

A Leap in the Dark

-A short story-

By Emmanuel Ngwainmbi

“Don’t bring a white woman here.” Rob’s sister’s words resonated in Rob’s twenty-two year old ears as he buckled the seatbelt. Concentrate on your studies and always pray. Harvest the doctorate and come back soon. The world would be proud that a youngest Ph.D. comes from our family and is teaching in the university.”

Rob’s had put her career plans of becoming a nurse and had worked in a rubber factory to pay for Rob’s tuition and books, buy new clothes and prevent him from bad company. She had taught him most of his people’s customs and encouraged him to learn a sport--football. Finally, here she was—at the airport—escorting him.

Rob stared blankly at the walls behind which a forest of discordant voices mangled out good bye in two hundred languages to the three hundred passengers thought to be the lucky ones, just because we were flying abroad.

For him, coming to America was a leap in the dark. He knew no one there, had only read about Negroes in the history and literature books, and in a few days he would meet them personally, clad in afro hair, tight-fitting trousers with patte de l’éléphant legs and worn out skin-tight short-sleeved shirts performing James Brown. Would they speak English like the character Bigger he had met in *Native Son*? Did all Negroes live in suffocating, rat-infested slums like Bigger’s family or were some packed up in the skyscrapers, often driving those monstrous Impalas? What about the white girls in *Penthouse* and *Playboy*? Obviously, skinny white women would be everywhere ready to throw themselves at me when they found out I had a Bachelor’s degree, with honors. But how would Negroes treat the university graduate recruited from the continent to attend graduate school on scholarship? Of course, they would be honored to have him, with his blown out hair, bearded chin and skinny frame in their classrooms, homes, even their churches bragging about his country. Rob was to become the Cameroon ambassador in America.

“Embarquement complet. Attachéz vos ceintures!” came the announcement. “Please, review the safety information located under your seat...” Prompted by the French accent fumbling with the phonemes of the Queen’s language, he turned up his head as a white woman in her mid twenties

waved her arms, going over safety directions. Rob was aroused by her knee-length dark blue skirt and white short-sleeve shirt. On the right collar a brooch with blue, white and red stripes was attached. Her blonde hair streamed down below her hips permitting his eye to undress her all the way down her long smooth legs and pencil-tipped high heel shoes. He thought, 'There must be many of them like this one over there. She may like me,' he decided. "Well, talk to her. Ask for her name in French. When you get it, thank her in French. She'll see that you're very smart and fall for you instantly", he felt. The woman promptly walked toward him.

"Arrr you comfortable sitting hieerrr by the exit window?" She pointed to the sign above Rob's head.

"Oh yes. Pas de problem!" he assured her smiling profusely.

"Ah bon? So you can help in case of emergency?"

"Yes. Oh yes!"

"Ok." She smiled and walked back to the front of the aircraft, her curvaceous buttocks set firmly between her underwear. I swallowed hot saliva. Rob's heart thumped. Why had I failed to introduce himself? He should have scribbled his school address and slipped it into her hands.

The engine purred like scores of hungry lions roaming the wilderness. Propellers spun a million fold per second and then, the craft jerked backwards, turned along the runway as I turned toward the window to take a final look at the two-story airport building. Rob's sister waved frantically. I dare say she shouted out her good bye with her shrill voice—the sound that foretold joy and success. She was proud to see the bachelor's degree holder, going to the land where money and drinks could be plucked from walls in the streets, where millions of cars drove about, where skyscrapers and cemented pavements spread into the ocean, a place with no trees or grass.

The plane sped across the runway and lifted itself. He was trying to inhale with eyes the last glimpse of the streets I had visited many times. Groups of red clay and cement brick houses with white zinc roof tops and green vegetation became smaller and smaller. Then, clouds blurred Rob's view. He looked to the right to appreciate the group in whose company he'll be for hours. A stout man in his late forties wearing a black suit, polished black shoes, white shirt and bow tie made eye contact with him and smiled.

"Tu parles Anglais?" He inquired.

"Yes." He returned the smile.

“What’s your final destination?”

“The home of James Brown.”

“Pardon?”

“America.”

“I see. I’m going to Paris.”

“Vacation?”

“No. Why?”

“Many well-to-do people like you choose France for leisure.”

He laughed dryly, exposing a gold tooth. “I’m going on stage.” He said confidently. Rob frowned. He may have thought Rob did not understand the meaning of the French term. “I work for the Ministry of Telecommunication. This is Rob’s first time going abroad.”

“How long will you be in Paris?”

“Three months.” He smiled broadly.

Rob hesitated, hoping I wouldn’t hurt his feelings. “The training is not offered in Cameroon?”

“Leave me alone, my brother. We have trained technicians in Cameroon, professionals trained in France and other parts of Europe. But they prefer to send us there.”

“A waste of money and time!” He mumbled.

“Pardon me?”

“I said it’s worrisome to think the country is struggling to pay civil servants. I heard this on the radio the other day. Yet it has money to send civil servant abroad.” Rob said nervously.

“I heard you clearly.”

“I bet this will be a vacation too, right?” He smiled broadly too, now feeling relaxed.

“You bet. I’ll do some shopping for Rob’s wife and children.”

“Have you changed your money into French francs?”

“I don’t need to. Our Customs in Douala told me they have

currency exchange booths at the airport in Paris." He took a deep breathe and exhaled. "So what takes you to America? Let me guess. Studies."

"How did you know that?"

"You look studious and much younger than me."

"Classes begin in a few days."

"I have heard many studies about that place. Enjoy but be careful. America is a free country but freedom is not free."

Rob asked him to elaborate prompting, "With freedom comes responsibility."

He only nodded.

"Are you tired?"

"I'm sleepy. They've turned off the lights. I guess it's time to go to sleep."

"Enjoy your trip and your stay." I concluded. I fell asleep and woke up between announcements, meals and snacks thanking God that Rob's dream to study in Europe had come true, but also apprehensive that destiny prevails.

Finally, seven hours later, he landed at Charles De Gaulle airport and connected onto American Airlines bound for the United States. One hour before arrival in New York, a fast-speaking attendant gave him a long form and directions. It was the infamous I-94 form, the one-way ticket to America. He knew of many students who had gone abroad but never returned home. They must have found a magnet here. He was about to experience that same magnet. Rob's face glowed with anticipation when he caught a glimpse of Rob's first houses and tarred roads of America. Settling back in Rob's seat, he noticed that almost everyone was Caucasian, chit-chatting and laughing hysterically as the plane poised to touch down. The sound I remember was the brrrrrrrrrrrr of the engine.

America!

We shuffled outside. A party of custom officials asked us to follow them. We filed into two lanes and obeyed.

"All US citizens in this lane. All aliens in this lane," shouted a fat man in uniform. "Take out your passports and cards." He ordered. Rob looked around to see what people were pulling out in terms of cards. He had a vaccination card. When he approached the counter, a slim five feet, three-inch white

woman stretched out her hand toward him. In turn, he stretched mine out and shook hers.

“I mean your passport.”

He gave her everything – Rob’s brand new passport, vaccination card and the sealed Form I-20.

“Coming to school?”

“Yes.”

She examined page four of the passport.

“Your visa expires in two years.”

“Yes.” I replied trying to find the letter of award.

“You’re going down south?”

Rob wasn’t sure if it was a question or

a statement. “Yes.”

“Good luck.” She said in a cynical tone.

Not sure how to reply, he reached out and retrieved Rob’s papers from the counter.

“Next.” She ordered. He grabbed Rob’s hand luggage and sprinted toward the arrival gate, expecting to find a university official holding Rob’s name against his chest.

When he got there, no one was waiting. Disappointed, he went to a telephone booth and dialed the school many times, but no one answered. It was three p.m., Eastern Time. He knew everything went well in America. Surely an operator was available but may have stepped away for a while, so he waited and dialed again and again. A couple that had been waiting to use the phone approached Rob and asked if he needed help. He told them he was trying to reach someone, so they gave him a quarter. “That’s so generous of you!” he remarked smiling broadly. “Anytime” his wife replied. Whenever he dialed, the machine would reject Rob’s money, “Try your call again”, the beautiful female voice said repeatedly. “I am trying to reach someone in the University of...” he stated. “Ti-li-li...Your call cannot be completed as dialed. Hang up and try your call again.” he dropped the phone and looked around, embarrassingly.

“Do you need more help?” the husband inquired. He looked perturbed.

"You are very kind, sir." He was serious. Nowhere in Cameroon would a human being walk up to you and offer assistance without sounding rude or sarcastic.

"Who're you calling?"

"Rob's university in Mississippi."

He smiled. "Is that where you're going?"

"Yes, sir." He replied proudly.

"You're a long way. You cannot reach anyone there." He said emphatically. The man must have had enough of Rob's foreign accent—this confusing blend of British, Francophone and eight African languages. "Let me see your ticket." He put on some glasses and examined Rob's handwritten ticket. "Good!" He heaved a sigh of relief, whispered with his wife, kissed her lips turned, and waved a hand at him. "Follow me."

They took a concourse train to another terminal and he asked him to wait on a bench until Rob's name was called. "The planes here fly to Mississippi. Good luck!" He shook Rob's hands firmly and left.

'Good luck!' Second time in a day. Surely, these people really cared about him so much that they wished him luck. "Are people always so caring in America?" He wondered as he slumped into the chair. Everyone around was Caucasian and they chit-chatted and laughed ever so often. He wanted to start a conversation but feared Rob's accent would be detected and would make him the subject. 'Why fear?' He was among them--the free-willed, the neighbors of Robert Frost, Michael Jackson, Kenny Rogers and cowboy Ronald Reagan was Rob's President. He adjusted his tie and examined his home-made gray suit. Confection Tam, the famous tailoring service in Yaoundé had hemmed it for him and surely these people around him would praise it if he told them. He was proud to tell people he had used his first bourse universitaire stipend from Yaoundé University, the central institution of highest learning in Cameroon, to obtain this suit, which had become Rob's good-luck charm. He was wearing it he met this girl the thought of which rekindles the strongest romantic feelings within him. The day he was interviewed for Rob's degree and visa, he was also wearing his lucky charm.

Directly across him was one of those typical airport bars reminding me of Katios, Rob's favorite nightclub, Rob's apartment, and the jazzy tunes of Manu Dibango, Africa's renowned artist danced in Rob's head. Then followed Prince Nico Mbarga's Sweet Mother, Pepe Kalle, Rochereau, Rob's

Africa in melody and motion. What a gift! What a rich continent! What a happy society he had left behind! The bars were always open and everyone was allowed in to buy a drink, dance or say anything. With no age limit for smoking and drinking and no curfew, the bars were full and yes, freedom rang everywhere. It was a pleasure to transport some of these freedoms to the land of Lincoln's America!

They finally boarded a Delta airline and a few hours later, landed in Jackson, Mississippi. When he departed the plane, it was hot and dry and there were no more than twenty people in the waiting area. Surprisingly loneliness gripped me. Just as he was about to stretch his weary arms, a bald-headed man in shorts and a faded Samsung t-shirt said in a semi-Yankee, semi-African accent. "Welcome. I am your official welcome guide. Frizz Ename is my name. How was your trip?"

"Rob's trip was fine. My name is Robert Isanglih Mundzi wi Missi" He replied grinning.

"How's Bamenda? You flew from Douala?" He inquired quizzically, his smoke-smearing eyes studying Rob's bushy hair.

"Yes." he glanced at his goatee and low trimmed hair.

"You must be very tired. Let's get home now. You a shower. Oh, do you have luggage?"

"Luggage?"

"Bags."

"Yes, I have a trunk behind." Rob pointed to the plane.

"Trunk. You only have one bag." He giggled. "Ok, let's go downstairs and wait for it."

Rob followed him, hoping to meet a bunch of white people with balloons, flowers and placards chanting his name and a camera crew, like families welcome loved ones and important people in those American movies. Rob grabbed his three-by-five foot trunk and sauntered toward a rusty, tan, four-door Chevy. Then, he ushered me to the front seat and rushed over to the driver seat, glanced at his watch and started the engine.

"Put on your seat belt. I can't afford another ticket." He later informed me he had received a speeding ticket on the way to the airport.

"So why did you choose to come to Toogaloo?"

He gladly narrated the details, pointing out that a Fulbright scholar from an American university teaching at Yaoundé university had invited him to apply to three schools and among them Toogaloo had offered me full scholarship.

“Including lodging?”

“Maybe, I have to check the material they sent.” He shuffled through papers in a briefcase Rob’s uncle had given him.

“Not now. We’ll look into that. You’ll stay at Rob’s place today. Tomorrow, I’ll take you to school.” He glanced at his watch and sped away. “Gosh, I’ll be late for work!” he muttered.

“Where do you work?”

“Restaurant. I wash dishes!”

Rob examined his face, wondering why a man in his late thirties declares he was so cheaply employed.

“Are you enrolled in school?”

“I’ll soon finish the MBA which will enable me to work in a bank or even manage a restaurant chain.” He laughed dryly, casting a quizzical yet pitiful glance at me, “Jobs are not that easy around here. This is Mississippi.”

“But Toogaloo is a top class university.” He announced, anticipating confirmation.

“It may be...but I won’t spend another night here when I get the degree.”

“Why? This is a beautiful place, education can....”

“Sorry to interrupt you, Rob’s brother, but don’t get your hope high. You’ll be lucky to find a job as a janitor or a floor cleaner.” He giggled confidently.

“I could teach. I have taught at college level.” How defensive could he be? Did he realize he had just hurt Rob’s feelings?

“Degrees don’t quite matter here. People matter. Let me tell you this. Whites don’t like blacks here. They’re racist. And they have a long history of that foolishness in this place.”

“Are professors racist too?”

“You’ll find out for yourself! Whatever research I submitted this Marketing teacher, he gave me a D or C and they know

you need at least a B to pass a class in a graduate program.”

“I won’t stand for that. I would challenge him with facts.”

“Don’t use those Cameroon ideas here or you’ll suffer badly. I’m off to work. Feel free. There’re some drinks in the fridge. I don’t cook. I’ll bring you dinner. If anyone knocks, don’t open the door.” As he was driving off, I stood in the doorway and looked at the broken down couch of his shabby apartment. As shabby as it was, it welcomed the length of Rob’s tired, worn body. Lying there smelling stale beer and dirty dishes, he pondered over the things he had heard and seen—the best and the worst feelings all in one day. America? As far as he was concerned, Frizz was just a tired, frustrated foreigner who wanted to poison the mind of a university graduate with eyes set on obtaining the Ph.D. in record time, and nothing could deter him. Before he left Rob’s country, he knew he would be taking a leap in the dark by going to place he had never visited and knew no one.

The next morning, first day of school, Frizz drove me to campus and delivered him to the office of Professor Devedo, the American scholar who had handled Rob’s paperwork and communication with the university. He was immediately impressed by the appearance of his office. There were pictures on the wall, a fish tank, shelves of books, a leather chair and a broad table with neatly stacked papers and a water fountain to the far right corner. The window ablaze with morning sunlight and the carpet was soft and clean. The air within was fresh and a white fan made the circulation of air refresher more appealing to Rob’s nose than the air he had breathed in Frizz’s congested one-bedroom apartment. On the wall behind Dr Devedo was a raffia bag with green, red and yellow stripes and the inscription: Greetings from Cameroon. Dr Devedo shook Rob’s hands, chatted freely with Frizz and explained registration formalities. He escorted them out and went back into his office.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back.” Frizz said dashing back in. He saw them whispering for while.

“But he doesn’t have any money.”

“Nothing?”

“Just about three hundred dollars.”

The Professor lifted his hands to his head. “So what are we going to do?”

“Dr. Phat may still have rooms.”

“In that run down place? He may not like it there...those

guys don't clean it."

"I can't believe this guy came here empty." Frizz mumbled shaking his head.

"I have a meeting in a few. See what you can do and call me. I'm taking a late lunch today...1pm."

"Ok. I'll see."

As they walked across a lawn, he wondered where he'd sleep if Frizz didn't find Professor Phat and Professor Devedo did not return from lunch, like most public servants in Cameroon. I would be homeless for the first time in Rob's life. During the drive to school, Frizz had told him he lived with his brother who was expected back from Dallas that evening, suggesting he could not prolong his hospitality. Was that an excuse to throw him out because he didn't have enough money or had he forgotten the key African tradition—No one is a stranger in your home? He wanted to assure himself rather than misjudge this man who had spent extra time and gas money to accommodate him. "How long have you been living here?"

"You mean here in Jackson?"

He nodded.

"About eight years. I started Rob's BA degree here. But I was in Dallas for fifteen years." He shook his head. "Time flies in America!"

Twenty-three years in America, and still driving a trap for a car and washing dishes! He mused. Eight years later and still struggling to obtain a Master's? Either this guy is a party animal or a dunce. Perhaps he was a slow learner, one of those Africans whose parents shipped them to America when they could not cope with the rigorous academic standards, including the British G.C.E ordinary and Advanced Level, the Baccalaureate qualifying exam or university instruction which was administered in Sorbonne French or in Oxford English. He quickly abandoned that thought. 'The way he undressed several women with his eyes, I'm sure he has spend all of his time chasing them.' "Have you been home lately?"

"No." He hesitated. "No I haven't." He turned around and looked at Rob.

"They must be missing you. Do you send them money?"

"Rob's family is rich. We have magistrates, mayors and doctors." He replied somewhat vexingly.

He glanced at his shorts, crumpled t-shirt and slippers. 'And they wouldn't send you money for clothes and school fees? Why do you go to work everyday?' He hoped he had not voiced his thoughts, as Frizz might leave him stranded there. "You miss them, the makossa and the beer, I'm sure."

" Oh yes, I used to drink Beaufort but I can't cope now. The alcoholic content for a beer bottle here is 6 or 12 percent here and 65 percent in Cameroon."

"That's why we're known all over the world as 12 million drunkards. We rank second highest consumers of beer in the world behind Germany."

"The Germans taught you how to brew and drink beer. They were true colonizers."

'Taught you? Aren't you a Cameroonian too?' He had used the American accent when greeting other Americans. He might be offended if I asked. "Do you like this place better?"

"Than Cameroon? Yes. It's easier to get things here and no one controls your life. Everyone, no matter his position in society, waits in the line. People are courteous and unobtrusive. You can go anywhere you want and buy whatever you want, as long as you have money. Money is greater than titles here."

Rob noticed he had not mentioned education as a measure of success. Could it be that he didn't want to encourage me to work hard in school because he himself was an academic misfit? He wanted to tell him he had no intention of staying in America after receiving his PhD degree but chose to play along. "You're teaching me a lot."

"I intend to gather enough money and go home for good."

He looked perturbed.

"Don't tell anyone this. Rob's form I-94 expired and I have not renewed it."

"So how would you return?"

"I don't have papers to return, that's why I have never left this country."

He didn't know the severity of his situation, let alone the countless number of illegal aliens hiding in large cities and smaller nooks. Rob promised him he would keep his secret. Rob's hero looked as if he had fallen on his own sword right before Rob's eyes.

We walked into Bethune Cookman Hall, took several turns and reached Dr. Phat's office. Frizz knocked faintly on the door.

"Come in." Replied a stern voice.

They obeyed.

"I have brought the...."

"Gentleman from the continent. Welcome to America." The six foot, three hundred-pound giant stood up, shook Rob's hand and showed me to a seat across his desk. His dark face, complemented by the gray spots on his short hair shone with delight. He was wearing an immaculate long sleeved white shirt and broad bow tie and black trousers that seemed closer to his chest than his navel. The post-middle aged man complained about everything, from his chores with the church, to lousy students and lunch his secretary had not delivered. He wondered why a distinguished man like this should share his secrets with a total stranger and much younger person like him.

"Dr. Devedo asked if you have any rooms to let."

Dr. Phat took a deep breathe and made several phone calls in a rather subdued tone. "Take him to Elf Street. The monthly rent is \$75."

Frizz stood up and scratched his head.

"Oh-ho . What now? You've forgotten how to get there?"

"He doesn't have a bed or mattress."

Dr. Phat held his head in his hands. "What about sheets?"

"None.But I'll give him some."

"And he has enough for food."

Frizz was quiet. He sat there transfixed. What had I just done to these strangers? 'One does not force anyone to be a benefactor'. Before leaving Rob's country, he thought the university would provide me with housing and feeding, as well.

"Let me see his paperwork." He reached down to Rob's briefcase, retrieved all correspondence I had had received from Toogaloo and surrendered them to him. He put on reading glasses and perused them like an old man by a fireplace trying to read a hand written letter under a dim

evening light. "HMMMM!" He glanced at Frizz, then Rob and wiped something on his right eye before returning the glasses in its case.

"I'll arrange for you to have dinner in the cafeteria for a few weeks." He said solemnly and turned to Frizz. "Take him there."

They drove across the campus and turned on several streets before arriving at Rob's new home on Elf, a smallish three bedroom vinyl home built right after the Second World War. He would later hear that Dr. Phat had purchased the house from a War veteran for about \$15,000, renovated it and made a fortune renting it out to students. But the house flanked by a scrubby-looking bush and poorly trimmed oak trees could not be a profit-maker. Only the poorest ones, who could hardly afford a half month's rent used it. The tenants were Nigerian, Moroccan and Belizean with no other possessions than a school bag, a few distressed-looking cooking utensils and a 14-inch black and white TV. Their rooms stank of unwashed clothing. The beds and stove were not theirs, either. They had to contribute money to pay the electric and water bill, but often, the landlord ended up paying everything. They gathered around the TV set every evening and quietly watched the local news and sometimes football, which he often took the liberty of arguing should be called 'handball'. "Football is played with feet, knee, the chest, and head and it involves mathematics. Why call something they throw and catch football?" Rob's next door neighbor, Obi, would reply, "Americans think they know everything. What are we doing in their country, anyway?" He was always cynical and bordered on sarcasm and frustration.

"Professorrrh, he would tease me, "Comment-allez vous, Professorrh?" And that's the French he knew and spoke. He told me a million times how much he liked French in high school, claimed he admired people who reasoned in different languages, wondered about Rob's national allegiance.

"Professorrh, you're sure you will return to Came-Arone after you degree?" I, in turn, would restate what I had told him ever time he raised the issue: "We are ambassadors of our countries. We must return home and build our communities. No one can do it for us. Our governments are all corrupt. Our parents are ailing. The young educated ones are struggling for their survival. Our countries are in our hands. We are our countries' future."

"Just how can we achieve this, Professorrh?"

"Take the knowledge back. When you get home, don't stay in the big city, drive your big American car and chase desperate men's daughters. Go back to your village and meet with the villagers. Find out their needs and work with, not for, them. Don't discuss problems and solutions with them."

“Where will the funds come from?”

“Grassroots development doesn’t require millions of naira. Whatever money you saved here, take it along and use it with your people.”

“And what will I give my family? These people might kill me.”

“You’re still nepotistic. Be a socialist.”

“Not a communist too?”

They would talk into the night, just to avoid spending more time in those beds dreaming about our loved ones and languishing in the pangs of nostalgia.

The professors had learned from Rob’s roommates that he was homesick, so they introduced him to a professor on campus who had expressed an interest in working with foreign students. Dr. Margie, a Choctaw by heritage may have had no idea what she was getting into when she offered him lunch a number of times.

This blue eyed, round faced, high cheek-boned 64 year old health sciences professor is always seen with dark sunglasses and high heeled open-toe shoes and noted for her sprightly walk and brash conversation. Though make-up concealed some of her wrinkles, she never failed to remind him of her age and that she could be his mother. Whenever she mentioned her age, he looked perturbed by her frankness. It was taboo in her culture, she told him, for a woman to tell her true age. Though in his, old age presupposed having greater wisdom, pride and commanding respect. He understood that he was not to mistake her attractiveness for youth; rather he was to be her confidant and treat her as his older sister and perhaps one day she would tell him the secret not even her family members knew about.

Between classes and office hours we went to lunch and visited museums and parks during which she asked him a lot of questions about his family. On one occasion while sitting in a park near the campus she wanted to know how many brothers and sisters he had? If he came from a polygamous home? If he would marry many wives? If his parents were educated? If he had fathered any children. She seemed pleased with Rob’s affirmative responses to all questions except he preferred a monogamous lifestyle and had no children.

“That is atypical for an African male. Why won’t you follow the culture?” she teased.

"It is economically and morally proper to marry once and raise your own children."

"Mr. Tali. May I call you Robert?" she requested.

"Sure." He felt a sudden closeness.

"I don't understand what you mean by 'morally proper'. In Chinua Achebe's novel, *Things Fall Apart*, he learned that men owned large compounds and many wives and children this gave them clout in the community."

He laughed, bloating with confidence for this was Rob's chance to show just how knowledgeable he was and how I differed from the status quo. "In any society, there are fathers and parents. Some of them don't even know their children's names and some wives get pregnant by their boyfriends. Husbands discriminate between their sons and daughters, many don't support their children because they're too busy making more children even with concubines while their wives sell their crops and fend for the entire family. The boys spend evenings at their father's house and do masculine chores while women follow their mothers to the farm and help with cooking. When they reach puberty, their fathers sell them out to suitors with no recourse to their personal feelings. Raising a female is like milking a cow for business. The highest bidder takes her away. Why should he become a polygamist and multiply the burden of innocent lives?"

Dr. Margie seemed plastered on the bench as she stared at the forest before us. Suddenly, she turned to him and said, "You should return to Carmon. Your people need you."

"Polygamy has destroyed the economic fiber of the African society. Remember those shabby looking, hungry kids on TV and missionaries begging for money to support them. Many of them are orphans and others are abandoned because their mothers can no longer support them."

"I love your accent."

"Thank you."

She drove him back to Elf Street and arranged to pick him up and take him to a museum the following morning which was Saturday. Whenever she arrived at our house, she wouldn't leave her car, instead she'd honk, wait about thirty seconds and honk again. If she didn't see him, she'd lean toward the passenger seat, roll down the car window glass and peep through our door. Obi would saunter across the wood floor to Rob's bedroom door.

“Kok, kok, kok! Professorrh, she is waiting. Hurry up.” He would whisper and stay there until he had come out. “Rob’s brother, you’re very lucky. Enjoy.” And he’d smile mischievously. When he stepped outside, he’d gingerly close the door and plant one eye in a hole to spy on us. He was disappointed that he didn’t see what he had hoped for. Obi had tried every trick in the book to find out if we had a romantic relationship. “Did she hold your hand? Were you both alone in the car?”

He’d give him a philosophical response. “She’s a kind woman. She has written to my father telling him she’ll take good care of me.”

He couldn’t hold it back anymore, “I think she likes you. She buys you groceries, gives you rides, and takes you places. There’re younger women here. Don’t let her buy you. We Africans have too much pride to be tricked into another round of serfdom. What they did to our ancestors is enough. Come with me to church and you’ll find decent ones, not those crack heads on campus.”

When he finally accepted Obi’s invitation to attend his church, a sister-in-Christ was assigned to him. Becky took him to Sunday school, to her parents’ home for lunch following church service, and drove him back home. It just happened that the Sunday he attended was “International Day”, where all foreign students and their chaperones were treated to a festival. The day started early and it had all the signs of an exciting experience. Clad in Rob’s gray suit, he entered Becky’s red Mazda 626. “You don’t have to sit in the back,” she prompted and he obeyed. He had not had an opportunity to be so close to a fair-skinned Negro. He was transfixed by her long hairy legs, her bright eyes, trimmed high eyebrows and loose dark hair that flowed past her mid torso. But her white leather shoes, flowery sleeveless turtle neck gown and her bold gold earrings were no match to the Irish national flag or milky white blouse and black skirt that Dr. Margie had always insisted on wearing. Becky reminded him of Beverly Johnson, model in Essence Magazine whom I secretly desired. But Becky was not a model; she was a God-fearing woman whom he believed would appreciate his passion if offered. Such a dismissive attitude was wrong, he had thought.

“Was this your first time attending the AME church?” she started.

Startled by her tinkling voice, I said no.

“I see. I take it you’re not a Christian.”

He had not deciphered the meaning of AME, and then a

blind assumption hit him. Was it an acronym or a term? He was angry and ashamed to ask. A university graduate from the greatest nation in the universe with no knowledge of theological nomenclature. Worst, he was unable to impress a beauty. Had Becky observed he had not been following the rituals during service which prompted her question? She had guts, he concluded, to ask question him directly. But often, such directness is a sign of interest, so he dared not nullify it. "Everyone in Rob's family is a Christian, Baptist."

"But you don't worship the same way as we do here?"

"Yes, we do." Rob's confidence was back. "During Thanksgiving farmers bring crops, carpenters bring furniture, traders bring money. They dance into the church with drumming and singing and ululation. After service, the deacons auction the gifts and use the funds to pay the pastor or address other needs, like repairing the building or buying medicine for the sick."

"What role have you played in the church?"

"I direct the youth choir." I lied. "And sometimes I teach Sunday school."

"I'm impressed." She nodded and smiled, exposing her teeth.

"Did you lose that tooth when you were younger?"

She laughed. "Nooooo! I went to Rob's dentist."

It was obvious Becky came from a wealthy family. Not only did she have a personal dentist, but the silverware at her parents' two-story home, its neatness, double garage, well-kept lawns, and her fresh looks all spelled comfort and satisfaction. He had expected her to express agitation.

"So what kind of work do you do? And do you have brothers and sisters?"

"Two questions, hmm. Let's see...I don't work. I'm a junior at Ole Miss and I have a younger brother who turned twenty last month. Our parents didn't want many children."

This was definitely Rob's idea of a good life—and he should become an in-law in this family, far-flung from the families her ancestors had been sold to in Barbados, Jamaica and America. But why would a full-fledged African get married to an offspring of slaves? Would her family ever treat him with dignity or would they inflict revenge as it was widely believed in Negro communities that Africans had sold them to slavery.

She swerved the car up a curve and into the churchyard and parked it behind the social hall. They joined a multitude of children and older people. Grandmothers were wearing hats and expensive clothes and shoes. For once, I thought I was at a wedding. They entered the hall and found people seated all around the room. Becky shoed me to a chair and sat behind me. He had no idea we would be there for the next five hours. Testimonies, chanting of spirituals with badly pronounced Swahili words, dancing, dining—the fellowship was too much for him as he didn't understand southern accent and excessive free-spirited self expression. Members at the congregation stood up and confessed every dirty thing he had said and done the entire week, citing shocking experiences, from committing adultery to shoplifting to shooting. As they asked God for His forgiveness, others chanted, "Yes Lawd. Mhm. Well? Say't gain." In Rob's culture, only a drunk in a bar could be so blatantly vocal about his personal life in public. He glanced at the exit door sweating profusely, but with no desire to surrender Rob's pride in such auspicious company, he smiled. He was the next in line.

At that moment, Becky stood up and announced that there were five new foreign students in the house and proceeded to introduce them. "I know I can't pronounce their last names, so I'll only call the first name." Of course Africans' first names were Christian names. If she had pronounced Rob's last name correctly, he would have felt she was truly interested in him. But this was not the first instance for an American to struggle with African names. It had happened every time someone claiming to make acquaintance mispronounced it, during class discussions with Rob's teachers and other students and in the cafeteria. They easily pronounced the multi-syllabic Russian and Greek names and avoided attempting to pronounce our names. Even educated Americans and children who easily grasp correct pronunciations were in the same boat. What a cheap escape! And little did he know this perception will follow him for decades in America. As the years passed, he often felt it was one of the countless signs of disrespect for Africans or an outright discrimination against anything that is African.

Rob noticed she had not asked them to say a word. Here was Rob's chance to impress them by saying positive things about him and Rob's beloved country. They did not know Roger Milla, the soccer legend. There were many wonderful things these pious, loving and potentially wealthy people ought to know about their real ancestry.

"Robert Isanglih Mundzi wi Missi." He said loudly and clearly, hearing the echo. All eyes were fixated on Rob or his gray suit, he thought. "I come from Cameroon on the West Coast of Africa. We have two official languages, English and

French. So I speak formal English. I also speak pidgin, the street form of English spoken by all 12 million Cameroonians. In South Carolina, 250,000 Negroes call it Gullah. I also speak German, Spanish and Latin, Itangikom, my people's language and five other African languages. I am happy you invited me here. This is a beautiful place. I am very happy I am finally in Europe." He sat down amidst scant hand-clapping. He dropped Rob's head to hear the next foreign accent for he had expected a standing ovation; no one there could claim to be a polyglot like him. He felt cheated, even bordering on the thought that Obi who knew these people better than him may have blackmailed him. If he was innocent, would Christians invite a prodigal son among them just to humiliate him? He decided he would turn down Becky's invitation the next time she called to pick him up. Besides, Becky never called him on a weekday, only on Sunday morning.

Becky introduced a young man from the Ivory Coast, another from Belize, Ghana, and finally Obi. "Everyone knows me here, except Rob's friend who thinks he's in Europe." Obi started and everyone laughed. "I wish to thank Sister Natasha and Brother Benedict for the groceries and allowing me into their beautiful home when I was homeless. God is good. Jehovah, you're Rob's king. We glorify you. Jehovah you're beautiful. I'm so privileged. You have delivered me from Satan's claws. Oh, Jehovah, I was lost in the wilderness. Thank you, Jesus!" He chanted, throwing his arms up in the air. And the congregation responded enthusiastically, cheering, crying out religious slogans as he mused over his public blunder—the thought that America was in Europe.

Later, Becky drove him back home. On the way, she inquired about Rob's impressions of the occasion and receiving good remarks, she asked him if he would like to join her church. His affirmative response warmed up her cheeks. "Our church people would be pleased," she added. I asked her if the deacons would like him to perform special duties. "Just come to church every Sunday. Give your life to Jesus. Of course, tithing matters. Every working Christian should tithe. You don't work, so you should clean the church, attend Bible study and eventually you'll be invited to join the youth choir." She went on to explain the role the church was playing in the community. "This area is known all over the country as the Bible Belt. Welcome and I'll see you at 9 a.m. in about," she glanced at her gold-wrist watch, "one hundred and sixty-two hours."

* * *

Twenty six hours later, Dr. Margie tooted the horn. He had barely dropped his books on his bed which served as his study desk. He sauntered through the living room and

dashed toward her car. When he got in, he found her smiling at him. "You're becoming time conscious," she remarked. He didn't say a word. "Have you eaten?" He shook his head. "Poor thing, here, let's go to Kentucky Fried, so I can bring you back and get home early today. "I have piles of papers to grade." She glanced at the rear-view mirror. "Does the university in your country give mid term exams?" He nodded. "Your classes, okay?" He nodded again. "Students in this country are very lazy. They won't do a thing but they want a passing grade." She went on a verbal rampage attacking the American educational system. "Even teachers don't want to grade long essays. They give multiple choice exams, which is no way to evaluate a student's learning ability. The European system is more compact. I can see that it has done you a lot of good." She smiled, as if to prompt the same. He wasn't sure if the last comment was a true compliment or just an excuse to engage him in a conversation about which I already had strong opinions. He didn't want any one to tell him that the American educational system was generally weaker than that which had formed his thought process. He didn't have to be reminded that those who had failed to succeed in secondary schools in Africa were not only admitted directly to universities here, but most received the master's degree within five years on matriculation. Strange!

She ordered the gravy, biscuit, coke, corn, leg and breast crispy combo and paid with her credit card. Everyone watched us as we sat eating. She suggested that we leave the restaurant immediately and dumped her food in the bin. He grabbed Rob's food and followed her questioning the purpose of her abrupt action. As they drove home she told him the people in the restaurant were not happy to see them.

"Why?"

She cast a sorrowful look at him, hesitated. "You're black...and I'm white."

"So..."

"Not here. Black men have been lynched for simply admiring a white woman."

'Don't bring a white woman here,' I regurgitated. "You shouldn't drive me around then."

"Well...I am your sister, remember? You need to eat." Her eyes traveled between Rob's legs and halted around Rob's torso. She stretched her right hand and massaged it. "Have you had a bowel movement lately?" He had not visited the toilet since he arrived in the Land of the Free. "My gosh, you are constipated." She stopped the car and pressed Rob's stomach with her hands. Then, she glanced at her watch,

started the car and sped off. "Good night. Sleep tight!"

At about 5 p.m. the following day, she picked him up from Elf Street and took him to the doctor's office. The nurses drew Rob's blood, took samples of his urine, checked his vital signs and ushered him back to the waiting room. About one hour later, a six-foot tall, bald headed Caucasian with a thick moustache cowered and stretched out his hand to him, at which time Dr. Margie rose and introduced him, adding, "He has just come from Africa!" , 'the taboo continent,' He mumbled. 'Say Cameroon, perhaps he knows Roger Milla, the legendary soccer player.' He wanted to add but remained silent. He beckoned them into his office and showed them to seats. Dr. Margie recounted Rob's medical problem and revealed everything he had told her about his family, often sneering as she massacred African terms. 'These people don't keep secrets.' He muttered under his breathe.

The doctor glanced at Rob's newly created chart. "Let's see. No disease. Blood pressure normal...blood count excellent." He ordered Metamucil and advised Rob to exercise in order to release stress. "I think it's nostalgia." He told her and she agreed. "Good luck!" he said to him with clenched teeth. They left the doctor's office and spent the remainder of the day sightseeing.

That weekend, Dr. Margie took him on a picnic two hours away in a deserted park. She laid a cloth on the grass, removed the bread, wine, peanuts, crackers and cans of soda from picnic basket. She sat eating while I watched the birds. "Don't be shy. No one is here. Those racist pigs can eat their hearts out or kiss Rob's ass! Oops, sorry!" He smiled.

"You've never heard me curse, have you? Oh, I curse." She looked sober. "You see, I lost Rob's husband twelve years ago in a motor accident." Tears stood in her eyes. "Rob's life has never been the same since." She wiped her dry nose but never shed a single tear. An African woman would have flung herself about and shed real hot tears. "I refused to date men. He read a lot of self-help books, traveled around the world and did a lot of writing. He wrote poems, short essays, songs, anything just to forget. But you can't forget.

"How long had you been married?" He wanted her to know he cared.

"Fifteen years. Before I met him, I had dated a lot of men." She laughed. "I was hot."

"You are beautiful."

She blushed. "Really?"

"I don't tell lies!"

"Oh, thank you, Robert." She leaned forward and kissed him. Rob's world instantly collapsed into a mound of ecstasy. Before he had even recovered from her kiss, she said abruptly, "Let's go. I want to take you to a very special place." They packed up the picnic basket and kissed again before he released her to the driver's side. They only drove a short distance before she stopped the car and beckoned him to follow her. They stood on a hill looking out at the most beautiful green valley that he had ever seen. "This is Natchez Trace." She pointed to a stretch of forest and dense undergrowth. It is about 450 miles long. Rob's ancestry is here." She paused to allow the news to sink into Rob's soul. "This ancient trail runs through the Mississippi River into Tennessee, a neighboring state. For centuries, Rob's people, the Choctaw, Chickasaw and other American Indians used this trail. From 1785 up to 1819 or 1820 AD boatmen traveled on the Ohio and Mississippi river and sold boats and other goods in Natchez and other southern regions and trekked back to the north." She studied Rob's face. "I'm sure the path was slippery when wet." She eyed Rob's groin area and smiled. "I really want to learn about your African heritage. I want to know about courtship, rituals, things like that...and French. If you promise to teach me, I promise to share a decade-old secret with you. Will you teach me?"

He promised her he would. They left the area, had dinner at a steak house and retired to a country-style bed and breakfast which she had reserved without telling him. "This place is just like farmhouses in Cameroon."

"Is that a compliment?"

"Yes. It's very attractive and brings back fond memories." He went on to tell her a story about his first experience working with his aunt and her children and spending a week in a farmhouse about twenty miles from our home. He described his lanky uncle who gobbled up the food that his aunt prepared for all of us and the mosquitoes that bit so much causing bumps to emerge all over Rob's body. He told her about the very cold nights and how the rodents, chimpanzees and owls had taken turns visiting our hut, perhaps in search of game or food.

Dr. Margie noticed a sudden sadness on Rob's face and sensed his homesickness had returned. She kissed Rob's forehead before disappearing into the bathroom. Rob's entire being trembled when she returned wearing only a pink negligee, beckoning him to comply to her seductive gait. He had never seen a white woman's breast nor imagined he would find himself with a willing, sex-crazed damsel dying to have him, after only a few weeks in America. The ghost of

his sister's words, 'Don't bring a white woman here' startled him awake. He looked down at the white woman lying next to him smiling and said to himself 'don't worry, dear sister.' He stretched his erect body next to her, determined to explore more of the America that was being offered to him right then.

Around 4 o'clock the following day, they packed out of the house and drove back to Jackson, often whispering in each other's ears. He had not told Becky he would be away from church service. He wondered what she would think or do. She had never entered his 'palace'. Surely, she had come by in the morning to drive him to church.