

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

Tiny Sunbirds Far Away

Written by Christie Watson

Published by Quercus Publishing PLC

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

First published in Great Britain in year of 2011 by Quercus
This paperback edition published in 2012 by

Quercus
55 Baker Street,
7th Floor, South Block
London
W1U 8EW

Copyright © 2011 by Christie Watson

The moral right of Christie Watson to be
identified as the author of this work has been
asserted in accordance with the Copyright,
Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Some characters in this novel first appeared in a short story entitled
'Basketball Player', published by *Wasafiri, Everything to Declare:*
25 Anniversary Issue, Vol. 24 Number 3, September 2009.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication
may be reproduced or transmitted in any form
or by any means, electronic or mechanical,
including photocopy, recording, or any
information storage and retrieval system,
without permission in writing from the publisher.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 84916 375 0

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters,
businesses, organizations, places and events are
either the product of the author's imagination
or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to
actual persons, living or dead, events or
locales is entirely coincidental.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Ellipsis Digital Limited, Glasgow

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

ONE

Father was a loud man. His voice entered a room before he did. From my bedroom window I could hear him sitting in the wide gardens, or walking to the car parking area filled with Mercedes, or standing by the security guard's office, or the gate in front.

The gate had different signs stuck on it every week:

No Hawkers

Hawkers Only Permitted if Called by Residents

No Barbecues in the Gardens

No Overnight Guests: Remember,

Friends Can Be Armed Robbers Too

And once, until Mama saw the sign and had Father remove it, after he had laughed so loudly that the walls shook:

No Sexual Activity or Defecating in the Gardens

We lived on Allen Avenue in Ikeja, on the fourth floor of

a gated apartment block called Better Life Executive Homes. I loved watching the street from my window, the traders outside walking up and down the avenue, with brightly coloured buckets and baskets and trays balanced on their heads. They were always shouting: 'Chin-chin, chin-chin', or 'Flip-flops', or 'Batteries', or 'Schnapps'. Every day, no matter how many days I had looked out of the window during my twelve years, there was something being sold that I had not seen before: shoe-horns, St Michael's underwear, imported *Hello!* magazines. I loved watching the women huddled underneath umbrellas, their legs poking out of the bottoms like thick yams. Or the men with necks covered in yellow gold, sitting on the bonnets of their BMWs, and the women wearing Western-style clothes hovering around them like stars around the moon. The women visited the boutique dress shops, and all the day the men would go in and out of the bars and Chinese restaurants, one hand always in their pocket ready to pull out some more naira.

Occasionally Mama rushed in and pushed me off the window seat, opening the window wide to let out the cold air and let in the heat, and the smells of the nearby market, of sewerage from the open gutters, the fresh fish, raw meat, *akara*, puff-puff, and *suya*. The smells made me feel sick and hungry at the same time. 'Don't look at those men,' Mama would say. 'I wish they would go to some other place to spend their money.'

But there was no other place. Allen Avenue was the richest road in Ikeja, with the most shops. If you had money

to spend, Allen Avenue was where you spent it. And if you were even richer, like us, then you lived there. On Allen Avenue every house or apartment had a generator. The hum they made was constant, day and night. Roads surrounded us that had no electricity at all, where people went to bed as soon as night fell and, according to my brother Ezekiel, produced too many babies. But Allen Avenue was brightly lit. People left their televisions and radios on loud all night, to show how much money they could afford to waste.

‘Hey, hey you! I need soaps.’

‘Best quality soap. Anti-germ. Very fine, good for skin. Will smooth you and soothe you, Mama. Very famous soap. Imported from US.’

Mama waved her hand up and down as the tall woman with the blue and white plastic bowl full of soaps walked slowly towards the security gate. She did not rush. Nobody did. Even when the other hawkers realised that Mama was buying soap. That she had money to spend. They looked up at the window and shouted out the contents of their bowls or baskets or trays: Oranges, Pure Water, Bush Meat, Alarm Clock, Petticoats, Gucci Handbags.

But from where I was sitting, I did not need them to shout.

I could see everything.

Father worked as an accountant for an office full of government ministers in central Lagos, and had to leave the apart-

ment very early in the morning to miss the worst of the go-slow. Ezikiel woke up extra early to see Father before he left for work, even though he was fourteen years old and not a morning person. He liked to sit on Father's side of his bed next to his neatly laid out work clothes, and watch him dress, pass him his tie, cufflinks and wristwatch. Mama would tut loudly into her pillow before swinging her long legs out of the bed as Father whistled and teased her. 'It is like sleeping next to a handful of needles,' he would say, 'sharp and bony, poking me through the night.' Mama would tut even louder, and sometimes suck her teeth.

We all had breakfast together. Father ate Hot Food Only, but lukewarm, which made his Hot Food Only rule seem silly. Ezikiel and I ate cereal, or rolls with jam that Mama had stolen from her job at the Royal Imperial Hotel. After dressing in her work uniform of navy blue skirt and white blouse, and painting her lips with a tiny paintbrush, Mama would make Father's coffee, extra sweet with warmed condensed milk. Then she would kiss Father on the mouth. Sometimes twice. After kissing Mama, Father would have the same red colour on his lips and make us laugh by pretending to have the voice of a woman. Father laughed the loudest. He always laughed at breakfast time, until he had a mouthful of food, or until our neighbour, who did not begin work until nine a.m., banged on the wall with his knuckles.

After Father and Mama had left for work, Ezikiel and I walked to the International School for Future Leaders, which

had floors so shiny I could see my reflection in them. My best friend Habibat and I liked to sit by the fountain at lunchtime and take off our shoes and socks, dipping our feet into the cool water. Ezikiel liked the clubs and societies: Chess society, Latin club, Science club. But we both liked school. We liked the marble floors, cool air-conditioning, and wide running field that seemed to stretch forever.

It was nearly night outside when Father arrived home. My window was shut, the air-conditioning was on full, but still, I could hear his footsteps on the path, his key in the lock, and his slamming the door. Ezikiel jumped up from where he had been reading on my bed, knocking his textbook onto the floor where it opened at a page that had a picture of a man with no skin showing his insides, and arrows pointing to the different bits inside him: descending colon, duodenum, liver.

Father's footsteps thudded across the hallway before the door burst open. 'Kids, where are you? Where are you, trouble kids?'

Mama hated Father calling us kids.

Father loosened his tie as Ezikiel and I rushed over and followed him to the parlour.

'I came top in the spelling test, and the teacher said I am the best at Latin. The best he's ever taught.' Ezikiel was breathless from talking too fast. His nostrils were flaring.

I moved closer to Ezikiel's back. Even though Ezikiel was only two years older than me he was already a whole head higher. My eyes were level with the bony part at the bottom

of his neck. I could not see Father drop to his knees, but I knew that he had. He knelt every day so that we could climb onto his shoulders, a shoulder each, and he would lift us to the ceiling, and throw us into the air. He was always in a good mood when he first returned home.

Father stood slowly, pretending to wobble and almost drop us, but I knew how strong he was. Ezikiel had told me he'd seen Father lift the car with only one hand, so that Zafi, our driver, could change the wheel.

We laughed and laughed on Father's shoulders, tickling behind his ears. The laughter flew around the room like a hungry mosquito. My own laughter was loud in my ears. I could barely hear Mama.

'Get them down, for goodness' sake; they are not babies any more. You'll damage your back!' Mama came out of her bedroom wearing a dressing gown and red eyes. 'It's dangerous!'

Mama had never liked us to sit on Father's shoulders, even when we were younger. She said that she did not like the idea of us falling, of having to catch us, but I was sure that she did not want us to know about the top of her head where her weave had been pulled tight and left a patch of bald, or the high up shelf where she kept a tin of liquorice, and a photograph album that we were not meant to see.

Suddenly, Ezikiel's wheeze appeared. It was louder than the television showing a Nollywood film. It was louder than the hum of the generators. It was louder than Father's laughter. Ezikiel's body straightened and he banged his head on the ceiling. I grabbed onto his arm.

‘See what happens,’ said Mama, rushing forwards.

Father dropped to his knees, and I jumped off, and stood back as Ezikiel slumped over. He was already coughing and hitting the front of his chest. His breaths were coming quickly, and out of time. Mama dropped down, sitting behind Ezikiel, holding his back with her arm. The redness had disappeared from her eyes and jumped into Ezikiel’s.

‘Quick,’ she shouted at Father, who was getting to his feet. Mama stroked Ezikiel’s hair, whispering into his ear, rocking his body back and forth, back and forth.

In one movement, Father opened the sideboard drawer and pulled out a blue inhaler, flipped the cap off, and passed it to Mama who stuck it into Ezikiel’s mouth, and pressed the top twice.

The inside of Ezikiel’s bottom lip was blue.

‘Get the paper bag on the kitchen top, quickly.’ Mama pressed the inhaler again. She continued to rock.

I ran to the kitchen. The brown bag on the kitchen top was full of peppers. I looked around for another. My eyes could not work fast enough. They zoomed around the kitchen but everything had become blurry. I could hear the rasping of Ezikiel’s breaths, and I could feel Mama’s panic in my neck.

There was no other bag. What should I do? I had twelve years; I was old enough to know that peppers should be treated carefully. I looked at them. They were unbroken. I took a long breath, and a chance that their pepperyness had not seeped out, emptied the bag, and ran back.

Ezikiel was slumped over his inhaler, Mama was behind him holding him up, and Father was behind her holding her up. Father had his arms wrapped around both of them. When I ran towards him he pulled me into his arms, too.

Mama grabbed the brown paper bag from my hand and placed it over Ezikiel's nose and mouth. It took a few seconds before the red trees in his eyes grew branches, and his tears fell like tiny leaves onto the bag. He pushed the bag away.

Mama leant forwards and smelled the bag.

Mama gave me a look that said, 'Stupid girl.'

I said nothing.

Father leaned towards Mama, and stroked her face where her frown line cut into her forehead. 'He'll be fine,' he said, in his loud voice that sounded so sure. Mama's frown line became less deep. His arm tightened around my back.

Father was right. He was always right. Ezikiel's breathing slowly improved. The trees disappeared and the wheeze quietened. Mama sniffed the bag, then put it back over his nose and only took it away to puff some more of his inhaler in. Ezikiel's breathing became more regular and equal, his skin no longer being tugged into his throat. I watched his nostrils until they were flat once more, against his face, and his skin change colour slowly from daylight, to dusk, to night.

Father was a loud man. I could hear him shouting from the neighbours' apartment where he argued about football with Dr Adeshina, and drank so much Remy Martin that he could

not stand up properly. I could hear him singing when he returned from the Everlasting Open Arms House of Salvation Church, on a bus that had the words 'Up Jesus Down Satan' written on the side. The singing would reach my ears right up on the fourth floor. From my window I watched the bus driver and Pastor King Junior carry Father towards the apartment because he could not stand up at all.

If Father did stand up, it was worse. He seemed to have no idea how to move around quietly, and when he did try, after Mama said her head was splitting in two, the crashing became louder.

We were so used to Father's loud voice that it became quieter. Our ears changed and put on a barrier like sunglasses whenever he was at home. So when we left for market early on Saturday morning and we knew Father was out working all day on some important account at the office, our ears did not need their sunglasses on. And when Mama realised she had forgotten her purse, and we had to turn back, our ears were working fine. I heard the chatter of the women at market, the traffic and street traders along Allen Avenue, and the humming of the electric gate to let us back into the apartment building. I heard our footsteps on the hallway carpets, and Mama's key in the front lock. I heard the cupboard door open when Ezekiel and I went straight for the biscuits.

And then I heard the most terrible, loudest noise I had ever heard in my life.

My switched-on ears hurt. I tried to put the glasses on

them, to switch them down, to turn them off. Father must have been home; I could hear him shouting.

Father was a loud man.

But it was Mama who was screaming.

TWO

It was a month later when the shouting reduced enough for us to hear the words that Mama and Father were saying to each other.

‘I didn’t mean it to happen,’ Father said.

Ezekiel and I were holding hands, and listening from behind the bedroom door. I imagined Mama’s expression, pinched and unforgiving, sharp arms folded across her nearly flat chest.

‘You are a louse,’ Mama replied, in a voice much clearer than usual.

I squeezed Ezekiel’s hand and wished as hard as possible for Mama to soften, for her to forgive. But I knew Mama.

‘I am going to live with her,’ said Father. The smell of stale palm wine followed the sound of his voice.

A few seconds later, the door slammed. I could hear Father walking down the hallway with his too-loud walk, and pressing the lift with his too-loud finger, and swearing with his too-loud voice.

Then it was quiet.



It was a month after that when Mama had to stop working at the Royal Imperial Hotel. She said that the owners only employed married women. Since Father had left, I did not dare ask her anything at all.

I did not dare ask her if she was no longer married to Father.

She had always left for work at dawn, except Sundays. Even then, she got up before sunrise and complained every week that her body was Just Used To It. She had always made our breakfast. She had always kissed us on the head before she left for work, and kissed Father on the mouth, sometimes twice. But Father was gone.

First she stopped making our breakfast.

Then she stopped applying lipstick with the tiny paintbrush.

Then she stopped kissing us on the head to wake us.

Instead she shouted my name: 'Blessing!' followed by 'Ezikiel!' as if there was an emergency.

And one day, she told us that Father had stopped paying the rent and we were going to be evicted. She said that Better Life Executive Homes had high rents that could only be paid by rich men, and she was not a man, or even a woman with a job; there was no way we would escape eviction.

And because we were being evicted, we had to move to our grandfather Alhaji's house.

I did not know what evicted meant but I did not dare ask.

I had never before seen my grandparents who lived a day's

drive away near Warri in the Niger Delta. Mama had told us once that her parents had never wanted Mama to marry Father, or any other Yoruba man.

‘Did you make up with Grandma?’ I asked.

‘We never broke up,’ Mama said. She had laid out two large suitcases on the bed and was wiping the insides clean with a piece of yellow sponge. ‘Essentials only,’ she said, when she noticed me looking at the cases. Her hair was matted and uncombed. She looked like the women hawkers walking up and down the avenue who wore no shoes on their feet.

‘But they have never been to see us. And we live so far apart.’

‘No mother and daughter live apart,’ said Mama, ‘no matter how big the distance between them.’

‘Even if you did make up,’ Ezekiel said, ‘Warri is not safe. And those villages outside are even worse! Swamp villages! I googled Warri at the internet café. Oil bunkering, hostage taking, illness, guns and poverty. What about my asthma? They burn poisonous chemicals straight into the air! It’s not a safe place to live.’

I could feel the panic in Ezekiel’s voice. It made the words sound angry.

‘I grew up there,’ said Mama. ‘And I was safe. More than safe, actually. I loved living near Warri. It’s a great place to grow up. Of course, I won’t have much time for fun now. I’ll be too busy looking for work. But honestly, Warri had its own vibe; it was really fun.’

‘Well, it’s changed then. It’s dangerous. The whole Delta region. And if we don’t get shot the bacteria and parasites will surely kill us.’ Ezikiel shook his head, and disappeared to his bedroom. ‘*Dra-cunc-ul-ia-sis*,’ he shouted. I peered around his door. He was reading from his *Encyclopaedia of Tropical Medicine*. ‘*Schis-to-soma-haem-at-ob-ium*.’ The Latin words became even longer the way that he shouted them. ‘Parasites! That one makes your urine red with blood! *Leish-man-ia-sis*, *Lymph-at-ic fil-ar-ia-sis*. “The river-dwelling parasites burrow through foot skin, enter the lymphatic system and can ultimately cause organ failure!” Are you listening to this?’

‘You’ll like it at Alhaji’s place,’ shouted Mama, eventually. ‘Or, you won’t like it. We have to go, either way.’ She started to cry again. It was unusual to hear Mama disagree with Ezikiel. And even stranger to hear her cry. I peered back around the bedroom door, and gave Ezikiel a look that made him close his book, and curl up on his bed, wrapping his long arms around his knees.

I did not want to leave Lagos. Every memory I ever had of Father was contained in the apartment, or garden. I remember feeling a sharp pain somewhere near my shoulder. I could barely move my arm. I could hardly breathe.

‘He might come back,’ I said, to no one in particular.

‘Is that the only reason you don’t want to leave? Do you know where we are moving? It’s the parasites you should be worried about. What about my allergies? That place is so bush; I doubt they even have medical facilities!’

‘If we leave, we will not remember everything. About Father, I mean.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘If we stay here in our apartment we can remember Father better, even if he does not come back.’ I paused, to swallow the lump in my throat. I looked out of my window to the street below.

‘A person becomes part of their surroundings,’ I told Ezikiel.

Ezikiel rolled his eyes and sighed before putting his long arm around me.

Later, I touched the stone walls and felt Father’s smooth skin that remained cool even during the early afternoon road-melting heat. I tasted his toothbrush, which I had hidden after he left in case Mama threw it in the rubbish bin. Either the toothbrush, or my mouth, was too dry. I found Father’s footprint in the red dirt behind the electric gate and put my foot inside it. My foot looked too small. Everything was too quiet. I wanted to scream.

It was Zafi, our driver, who had taught Ezikiel and me to speak Izon. Before then, we had only spoken in English, and some words in Yoruba, Father’s language. Mama smiled when she heard us speaking her own language. That is why she had allowed Zafi to remain our driver despite him having only one eye and only one foot due to what Ezikiel called ‘poorly managed diabetes’. He was lucky that his remaining

foot was so long; he had mastered the art of driving using his toe on the accelerator and his heel on the brake. Zafi had stayed with Mama after Father left. He said that Father had a new driver with two working eyes and two working feet, and that he did not require payment until Mama had found employment. But really, I did not imagine he would find another job as a driver.

Zafi coughed all the way out of Lagos. The journey should have only taken a day but the go-slow was endless and the car tyres stuck down on the road as if they too did not want to leave. Even the gearbox joined in and made third gear into reverse, and reverse into third gear. We drove all the way out of Lagos with the gear stick facing backwards, pointing at Mama, like a long finger. As soon as we left Allen Avenue the hum of the generators began to fade, and I felt the blood rush forwards in my head. My eyes hurt. My right side began to hurt. I wondered if that was my Yoruba half.

We drove past the Egyptian restaurant where some men were playing *ayo* on small tables outside, and sat in the go-slow at the junction opposite the old Radio Lagos Station, where Father used to get annoyed at the traffic. At Oregun Road, we turned towards the Secretariat and arrived at Eleganza Building. We were silent for the half-hour it took on the express until Sagamu exit, where we followed the road until Ore Road.

Father used to say Ore Road was the most dangerous road in all Nigeria. We swerved around overturned lorries, and

fell into potholes that swallowed the car. The road was separated by a concrete bank, with metal barriers between the sides of traffic. But that did not stop anyone. Cars climbed the concrete, revving until they reached the top, and slid down the other side to face the traffic head on and drive as fast as possible the wrong way. Other cars swerved and crashed and slid and skidded. I could not see the faces of the drivers of the other cars; the sun was too bright, but I imagined they all had their eyes closed like Mama.

We stopped at Ore to run into the bush and urinate. I angled myself this way and that but still the urine went on my ankles. Ezikiel laughed. As we walked slowly back to the car I listened to the voices around me. The language sounded different. People were speaking Yoruba, but mixed up with words that I did not recognise. I could speak Izon, Yoruba, English, and even some pidgin English, which Mama called rotten English. But I did not recognise many of the words around me. I held on tightly to Ezikiel's arm. Everyone we walked past watched us closely. It felt like the first day of school, where even though you wanted to be invisible, everyone could see that you were new and out of place and different.

I listened carefully to the last of the loud Yoruba voices. I listened for Father. I opened my ears as wide as they would go. But he was not there.

An overturned lorry blocked the road, and we sat for hours waiting for the go-slow to lessen. I watched the men standing around, the traders selling bananas, plantains, yams and logs. Some people had left their cars on the road and walked away,

which added to the wait. Everyone was shouting. Fists were being thumped onto car bonnets. Horns blasted. People were tired of waiting. But not us. It was silent in our car. Even Zafi stopped coughing. We waited and waited without even noticing how awful the waiting was.

Eventually it turned to night and the traffic cleared. I had never been beyond Ore. I had never left Yorubaland, the land of Father's tribe. As we drove away, I wanted to turn my head around and look backwards, but instead I looked at Mama, whose eyes were still shut.

I woke with a pain in my neck that stretched right up to my ear. I tried to straighten my head but the pain made it impossible, so I turned my head back towards Ezikiel. He was sleeping with his mouth wide open. His throat looked redder than usual. He was always ill. There was never a week when Ezikiel did not have an asthma attack, an allergy, a throat infection or chest infection. Mama said he was born sickly. The first time Ezikiel had eaten meat fried in groundnut oil I was too young to remember. But Mama had told me the story so often that it felt like a memory. Ezikiel had been two years old. Before then he had lived on a diet of porridge and milk. It was before the time that Mama knew she had to bring home vegetable oil and fry all of Ezikiel's food in it. Every time Ezikiel was presented with fish or meat that had been fried in groundnut oil he screamed as though his body somehow knew what would happen. But by the time he was two, Father had bought Mama an electric liquidiser.

She whizzed up some chicken that had been fried in groundnut oil, and a tiny amount of pepper, and then spooned it into his mouth. Ezikiel gulped down the food quickly. Father and Mama were laughing. I do not know where I was, probably asleep, as I was newly born. Ezikiel's face suddenly turned red, and his skin blistered. Mama screamed. She said the next things happened slowly. First, Ezikiel's face swelled up, then his arms; then his tongue became larger and larger until there was no room for air to get into his mouth. He became blue. Luckily, Dr Adeshina was home. He stuck a syringe of medicine into Ezikiel's leg. He told Father that Ezikiel had a nut allergy. He saved Ezikiel's life. Maybe that was why Ezikiel wanted to be a doctor.

It was still dark outside but the sky had changed colour. The further away we had driven from Lagos, the brighter the sky became until we were on the outskirts of Warri, and it looked bright enough to be day. The stars were the size of my hand, and seemed to move. The moon was close enough to see its uneven surface, like a potholed road in Lagos. As we neared Warri, the sky became even brighter. I saw a flame in the distance. A giant torch, which made the sky look angry.

'Pipeline fires,' said Zafi. 'They are burning the gases from the oil.' He started coughing again.

As we drove through Warri, I opened my eyes as wide as they would go, to let in all the differences. When we stopped in another go-slow I heard birds singing loudly. I looked at the sky but saw nothing except dust and air, before I realised it was not birds singing. It was people talking,

low then high, then low again. They were speaking pidgin English mixed with some other language. I did not understand a single word. Even the pidgin English sounded different. We drove past tall buildings with shops underneath hanging onto the sides, and large areas of wasteland, shopping malls and markets. But as we drove through Warri, I did not see any slums, like Makoko under the main bridge in Lagos, where the smell of fish and human waste and rubbish is so strong that if it fills your nostrils it takes all day to remove. I did not see an area like Victoria Island where the white men used to go and shop, and stay in five star hotels like the one that Mama used to work in. There was no Allen Avenue where you could eat Chinese food and shop for designer clothes. Warri even smelled different to Lagos. I closed my eyes and sniffed. The air smelled like a book unopened for a very long time, and smoky, as though the ground had been on fire.

On the other side of Warri there was nothing to see except bush on either side of the road. I closed my eyes and tried to remember Father's face. It was already changing. Becoming less clear. He had a mark above his eyebrow, I remembered, of course. But already, I had forgotten which eyebrow.

Eventually we drove past a sleeping village and down the end of a potholed road, and we pulled up outside a large gated compound. The first thing I saw was a chicken, in the car headlights, marked with a splash of red paint. The chicken stopped in front of the car and made no attempt to move, then, at the last minute, it shrieked and fluttered off. A

sleeping dog was by the gate, curled up like a cashew nut. It did not move or even wake up. The gate was rusted metal with sharp broken edges. Barbed wire and pieces of glass lined the top of the gate and the wall. I could hear shouting: 'Eh! Eh!'

A woman opened the gate and came outside carrying a kerosene lamp. I could see at once that it was Grandma; she had the same pinched nose as me. She had the flattest, roundest face I had ever seen. The area around her mouth was criss-crossed with tiny scars, and two thick scars either side of her lips made her smile seem even wider. Grandma was very short, but she looked tall until, one by one, we climbed out of the car.

An old man came out from behind the gate next, half the size of Grandma. He greeted Mama with a nod. He did not extend his hand at all. His face was crumpled like my T-shirt. Mama dropped to her knees and bent her head forward until he said, 'Rise.'

Mama stood and stepped backwards, her head still lowered. 'Thank you, Alhaji, sir,' she whispered back in Izon.

'You are welcome, daughter.'

Grandfather!

Grandma reached out for Mama. She squashed her tightly, and kissed the top of her head. I had never before seen anyone kiss the top of Mama's head. Mama sobbed, just once, then moved aside.

'Ezikiel,' said Grandma. 'Let me see this big strong boy.' She hugged Ezikiel and rubbed her hand on his skinny back.

I stayed by the car and stuck my hand out to Grandma. Grandma did not take my hand. She just looked at me so deeply it felt as though she could see right through my skin, and into my bones.

We followed Grandma into the house, where I could only just see that other people were sitting on chairs. I noticed a girl my own age, and wanted to ask who she was, but I did not dare speak. It was too dark. It was too quiet. In Lagos our house had only contained four people and yet it was always noisy, always busy. This place was full of people, but it was silent. There was no talking or laughing, no music, television or radio, no humming of a generator. I could hear my own breath coming out. I could hear Ezikiel's wheeze at the bottom of his back.

We walked though into a room where Grandma pointed to the plastic chairs that were around a small wooden table. On top of the table was a tray with four glasses and four bowls. Grandma took the bowls and lifted them. She opened a door to the back of the house. Balanced on a metal block on top of the fire was a pot. It bubbled like Ezikiel's chest.

Grandma picked up a large spoon from the dusty ground. She put a spoonful of soup into each pot and handed them to us. We took our bowls into the house and sat down on the plastic chairs. Grandma followed us with a tin, which she opened to take out four white balls wrapped in cellophane. Of course, we had had pounded yam before, it was Father's favourite, but this was different. We had not washed our hands in anything except a bucket of water, there was no soap, and

I could feel the dirt from the journey stuck to my fingers. I thought of Ezikiel's parasites. Grandma was watching me. I scooped up some fish stew with the yam, and put it into my mouth. My tongue burned from the pepper, and a tiny bone caught in my throat, causing me to cough repeatedly in the quiet house. I was not hungry and the food tasted strange, and my fingers were full of parasites, but I felt as though I could not leave any at all. My stomach was angry. I could not stop thinking of the dirt on my hands, the lack of soap, and the pounded yam that did not taste at all like pounded yam.

I could see Ezikiel studying the stew. The layer on top was palm-oil red, but we did not know if Grandma had fried the fish first. He looked up at Mama, and Grandma, his pounded yam ball in his hand hovering between the sauce and his mouth.

Mama nodded her head slightly. 'It is safe,' she said.

'Your mama told me you are allergic to nuts,' said Grandma, in English. 'It is not fried in groundnut oil, only cooked in palm oil. Eh! I tried to fry it in palm oil and I am nearly blind from the smoke! But the fish is extra fresh today. I paid extra. So no need for worry about illness because it is not fried first.'

Ezikiel's face dropped. He dipped his yam into the stew so slightly that only the edge became orange. I could feel the wheeze of his breath on my arm, through the sleeve of my T-shirt.

After dinner Grandma took us to our bedroom. The room smelled of disinfectant. It was empty bar the one mattress

on the floor, which did not have a sheet, but a wrapper had been spread on top. I looked around the room. One mattress! I realised that we were all supposed to share the room together. Me, Mama and even Ezikiel. And worse than that, we were all to share a bed. One mattress on the floor. I felt the pounded yam leave my stomach and travel back up towards my mouth.

There was no pillow, or blanket, or mosquito net. A tall fan stood against the wall with a plug hanging over it, as if it was not going to even bother trying for electricity. I looked quickly around the room for plug sockets, and listened for the hum of a generator. But there was no hum. Surely there must have been a generator? Surely, they did not rely on NEPA? That meant days without electricity. I did not want to believe it. *No electricity!* Cold things raced through my mind: fridges, drinks, fans, air-conditioning.

I thought of all the things I had done, to cause Father to leave. I thought of the time I had complained that he worked too-long hours. I had always complained. As soon as he had returned from work. I thought of pestering him to take me and Ezikiel swimming, when he must have been tired on his day off work. I thought of Father reading my last school report where I had received a C in Maths, which was Father's favourite subject. I closed my eyes, and pinched my own arm.

When I opened my eyes, I could see that the paint on the walls was peeling away. On the wall above the bed a large golden frame, smashed at one edge, contained a picture of just one single curly word in Arabic. I could see our suit-

cases, which looked brand new in the room despite being at least two years old. And I could see the dust on the ground, and hear something scuttling around on it.

We all climbed onto the mattress with our clothes still on. I watched Mama's back. I lay there for a very long time, listening to Ezekiel's wheeze. Even though Mama too was pretending, I could see by how quickly she was breathing that she was not asleep either. Eventually, I crept up from the mattress and walked to the mesh-covered window to look outside. The sky was much bigger. The brightest stars I had ever seen covered the sky, and the air was blue. The garden was full of spiky shapes and shadows. But the sky was lit up. The stars were so bright that when I closed my eyes they remained there, behind my eyelids, as though my body had swallowed some of the sky for itself.