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T the crack of dawn on Monday when the city was turning into a huge sound of awakening Asafa came to rouse me. I was at once struck by the freshness he put on, so early in the morning. The pristine picture of a school

Asafa



I have never known began to form in my enthusiastic mind. In the kitchen, I could hear Tonia activating the house with clatters in one of those ephemeral human acts that are curiously stamped on the memory. Here was a morning without strife or sobs, the most significant I had known in months, when everyone faced life with impulsive reso-

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luteness perhaps because it was a fate at once arduous and inescapable. He took me through a ritual of preparation asking what sort of books I wanted and if I really thought I wanted to go to school. Even as the three of us drove into the city that morning, I was convinced his unanswered questions bordered on matters in which I had practically no say. In the streets, at the time of morning I had grown to note for its vitality, we sped into the smell and speech of a new beginning.

There was the freshness no one could take away from Monday morning. Where school children clustered around a food-vendor seated on a low stool, I grew giddy with the stronger smell of misapplied body creams glistening on their faces, arms and legs, all sticky to the touch, hardly distinguishable from the aroma of the vendor's stew or the oil the woman down the lane fried buns and plantain chips with; the steam that rose from the rice measured into their little containers mixed with the fume from passing cars honking deliberately to scare the unheeding multitude into flight and transformed the morning. A well-dressed pupil, obviously conscious of her appearance and facing a shallow but wide drainage had to choose between waiting for her partner who was dealing with a tea-seller

running from a reckless car and standing, however momentarily, in front of the huge furnace that rose, all amber and rage, from a roadside grate. She had walked a few yards away from the tea-stand and was a couple of feet to the drainage when the car came cruising down the street. She momentarily dashed back, barged into a crowd of waiting buyers and avoiding their insult or assault scampered up a raised pavement at the other side of the street and slipping, fell in a gutter that had not been cleared in a long time. She hissed through the cries of pity and mockery that welled up about her.

Asafa drove through the listless morning and dropped me at the home of person who, he informed as we entered the sitting room, would take me to school. He dropped the information as a general statement to be digested by both Tonia and me. After he had written down an elaborate note which he handed to the housemaid, they both departed and promised to come for me in the afternoon. The maid went away to carry on with the kitchen noise that Tonia had begun that morning. The room had old things; torn and worn settees, and old cupboard blackened with disuse and the tradition of family memories it housed, an old-styled television set with one of its doors broken and the other eaten in places by rats or roaches, shabby rug opening to the potholed floor, a conference of portraits of the family's offspring taken years ago, a wall-clock with Roman figures that had stopped at fourteen minutes to three, a telephone that kept ringing but stopping the moment the maid came into answer it. (After three such attempts, she finally put the handset on the table, then returned about ten minutes later to replace it and thereafter it rang thirty-five times without stopping). Five of the cardboards in the ceiling had come off and from one of the openings a cobwebbed cord dangled like a noose waiting to be used. A tiny rat, the type that dashed off at the slightest threat kept jumping about the room, oblivious to the presence of a slumbering cat on the pressing board, and scampering each time I made a deliberate move to startle it. The room stank of mouldy bread and chicken shit which the aroma of

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ven in the elitist outposts of Ilupeju and Maryland Estate, friends across the confluence had broken natural pacts and buried the machetes of their accords in mutual heads.

boiling rice that wafted in from the kitchen could not overwhelm. The entire house had its certain deadness intermittently undermined by the noise in the kitchen but the aura nevertheless made me feel as if I had been dumped there forever. The three new exercise books Asafa bought for me the previous evening were in my handbag together with my favourite picture-book. I took out one of the books and with a pencil wrote my name on it. The telephone was ringing when a man, about Asafa's age but more huge, entered and went straight to pick it. As he clutched the handset and glanced over his shoulder at me he shouted across to the kitchen demanding to know why the maid didn't see it fit to answer the phone all the while. There was no response from the kitchen. Strangely, he found corroboration at the other end of the line and I wondered if anybody else could achieve that. If this was the man Asafa meant, I thought, then schooling should be a smooth sail for me. He spoke excitedly into the receiver and mentioned Asafa more than once glancing at me on each occasion. He spoke sporadically in Yoruba, English and another tongue I couldn't place. After about five minutes of that verbal gymnastics, he dropped the phone and wondered loudly, even noisily, if the maid wanted him to have his breakfast in the kitchen. The maid finally emerged but without any food. Instead, she informed him of some Mummy's instruction against serving breakfast in her absence. He ignored her and went to pick the cat which had been disturbed by his energetic presence. I wished the maid would deliver Asafa's note immediately. The man went into the kitchen, followed by the maid and the cat.

But they had been there hardly five minutes during which the man had bellowed and boasted with astounding belligerence,

when a great uproar finally erupted and the maid soon came running into the parlour clutching a kitchen knife dripping with blood. She stormed out the parlour and drummed her feet down the winding staircase. She was followed by the man, his face bloodied and bleeding, his white shirt patched red with the blood that had also blinded him, making him barge into chair, stools, slip over the pressing board and crash against the entrance door which the maid had pulled shut on her way out. I was up and lost in the dizzying spectacle. The man was actually after the maid and as he gathered up and hurtled down the stairs my reaction was to follow him, my bag in my hand, avoiding the trail of blood he left as he went. By the time I landed the housemaid had camped in a store on the other side of the street, still clutching the long knife and encircled by a tiny crowd of curious women and youngsters. They all looked alarmed in the direction of the house. The street was busy but the bleeding man ran into the traffic and collided with a pregnant woman crossing from the other side. Before he could get to the circle of women his situation and presence in the street had attracted some fellows sitting at a store-front near the one the girl entered. They ran up to him. I was unable to quickly cross the road; I was too perplexed by the incident to regain my composure. Meanwhile, an argument had developed amongst them and a crowd had gathered. The problem had led to a minor hold-up that enabled me to scale the street with little effort. About six or so men were holding the man who insisted on getting at the girl. They demanded instead an explanation. He had just started narrating his story when one short man ran up the street and confronted and rebuked the bleeding man (whom he called 'Timi') with a tone of familiarity. He asked if the girl had done it again. He

was more tempestuous than 'Timi and in a couple of minutes had treated the crowd to a breathtaking narration of the maid's hatred of his friend. The girl, he revealed, was hired by 'Timi's parents as housemaid and had accused him, certainly without base, of sexual harassment. This had in the past caused the aged parents to send her away, but on such occasions she had made deputations to plead to the family on her behalf. Before his story was over, a few voices had begun to rise from the crowd shielding the maid. And even among those holding 'Timi down and tending his wounds, some sort of bewildered concern was manifest. The man who was speaking then stormed the store, broke through the protective fortress of women and youngsters and dragged the girl out. He kicked her into the gutter. The women raised a protest and one of them trying to restrain him was hurled along into the gutter green and rancid with algae and neglected dirt of the past months. Amid the chaos, someone alleged that both men had set up the girl because she was not of their tribe. Something happened just as he made that statement. It was an emphatic chorus of Yes!! from the kitchen from where the girl had been dragged out. But she ran back in and returned with a stick with which she hit the man. Before long a fight had begun; the men holding 'Timi soon turned his assailants, kicking him and his more tempestuous friend into the dust. Two against a multitude. I ran up and down the street and cried for help. More people surged from various corners and turned the street populated by spare parts sellers into a big square of fights and reprisals. The dealers in vehicle parts were quickly shutting up their stores. I thought of running back into the house but on the alley that led in, a fence of cars had sprouted, their owners eager to join or stop the street-fight. Men, women, children threw sticks and exchanged stones. Cans, bottles and other civil weapons flew in the air like a swarm of fireflies. Two young boys, each bearing a rod, ran to the car parked by 'Timi's friend and dealt clubs at its windscreens and body works. In the blind fury of the chaos, vehicles trapped on the emergent jam made sudden detours and collided with other equally

eager to escape the indiscriminate arson that could accompany such an incident. A different fight broke out between a commercial motorist and a private driver who had dented the rear bumper and broken a trafficator of the commercial bus. In retaliation the conductor torched the offending car. The shut stores were being broken into. I saw 'Timi in the thick of the imbroglio, his soiled shirt gone, cracking a decrepit bench on the back of a fairly old man. His friend was chasing a youngster furiously down the street and as the latter tried to scale a garbage heap, he stepped on a rotten substance and slipped, and his pursuer fell on him. He beat him down into the refuse, even as fresh adversaries emerged from the cloud of smoke billowing from the burning car. They fell on him too, necklacing him with a disused tyre. He fought off the assault. Two men joined his struggle but were too late to prevent the tyre on his neck being torched. He ran off with that necklace of flames and collapsed in a huge furnace at the edge of the road. The fight went on for much longer than I could witness. I saw many people running off, I ran away too, in a blind direction, because though I had no idea why else they were running, I thought it unwise to stay.

Later in the evening when some semblance of sanity had returned to the street and anti-riot policemen had taken to patrolling the entire neighbourhood, unable to find my way elsewhere, I returned. I thought I should make it easy for Asafa and Tonia to find me. No word with properties of the chaotic could be too weighty to describe the street that I encountered that evening. Four vehicles had been burnt to immobility at different spots. The store where the maid had hidden had been pulled down and some others with it, and I was amazed that no fire happened there despite a gas-cooker stationed at one corner. The street was littered with broken bottles, burnt tyres, assorted shoes, chairs broken into woods and burnt without thoroughness, in places kiosks with provisions in them had been pulled down, demolished and torched; lofty glass-windows of storey buildings stood vacant and distant like the sockets of gorged eyes; electric cables hung down from low-

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he summoned up riverine gods and invoked family totems, crying and slapping her hips, grabbing her symbols of maternity and ungrabbing them. Her face glistened with tears in the faint glow of the inferno. She prayed in her melodious language for the safe return of the couple.

voltage poles; gutters were filled with unclaimed cupboards and stew-pots flung through distant windows. The air of the neighbourhood was rank with the smell of burnt tyres, and a faint, sickly odour that remained implacable hung above. The few houses around had their front doors shut and people peeped from their windows while at balconies of towering buildings crowds gathered to witness policemen clearing burnt cadavers scattered about garbage dumps, and loaded them into the motor-hearse.

But there was still in the bearing of people I encountered the smouldering embers of the epic battle. Since that was my first day in that area, I didn't know enough of it to navigate home. In front of 'Timi's house stood a group of policemen robed helmets, basket shields and canisters of tear-gas. People were prevented from gathering about the streets. An unmtstakable mood of mourning hung over the house but I was more interested in how I got home before dusk fell completely. Soon the policemen became agitated and restive, and word spread quickly that riots had erupted in places like Itire, Ijesha-Road, Babaloosa, Central Mushin and such far locations as Lawson, Orile, Amukoko, Ijora, the industrial quarters of Iganmu and Iponri, the caravan campsites of Marina Beach where vehicles of merchants from the north stopped to fuel and rest; that 'ethnic butchering' (as the newspapers were to report the following morning) had taken over the army barracks on Malu Road and Western Avenue, the resilient slums of Olateju whence embers stoked by tribal lords sprawled through Kayode Street to Fadeyi on Ikorodu in the north-east, latching on to inflammable rubbish along the way; and that even in the elitist outposts of Ilupeju and Maryland Estate, friends across the confluence had broken natural pacts and

buried the machetes of their accords in mutual heads. The latest information available on the lips of people running up and down added that there were now three sides to the conflict, one fighting another for reasons that were not included in the elongated stories.

In the confusion of this fresh alarm families, I heard, piled old belongings in trucks and carts and late as it seemed to many, took to deserting the city. Long buses droned down the streets carrying the instant passengers and were being stopped by policemen torn between preventing the exodus and constituting patrol teams in the fresh trouble-spots. Asafa chose that moment to arrive. He was alone and without his car. I saw him hurrying toward the house, and I ran up to him. We were prevented from entering the house and as he tried to talk to one of the policemen, he handed two diaries to me. The policemen refused all his entreaty, and even threatened him with arrest if he persisted in his pleas. He merely wanted to see 'Timi's father, he said, to know the situation in the family. Still the policeman declined. He took me by the arm and we hurried down the street. We walked for about thirty minutes before we got to where he parked the car. I had expected to see Tonia waiting for us but there was no one inside the car. Asafa assured me, when I inquired after her, that she was at home. We didn't drive right home, we headed for Mile Two in the Far West and he announced that we would be going to Ojo Military Contonment. For what purpose, he never told me. But we had to make a detour at a bus stop along the way, because the highway had been elevated to a frenzy. We drove round Okota, Ikotun and Idimu, settlements in central north west Lagos, for the next couple of hours. Everywhere, disquietude had taken over the land and looting followed arson preceeded by physical attacks on the

owners of shops and wares. At house fronts in almost every street we turned, women and children rolled their belongings into huge heaps, underscoring the air of discontent in town. Asafa drove through all the pandemonium with the same resoluteness he had put on when he had come to rouse me that morning.

When we got home we encountered a strange peace. It was as though Papa Ajao, our part of Mushin was another world. We found Tonia's grandmother, who had arrived the previous week breathless at one corner of the sitting-room. She told us Tonia had gone out to trace us through the commotion. Asafa could wait to hear no more. He seemed instantly to have lost the calm resoluteness that had possessed him all day and in seconds was honking down the darkened peaceful street. The grandmother tried to warn him but he was out of earshot. While I watched the state governor making impassioned appeals in intermittent broadcast, she continued to bother me with questions about the situation in town, and I managed to narrate the story to her. In the course of our conversation, I discovered that she was hard of hearing and had developed the habit of bending forward to pick the words. Asafa did not return before midnight and by now, I was so tired that I dozed off without dinner. I didn't know what time an eerie noise suddenly shattered the quiet of our world. The grandmother pulled me off the settee and cried in her barely intelligible Yoruba, that war had come. We both ran to the balcony to behold the riotous street lit with the amber of burning cars and houses. She summoned up riverine gods and invoked family totems, crying and slapping her hips, grabbing her symbols of maternity and ungrabbing them. Her face glistened with tears in the faint glow of the inferno. She prayed in her melodious language for the safe return of the couple. When she could no longer bear the pain of hope in the unhalloved hour of hostility, she held me by the hand and we went into the street. We were not too far from the housefront when Asafa dashed out his car and had his jaw caught in the waiting boot of a man standing by the side of the road. A female voice, certainly Tonia's, was shouting from the car warning the protest-

ers who had barricaded the road with bonfires, that they were not strangers. Asafa rushed up from the spot he'd been kicked and fell in a drainage without water. I ran to him to help him up, but was shoved back by the man who had kicked him. The grandmother, having the recognised them walked into the road and at that moment Tonia put the car in reverse gear and bumped her several yards down the street. She lay lifeless about two feet from one of the bonfires. I raised a sudden cry that startled the night. Those who had witnessed the accident promptly gave the car a chase, while others descended on Asafa who had managed to get up. I clung to him and as he looked at me, he tried to smile through his bleeding mouth. But he had little time for me, as each of his pursuers seemed gifted with the power of ten buffaloes. I could not keep up with the speed. They were running in one direction while Tonia had been trapped in the car in the other. I then ran up to the host of assailants and through the open front door. I scrambled in, pleading with those who had invaded the car that Tonia was not a murderer. She handed me a bag (it was my bag I'd left in the car earlier) as the men tried to drag her down. They were beating her and I was still in the car when one youngster came running down with a can. I ran out, clutching my bag. The street and its adjuncts had turned totally chaotic, and no movement or action was anymore discernible when the clangour of police siren threw the rioters into last-ditch safety scramble. Blindness took over the night and I ended up, after running and falling through the nooks and crevices I found totally strange, on the steel-cold floor of a black maria.

I was herded in with men and women who stank of burning and stale sweat. The van was crowded that when we were ordered out at the police station, two people had suffocated. It was still night or early morning, dark and omen-ridden, the prevalent atmosphere in the city barely concealed in the artificial discipline of the station. Policemen patrolled everywhere; the adjoining streets, the hidden thoroughfares, some stood at attention within the courtyard, clutching

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people had started looking for relatives and friends of their enemies to attack, looting shops during the night and hiding in the dark to deal club-blows at unsuspecting victims. In more than two instances, governors actually supervised the attacks. One declared a state of emergency and accused the government at the centre of complicity.

guns, clutching clubs and truncheons, looking livid and closely at crowded trouble-makers, searching with flashlights for others whom we all knew were out in the street. Mosquitoes teeming with enthusiasm brought a disquieting life into our midst. After a long period of waiting in the dark, in the cold, during which I dozed and drove mosquitoes away, refusing to cry as most, even the elderly amongst us did, policemen came to lead us into a large room floortiled with soot. Here we stayed till morning.

Suspects driven to police station must supply certain information of which next of kind was one. The amiable policeman who took my details was surprised the following morning when to the question who my next of kin was, I replied 'Nobody'. He smiled, but the others loitering about the office laughed and I remembered one of them saying, 'Na to rot here be dat'. But in actuality I had no idea what became of Asafa or Tonia. The grandmother I saw clearly was hit by the car and was at least conscious as she lay sprawling by the bonfire. I couldn't bear to look at the car as a can overflowing with petrol passed hands. All I could remember as the policeman's comment resulted in deep-throated laugh was Asafa's sense of purpose the previous day, his once-in-a-lifetime resoluteness as if he had finally espied an object for which he had spent years searching for. The police officers insisted, pointing out it was just impossible that nobody 'owned' me. A crowd of other kinds had gathered outside to buy reprieve for their wards and relatives. The cool-headed officer explained their presence and added that in truth, in the event of not registering a kin, there would be no one for police authorities to contact. Therefore I might be left forever in the station, from where I might be transferred to a jail-house. It was then I told him that

I had only a brother whose fate I was not sure of. I referred to the documents in my bag, now with the police. I never expected any sympathy, but neither did I expect the derision; so I was stung when the same policeman who had predicted I would rot in the station said; 'So you wan revenge im death and kill other people'. I protested, saying I was not sure Asafa was dead. That day, the divisional police officer instructed that I be treated as a special case and it was for this reason that I was not lumped with the others in police cells.

The day's newspapers bought by the policemen reported nothing else, and brought in entirely new dimension by reporting reprisals in other part of the country. People had started looking for relatives and friends of their enemies to attack, looting shops during the night and hiding in the dark to deal club-blows at unsuspecting victims. In more than two instances, governors actually supervised the attacks. One declared a state of emergency and accused the government at the centre of complicity. Another, presiding over a state where he was "ethnically an alien" tried to affect the air of equanimity, making broadcasts that were, like those of the governor of Lagos, meant to control the temper of his citizens. But it was said of him that members of his cabinet held a secret meeting later in the evening and issued a statement that ran contrary to the impression he was trying to create. According to the report read aloud by a policeman, the cabinet members gave "all outsiders without exception" up to seventy-two hours to pack their things and leave the state. Since the period had not elapsed, no serious incident was reported by the papers. But that was only a matter of days. Another report spoke of how religious leader attacked fellow religious leaders of rival tribes and (according to reports in the papers)

churches, mosques and community halls where ethnic unions met were touched or burgled. But none gave the correct account of the trouble as it happened in 'Timi's house the day before.

Policemen and suspects who had found some way round their misfortunes crowded over the papers in groups. Earlier that morning, fighting off the stench of sweat and hatred that rose from the bodies sleeping tight against one another in that dark room, I had listened to two men, ostensibly chance friends, swearing their innocence and condemning the partiality of police arrests. One said that thoughts about his tribal origins hardly crossed his mind in a whole year, whereas he daily enjoyed dinning-out anywhere the food wakened his palates; he slept only with pretty women without thinking of colour or tribe. With women his only bias was for sexual appeal; for a wife, he said he would consider the mind in addition. But he married, by his

own admission, a woman from his tribe. He blamed his family for meddlesomeness. His friend recalled witnessing two policemen exchange first words, later blows early the previous evening, trying to fulfil their own part of the ethic bargain. They were dismissed on the spot. I realised, remembering that conversation, that those who crowded over papers had had the way found for them. One by one that day and the days that followed, men and women came into the office after loitering around the police station seeking to bail their relatives. Often they succeeded, although the fact that the crisis continued would soon force the authorities to stop granting bails. But those who bought their relatives' freedom went away hugging them passionately, comforting us still waiting or without illusions, that whenever we left confinement, a forgiving city would be waiting to welcome us.

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