

*Victor Ehikhamenor*

## The General's Bulldozers

We were expectant. Any moment the bulldozer would come to us; the order had been given by His Excellency. We, the inhabitants of Ira, a slum in the south end of Lagos, would be thrown in the air like rice chaffs in a whirlwind. If lucky, we would land in another place and time to tell our tales of escape. Otherwise, we'd be part of the dug-up earth that would form the foundation of the General's new mansions. Here human bones are stronger than cement. Many had gone like this before; we would not be making any new history.

There was nothing else to do other than wait for the soldiers with earth-moving equipment and AK-47s to remove us from our face-me-I-face-you shanties. We all waited in a trance. Our world had become one drunken masquerade on stilts, swaying whenever the wind blew. Before the soldier-driven bulldozers arrived, some of us, the slum dwellers of Ira, passed our remaining days as if the General had changed his command.

Across from a distant smoke-filled sky, the evening's orange sun peered through my window. The six o'clock ball of fire would soon implode into darkness, and we would all be groping for candles and lanterns. We had electricity that never worked. The weaverbird-voices of my neighbors chattered incessantly. Everybody in my compound was outside, taking in the evening breeze before retiring to a sweltering night. The day was not yet over for us; we were all worried, but went about our business. I wanted to catch a glimpse of Lola. Lola whose beauty had given me the reason to linger in Ira, knowing fully well the neighborhood would soon turn to dust.

I lit a joint and leaned over the greasy lintel of my window to observe familiar kids sculpting abstract objects in the dusty playground. In this little backend slum called Ira, along Badagry Expressway, toward the Cameroon border where most illegal drugs entered the country, we were

orphans of squandered promises. Jimoh, a boy with a watermelon head and limping gait, poured sand on Sefirat's newly plaited hair. The boy enjoyed the sand bath he was giving the beautiful little girl. Jimoh, our landlady's adopted son from the village, had a knack for not leaving anything beautiful untainted. Once he set out on an evil mission, only accomplishment stopped him. Even when we were all on tenterhooks about our homes being bulldozed, he did not care. This Sunday evening I was too tired and perturbed with thoughts of sleeping with Lola before the bulldozer came to waste my breath on stopping him. Hopefully, Sefirat's mom, Ginger, would stumble on him, and hell would break loose and riots would start even before the bulldozers arrived. Ginger was a prostitute and peaceful co-existence was a boring pastime to her. We had seen her many times catch fire without matches or petrol. She was the only woman my landlady did not fuck around with. If caught, when Ginger returned from her roadside prostitution, Jimoh's hideous loading of sand into Sefirat's cornrows would start a civil war. That was where she got her toughness from, at the Salamander Hotel, fighting men who refused to pay the negotiated amount for her body.

Aside from other neighborhood children waiting for darkness to come, there was a sycamore tree. This tree would also go; it would not resist the bulldozer. This ancient tree that had a river flowing underneath it would be forgotten. But right now the sycamore's roots rose above the earth, stretching out over our compound and beyond. Under the coolness of this primordial tree was Rastaman, nonchalantly smoking a joint. He was the neighborhood musician who also sold marijuana to make ends meet. We all bought our joints from him, most of the time on credit. His long dreads snaked out from under a big green-yellow-red knitted hat. Rastaman rested his head on one of the swollen roots of the tree, his legs splayed out as if surrendering to it. This evening he became one with the tree.

Rastaman was the lead singer in a raggedy local reggae band, which boasted of Perry Nkomo (an ex-break dance champion), Ganjaman, Shagasha, Popo and some other street urchins. Most members of Rastaman's reggae band, Jah Reign, smoked marijuana and mimicked

Peter Tosh, Bob Marley or Jimmy Cliff whenever they performed for expatriates at Victoria Island. They were young men like me, scratching a living from anything. Rastaman was my friend; sometimes he would come to me with lyrics and ask for my opinion. Though I was not a musician, I could tell if he was off key. When he was not too stoned, we would sort things out. The expatriates of Lagos, working for companies like British Council or Shell Petroleum, were always looking for the exotic in us, which was why Rastaman sometimes twisted his tongue in an attempt to speak patois or Creole. Listening to his fake Jamaican accent was like listening to a madman's chant.

"Rastaman, how are you doing?" I greeted him, spitting out a particle of match stick I was chewing.

He rolled his deep brown eyes towards me, stuck his almost finished marijuana joint back between his burnt lips and a cloud of smoke poured from every pore of his body.

"*Ire!* Whata guan man? Do you know when dem army boys are coming?" Rastaman was already dazed and I was just starting my smoke.

Delicately he held the hemp that had thinned beyond the usual crackling of seeds to an iota of brown paper in his blackened fingernails. All he had left was the tiny bit he'd named *clarole*.

"Who knows, all we can do is to live our lives and be prepared," I said, as I exhaled smoke into the evening.

Rastaman flung the burnt-out piece of marijuana toward sticks of half-burnt incense.

"Jah be praised for his mercy. You and I must hope for a-better day *man*. I see it a-coming man," he said as he adjusted his head on a swollen root.

The pungent of marijuana smoke mixed with the piquant smell of burning incense invaded the air, giving it the smell of a clairvoyant's parlor.

"There is no better day coming anywhere. Where did you see the better day? Show me. Show me. No better day for a poor man in this country, you hear me. Stop. Stop I say," Old Samson's voice cut into the evening, "I hear the bulldozers are already near, they are hiding in Festac Town. I hear the tanks are coming too. They are near, they are shooting—take cover, take cover!"

Old Samson, a survivor of many wars, now losing the battle of life, hobbled around. He lived in one of the uncompleted buildings right beside the sycamore tree. You could see what he was doing inside his house if you peered hard enough. The only cover he had on his door was a tattered curtain, which was full of grease and oily stains. Back in the day, I used to have meaningful discussions with him, mostly about the civil war, but his facts were getting jumbled these days. In walking, Old Samson shuffled his left leg, housed in prosthesis. Ever since he got wind of the impending destruction of our neighborhood by the military government, he'd been delirious.

“Good evening O’ soldier!” I greeted him by his nickname.

He ignored me, his eyes darting here and there looking for a half smoked cigarette or marijuana. He was a scavenger of our slum’s garbage. Unfortunately, there was nothing worth eating in any of the neighborhood’s garbage dumps. Old Samson walked threateningly towards Rastaman’s resting place. He stopped and observed a distant horizon, his torn shirt fluttering in the evening wind. He was not a violent man, just really agitated at the thought of losing his uncompleted building. The government had stopped paying his pension a long time ago, and the building was all he had.

Rastaman sat up, retrieved a crumpled packet of Benson & Hedges cigarettes from his trousers and shook one out for him. Old Samson’s face brightened with joy, he forgot his sorrows for a minute. He gave a mock salute to Rastaman and released a raucous laugh. Rastaman cupped the flame of the match for the cigarette, building a hedge against the wind with his left palm. The brown filter of the cigarette dangled in Old Samson’s lips as he inhaled deeply, leaving depressed dimples on both sides of his unshaven chin. A cloud of smoke from his flared nostrils added another smell to the Ira air. He danced round and round the base of the large tree, picked up a piece of paper bag, examined it and threw it up like a kite.

“Let the bulldozer come, Samson will teach them a lesson they will never forget. I will teach them I still have a soldier’s blood in my body, I am ready now,” he laughed maniacally and disappeared behind the tree.

“See you later *maan*,” Rastaman said to him.

I watched as the shadows of everything disappeared into a secret world and darkness gradually took over the color of the evening. We were thrown into an expected gloom, except for Old Samson's cigarette that glowed as he entered his house. I coaxed fire out of my dying joint and closed my window. I did not see Lola come out to the compound. As I fumbled around for matches to light the lantern I heard her vibrant voice, "Useless people, na ogun go kill all of una for that NEPA office." Lola was cursing out the National Electric Power Authority for not providing electricity. This pretty, yet rebellious university student once told me she would tie herself to one of the bulldozers in protest. Since that day, I felt connected to her more than before. When I was an undergraduate I had harbored such a rebellious spirit, thinking I could change the minds of dictators by taking part in numerous demonstrations, painting and writing signs on placards from morning till night. Many of my friends were shot in cold blood in open daylight; their young bodies dragged into waiting Black Maria military vans and taken to unidentifiable mass graves. Yet, not even one single thing changed in the country. I only hoped Lola would graduate alive. She had no business living in Ira; Lola was from a well-known wealthy family from Abeokuta. Ira was for the poor and downtrodden.

On the numerous occasions when we had walked to the Volks Bus Stop together, all Lola talked about was revolution this, revolution that. At a point in her third year, along with some students, she took an empty coffin to government house at Dodan Barracks and set it on fire. Before guard soldiers could stop them, they had made their point. Most nights I would hear her reciting politically inciting poetry, dishing it out to past and present governments, "*The mongoose hunt for her snake—the snake pray for her hen—feeble minds become pallbearer for heroes—wisdom has become the rags of the homeless—pain has tears—rain has eyes.*" But I preferred her lighter and more sensuous poems, they drove me bananas. Strands of discussions we've had were woven into such poems. Since I was the only person she spoke with in the compound, because we always talked about my days at the university, I assumed the poems were meant for me. Lola said Rastaman was not a true freedom fighter, just "a hungry

imitator of an unknown movement,” and Rastaman thought we were already “fucking,” so, “let Jah be praised.”

Her love poems set me on fire. One night after I smoked a long joint with Rastaman, I imagined Lola and me together: The softness of her bed welcomed me. My hands were all over her nakedness, like cow tongue on a newborn calf. We were bathing in the River Niger and she filled the entire river with a lavender smell. Petals of roses like a waterfall dropped from the sky forming a bed of floating redness. From Zanzibar to Zambezi we swam in eternity. Her moaning dragged the moon to the window and our sweat and breath became a symbiotic existence. That night I woke with soaked pajamas. When I asked her about the poem the next day, she laughed coyly and said, “Nigeria is my lover, my dying muse.” I felt deflated, but smiled and nodded.

I thought about the bulldozers and wondered if Lola would actually commit suicide by tying herself to the big destructive machines. What would I do when the day eventually arrived? Would I be man enough to protest, knowing that the top brass of General Ibrahim Babangida’s regime wanted to drive us away so they could steal the land and build mansions? Ira was only a few kilometers from the most beautiful beach in Africa. Would I ever be able to tell Lola that she was enveloping me into a world that was more uncertain than that of Ira? Or does she already know? Lola. Lola. If I decided to form a human fence with her and the soldiers killed both of us, who would come to look for our mashed bodies? Would BBC or CNN report the incident to the entire world? What were our bodies—one jobless graduate and one beautiful, rebellious student—worth to the world? I discarded the grisly thoughts and lit my lantern. *“Flap your wings in my night o blind bat—embrace the hunting season and pray for your innocent prey.”*

I dragged the jute bag of used clothes to my bed and started emptying the contents. The used clothes I sold to make a living needed sorting and repackaging. As I flung rumpled clothes to the side of the bed, I was overcome with anger and frustration. Where was the damn electricity? I asked nobody in particular. As I stewed in my anger, the kerosene in my lantern

ran out and a thick soot of darkness fell upon me. Lola's room was quiet too; she had probably gone out for some fresh air after her last recital. I decided to go to Sweet Mama's bar and eat rice and drink a bottle of beer on credit. Lola came there sometimes to relax too. On my way, I lit the leftover wrap of marijuana I had in my breast pocket.

The streets were darker, except for the few hurricane lanterns of women selling cigarettes and other minor provisions. The shadow of Old Samson could be seen shuffling around inside his house. The threadbare Nigerian flag tied to a dry bamboo stake in front of his house trembled. I took the narrow but shorter path to Sweet Mama's bar. This was the seedier part of the slum, frothy with low life criminals and prostitutes, who behaved as if they had not heard about the bulldozers. A nocturnal smell swelled in the air around me. I walked past the Good Health Chemist store, our only source of healthcare in this part of the city. The owner, a pot-bellied man named Calistus was sitting on a verandah bench. He was bare-chested with a stomach the size of a pregnant bush pig. A candle sputtered behind him as he fanned himself with a newspaper. Women in labor went to him; children with jaundiced eyes ran to him, boys with broken bones also went to Mr. Calistus. He too would have to move soon, but I doubt if he would find another store. Cheap accommodation had been one of the reasons he set up his stall in Ira, despite rampant robberies in the area. Just a few weeks ago he was robbed to the very last cotton wool in the chemist. The armed robbers took all his money; all the gains from dealing fake drugs disappeared. He was found in the morning, tied to the leg of a table, whimpering. He was lucky to be alive.

I swatted away a whining mosquito as I walked past some men drinking in another dingy bar; Ira was full of small bars, meeting places for armed robbers and hoodlums before embarking on their nightly terrors. A youth ran by me in the dark, smelling of fermented fufu. I thought it was Jimoh, but he disappeared behind a building without a word, and a waft of smoke trailed behind him.

Along this road was the Salamander Hotel where young prostitutes with painted faces and long wigs called on passersby to come for a quick

one. One called out to me, “Customer come, I am young and fresh.” Another familiar voice came from the semi-dark verandah of the hotel; it was that of Ginger, my co-tenant. Not knowing it was me, she hollered “Come—come and taste the goodness of life that is between my legs, I go do you wetin your girlfriend no gree do for you.” I laughed and deeply inhaled my joint. I would rather die than enter the Salamander, which stank all the way to the roadside of cheap drink, cheap perfume and unwashed bodies. Lola is a fresh flower and you, Ginger, are a decaying mushroom, I thought.

I kicked stones and avoided deep gutters as I wandered in the dark, towards Sweet Mama’s bar, the only place where I could eat on credit. Before getting to my destination, the sky opened without warning. Lagos rains were always sudden. I made a sharp bend at a four-junction road and ran to the wide verandah of an old temple, recently converted to a church, with a large signpost THE SALVATION MINISTRY OF GOD’S CHILDREN. There were many like it in Lagos, with such redemptive and inviting names. As I watched the rain hammering the dark night, I wondered if this temple would also go. It was a landmark, built a long time ago. Rumor had it that it was built by some enslaved bricklayers and craftsmen. Ira was very close to Badagry Port, where the last batches of slaves were sorted before being taken to the New World. Waiting for the rain to subside, I started studying the double-doors that led to the inner sanctuary. The craftsmanship was obviously from another time. Whoever the artisan was took his time and put his heart and soul into crafting the temple doors. He brought to life an ordinary plank. The large-scale sculpting had numerous elongated and angular forms. The high relief and heavily textured images came to life. Each contour, corner and line bore the keenness of a careful carver’s eyes and chisel. The labyrinth of these doors had neither beginning nor end. I traced every centimeter of the images with my fingers and went as high as my height allowed. There were two discernable figures that energized the center of the doors, a man and a woman in noble regalia, riding a giant horse with a pointed horn. Birds with iron beaks surrounded the two figures. Perching on the first rider’s

shoulder was another outlandish bird. The bird's profile signified an eagle with sickle-curved talons. The motifs of carefully rendered feathers formed a sea of tiny incisions like the beakmarks of a persistent but undecided woodpecker. The bird's wings were spread to fullness, forming an umbrella above the heads of the two royal horse riders. In between the marching hooves of the horse was a large animal whose identity was not immediately known to me. The head of the animal started out as a yawn or maybe a growl but petered out to the large fin of a sea monster. The geometric compositions of the tail fin formed the base of the door like small streams.

To the far right of the doors, horses pressed their hooves on groaning men, women and children. These people struggled to stand up from the heavy weight that rested on their chests and backs but they could not. Their rib cages that protruded from damaged tendons formed a gathering of brokenness.

In another place or life this double-door would have become a prized antique, the interest of seasoned and renowned ethnographers. It would have been an object sought by museum owners, world-class art collectors, in a country that saw value in its cultural assets. An eccentric British tycoon would have paid handsomely for it, or taken it, like the bronze mask of Oba of Benin's mother in a London museum.

I stood transfixed by the temple, until I saw myself merging into the door, as if it were a mirror. I traced the new angles that had become me. My face laughed at me jeeringly as if it was ashamed of its existence in my bony body. The door revealed me as a mask, broken but held together by sinews of suffering. My elongated head danced in my eyes. In my view an eagle adjusted its talons and flapped its large wings a couple of times, awakening the horses. As if crazed, the horses started kicking me with their hooves of iron. An old voice owl hooted and animals with human faces growled hungrily. The lion with fish tail swam back and forth impatiently, and numerous other polychromatic motifs started singing inside my head.

I did not know how long I was transfixed before thunder broke the sky with sharp, jagged lightening. I ran inside the temple as wind started

hurling rain water at me. The interior was illuminated by so many gas lights. On a Thursday evening, I was surprised to see men and women with flowing gowns dancing wildly and praying against the impending bulldozers. The tumultuous rain outside was silent inside the temple. Talking drums and maracas and gongs and long shiny trumpets formed a vibrating chorus of intoxicating music, the worshippers gyrated and became a whirlwind of dust and granulated pebbles. To think that praying would stop the maniacal military from destroying Ira made me laugh. Lola said that prayer had truly replaced protest in Nigeria. We were going to the bus stop one day when we saw a group of Aladura church members ringing a bell along Ira's main road and Lola shook her head and asked, "If the Mau-Mau of Kenya were praying instead of waging jungle warfare, do you think the British would have given them independence?"

Like a cobra in mid strike, I saw the leader of the temple position his fin-like feet on the dusty uncarpeted floor and start to rise. His eyes lost their black pupils and irises, giving way to egg-white sclera. A convulsion started as the congregation wove titillating songs of how David defeated Goliath in the bible. The Ira people were David and the military government was the frightening Goliath. The drummers, made up of three robust boys in their early youth, gave their large drums the beating of their lives with sticks that looked like human femurs and hip bones. Women fell into a trance, weaving back and forth, almost naked from shouting and twirling.

While this riotous dance took over the entire building, my stomach rumbled with hunger. A pool of burning incense smelled strong. The more I inhaled, the more it took on the odor of viaticum, as if I was attending a requiem mass for a departed soul.

The worshippers levitated beyond the deck that formed the roof of the temple. I fixed my gaze on their ascendance and watched as their eyes emitted fire in blue and yellow flames. One more look and three women were out of my site, forming a cloud towards the moon that was struggling to unclasp itself from a deep dark cloud. The other worshippers were sweating and crying as if unaware of what was going on. They rolled on the dusty bare floor screaming, "We bind the bulldozers, we bind the

soldiers, whatever is bound on earth is bound in heaven.” Some were praying for the temple to be spared. When the drumming was ebbing, I gently eased myself out. The rain had subsided to a drizzle and I changed my mind about going to Sweet Mama’s bar.

Stars, cicadas, crickets and croaking frogs led me back to my dark room.

I changed to a dry pair of pajamas and I pried open the battery cage of my small Sony transistor radio and put some dry cell batteries in it. Since no radio station in the country would carry any news about the impending destruction of Ira, I searched for BBC Africa, hoping to catch some news. The radio stations in the country had long been censored. Media houses that published or broadcast unfavorable news about the junta were raided, demolished. On a daily basis, journalists disappeared without a trace.

BBC was not too clear, there was too much static, either because of the rain or the batteries were too weak to make the radio work. Since I couldn’t get to Sweet Mama’s bar or have a battery to listen to the radio, I became conscious of my hunger again. I flung the dumb radio on the floor and walked across the room to get some Cabin biscuits from my cupboard. I took three pieces and closed the box back to prevent roaches from invading it. I bit into the dry biscuit and crumbs fell on the bare floor for ants and roaches that would come later to feast.

Lola was back and I heard her reciting line after line, as if committing it to memory—*“But the clenched fist of yesterday has withered with leprosy of betrayal—Now we box the shadow of a hollow ghost / with arms that refused to swing,”* she repeated over and over again, moving the words around as she continued.

Coming to my room and listening to Lola made me dwell on the end of our time here and I reflected on the poor people praying at the temple. I thought it funny that the government never found bulldozers to fix the bad roads, yet there were many available to destroy Ira. My mind started swinging all over the place. I thought of what to take if I were to evacuate in a hurry and realized I had nothing of importance worth taking, except

Lola, who I didn't believe would follow me anywhere. She had a home in a rich neighborhood to go to, if she decided against her revolutionary plans. I came to Lagos because I did not want to return to the poverty of my village, to look for a better life in this mad city, but chaos had its open arms waiting for me. I drank a mouthful of water and lay down on my springy bed. Lola had gone silent, like the rest of the neighborhood, and I fell asleep.

Staff sergeant Samson was standing erect. His eyes, like a possessed man, fixated on his fluttering flag. The green-white-green was the tattered rag of a national shame, at the mercy of rain and sun. It had been ten years since Old Samson said he moved to Ira, retired forcefully from the army. An unknown mission bullet had cut down his right leg and cut short his military career. The bitterness he felt in his mouth every morning while saluting this old flag could be seen in his ashen face. Bitterness towards his commandant who under-manned his post where his leg was shot by coup plotters. Bitterness towards the ineffective military orthopedic doctor who could have saved his leg and career, but decided on amputation instead. Bitterness towards his current Ira neighbors who thought him mad and were not ready to fight the bulldozers with him. Bitterness towards the false leg that had never quite fit his leftover stump. And bitterness towards the phantom itches of the absent leg, the daily petulance that was incurable and driving him insane.

As he bellowed the last stanza of the national anthem, he instinctively caressed his old service pistol. The berretta was never taken from him and he went everywhere with it; an administrative mistake, like many others that had made him disappointed at the entire country he once lived and hoped to die for.

Staff sergeant Samson couldn't remember the last time he was truly happy. The joy of his first daughter's birth was cancelled out by the loss of his leg. The joy of his second daughter's birth was cancelled out by the death of his beloved wife. Every other joy of life was cancelled out by the near immobility and eternal prison in which his painful leg had abandoned him.

Life to him was one dark bottle of ink. The memory of the letter bomb he delivered to a well-known news magazine editor haunted him. That assignment brought him bad luck, instead of the promotion he had hoped for or was promised by his commandant. He was used and spewed out.

The sharp morning sun penetrated his pupils, yet he did not squint. The orderly that served him morning tea while in the service walked past him. His youthful and loving wife swam past him. A column of junior officers marched past him like black ants. He stood alone in a parched and arid parade field. Standing at stiff attention he caressed the head of his gun on the holster that rested on the hip of his shorter leg, the dead leg. He shifted his good left leg uncomfortably, the one that carried the burden of his sixty year old crumbling body. A body that was once robust from drinking good beer and fresh fish pepper soup at the Officer's Bar. A bar where young girls' puberty and buttocks made commissioned officers go stiff in their groins. A bar that congregated every Friday night to boast about how many diamonds each had from the war loot and how much money the new government had embezzled sending them to foreign wars. Poor people and stupid civilians chattering on their way to nowhere woke him from his lurid reverie.

"Good morning sir," a woman greeted him and black butterflies escaped from her mouth. He ignored her.

He positioned the dark, hollow end muzzle of cold metal on his pulsating temple and ignored his throbbing kneecap, where wood met flesh. Where the living met the dead.

The single shot rang through the entire Ira neighborhood. Birds from the sycamore tree fluttered in fright and flight. A dog began to bark in the distance and the morning sun glided towards noon. Staff sergeant Samson fell on the ground; the smoking pistol flew out of his hand. Blood from his temple started flowing, forming a red river on the black Ira sand. I started screaming. After I examined Old Samson's wound, I looked everywhere and the usually boisterous Ira was empty. The vicinity was void like the day before Creation. The birds and bats of the sycamore tree were gone. Jimoh, Ginger, Rastaman and landlady were all gone. Nobody was around, espe-

cially Lola. It seemed like the bulldozers had already come and leveled everything, both living and dead. “I need some help!” I screamed. Old Samson rolled his eyes and started laughing as a ghoulish image started leaving his body. I grabbed the ghost and wrestled him down, forcing it back into Old Samson’s limp body. If I’d let the ghost escape, Old Samson would be dead. The ghost raised his head again and I angrily slammed him back into the old man’s chest. As I looked closely at his face, he became one of the large roots of the sycamore tree. I kept hollering and it was the shouting and screaming that woke me up. And I found my head on Lola’s lap.

“Are you having a bad dream? I heard your screams tossing around the whole place and I came in. Luckily your door was unlocked,” she explained her presence in my room.

I was flushed with embarrassment. I did not know what to say. I couldn’t tell her about the strange dream I’d had of Old Samson. Lola kept rocking me, and her scent filled my nose and started to arouse me.

“I am fine. You are right; I had a really bad dream. I am okay now,” I said.

“Is it about the bulldozers?” Lola asked, waiting for me to give her details.

“No, far from it—it is not that at all.”

“By the way, what exactly do you plan to do about the bulldozers—are you just going to fold your hands like Rastaman and other useless boys and watch them destroy this place?”

“Lola, we can not fight an army with bare hands. I have seen many of my friends gone, and please, you need to be careful,” I said and hoped she did not think me a coward.

“But we can try. To be silent is to be a partaker in extorting us.”

She started to caress my head as if I were a baby. I did not want her to discover what was happening to my raging body. She had never been that close to me, and to find my head on her lap was something my body could not curtail. She slid my head back to the pillow and patted my shoulders as if trying to pacify me back to sleep. Electricity came back in half current. The single overhead bulb gave a faint illumination to the room. As

Lola stood up to leave, I realized she had nothing under her pink night-dress and she became prettier than I had ever realized.

“Lola wait. I will do anything, if that is what you want. But let’s not be foolish, please,” I said from where I was laying down.

“It is not about what I want, it is about the poor people of Ira who have no voice. It is about the future of this country, about jobless people like you.”

She started heating up and losing the beauty that had accompanied her to my room. We locked eyes; her look was to fight and mine was to make love.

“Sleep well Christopher, we will see tomorrow.”

“Thank you Lola,” I said breathlessly as my erection began to hurt.

She looked back and smiled, “You are welcome.” She left the room.

From that point, I prayed and hoped she would not tie herself to any bulldozer. I opened my eyes wide and froze the image of Lola’s wide and sensuous hips swaying through my door.

Early morning clanging of buckets against well walls woke me up. I opened my window to take in the morning scene of screaming children and my neighbors getting ready for their daily hustle. Old Samson’s house was silent. I looked tensely through the tattered curtains that served as his door and there was no movement. I was about to ask Rastaman if he had seen Old Samson when he staggered from behind the sycamore tree. He must have gone to scavenge at an overnight party, I thought. Ira people were used to scavenging big parties in rich neighborhoods, where alcoholic beverages and jollof rice were left over on tables. Only God knew where Old Samson went, because there were no longer rich people anywhere near us. His eyes were bulbous as he rested one hand against the tree trunk, clearly drunk, he started to urinate.

Lola came through the back door, slinging a book bag around her left shoulder. A silk scarf bunched her hair to a rising ponytail. She wore faded jeans that clung tightly to her thighs. The black T-shirt she wore had the inscription “SOUL REBEL” in crimson red. The T-shirt was too tight

and too short; her deep navel stared at me like a one-eyed owl. I wanted to tell her not to tie herself to the bulldozer, that it was not worth it. I wanted to let her know that the soldiers would not hesitate to shoot her and nothing would come out of it. I wanted to tell her that ideologies that cater to monumental changes are fluffy at a young age, but ridiculous when one gets older. But after last night, cowardice or semblance of it was not a trait I wanted to advertise too blatantly to Lola. One must be careful in catching a mouse from an earthen pot, if the pot must be saved.

My eyes met Lola's and she had a knowing smile hovering round her mouth.

"I hope you are feeling better now, *oga*?" She asked as she walked past my window.

"Yes, thank you so much for—," she cut me short with, "Don't mention," before I could finish my sentence. She never spoke to me at length whenever Rastaman was within earshot.

Rastaman came into view as well. He started singing Bob Marley's "Stand up for your Rights," when he saw me and Lola talking. I greeted Rastaman and Lola swayed away towards the bus stop on her way to campus. No matter what, I must let Lola know my mind tonight, I thought. There was no use wasting time anymore. I should write a poem and code my heart in words, a farmer must waste some corn to catch a chicken.

"Hey man—when you marry her, I will jam at the wedding for free man!" Rastaman said with loud laughter that revealed his missing front teeth.

"Thank you, Rastaman, I will remember that, but nobody is marrying anybody. You have any good joint on you?"

"All gone man—till dem boys come back from Ajegunle with some more."

"Alright, let me know."

I went back inside my room. Unsold used clothes were piled up in a corner. I thought about ironing and refolding them. But I did not feel like going to Lagos Island to sell used clothes. I suddenly felt very ashamed of hawking used clothes. It was not considered a job anyway. Lola made it

even clearer for me last night, when she lumped me with “jobless people.” I was probably a joke to her too—a university graduate who was afraid to stand up and fight for his right to exist. All the protests I participated in as a student were now stale, an old song that was no longer suitable for the current dance. A veil of shame descended upon me and my hatred for the regime and the coming bulldozers surged. I decided against the love poem I had planned to write to Lola. She did not need any love poem from me; she needed me to show love for Ira, for my country. I paced around the room thinking of the best way to confront the bulldozers when they came. I walked to my window, folded my palms and rested my chin on the window frame. Close to the well, Ginger scooped water from a tin bucket and poured it on Sefirat’s back, avoiding her crippled daughter’s plaited hair. My landlady was openly berating Jimoh for wetting his sleeping bed, while struggling with her wrapper that had almost fallen off her waist. Old Samson robotically circled his bamboo flagpole, stopping at mini-intervals to stare at the rising sun. Rastaman had fallen asleep under the sycamore tree, he rested his head on the base of his wooden guitar, burnt out incense formed a pool of ashes at his feet. A low branch of the ancient sycamore tree provided an answer for my dilemma. The tree branch was low enough for me to climb up and wait for the bulldozers.