

**White skin, green eyes, red hair...**

# **BLACKKASS**



**A. Igoni Barrett**

**'A MAJOR TALENT'**  
Teju Cole

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

### **White skin, green eyes, red hair - black ass.**

Furo Wariboko - born and bred in Lagos - wakes up on the morning of his job interview to discover he has turned into a white man. As he hits the streets of Lagos running, Furo finds the dead ends of his life open out wondrously before him. The world, it seems, is his oyster - except for one thing: despite his radical transformation, his ass remains robustly black . . .

Funny, fierce, inventive and daringly provocative - this is a very modern satire, with a sting in the tail.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A. Igoni Barrett was born in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, in 1979 and lives in Lagos. He is a winner of the 2005 BBC World Service short story competition, the recipient of a Chinua Achebe Center Fellowship, a Norman Mailer Center Fellowship, and a Rockefeller Foundation Bellagio Center Residency.

Also by A. Igoni Barrett

*Love is Power, or Something Like That*

To Carlton Lindsay Barrett

# Blackass

A. Igoni Barrett

Chatto & Windus

LONDON

*O gbodo ridin* (don't be stupid)

*O gbodo suegbe* (don't be slow)

*O gbodo ya mugun l'Eko* (don't allow yourself to be taken for a fool)

—Words on the plinth of the *Agba  
Meta* (Three Elders)  
statue at the entrance to Lagos

# FURO WARIBOKO

‘And now?’ Gregor asked himself, looking around in the darkness.’

—Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis*

FURO WARIBOKO AWOKE this morning to find that dreams can lose their way and turn up on the wrong side of sleep. He was lying nude in bed, and when he raised his head a fraction he could see his alabaster belly, and his pale legs beyond, covered with fuzz that glistened bronze in the cold daylight pouring in through the open window. He sat up with a sudden motion that swilled the panic in his stomach and spilled his hands into his lap. He stared at his hands, the pink life lines in his palms, the shellfish-coloured cuticles, the network of blue veins that ran from knuckle to wrist, more veins than he had ever noticed before. His hands were not black but white ... same as his legs, his belly, all of him. He clenched his fists, squeezed his eyes shut, and sank on to the bed. Outside, a bird chirruped short piercing cries, like mocking laughter.

When he opened his eyes again the air was silent, the bird was flown. Turning on his side, his gaze roved the familiar corners of his bedroom and rested on his going-out shoes, their brown leather polished to a dull lustre, placed at attention beside the door. His blue T.M. Lewin shirt and his favourite black cotton trousers (which he had stayed awake till after midnight, when power returned, to iron) were hanging from the chair at his desk. His plastic folder, packed tight with documents, was on the desk. He stared at the folder till his eyeballs itched with dryness, and then he rolled to the bed's edge and blinked at the screen of his BlackBerry lying on the floor. He grimaced with relief: the alarm hadn't gone off: he had sixteen minutes until it rang at eight. On account of Lagos traffic he planned to leave the house at half past eight. A bath, get dressed, eat breakfast, and then he would be off.

Furo heaved on to his back and fixed his gaze on the white ceiling squares festooned with fragments of old cobwebs. He tried to corral his thoughts into the path of logic, but his efforts were brushed aside by his panicked heartbeats. Through the window and far away he heard the unruffled buzz of traffic, the whale honks of trailers, the urgent beeping of a reversing Coaster bus, the same school bus that arrived every weekday around this time. The accustomed sounds of Monday morning. It appeared a normal day for everyone else, and that thought brought Furo no succour, it only confirmed what he already knew, that he was alone in this lingering dream. But what he knew did not explain the how, the why, or the why today. I shouldn't have stayed up late, he said to himself, no wonder I had such nightmares - I, who never dream! He tried to remember what he had dreamed of, but all he recalled was climbing into bed with the same dread he had slept with since he received the email notifying him of his job interview.

He was startled back to alertness by his phone alarm. He reached forwards to turn it off, then pushed his legs off the bed, and sat at the edge with his feet pressed into the rug. The pallor of his feet was stark against the rug's crimson. He was white, full oyibo, no doubt about it - and, with his knees swinging, the flesh of his thighs jiggling, his mind following these bone-and-flesh motions for bewildered seconds before moving its attention to other details of his physiology, he began to comprehend the extent of his transformation. He stilled his knees and, calming himself with a deep suck of air, raised his hand to his cramped neck. As he massaged, his mouth hung open and gastric gasses washed over his tongue in quiet hiccups.

Then, without telltale footsteps, three knocks sounded on the bedroom door. Furo caught his breath and glared, thinking, I locked it, didn't I? I hope I locked it! 'Furo,' his

mother called, tapping again. 'Are you awake?' The handle turned. The door was locked.

'I'm awake!' Furo cried out. The relief in his voice made it sound strange to his ears, but otherwise it was his, unchanged. 'Good morning, Mummy.'

'Morning, dear,' his mother said, and rattled the handle. 'Come and open the door.'

'I'm not dressed, I'm getting ready,' Furo said in a rush, and bit his lip at the quaver in his voice. But his mother it seemed had noticed nothing abnormal. 'I'm off to work,' she said. 'Remember, today is Monday, traffic will be bad. You should leave soon.'

'Yes, Mummy.'

'Your father's awake. I asked him to drop you off.'

'OK, Mummy.'

'I've told Tekena to fix you breakfast, but you know how your sister is, she won't get out of bed unless she's dragged. Remind her before you enter the bathroom.'

'Let her sleep. I can take care of myself.'

In the ensuing silence, the back of Furo's neck ached, the hairs on his arms prickled, and he moved his hands to his groin, cupped it from view. When his mother spoke again, her tone sounded like it came from a troubled place.

'Don't worry too much, ehn. Just do your best at the interview. If that job is yours, I'm sure you'll get it. Everything will be OK.'

'Thank you, Mummy,' Furo said. 'Have a good day.'

At the sound of the front door closing, Furo raised both hands to stroke the sweat from his bristled scalp, and after dropping his hands to the bed to dry them, he tried to focus his mind on the problems that swelled before him. His father and his sister were obstacles he had to elude. Another hurdle was money. He had no money, not a kobo on him. He'd planned to ask his mother for the bus fare to the interview, but even if he'd dared to speak about it through the closed door, his father's offer of a ride had quashed any

chances of that succeeding. (It was impossible to accept, absurd to even think it, but there it was before his eyes, this skin colour that others were born into but he, Furo, had awoken to.) There was his sister, and he could try borrowing from her, but how to collect the money without facing her? No, too risky – he would have to walk. There was no time to eat, to bathe, to take chances. He had to leave now. There was no more denying what he was experiencing at this moment: he, Furo, son of a mother who knew his voice, was now a white man.

Furo rose from the bed, pattered across the cold floor tiles to the bedroom door and grabbed his towel from the hook. With the towel he scrubbed his armpits, wiped the sweat from his torso and back, rubbed down his legs, and then he straightened up and turned, turned, kept turning, his eyes scanning the room. A sachet of pure water lay on his desk. Beside it, the hand mirror. His gaze moved to the bed with its rumpled sheet, and the louvred window above it, the dust-clogged mosquito netting that sieved the morning light, the old rainwater blotches on the window ledge: everything familiar, as it should be. His eyelashes were stiff with sleep crust, and his breath stank of last night's meal: noodles and fried egg garnished with raw onions. He ran his tongue along his crud-caked teeth. A large, reddish-brown cockroach emerged at that instant from under the bed and, waving its antennae furiously, skittered across the floor and into the darkened wardrobe. Furo stopped turning, strode to the desk, grabbed the hand mirror, and with a quick glance at his face, he flung it after the cockroach. Picking up the water sachet, he tore open the edge, and after rubbing his teeth and tongue with a finger, he squirted water into his mouth, gargled, and swallowed. He squeezed the last drops of water on to the towel, mopped his face with it and cleaned the crust from his eyes, then put on his clothes.

Getting from his bedroom to the front door was easy. There was no one about – his father and his sister were still

in their bedrooms – and he reached the front door in a soft-stepping dash. Getting to the gate was easier. He sprinted across the yard, shoe heels smacking the concrete. He breathed a sigh as the gate swung closed behind him, and then reached into his trouser pocket for his BlackBerry to check the time, but his pocket was empty, he had left the phone behind. He hesitated a moment, and then, with a brusque shake of his head, he stuck his plastic folder under his arm and set off at a trot for his job interview.

The first person Furo met was the stocky Adamawa man who had the monopoly on garbage collection in the quarter of Egbeda where Furo lived. He was pushing his garbage cart down Furo's street, and he drummed the cart's side with a hooked metal rod to announce his presence to the gated houses. But on catching sight of Furo, the rod slipped from his grasp and dangled on a string from the cart's handle, and then he averted his gaze to the shambles in the cart's bed, but kept on advancing, his steps growing slower, the cart trundling before him with its bold stench. Furo usually delivered the house garbage to him, and they had bantered several times over the haphazard costing of his seller's market service, so Furo, out of habit, greeted him as they drew abreast, and at once regretted the appearance of his voice. The man's silence only sharpened the bite of Furo's blunder. They pulled past each other, and Furo reached the bend in the road before casting back a nervous, salt-pillar look. The cart was abandoned in the middle of the street, and the man stood several paces in front of it, one hand shading his eyes and the other slapping at blowflies, and stared at Furo with festering intensity.

On the next street Furo approached the Isoko woman who ran a buka in front of a tenement building for navy personnel and their families. She was frying hunks of pork in a cauldron of seething oil that straddled a coal fire. Her naked toddler – a girl, her round tight belly accentuated by

strings of coloured plastic beads looped around her waist – sat on the ground a short distance from the fire. The child played with fistfuls of charred wood chippings and coconut shell; she babbled to herself – or her imaginary friend – through popping bubbles of spit. As Furo drew near, she looked up with fat-cheeked wonder and caught her breath. He was expecting it, but when the howl came it startled him nonetheless. Hearing the rush of the mother’s footsteps, he glanced around to see her picking up the child, and after turning back, he heard her say with a laugh, ‘No fear, no cry again, my pikin. No be ojuju, nah oyibo man.’

And so it went: stares followed him everywhere. Pedestrians stopped and stared, or stared as they walked. Motorists slowed their cars and stared, and on occasion honked their horns to draw his face so they could stare into it. School-bound children hushed their mates and poked their fingers in his direction, wrapper-clad women paused in their front-yard duties and gazed after him, and stick-chewing men leaned over balcony railings to peer down at him. As he passed by the corner store where his mother got her emergency groceries, a hubbub of voices burst out, and when he looked over he saw the attendants, Peace, Tope and Eze, crowded in the doorway, gawping at him. A radio jingle – *Mortein! Kills insects dead!* – blared from the barbershop where he got a shave every weekend and his hair cut every month, and when he hurried past the front, Osaze, the Bini barber, who was bent over a smouldering pile of hair, froze in that position, only his head moving through thickening smoke as he followed Furo with his eyes.

No one had called out his name. He’d passed houses he wasn’t a stranger to, and he’d been stared at by several people he knew, people whom he had lived beside for many years, joked with, been rude to, borrowed money from – and yet no one had recognised him.

Lagos, they say, is a city of twenty million people. Certainly no less than fifteen million. The economic capital

of Nigeria and its most cosmopolitan city, Lagos hosts the highest numbers of foreigners in the country. Construction workers from China mainly; restaurateurs, hoteliers and import dealers from India and the Middle East; tailors, drivers, domestics and technicians from West and Central Africa; expat employees of Western multinationals and global bureaucracies; sojourning journalists and religious crusaders; few exchange scholars; fewer tourists. In some parts of the city it is not unusual to see a white person walking the streets on a sunny day. Ikoyi, Victoria Island, and Lekki Peninsula. That's where oyibos - light-skinned people - live, work, play, and are buried. In private cemeteries. In Apapa, Oshodi, Ikeja, and other business districts of Lagos, the sight of a white man passing through in a chauffeured car is by no means a rarity. But if in traffic his car were bumped by another motorist and he came down to demand insurance details, it is likely that a Lagos-sized crowd would gather to stare, drawn by this curious display of courage. As for the outlying - economically as well as geographically - areas of Lagos, places such as Agege, Egbeda, Ikorodu: a good number of the inhabitants of these neighbourhoods have never held a conversation with an oyibo, never considered white people as anything more or less than historical opportunists or gullible victims, never seen red hair, green eyes, or pink nipples except on screen and on paper. And so an oyibo strolling down their street is an incidence of some thrill. Not quite the excitement decibels of seeing a celebrity, but close.

One anxious step after another and Furo finally reached the stretch of roadside marked out by collective memory - the script on the metal signpost had since rusted away - as Egbeda Bus Stop. It was mid-June, the flood-bearing rains had arrived, and the road drainage, which was clogged with market litter, was undergoing expansion by the municipal authorities. Half of the sidewalk was dug up, the excavated soil heaped on the other half, and these hillocks of red mud

had been colonised for commerce, turned into a stage for stalls, kiosks, display cases, impromptu drama. In this roadside market stood food sellers with huge pots of steaming food, fish sellers with open basins of live catfish and dead crayfish, hawkers with wooden trays of factory-line snacks, iceboxes of mineral sodas, and armloads of pirated music CDs, Nollywood VCDs, telenovela DVDs. Then there was the noise, the raw sound of money, of haggling and wheedling and haranguing, the rise and rise of voices against the roar of traffic. The bus stop was crowded with heads and limbs in a swirl of motion, and jostling for space on the motorway were all types of vehicles, from rusted pushcarts to candy-coloured mopeds to sauropod-sized freight trucks, all of them vying with pedestrians for right of way.

Lone white face in a sea of black, Furo learned fast. To walk with his shoulders up and his steps steady. To keep his gaze lowered and his face blank. To ignore the fixed stares, the pointed whispers, the blatant curiosity. And he learnt how it felt to be seen as a freak: exposed to wonder, invisible to comprehension.

About two hours into his trek, just as he sighted in the skyline the straggly multi-storey buildings of Computer Village, Furo realised he had misjudged the distance. His interview was at Kudirat Abiola Way, on the other side of Ikeja, at least an hour's walk from Computer Village. A long way still to go. His face smarted from the sun's heat, the underarms of his shirt were moist with sweat, and thinking of the road he had to cover, he pulled out his handkerchief and scrubbed his face. The cambric came away browned with grime. He fisted the handkerchief into a wad, adjusted the folder under his arm, and quickened his pace. He hadn't come this far to be defeated. This was the time to find a solution. But first he had to find out the time.

He picked the nearest person in front of him, a young lady in a tank top and tight jeans, and slowing his steps as he drew up to her, he said, 'Excuse me.' The lady glanced around without stopping, her expression puzzled, but as Furo raised his hand in greeting, she halted and turned to face him. 'Sorry to bother you,' he said to her, and when she gave a smile of accommodation, he asked: 'Can you please tell me the time?'

She glanced at her wrist. 'It's twelve past ten.'

'Ah,' Furo said, blowing out his cheeks. 'Thank you very much.'

The lady waited as he mopped his neck with his handkerchief. She seemed oblivious to the attention they attracted from passersby. After he folded the handkerchief and put it away, she said, 'How come you speak like a Nigerian? Have you lived here long?'

'Yes,' Furo answered.

She made no move to continue on her way, and as Furo tried to step backwards so he could go around her, she reached out and grabbed his elbow. His muscles tensed at her touch, and he resisted at first as she tugged his arm, but then he realised she was only guiding him out of the path of a motorcycle that was bearing down the sidewalk from behind. 'That's interesting, that your accent is so Nigerian,' she said when the danger was past. She released his arm. 'Where are you from?' she asked.

'I'm Nigerian.'

She squawked with laughter. Astonished faces turned to gawk, and seeing Furo's embarrassment, she caught herself. 'Sorry for laughing. But how is it possible that you're Nigerian?'

Furo's eyes lingered on her face. Her smile showed small white teeth and health-shined gums, and the dimples in her cheeks were signifiers of a merry disposition. Any other day, in a less pressing position, in his old skin, he would have asked her name. But there was no need for that, as she now

offered, 'My name is Ekemini,' to which he responded, 'I'm Furo.'

Her face pulled a look of doubt. 'As in, *Furo*? Isn't that a Niger Delta name?'

'Yes.' Furo cast an impatient glance past her. 'Actually, I'm in a—' He fell silent, distracted by the idea forming in his head.

'Yes?' Ekemini prompted.

'Hurry,' Furo said. 'I'm in a hurry.' He lifted his shoulders in a shrug. 'I'm going for a job interview that starts at eleven, but I just realised there's no way I can make it in time.'

'Oh no, that's bad,' Ekemini said, and checked her wristwatch. 'Where's the interview?'

'It's here in Ikeja, near Ogba side. Kudirat Abiola Way.'

'What!' Ekemini cried, and grasped Furo's arm again, this time in excitement. 'But that's not far from here. If you take a bike you'll get there in twenty, twenty-five minutes max. But you have to go now.' Dragging him along, she crossed to the sidewalk's edge. As she raised her hand to flag down a motorcycle, Furo spoke.

'That's the problem. I don't have money on me.'

'No money?' Her tone was startled. 'I see.' She freed his arm and drew away from him. Her eyes glinted with suspicion, and it seemed clear to Furo that any moment she would mutter something rude and whirl away, convinced he was some sort of confidence trickster. To forestall this, Furo took the offensive. 'Yes, no money, that's why I'm walking.' His confidence mounted along with her curiosity. 'It's not like I chose to trek to my interview, you know,' he said, and held her gaze. Settling deeper into character, he softened his tone: 'I was attacked by robbers this morning. They took my car, my wallet ... and my phone. I was lucky to get away with my documents.' He tapped the folder under his arm.

In the silence that followed, Furo and Ekemini were jostled together by a flash wave of pedestrians. With her chest pressed against him and her breath in his face, Furo almost

regretted lying to her. But he had no choice, he told himself, no choice at all. 'I'm sorry,' Ekemini now said to him, and after pulling back from his body, she continued, 'So what will you do? Do you need to call someone?' She reached into her handbag. 'Here, you can use my phone.'

'I've called already. My people will meet me at the interview venue.'

'Oh yes, of course - your interview. You really must get going.' She waited a beat, and then spoke in a rush, her tone embarrassed. 'Can I give you some money for the bike fare?'

Furo's grin was truthful. 'That would be nice of you. It's just a loan, of course.'

Ekemini pulled a thousand naira note out of her handbag, and her face was pleased as she handed it over. 'Thank you, thank you,' Furo said, tucking the note in his breast pocket. He opened his folder, took out a pen, passed it to her and said, 'Can I have your number? I'll call you tomorrow so we can meet. To return the money.' He watched with growing impatience as she wrote down three sets of numbers on the back of a business card. After she passed the card to him, he swivelled to face the curb, held his arm aloft, and a swarm of motorcycles shrieked towards him. He climbed aboard the first to arrive and, blocking out the shouted banter from the disappointed riders, gave the man directions. After the okada jumped forwards and weaved into the rush of traffic, Furo turned sideways in his seat to wave goodbye to Ekemini. He got a shock when he saw her running along the sidewalk after him with a raised arm and her face twisted with effort. 'Your pen! You forgot your pen!' she shouted against the wind, and the rider heard her and slowed, but Furo leaned forwards, said in his ear: 'Abeg keep going.'

Arriving at the interview venue, Furo realised with a sinking feeling that even if he had walked over he would still have got there on time. Through the grilled gate - from

which hung a white signboard announcing in green block letters: HABA! NIGERIA LTD - he could see a mass of people standing in single file in the bright sunlight, all dressed in formal clothes, all clutching folders, briefcases, shoulder bags. It was obvious who they were, why they were there, what they were dressed up for. He had heard of them. He had seen their faces under newspaper banners that screamed '*50% Youth Unemployment in Nigeria!*' He was one of them. And yet, despite his own desperation for a job, despite the worst scenarios he had conjured up in the days since he got his interview invitation, he had never imagined that so many people would turn up for the same job he wanted. As far as he knew there was only one position on offer. And for that at least forty people were standing in line.

After he paid the okada rider and collected eight hundred naira in change, Furo hurried to the gate to find it unlocked. Inside the compound stood a whitewashed, gable-roofed, two-storey vintage building with a residential aura. The expansive compound was unpaved, the red clay soil spotted with clumps of weed, and several cars were parked close to the building. By the back fence, a Mikano generator squatted on concrete pilings. The only other structure in the compound was the yellow-painted gatehouse, which Furo approached. News in Hausa blasted at full volume from a small radio perched in a rocking chair facing the doorway, and even before Furo stuck his head in, his nose was greeted by the smell of incense. He saw a wooden table on which was balanced the incense stick, smoke spiralling from its tip, the floor beneath it sprinkled with ash. Prominent in the room was a longbow and quiver of arrows, and there were clothes hanging from nails in the walls, as well as a kerosene stove, cooking utensils, and other domestic trappings. The gatehouse looked lived-in, but there was no one there.

Rather than wait for the guard's return to enquire about a process that seemed apparent, Furo decided to join the

queue. Stares he expected, and got as he approached the waiting group, and when he stopped behind the last person in line, the long row of heads began all at once to chatter. Furo dropped his eyes to his shoes, powdered with dust from his trek, and shut his ears to the grumblings. He had as much right as anyone to be here. He had probably suffered the most to get to this place, and all for a chance to be treated the same as everyone. He, too, needed a job, and come anything, despite everything, he would stand his ground. He ignored the rising voices.

‘I’m talking to you!’

A sharp-toed pair of shoes – oxblood leather finely cracked, the uppers lopsided from long wear, black laces untidily knotted – appeared in Furo’s line of sight. He raised his head.

‘Yes, you, don’t act as if you didn’t hear me. Or you don’t like black people?’

Tall man, lean and dark, with a round small head from which his cheekbones stuck out. In the corners of his mouth white flecks of saliva showed.

‘I don’t understand,’ Furo said, and took a step backwards.

The man barked with laughter, a false laugh, showering spittle. Furo gave a start as he was strafed in the face; he fought the urge to raise his hand as a shield. Scattered titters drifted along the queue, and when he stole a look, a gang of eyes confronted him.

‘My elder brother lives in Poland.’ The man stared at Furo as if awaiting a reply. Furo took another step backwards. ‘Where are you going?’ The man’s tone was surprised, and striding forwards to close the gap between them, he crowded Furo with his height and sun-beaten odour. ‘Didn’t you hear what I said?’ he demanded, his Adam’s apple jumping.

Furo managed in a calm voice, ‘What does that have to do with me?’

Sadness suffused the man's face. 'Your people have refused to give me a visa. I've applied four times. My brother is getting tired of inviting me.'

'I'm not from Poland,' Furo said.

'Did I say you were from Poland?' At Furo's silence, the man added in a softened tone, 'You came for the job interview?'

Furo's nod set off a flurry of exclamations from the queue. The person ahead in line, a Deeper Life-looking woman - hair banished into a scarf, no earrings on, and dressed in a polyester skirt suit of baggy cut - glared at him with fuck-you intensity. The animosity in the air was so noxious that for an instant he thought of leaving. For an instant only. He needed the job more than he feared a lynching. Lucky then that he didn't have to face his convictions, because the tension eased when the mob leader - *this idiot who wants to get me in trouble*, Furo thought with a flash of hatred - raised his voice: 'It's a nonsense job anyway.' He turned his attention back to Furo. 'You have to go inside and write down your name, then collect a number from Tosin, the woman at the front desk. She will call you in by your number.'

Relief flooded Furo's guts. 'Thank you,' he said quickly, and then stood waiting, uncertain of how to take his leave. He wondered if he should shake hands to show his gratitude and dispense the man's assumptions about his feelings towards black people, but the handshake it turned out wasn't needed, as the man seemed to have forgotten the grudge he held. He grinned at Furo, placed a hand on his shoulder in a gesture of affability, then bent his face close and said, 'I like you. You don't talk through your nose like other oyibo.'

Furo forced a smile. His face itched from the flying spittle.

'Black and white, we are all brothers,' the man continued. 'We should support each other, you know, like Bob Marley, one love.' He held up his free hand with the middle and

index fingers entwined, and waved these under Furo's nose. 'We should be like one. I plan to marry oyibo when I reach your country. My brother's wife is oyibo. She's the one inviting me—'

Furo interrupted him. 'I have to go and put my name down.'

'Yes, go and write your name,' the man agreed, and nodded vigorously, but did not release his grip on Furo's shoulder. 'You will get the job, for sure. Me and you have plenty things to talk about.' His eyes bored into Furo's, and his face hardened, shed its friendliness, twisted into a scowl. 'Watch out for Obata!'

The vehemence of his words spattered Furo with spit, and this time he couldn't help it, he raised a hand to wipe his face before muttering, 'OK, thanks.' He shrugged off the man's hold, drew away from him, and ran the gauntlet of hostile faces towards the building entrance.

The receptionist smiled at Furo from her chair. The push-button phone on her desk had started ringing as Furo entered, but she ignored it. She gave him her full attention.

'Are you Tosin?' Furo asked.

'Yes, I am. How may I help you, sir?'

'Someone told me to come in here and collect a number from you.'

The puzzled expression that leapt into the oval of Tosin's face was quickly replaced by a smile of apology. 'I'm sorry about the mix up,' she said. 'You must have spoken to one of the applicants. We're interviewing for a vacancy.' She flipped open the visitors notepad on her desk and picked up a biro. 'Who are you here to see?'

The phone had fallen silent, but the air vibrated with anticipation of its next ring. The Haba!-branded clock on the wall above Tosin's head pointed to nine minutes past eleven.

Furo said, 'I'm here for the eleven o'clock interview. I'm really sorry I'm late, but I've been here - I've been outside