

A woman with dark hair is sitting and reading a book. The book cover is visible and has the text 'SENIOR SECONDARY PHYSICS' on it. The entire image is overlaid with a semi-transparent red filter.

# Under Fire

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ATHENA

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A Novel

ATHENA

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Dedicated to Nkechinyere, a woman of immense beauty,  
her sisters, and my own sisters

# I

Imoni didn't think he had come out here today to watch the man and Aham move from one corner to the other in their discussion. But, that was exactly what he was doing. Worried, he decided to end his exclusion from the discussion, intending to assist his friend. He addressed the man in the most polite manner. If they had up to the money he asked for, they wouldn't hesitate to give it to him. Just simple.

Such a harmless plea, but what was the man's reaction? "Give it to me?" He looked instead straight at Aham. "What's this supposed to mean?" he asked further. "I don't like it at all. Hear me? I don't like it."

"Are you dealing with him or me?" Aham wondered.

"Don't worry, Aham," Imoni said, merely reacting to a demeaning crack. "I can see the hall supervisor myself, since..."

The chief porter's eyes glowed with unbelief at the young man's arrogance and threat which were already affirmed in his unwavering eyes. "So, my friend," every word was worth the emphasis, "you want to walk in there and tell him you know he's receiving money from students?"

"No, not that." Aham looked angrily at Imoni. "I told you to leave the negotiation to me."

"It's alright, boys." The man was leaving. "I don't blame you."

"Listen, please." But Aham couldn't stop him.

Corruption's now vindictive and intimidating posture. It only met Imoni's contempt.

"See what you have caused?" Aham's words filled the emptiness shed by the man's departure.

"That scum-turned-saviour. After all it's all out of self-interest."

"These people are helping us students. You ought to know that."

"It's a lie. They're peeling us." He linked an indifferent index finger with a passer-by, then pointed. "Brand new. Can his annual salary fetch him that? And a 55, and the one he's running errands for."

"You made an allusion to that just now, see the result?"

"Don't mind the man. He'll accept that one-twenty we're offering. If he thinks he can easily post me, he should look elsewhere."

Imoni shook his head. Students' tolerance was nil. The student he had dreamt to be had been demystified. The pampered student had



suddenly been replaced by one operating, in his own constituency, like a beggar and stranger, while every other person conducted himself like a humanitarian or superior. And how these people, emboldened by a disturbing immunity, toasted this power shift. A need had been created by a simple legislation. Now, securing a deal from the man meant crawling on the ground.

It was a sad thing to have to put one's money into those people's pockets. Yet one was compelled to do it. It was a market place out here.

In spite of their differences, he still joined Aham to meet a student who had apparently pulled off a deal. Imoni beckoned to him. He wanted to know how much the young man had to put down for a bed space.

One hundred and eighty naira, the young man unwillingly said, showing the receipt. "One-eighty?" both Imoni and Aham exclaimed, surprised.

"Is it too much?" the young man asked.

"Is it downstairs or upstairs?" Aham knew why he asked. "Downstairs. Maybe that's why it's so much."

"Wait. I hope these people haven't cheated me. How much are they demanding from you guys?"

Aham told him it was one hundred and fifty naira the reason being the room's location. The rooms downstairs were justifiably costlier. It made economic sense, the way Aham worked it out, the difference against the comfort. Those downstairs provided year-round comfort, especially during the hot season. And to secure the enjoyment of good accommodation, he was reminded, one had to pay more. "It's true, anyway," Imoni agreed. "We are simply trying to get each space under one-thirty naira. But the one-eighty, one-fifty are too high. Only the official sum, ninety, appears on the receipt. Funny."

"So, the two of you will be paying three zero zero?"

"Not the two of us," Aham said. "This one is for one of us, Yunusa. He went to the town. We want just the three of us in the room. We can only find such opportunity in a room upstairs."

"The three of you are not part one students."

He was asked how he knew. How he knew? Part one students, obviously, wouldn't have the kind of balls and knowledge of the place they could boast of. He learned they were in level two, and from him, they

were informed he was a direct entry student; a new student. He was Yinka, from the receipt. Aham introduced himself, as well as Imoni.

Imoni's interest was already diverted. Strange, Imoni hadn't seen Gladys since school resumed and there was she coming from a nearby hostel. "Aham, see who's rolling by," he said casually.

"Gladys," Aham acknowledged, looking ahead of him.

Why she preferred that road puzzled him. When a girl stepped out of the normal routes for an isolated one, free from interference or interception, then one would become suspicious. Aham's presence might give him away, so he went behind Yinka to set him against whatever would be revealed to the girl. She had seen him, already, Aham said.

The girl called him from across an interfering wire fence. "Hello, babe," Imoni responded, withdrawing to meet her. "Dear angel, where could you be coming from?" She came up to the fence. She had escorted a friend to her boyfriend's, but had had enough of the friend's time-wasting, so she left. She had to unpack. Or the boy wanted to hold back longer, he thought. "What a cool lie!" he told her.

The girl frowned in bewilderment. She struck back the way he never expected, and charged he must have gone out of his head. He out of his head? he asked.

"Come, come, Imo," Aham intervened. "What's this supposed to mean? Trading abuses or what?"

"Let him," Gladys said. "Let him keep embarrassing himself before all these people."

Imoni adjusted his outburst because of the conventions, and the revered grounds. "And this minute, Aham, we must go to meet the boy and the girl to satisfy every doubt." The girl's eyes almost yielded tears.

"It's just alright, Gladys," Aham shifted. "Please. The mags."

To hell with them, and, didn't she have the freedom to feel around with a friend? she asked. Fool around, Imoni said. What a worthy passion. But he turned his back to her fury. He heard her call him names, 'shameless, small boy. Could never grow up,' as she started walking away.

They reverted to their original objective though discussing the girl and Imoni. Imoni's first round adversary still held sway, meanwhile. Aham went to meet him. Their conference moved them to a corner.

He still considered the collision with the girl as he handled Yinka's questions on school and its ways. They hardly came as questions, for Yinka wasn't your toddler on his first day in school. It was merely up to him, for instance, to explain why Aham had the man's attention in spite of other students. Aham was successful with the people, even beyond here, he told him. But not that they, Aham's friends, derived any favour from such advantage. Yinka considered it rewarding to penetrate such quarters.

Imoni looked up and saw Yunusa coming. "That's the guy whose accommodation we're trying to secure, just surfacing."

"I see."

Yunusa joined them. "Hello." He shook hands.

"You've come in good time," Imoni observed.

"I didn't meet the man, so I left immediately. How goes about the accommodation?"

"A good circumstance. Your receipt's on the way."

Imoni smoothly plucked the receipt from Aham's hand when he came around. "Still that amount?"

Aham ignored him. To Yunusa, he said, "You're back so soon."

"I missed the man."

Later, as they left the hall office, Imoni said, "We planned to go to Bee Hive. Could we now go?"

"What's the time now?" Aham looked at his own wrist watch.

"Three thirty," Yunusa said.

"Why don't we wait till around four-thirty?" Aham advised. "Just walk around and see the school."

"Okay."

They were now walking casually along a main street into the D hall area. Both Aham and Imoni stood shoulder to shoulder at six feet, while Yunusa and Yinka, taking the flanks, shrunk by a few inches.

Imoni never tired of inward criticism of the school's depreciating beauty, was now impressed by the place and its unusual and wonderful elegance occasioned by the revived plants all around. He thought that was how a university environment should be. Some rouges here and there, and the intertwining at the hedges. The return of pleasant horticulture. Some of the plants still had protective gears. That somebody thought about these plants out here. Aham said the unseen hand

responsible for the change was a friend; an Indian or Bangladeshi. He could even be Singaporee. They all looked one-in to him. He gave the man's unseen back a pat.

"Who is that guy?" Yinka suddenly asked.

"Haven't seen him before?" Imoni asked. "Ah, he's all bristled up. That's Silas on the stomp."

"What's he doing? See. He has no audience."

The others laughed. "His audience is visible to him alone," Yunusa told him. "He with his invisible audience is a common spectacle here."

Yinka stared on, perplexed. In earnest, and with strains of his fury standing out on his face, Silas was making a ferocious speech with the professional delivery of a gifted politician at a rally. "They want to kill poor Silas," his hands were moving. "They want to drive me underground because I dare uphold the truth. But their actions will come to naught. Even now, they whimper with their bruised nose. Even the veecee, Mr..."

Yinka was shocked. "He calls the Vice Chancellor? His name, and by Mr.?"

"The guy can tear. One of the warheads we have here. Whom does he spare? Let's go, else you turn spectacle instead of Silas himself." Imoni drew him by the hand.

They amused him with Silas' stories, providing him with a lot to laugh at, especially his softness for women. He would get to know him anyway, they told him, then he would learn to ignore him. The young man had such incredible eloquence, but he appeared underfed and unbalanced. So, why were they ignoring him? he inquired. Why they were ignoring him, no one knew, said Yunusa. His condition was put down to opium. So, they were told. And some said he studied too hard and had brain fag. And others, he took a relation's woman and a curse was following him.

Yinka couldn't hold back on Silas whose voice sound was being reduced by distance. "Such unskillful display of strength can't deter me," Silas was saying. "The university as a fine soil for intellectual activism, not kneading unworthy.... Abilities should be determined by..."

The quartet received and extended pleasantries at the trade fair complex corridors, then crossed into hall B. Through the entire frame of the school, transfer and transport of furniture, gathering of sweep-

ings, interesting circumstances and initial marks of a young semester, enterprised earnestly. Some students with a head start had already taken to entertainment.

“Waltz,” some students practising music with instruments under a tree called.

“Orlando.”

“Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year.”

“Aham.”

Hands were in the air.

A student from the opposing direction hooked fingers with Imoni, and was on his way again.

“You’re karried?” Yinka asked.

“Ah, he’s woked,” Yunusa said, laughing.

“And you?” Imoni asked him.

“Karried.” They both affirmed their fraternity. “This is Illya du?”

“Illya du Sahara,” Imoni told him. “I even want to see the Chief, Bokassa, very soon.”

“We’ll both go together, then. But, what’s the guy’s karability?”

Karability meant the Chief possessed the vision and wisdom of their ancestors. The local Palm Wine Drinkards Club was blessed with a Chief, a fellow empowered by insane gods and surrounded by his own voice. In the club, few were called, but many were chosen. It sought converts, but never begged for them. Imoni and Yinka spent some time discussing the club and affirming their fraternity.

“I guess I have to go back,” Yinka said later.

“Why?” Aham asked. “We’re just taking a stroll around. Aren’t you enjoying it.?”

“I am, but I have to see a friend about the new bed space. I want to swap with a friend of his.”

He would be missed, they regretted. They exchanged addresses with him and begged him not to go watch that poor Silas. But, he had a problem. The place had completely disarranged his geographical balance; what it did to every new comer. “How do I go back now?” he asked. He was told to just turn left, go straight, then, after about five hundred metres, turn right.

“Thank you.”

“Small. Bye.”

The hall, B, remained the noisiest in school, Imoni was telling his friends. Like a musical competition going on. “Can’t you hear the music from this hostel? Those must be outdoor speakers.” Even then, a truck arrived with some musical equipment. He was always amazed at the size of those speakers. He waved a female fan.

Often, a door bore a poster of Ghadafi, Castro or one personality or the other. Aham raised a hand to one of two young men passing nearby. One, light complexioned, and slightly on the stocky side, carried snacks in one hand, and the other hand hooked two bottles. He had both hands spread out clearly in a self-important manner. “Who are those guys?” Imoni asked Aham.

The lanky one was part of a little group they hosted at a Law dinner the previous day, Aham said. He didn’t know the one carrying those things.

He thought those things were usually put in things, Imoni said. Or was the young man trying to show the whole world he was going for a snacks dinner? Such ceremony he was making about it, he continued. The young man even had to polish that with an assumed good walk. Designer walk. He commented on the form of the fellow’s shoulder, open wings and roughly rolled-up sleeves. He just wondered where they picked up such habits.

The young man spoken about was supposed to be a royal off-shoot, Yunusa told them. The son of an influential and wealthy traditional ruler. Was it then why he had that pedal walk? Imoni asked. What was he exhibiting?

It was probably the way he elected to live his own life, Aham replied. It was a free world here. People should be free with their inclinations.

Yunusa began to relate more than Imoni probably would wish to hear. He related how he had encountered the young man and two others in a very bewildering instance at a popular barbecue spot the previous day and how they shook the place.

“Those guys must have caused some other guys some anxiety,” Imoni observed after the narration. “But, do they think they’re still in secondary school? They must be insane.”

Aham disagreed. “You can never tell. They must have their reasons. The girls. Weren’t there girls around?”

Aham enjoyed disagreeing with popular argument. That was the problem. Imoni found the young man's conduct disgusting and told him so. "And that won't carry the message that they've got good pay. What put them up to such nonsense?" He simply refrained from further discussion of the irritating episode. He instead got absorbed, watching the antics of new students, making their campus debut. They were all over the place, especially the girls, unspoiled, and invoking the devil.

It was a routine, purposeless walk. Realising Bee Hive no longer ideal, they decided for lunch at the restaurant nearby.

Some moments later they strolled into the place, and into a queue. It was soon Aham's turn to get his meal. "Why?" His eyes ran from the food to the teenage girl behind the counter. "How can you give me this thing for three naira?"

"Next." The girl looked beyond him.

"My friend," a muscular, bespectacled student in a sleeveless T-shirt called, "please, we can't keep standing here because of you. It's like this line got to be moving."

"Who is that fool?" Aham turned.

He had abused decorum. Numerous eyes followed him to his table. His opponent was an instant hit. He soon got before the buffet. "Hello, Steve," the teenage girl called.

"Hi, Deko."

"What's it by your time now? You're late today by one hour..."

Yunusa and Imoni's eyes expressed amusement when they joined Aham at the large, round table. "My God, they gave it to our guy," Imoni said. "But check out Aham's current. He almost laced the guy."

Aham said nothing, and was smiling, instead. Mid-way into their meals, Yunusa went for drinks. Imoni's fresher observation was diners in the restaurant barely touched their foods and drinks. Like a rite. It was less puzzling now.

Later, their emptied plates out of the way, they went slow on the drinks. Yunusa recalled a request he couldn't grant. It was Nnamdi. He was talking about putting up with them. He told him anyway about their collective decision against squatters this time. Nothing would change from what it was the previous semester, Imoni put in. The room couldn't support any more persons. Ambrose had been there

before. And Ambrose stood ahead of any other person, thinking of humanitarian considerations, but he had to go away without a promise.

Aham smiled cynically. Ambrose, the Agri-econs dud? That was a nice guy. He would have clinched it. But Nnamdi? He talked to him, too. He held him away. He told him no way. This wasn't a matter of collective decision. He wasn't entertaining any requests. He wouldn't have to fight with somebody over his bed in the day time or tolerate somebody lying in the middle of the room. Like those guys, Deji and Uwem, they had early last session. That, without their approval. A friend of his took two colleagues the previous semester on board, and what he got in return was disappearance of his items. With one directing the other to the host's things. Some people, he said, were determined from the on-set to live on others.

Nnamdi was so fund of that thing. His past records would even work against him. If his parents weren't well-off, so were his. He couldn't be spending his money on girls, and expect him who forfeited his to hall officials to squat him. People who had better ideas with their monies having him on their schedules as one to mix their problems with. In fact, he wanted any further enquiries about the room passed over to him. If he did get another Nnamdi, he would burst him and turn him around to rational thinking. Such people couldn't exploit him. He wasn't their fool. And no girl on campus had obliged that Nnamdi.

Notorious fool, he continued. And that was where he missed the point. He was unwise. All those students who sold their bed spaces to late comers, only to turn squatters. It was a lot of inconvenience one had to bear. And saving one's accommodation money to squat saved one nothing. Spending it on girls was even senseless. No girl dug for a squatter boyfriend. They all laughed.

The girls appreciated boys who owned their own beds, a key to the door, and the privilege to keep their guys' roommates away as long as possible, if not permanently.

"Have you heard?" Yunusa asked. "That fat daughter of this state's past Governor bought off her boyfriend's roommates' shares so she could move in herself."

Laughter.



“Big eaglet.” Imoni made a sign, toward a huge girl that had come in with two boys and a second girl. “What a big scoop Duncan and Tony have made.”

The two young men waved.

Their wave was returned. “Duncan has finally landed a babe,” Imoni said.

“I saw that girl at the registration hall the day before yesterday,” Yunusa said. “She must be of rich origin. Was brought by her mother, probably in a big Mec, and they were accompanied by this BM. Officials were running around, and the woman was being addressed as Chief Ogunsanwo.”

“Maybe one of the Ogunsanwos. Those guys then want to obtain the girl’s mother, and Pa Ogunsanwo himself.” But he doubted, he said, if they could hold on. Hanging around such a girl. The argument was, if Duncan made it with the girl, he might need to get past the mother to clip it.

They were smiling and looking at what they thought Duncan was looking at. Perhaps, what could be gained off the girl.

Aham drained his bottle. “I don’t know why; it’s Yunusa who always sees everything. Let’s fash, guys.”

They all stood up and left.

## II

Back in their room, Yunusa was by a large window, lapping louver glasses with newspapers, an exercise meant to insulate the room from heat outside. Beside him, was Aham, decorating the pasteboard before one of the two reading tables in the room. Aham had commenced to stick a Nature Conservation Society calendar on the board. And to Aham’s right was Imoni. Imoni was seated on Aham’s bed, his legs spread on the padded floor. He was set for laundry downstairs, but he wasn’t done with sharing his worry.

This was a story that had been told before. It was about cigarettes. Cigarettes depreciated quickly, Imoni was saying. And he had turned this thing over and over in his mind. He still couldn’t understand how he could have invested all the money into it, when he didn’t have any

income or sponsor. He was beginning to think it was all over with him. Really. Aham still disagreed with him. He wasn't any the worse for it. He didn't see why Imoni should continue being unfair to himself. After all, if everything had come off as planned, Imoni would have been smiling. He pinned a press clipping on the organisation on the board. He shouldn't blame himself. The customs were human beings. All they needed was explanation. Here was a genuine subsistence effort by a helpless student. That should be encouraged. So simple. Everybody suffered financial reverses sometimes. And any good businessman would have done the same thing.

For certain, Yunusa agreed. He crossed a tape over a paper. Business was all risk, he added. It was rather unfortunate it was happening that way. Imoni would still recover, he assured.

Imoni appeared unconvinced by the assurances. There was no crash barrier if one was going down, he still argued. When it was all over, and he had walked away with his fortune, he started wondering where he did go from there with all that money. It came up to fifteen thousand naira, and more. He was confused about what to do with it, start a small scale business, or acquire a new commercial bus, or even resign and go back to school. He wanted his friends to draw a line between having money and getting anything going with it. The company's fortune had started looking up as well, he continued. He was no longer keen on just having money slapped into his hands. At his place of work, his colleagues started to notice when the money started coming in. One of the directors wanted to take a closer look at what was happening. The man suddenly turned around with a hey, what's going on here attitude, and came up with various schemes and before he knew it, he had started reporting directly to the man. The man came up with some guidance, but behind it were some traps. It wasn't a good game. Everything ceased being fun. His employment terms were reviewed. He was placed on full salary, and no more commission. But he was no fool. He took JAMB, the entrance examination anyway, and here he was. He now regretted his decision.

Aham had finished doing the work now. "There's no use regretting your action," he said, to Imoni. "Just perch. You'll see." There was nothing to regret, Yunusa added. Imoni was anything but finished. With those business drills, he reasoned, Imoni had some experience

to take with him. And age was on his side. "Very much on his side, in any case," Aham said. "Just turned twenty three. But, can't you try and connect a high-ranking army officer to intercede on your behalf?" He addressed Imoni specifically. "You could count on a better representation if you seek somebody in the town. Or even any big, waded guy."

They all agreed he had to approach somebody in the town to make his case, to take his case up to the appropriate table. To get the goods out and turn it over to him. One had to ride on somebody's influence to obtain one's items. Anything could be reversed. A working man was entitled to his goods. Everybody knew how it was, being separated from such goods.

He knew one Idingi, Imoni said. But the man was a fly weight. To another question, he said he knew what was involved initially. Very important in the business was knowing how to get away with such things, even when apprehended. And that was the edge Austin, his friend, for instance, had. Austin was in the same trade. Austin already had five years experience behind him in it, and earned at least four thousand naira on each trip. He put in nine thousand naira, and another five hundred, on two occasions, and another five.

"Some pay," the other two acknowledged.

He ought to have had some back up capital, he continued. The smuggling environment was an uncertain environment. He had tried as much as possible to cut down on his risks, and made enough financial sacrifices. He had, traditionally, notified a link man he was on his way, but that the fellow's colleagues had to jump other smugglers to cease his goods was simply baffling. He was used to give others passage. Everything had been within a speaking radius. It was a stage-managed error. He had been locked into a situation whereby he couldn't get rid of the thoughts troubling him. He did better hear the last of that episode, and have his peace. And, should the goods slip off him, such a crash it would be. Which meant, he would be left with about one thousand naira for the remainder three years in the university. How could he begin now to deal with this new reality?

The other two shook their heads in sympathy. His case wasn't like one who stumbled foolishly, Aham said. Smuggling at that scale by a student could still be considered small time. So, if they should penalise

him at all, it should be with restraint. He should be treated as a first time offender and because of his status.

“Okay, look at it,” Imoni continued, “I spent about three grand last session on the Waltz and others. Already I’ve blown about four hundred since resumption, just a few days.”

“Oh, no,” Aham redirected the discussion, “the Waltz was great. It just woke the school up from slumber. The show broke the ban on social and political activities in the school. And when one considers you brought the band single-handed.”

“For us, it was such an unforgettable moment,” Yunusa said. “Even up till now, one is enjoying the glory of that moment.”

“And how much profit did I make from the show? Just five hundred. Not your box office success.”

“Any way, the gate fee was moderate, and many students who couldn’t afford it were allowed in. One of those things. Men, guys are still clamouring for a repeat. They expect you to go ahead and do it again. Even yesterday, Yunusa and I overheard a boy and a girl telling some jambites you were keeping the date secret. They talked about you as if you were not the guy we know.”

“Really?”

“You can’t try.”

Imoni’s approach had really made the difference. It was unbelievable. After that face-off with the authorities, it was like everybody was sitting down together and talking again. The party industry was having a great season now. But everything went all the way back to that first step he took. It opened things up also for other activities. The lifting of the ban on parties on campus was tied to it, then followed the cultural activities. And newspapers followed and so on. It all came back to him, too. Like now he had that touch about him which he hardly admitted. That touch expressed a lot about him. By doing it, he hadn’t been chasing any applause. He had presented to the school, a well-executed entertainment, with his support staff of Aham, Yunusa and co, with a make-shift office. Everybody got his wage. He, too. He had his benefits, being now a legend. Like it was being handed over to people who never witnessed it. It had entered the story books. A deserved myth. The atmosphere then had created him. The school authorities suddenly realised they had to listen to the students’ silence. Enquiries Imoni had

earlier received had been encouraging. Yea, he agreed with his friends, the school wanted the Waltz to come back. They hadn't forgotten a good time. But it had almost put him in debt. "Maybe somebody else has to do it this time," he said.

"How many students can risk that type of ticket?" Yunusa asked.

"Damn too many, I tell you. What it cost me is how much they squander at Lake Tchad."

"Quite a lot of them. What I mean is, how many of them have the organisational skill, discipline and patience? Remember not a word was breathed out until everything was certain, then the publicity took the school by storm.

"I must have built a wrong image of myself, then. If I lose the goods, and no more coins, the realisation, my now-supposed true status would spread, and the mags are always there."

"But you're pessimistic about everything, Imoni," Yunusa rebuked him. "You should be rather hopeful and not despair."

He stood up, picking up a bucket filled with clothes. "Is it not strange that in this school, most of the guys who have never worked in their lives are those basking recklessly in luxury?"

"Recklessly, men," Aham agreed.

"Consider my situation, for instance. No assistance of any sort. And I'm unfortunate not to have come from the educationally disadvantaged states enjoying the Federal Government's sympathy. Apology to Yunusa."

"You can say what you like."

They eventually left the room at intervals, with Imoni a few minutes behind the others, and with clothes meant for laundry.

At the tap downstairs, he saw the pompous, young man previously identified as a prince, doing the impossible; washing his own clothes. He wondered why the fellow could not push them over to Modibo's, nearby. The young man stirred as Imoni let his bucket drop beside the tap. "Good evening," Imoni greeted.

"Evening. Welcome."

He instantly won Imoni's admiration. The young man had a yoghurt drink companion. Imoni freed his clothes from the bucket, and fetched some water. He pressed the seal of the detergent packet, and allowed some flakes into the bucket, then stirred the solution. With adequate

result, he dipped in a white shirt, and started trashing at it. The other fellow discharged some healthy, bristling solution, got some fresh water, and recklessly sent some scandalous overdose of detergent into it. Imoni was startled.

The young man abandoned work. He dispatched down his throat some yoghurt, then went inside a room nearby. He soon appeared with a portable tape, as a reel of cable uncoiled after him. He punched a switch, and Prince started with a loud tone. He started singing and swinging to the music, his hands busy inside the soapy water. Imoni exchanged tired-out soap water with fresh water, and at the conclusion of his task, he got set to go.

“Excuse me, please.” It was the fellow. Imoni turned. He had an immensely handsome face. “You stay upstairs?” That was right, Imoni said. “Can I keep my portmanteau in your room? For just one night.”

The young man didn’t leave him enough time to decide. Taking a stranger’s luggage into his care. It was a tricky request. “It depends.” He hesitated. “Okay.”

“It’s my portmanteau, and...”

There was a place for a portmanteau in the room, he told him. That wasn’t the question. It wasn’t easy to decide. He was split inside him. But he gave the nod. The fellow fetched the case and his identity card. “This is my name on the box. But you call me Mickey,” he said quickly, his eyes studying Imoni’s.

Imoni examined the names. ‘Michael Eto.’ Any prominent royal connection? “You can bring it along,” he said.

“Thank you. I’ll be up in less than no time.”

Imoni started climbing up. Moments later, the young man appeared and rolled up the heavy portmanteau. Imoni showed him the way into the room and the corner in which to haul up the case. “I shall come back later,” he said and fled away.

He kissed sleep and barely tasted its sweet, peaceful flavour, when it was severed. He staggered to the door, and threw it aside. The baggage siege was more interesting than the stranger before him. He responded to the young man’s greeting with an inquiry attitude, the way he felt in disturbance. Like he was going to throw back the door. He heard Aham’s name. He wasn’t Aham, he replied, now less puzzled, but Aham belonged to the room. Hall office. The room was full already, if he....

“No. I’ve just arrived,” the young man said. “I’m yet to get a place, so the chief porter directed me to one Aham; to put up with the guy till tomorrow, when I can get my own place.” He then stepped aside to let him in.

“I’m really grateful.”

“Small.”

They both shared the fifty kilogrammes average weight of the six suitcases, Imoni sometimes trying to keep his balance, as he struggled with the unruly cases. How a student could bring so much to school. The luggage filled the room. “Perch. Sorry, sit down.”

“Thank you.”

“Small. Don’t tell me you brought these things up here alone.”

“The taxi driver who brought me assisted me, so the porter didn’t come with me. He was busy, so he gave us directions.”

He was Imoni, he said. The young man was Modesty Okonkwo, and he took the 16.45 flight from Lagos. He had been admitted for History. Imoni smiled to that. “You’re a brother, then. I’m in part two of same department. You’re welcome.”

“Yea.”

Silence reigned briefly, then Modesty asked, “How do you guys stay in a town like this? I don’t think I can stay here. I was warned. My mum especially.... But, you see, adventure...”

Such preconception or prejudice wasn’t healthy, he told him. Against fact, it was so cheap. He would adapt, he told him. He would see. The place was at least a thousand kilometres from Lagos. So, the best method to survive there was to first, not to say, my mum. He wouldn’t like to, Modesty said. He was just scared. But, it wasn’t the first time he was leaving his mum. Was it? Imoni used a military academy term.

“Don’t you see me in that light,” Modesty responded. “I’m an adult. The weather. So hot a while ago, and it’s getting cold already. And getting colder. Exactly what a lady was saying in the aircraft.”

It was like that in January, Imoni said, that was why. The door was about closing on the cold season. Their discussion changed to general interests, then Modesty said, “Please, I would like to have some shower.” He could fetch him some water. Imoni picked up the bucket he had used earlier. “You mean I shall have to scoop water from the bucket?”

“Of course. The shower hasn’t functioned since we came back.”

He was disappointed. “And, one minute, please. Warm water, I suppose?”

“It has to be straight from the tap, and even steaming.”

“Alright.”

Imoni went downstairs. Back in the room, Modesty was wrapped in a large, colourful towel. The water was ready. He should just turn to his right, just by the world bank sign. He said he saw the place on his way up. The bucket of water was in the second bathroom.

“I’m really grateful.”

“Small.”

Moments later, he came back with an empty bucket, but with the absence of water evidence on him. Some surprise. What was it? Modesty was panting. “The bathroom! The place is hell! Very dirty, slimy. What an awful place.”

But, they all went in there for their bath, Imoni told him. It wasn’t unusual of a hostel bathroom.

He couldn’t bath there, he said. He said that like he could see the slime creep up to him. He would prefer to go about with an unwashed body. Could one even bend down there? he wondered. He said he felt like vomiting. He shook his head. They all had the same experience the first time, Imoni said. One would hit the water and it would be all over. His guest was exhibiting that first time attitude to the place, he was saying, amused. The disgust always decreased eventually. With him, it was different, Modesty replied. Even now he was going to recall the feeling and that place often. Actually, the feelings lingered on longer with some people, Imoni admitted.

He was in trouble if all the bathrooms were like that, Modesty said. “Not all. In halls A and B for instance, it’s different. But A’s the best. Quiet.”

“Where could that be?”

“Just a little distance away. Close to the sports centre. It’s supposed to be for post-graduate students. But they rarely stay there. They prefer to trade off their bed spaces at exorbitant rates, and to stay elsewhere.”

“How much do you pay here?”

“Well, we’re three, and each of us paid one-fifty. We’re not entitled to accommodation, that’s why. For you, it’s supposed to be ninety, the



official fee. It keeps going up everyday. And I doubt if any jambite can get his legitimate space now because of lateness.”

“So, the extra is the premium.”

“Yes.”

“How is it in hall A?”

“You can’t get a bed space for less than two-fifty now.”

“The rooms are all like this?”

“All rooms in boy’s hostels are similar. Just bed-sitting rooms like this one. Barely enough to squeeze two students in.”

“I can see the rooms do not hold enough convenience.”

“Students provide much of the convenience. You could alter a lot, if you’re creative. But you don’t sink anything into the walls. Nothing can even penetrate them.”

“I think I’d better stay in that hall A if the place is so good.”

He would really like it, Imoni told him. There were still students holding on for the highest bidders. And, moreover, lots of people kept rejecting rooms allotted to them. What were the reasons? Modesty asked. The reasons varied, was the reply. Some social, some ethnic, and most religious.

Modesty soon changed into new clothes and shoes which told of good tending. He was unpretentious and unstudied.

“You plan going out?” Imoni asked.

“Where and whom do I know? Except this lecturer.” He produced his address book. “Dr. Osuagwu. Very tall, big. Bearded. You know him?”

“In the political Science department? With Marxist attitudes.”

“Yes.” He laughed.

“I know him.”

“Please, I would like to see him today. Would it be possible?”

“Why not?”

Knocking came on the door. The door moved inwards, and Aham entered. “Hello, Aham,” Imoni greeted. Aham responded as his eyes strayed to the baggage and the stranger in the room. “This is the Aham you were directed to meet.” Imoni gestured to Aham.

“Modesty.” Modesty threw a hand, smiling to Aham’s puzzled expression.

“Modesty has just come,” Imoni continued the introduction. “These are his luggage.”

Aham winked.

Modesty's presence was further clarified. "We want to take a stroll around," Modesty said, when Imoni had finished talking.

"Right. I'm around." He peered into his new time-table.

"Let's go, Modesty."

They left.

Imoni noticed more kiosks, in a commercial drive, still moved into the secretariat's and a hostel's partition. He wouldn't be surprised if it witnessed more entries. The place could still receive more. The latest was a kiosk screwed right into the nose of the hostel. Focus shifted to a certain direction, and the activity continued.

The school was lively after all, Modesty pointed out, as they hit the trade fair complex. He was seeing many beautiful girls already. Were they all so free? he asked. Well, not all of them, Imoni replied. A female voice called just then, "Imoni!" Imoni returned the call with a wave and excitement. It was Fostina. She left her friends, and started coming.

Modesty remarked about how girls deliberately put things in men's heads, referring to the uncovered part of Fostina's thighs. The girl hitched up her skirt even with Modesty's unfinished speech. The speech interval couldn't anymore exclude the girl's participation, so Imoni held his response. Smiling, she spread out her hands, and she and Imoni embraced. But they released each other quickly. Modesty relocated.

"Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year."

"Fosty, what have I done to you?" Imoni asked her.

"Tell me," she was looking at him and Modesty, "what have I done?"

Imoni feigned seriousness. "Look, If you don't want a guy, you tell him. You want to wreck me?"

"It's like, you've started again, Imo. I do love you, and you know it."

Smiled to him now, but ran to some other fellow later. That was what he meant. And the last time she stepped into his room, she came with conditions. "Oh, Imo," the girl said. Binta, one of the girl's friends shouted her name impatiently, but the girl ignored her. "You mustn't doubt me. Rufus is my cousin. Okay, I shall come to your nest. Still in room fifteen?" The address hadn't changed, Imoni told her. "I'm not giving the time," she said. "It's like I want to catch you with that

Gladys.” Her expression shifted dramatically. “I see you’re still going out with that girl.”

The girl’s friends wouldn’t relent. They put together an effective and funny call. Fostina shouted back for time. He and Gladys were parting, Imoni replied, and wondered who was telling her that. Well, the girl said she hoped he was telling the truth. They said farewell to each other and the girl left him to join her friends.

The girl was in part two and her father a professor in the university, Imoni said to Modesty’s question, as soon as they got together again. She was seventeen, but looked thirteen. Modesty assumed he noticed true love for Imoni revealed in the girl’s eyes and utterance.

“She keeps telling me how much she loves me. But I discover she has another boy in this school.” That wasn’t what Modesty hoped to hear. “I have another girl whom I cherish a lot,” Imoni continued. “But can you risk sticking to one girl in a place like this? What if she unexpectedly dumps you? The other girl likes politics a lot, which gets on my nerves. Earlier today, saw her coming from a male hostel, and she had a ready excuse when I confronted her. Since we came back, she’s only visited me once.”

If she was full of trouble, Modesty advised him, he should go for this Fostina. He should make efforts to keep her to himself. He counted him lucky.

“But, I don’t know what to do about the girl’s other guy. I don’t want to really confront her, so I don’t lose her.”

Modesty was pessimistic about his chances with the girls, in spite of Imoni’s assurances. He passed judgement on himself. It was inconceivable to him that a girl would eventually take his hand and smile to him. “I must have to confess to you. At my age, I’m a stranger about women. I think it’s the way we were brought up. I shake all over when I’m before a girl.”

“No. You should overcome it. There’s no big deal in yarning a girl. Just bear in mind they’re easily influenced.”

That was everybody’s position on the issue, Modesty said, but it was at variance with his impression. He couldn’t just get over it. The fright alone. But he had touched his first woman, Imoni wanted to know. Not at all, he replied. Imoni was surprised. He wasn’t kidding?. The truth, Modesty swore. And it was the truth.

“Don’t worry,” Imoni told him, “you will, as long as this school is concerned. You shouldn’t doubt me. I see it’s because of the way you were brought up, and the environment, too. The girls here will come for you, they’ll teach you. They will open your floor.” Open his floor? What did he mean? Modesty asked. “Just one of the slangs you’ll learn eventually. Like yarn.” He knew yarn, he said. “You know yawa?” Imoni tested him. “You don’t know? When yawa gaz?” He still shook his head. “Men, when yawa gaz, guy man will fold his legs.” He laughed and said he now understood. “And, then, you know lecturer?”

“How can I know? What does it mean?”

“A lecturer is a student who pretends to be perfect in his conducts.”

He laughed. Then, what of a true senior lecturer of similar characteristics? he asked. He meant a dean, Imoni told him. Great, he said. Sometimes a student could turn dean, Imoni informed him further.

“Really?”

“Can’t try. We had one last session. Everybody rose and declared him a dean because of how far he pushed it.”

“Wonderful!”

They soon got to the mount Sinai suya spot. It reminded him of a moon-lit African environment with a blazing barbecue spot, Modesty said of his impression of the place. It was the right circumstances to associate it with, Imoni agreed. It had a good complexion that appealed to the senses. Like a bridge between ages.

They sat down. In a subdued tone, Modesty said, “Whoever owns this place must have some brain.”

“Maybe, or not. May have been some coincidence.”

“It should be swarming with people.”

“A lot of people do come here usually. The night is still young. And the session is just at it’s infancy. Then, again, the weather.”

Imoni got up and walked over to the circular suya mound. “Mai suya,” he said, “give me ten naira suya. Two plate.” He surrendered a twenty naira note, and withdrew to his seat. Soon, the suya came in two portions. Imoni removed one of two out-stretched five naira notes, “Give us two can coke.” The man complied, then re-united with his office and other patronage. A girl in a fitting white scarf carried some suya and soft drink, and established herself nearby.

“How much is the suya?” Modesty asked Imoni, picking some of it.

“Ten naira.”

“You should have let me pay for it.”

“Forget it. It’s nothing.”

Suddenly, a sharp sound roused them. Imoni noticed four young men planted beside the suya mound. He discovered one of them, a can of soft drink in hand, was Mickey Eto, whom he had earlier encountered at the tap. Mickey suddenly sprang out, pursued by one of his colleagues, then the pursuer gave up, giggling. He pulled out a steak of suya from the mound, drank a little from the can in his hand, then violently disposed the can which hit the ground heavily. Imoni and Modesty’s attention returned to their drinks and suya. But only briefly. They were upset by sharp reports from the fire place. The quartet raised their cans, swallowed some of the contents, then launched them off. And, simultaneously, too, they pulled out steaks of suya, chewed a little, and transferred the remnant to the garbage. They reached for fresh drinks. “This isn’t normal,” Modesty observed. “What do these guys think they’re doing?”

“Don’t know, myself.”

Meanwhile, the meat seller tried with difficulty to right some girls’ stubborn ignorance. “Can’t he understand?” Imoni and Modesty heard one of the girls complain. “Tickets. We have our tickets. It’s like, we’re paying.”

“It’s like, it’s you who hasn’t understood him,” another girl said. “Everything has been bought.”

“The lot?”

“That’s what he was telling you. By those guys.”

Imoni and Modesty shook their heads. The merriment continued, the other people’s feelings notwithstanding. The girls had started leaving, just as some others were arriving. “You won’t believe I know that plump one among them,” Imoni said casually. “His bag is even right now in our room.”

“He hasn’t spotted you, I guess.”

Two young men nestling their girlfriends, arrived in very light spirits. They spoke with the meat seller, but perhaps failed in their purpose, for they only bought biscuits and soft drinks. Disappointed, they set themselves beside Imoni and Modesty in their expired excitement.

“This is simply crazy,” one of them was saying. “It’s like you feel you have tickets to throw around, you deny others something.”

“What did I tell you?” one of the two girls asked, her fingers spreading out. “I told you we should be here early enough, else we won’t get anything. They did the same thing yesterday, and the day before.”

“It’s like these guys are goaded by a mad impulse,” the girl’s boyfriend was saying. “If you want to oppress, Lake Tchad Hotel is there for you, or you fling the party of the year, not the disposition over a little portion of suya. Who can’t do it? I just feel like lacing somebody.”

“What’s wrong with you?” the second boy asked. “It’s like you’re too worried, kind of.”

A team of girls had just procured some snacks and soft drinks, and was collected in a corner, its discussion and focus aimed at the night’s enticing points.

The girl in white scarf was already hooked to it.

Some more girls were coming and going.

Imoni and Modesty left the place as there was nothing more left to eat.

“Wao,” Modesty exclaimed. “Look at that couple in that hidden corner... What a place.”

That was the introductory side, Imoni told him. So were school affairs. The school was just opening out. They were conventions adopted away from home. And they were some of the things he had to grapple with initially, for instance, a girl going into a boy’s arms unashamedly in public glare. How then could he have accepted it if he knew this was happening, and had been refused admission? Modesty wondered.

After walking another distance, they saw another spectacle. Modesty grunted. “Hey, you,” Imoni shouted, “what do you think you’re doing? I’ll hand you over to the blue guys.” Funny. The couple responded with laughter. Both Modesty and Imoni couldn’t help laughing, too.

Imoni stopped suddenly, thoughtful. What was it? Modesty asked. He wasn’t sure he could locate Mr. Osuagwu’s home that night. Moreover, it wasn’t the friendliest place to go at that time, with stray dogs on patrol. His suggestion? Modesty asked. “I suggest you see him tomorrow. Since I know the department, why don’t we go there, instead of, maybe, searching for the house in vain?”

“That’s still alright. We can go back, then.” They therefore, turned and started walking to the hostel. Taking his gaze up, Modesty said,