudden bout of coughing forced an early conclusion to a speech that could easily have lasted the duration of our meal. To

my parents, education was everything. She was the recipe for wealth, the pass to respectability, the ticket to eternal life.

Once, while in primary school, I had ventured to exercise my talents in the football field during break time and returned home with my school shirt badly ripped and stained. When my mother saw me, she stared as if I had huge pus-filled boils all over my body. Then she used a long *koboko* whip to express herself more vividly on my buttocks. Later that evening, my father called me into his bedroom. He sat on the bed, held my shoulders, and adjusted my posture until I was standing directly in front of him. He stared into my eyes forever. Then in a deep, sententious tone, he changed my life.

'Kingsley, do you want to be useful to yourself in this world?' he asked.

I answered in the affirmative.

'Do you want to make me and your mummy proud?'

Again, my answer was the same.

'Do you want people to know you and respect you wherever you go?'

I did.

'Do you want to end up selling pepper and tomatoes in Nkwoegwu market?'

I shuddered. My soul was horrified at the thought of joining the sellers who transported food items from different villages to one of the local markets. Hardly any of them understood what was being said if you did not speak Igbo. Most of them looked wretched.

My father amplified his voice.

'Do you?'

No, I did not.

'Then you must stop wasting your time on silly things. You must read your books . . . focus on your studies and on the future you have ahead of you. A good education is what you need to survive in this world. Do you hear me?'

I heard him too loud and very clear. Still, he continued.

He explained that without education, man is as though in a closed room; with education, he finds himself in a room with all its windows open towards the outside world. He said that education

makes a man a right thinker; it tells him how to make decisions. He said that finishing school and finishing well was an asset that opened up a thousand more opportunities for people.

My tender triceps started grumbling. He continued.

He said that education is the only way of putting one's potential to maximum use, that you could safely say that a human being is not in his correct senses until he is educated.

'Even the Bible says it,' he concluded. '"Wisdom is better than gold, understanding better than choice silver." Do you hear me?'

Not only did I hear him, I believed him completely. I was brainwashed. I became an instant disciple. Thereafter, as I watched other little boys squandering their time and energy in football fields, I simply believed that they did not know what I knew. Like the Spiderman, I was privy to some esoteric experience that made me superhuman. And the more my scores skyrocketed in the classroom, the more I kept away from my friend Alozie, who could still not tell the difference between 'there' and 'their', and our neighbour's son Kachi, who was finding it difficult to learn the seven-times table. I continued to outdistance my classmates in academic performance. I had never once looked behind.

My mother reached out and patted her husband's back softly until his coughing ceased. Then she changed the topic.

'Kingsley, when is the next interview?' she asked.

'The letter just said I passed. They'll send another one to let me know. It's going to be a one-on-one meeting with one of the big bosses in their head office. This time, each person's date is different.'

'You're going to Port Harcourt again?' Eugene asked.

'It's probably just a formality,' my father said. 'The first three interviews were the most important.'

'So if you go and work in Shell now,' Charity asked, 'will you move to Port Harcourt?'

There was panic in her voice. I smiled fondly at her.

'It doesn't matter where I live,' I replied. 'I'll come home often and you can also come and be visiting me.'

She did not look comforted. My father must have noticed.

'Charity, bring your plate,' he said.

Charity pushed her enamel bowl of soup across the table, past my mother, and towards him. My father stuck his fork into the piece of meat in his plate and put it into his mouth. He bit some off with his incisors and deposited the remaining half into my sister's bowl. Unlike mine, his was a veritable chunk of cow.

'Thank you, Daddy,' she said, while dragging the bowl back.

I remembered when Charity was born about eight weeks before my mother's expected date of delivery. Though we were all pleased that it was a girl at last, she looked like a withered skeleton, tiny enough to make seasoned doctors squirm. Going to hospital almost every day and watching her suffer must have been when each of us developed a special fondness for her. All of us except Eugene, who was a year younger than Godfrey and a year older than Charity. He was a thorn in her flesh and made her a regular target for his silly jokes.

'Ah!' Eugene exclaimed now. 'Look at your armpit! It looks like a gorilla's thighs!'

Everybody turned towards Charity. She clutched her arms close to her sides and looked about to press the control buttons of a time machine and disappear. My mother's eyes swelled with shock.

'Why can't you shave your armpits regularly?' she asked. 'Don't you know you're now a big girl?'

A cloud fell upon Charity's face. At fifteen and a half, she was still very much a baby. She had wept when Princess Diana died, sobbed when we watched a documentary about people whose body parts were enlarged because of elephantiasis. While other Nigerians poured into the streets and celebrated General Sani Abacha's sudden death, Charity stayed indoors and shed tears.

'Is there any law that says she must shave?' Godfrey intervened. 'Even if there is, who makes all those laws? Whose business is it if she decides to grow a forest under her arms?'

Charity rubbed her eyes.

'It looks dirty,' my mother said. 'People will think she's untidy.'

'Why can't people mind their own business?' Godfrey replied. 'Why should they go about inspecting other people's armpits? After all, those hairs must have been put there for a reason.'

Charity sniffed.

'Actually, you're right,' I added. Not that I agreed that any girl should go about with a timberland under her arms, but for the sole purpose of coming to my darling sister's aid in this her hour of need. 'Scientists say that the hairs there are meant to transmit pheromones.'

'What are pheromones?' Eugene asked.

'They are secretions that men and women have without being aware of it,' my father explained. 'They play a part in the attraction between men and women.'

That was one thing that sickness and poverty had not been able to snatch from him. My father was a walking encyclopedia, and he flipped his pages with the zeal and precision of a magician. He knew every theory of science and every city in the atlas; he knew every word in the dictionary and every scripture in the Holy Bible. It was such a pity that all the things he knew were not able to put money in his pocket.

'No wonder,' Eugene said seriously. 'Like that houseboy on the third floor who's always staring at her whenever she's walking back from school. I guess it's not really her fault the sort of people her own pheromones attract.'

He laughed and choked at his own joke while the rest of us stifled our amusement for the sake of solidarity with Charity. All of us but one. My father transmitted an icy frown that froze the dancing muscles on Eugene's face. We all looked back to our plates. I realised that mine was empty. It was little episodes like this that made it easier for me to forget just how much like sawdust our meals tasted.