

*I don't know about that.*

*Neither of us spoke on the boat that took us from that village. They dropped us off on land near a busy road not far from our hotel with one final warning.*

*"When you write about us in newspaper," one young man said, "tell the world this: If you people don't listen, if your oil companies don't get out, we crumble your economy. And maybe we take down Nigeria economy, too. You go see dis country fall to small small pieces like Biafra War. We at war with everyone. And like you know, we hard to kill. No one go at peace till you people listen to us." Then they sped off in a hail of splashing water.*

*Nancy showed me the photo on her computer. She hadn't only taken one. Nancy has balls, no doubt. The first was a dark photo of the boy just after Icon drew the symbols of him. Nancy truly has courage. She'd turned off the flash and held the camera discreetly at her side when she took the photo.*

*Despite the shade from the trees, the six point star on the boy's arm and the circle on his forehead glowed a soft pink. And they looked crisp and clear and solid. I noted how perfect the star and circle looked. As if it had been made on a computer and not by Icon's hand, the thickness the same all the way around.*

*Speaking of hands, the second photo, which was of some of the militants standing nearby, caught a bit of Icon, mainly his hands, and a bit of his chest. I don't think any phenomena in the photos were glitches from the camera and neither does Nancy. There was a pink vapor emanating from his hands all the way up to his elbows. And more of it wafted from his chest.*

*The third photo was a full shot of Icon standing there looking powerful and smug, and there was the pink vapor again, coming from his chest and dripping from his hands like liquid heat. I didn't see this vapor when I was there.*

*That place is a cesspool. Oil companies should get out while they can. Who knows what all the pollution and exploitation has made those people into? And who the fuck cares? Leave it alone. Fuck Africa, fuck Nigeria. Fuck history. And fuck this story. Nobody is ever going to hear it.*

## THE POPULAR MECHANIC

Anya was high up in a palm tree when her mother called. She thrust her hand into her pocket, fumbling for her portable. "Shit," she hissed, as it screeched the Nigerian national anthem a second time. Finally, she grasped and held it before her face, shielding the tiny screen from the sun's glare. "Hello? Hello? Hi, mama."

She clutched the tree with her thighs and leaned back against her leather sling.

"Can you hear me, Anya?" her mother asked.

"Yes, mama," Anya said. She frowned. She could see the brown rosary in her mother's hands. Something was wrong.

"Are you in a tree?" her mother asked, looking past Anya.

"I just finished my first semester in *medical* school, mama," Anya said with a small smile. "No lectures about palm wine tapping only being for men. It relaxes me." She paused. "Mama, what's wrong?"

"I don't want to alarm you. Especially if you're in a tree."

"Mama, just tell me."

"Come home immediately . . . Your father . . ."

Anya's heart jumped in her chest. "Is he okay?"

"I don't know," her mother said, now looking openly distraught. When Anya had returned from school a week ago, she was surprised at how tired her mother looked. Even now Anya could see the bags under her mother's eyes.

"What do you mean?" she asked, grasping her sling.

"He isn't here! I don't know where he went! He's in one of his moods . . . he threw a wrench at me. He was yelling . . . in English."

"Shit," Anya hissed. It was always English when he was angry. She brought her phone closer to her face. She didn't see any bruises, at least not on her mother's face. "Mama . . ."

"I'm fine. Just come home."

"I'm on my way."

She folded her cell phone and put it in her pocket. With a shaky hand,

she pulled the wooden straw from the large bunch of shiny red palm kernels just below the tree's crown and put it in her pocket. The round gourd she'd hung just below the straw was full of milky-white palm sap. She held the gourd to her nose and closed her eyes for a moment. It smelled so very sweet and flowery. Once fermented, it would make a good batch of palm wine. Her father would be delighted.

"If I can find him," she mumbled.

Though tapping palm wine was considered a man's job, it was Anya's favorite hobby. She'd always loved climbing trees but she'd started tapping palm wine when she was fifteen. It had brought a rare smile to her father's face that first time and she'd been doing it since. Nevertheless, despite her efforts, as time progressed, she saw her father smile less and less. These days, he was in "one of his moods" quite often. Volunteering his body to the American scientists had been the biggest mistake of his life.

If there was one thing Anya had learned in the past year it was that if something was not broken, *don't try to fix it*. She and her medical school friends debated about this quite often. Anya was always the one wildly against any surgery that made a good normal life even "better." To Anya, if a medical condition wasn't life threatening, or possibly a crippling deformity, then it should be left alone to do as nature wished it. Her father's life had not been in danger, nor was he deformed. He'd just had one arm.

Anya's mother was a schoolteacher and her father was a mechanic who owned a spare parts shop. Anya hadn't grown up rich but her parents were always able to give her what she needed. Ten years ago, when she was thirteen, her father made what would turn out to be the second biggest mistake of his life.

"Did you hear about it?" her father had said as he ran into the house that day, a big grin on his face. "One of the pipelines in the forest burst! Free fuel!"

Nigeria was one of the world's top oil producers. Yet and still, as the years progressed, the Nigerian government had grown fat with wealth harvested from oil sales to America. The government, to the

great detriment of the country, ate most of the oil profits and could care less about what the process of extracting the oil did to the land and its people. On top of all this, ironically, Nigeria's people often suffered from shortages of fuel.

Anya's father's business thrived more from the sale of bicycle and *okada* parts and portables and computer repair than anything to do with cars and trucks. Fuel in Nigeria was liquid treasure. On the black market it was more valuable than clean water. Thus a burst pipeline attracted desperate pirates of all kinds.

Anya's father grabbed two buckets and was off. Anya had heard him describe what happened next many times over the years. It was usually after he'd had several cups of her palm wine. When his mouth grew loose and pensive. He usually told the story in Igbo.



I ran to the site with great speed. I was so excited, o! With those buckets of fuel do you know how many bicycle parts I could transport in that useless piece of shit truck we have?

Since I'm big and strong, I was easily able to get to the front. There was a big big pool of fuel and over a hundred people gathered around it. It was like a pink pond. The fuel was coming out of the pipe like a fountain! Men, women, children, Igbo, Ogoni, Efiks, Yorubas, Hausas, Ijaw. We all may fight a lot but we're all here together struggling, too. I even saw a white man there! We all needed fuel. Bowls, bottles, buckets, wheelbarrows, and jerricans; we used whatever we could to collect it.

The smell was overwhelming, o! Stung my nose and stuck to my clothes. We all withstood it with runny noses, turning our heads to the side and spitting, thinking we could just wash our clothes and bodies afterwards. Drink lots of water, beer, and palm wine to cleanse our systems. Fill our bellies with fu fu, soup, and plantain once our containers were full. It was madness. It's still madness. Look what that damn government has turned us into. Robot zombies scrambling for a sip of fuel!

I remember laughing as I ran home with those full buckets. On the way, I passed a market women carrying buckets of all shapes and sizes balanced on her head; she'd come to cash in on things, too. Smart smart woman. I put down my buckets and fished out some naira and bought two more from her. I balanced them on my head and went home.

You remember this part, right, Anya? When I came home with the fuel, put it down, and took the new buckets back for more? You kept asking what I was doing but I was too hurried to answer. One bucket was bright orange and one was blue. Oh, if it weren't for that lady being there to sell them to me. But how can I blame her? Eh? She was just being business savvy, no? I'd have done the same if that were my trade.

So I was on my way back. When I got there, I was about to step around a group of fat women and elbow my way in again. They were laughing and talking about selling the fuel they collected. We all were going to make a fortune. That's when it happened. I heard it first, a soft "phwwwoom!" Then all became heat and light. I don't remember a thing after that. Just waking up in that filthy sloppy slimy hospital.

★

Someone near the pool of gasoline had needed a cigarette and lit a match. Anya's father was burned on his face and his entire right arm was burned to the bone. He was *very* lucky. He'd not been that close to the gasoline pool and burst pipe and the bodies of the plump laughing women in front of him had shielded him from the giant fireball that rushed past them all like an unleashed demon. All of those women died. Anya's father was one of fifteen survivors. All together, ninety-nine people were killed in the explosion, including an infant who'd been strapped to her mother's back.

Anya's father ended up having his severely-burned arm amputated and undergoing several surgeries on his face. He'd returned to his spare parts shop months later, plagued by nightmares of pain, fire, gasoline, and burned flesh. Still, he was as strong and ambitious as ever. He

worked hard to train his left arm to do the job of both his right and left arms. And he succeeded.

Life settled down for Anya and her family until a year ago, seven years after the explosion, when the Americans came offering several million naira to ten one-armed individuals willing to try a new cybernetic arm transplant. Anya's father was the first to sign up. The newspaper advertisement said that the new arms would be like having the arm of Superman.

"Imagine how fast I'll be able to repair things with it!" he'd told Anya's mother. "Especially now that my left arm is more trained than my right used to be! Ah, ah! I'll be beyond ambidextrous!"

Her mother only laughed. She thought he was joking.

Her father didn't tell her mother when he left. She received a call from the hospital that night and Anya had gotten a call the next morning at school.

"Why is this room full of wire cobwebs?" her father asked her mother the day he'd left the hospital and stepped into the house. The cybernetic arm transplant had gone perfectly. There was no sign of rejection and it responded to the lightning-fast commands of his brain as if it were his own flesh. It could bend in all directions and was strong enough to lift a car. The arm looked like a perfect replica of his original except that the skin was of shiny gold metal instead of dark brown human flesh. It was made of a special carbonano alloy, the lightest and strongest material ever made by man. It was like a strong plastic that was not plastic.

"Why are computer chips embedded in the walls?" he asked his wife the next morning, looking forlorn. "What are you trying to do to me? I only asked for a new arm!"

The Americans came by once in a while to see how he was doing and type his words into their portables. The side effects of the transplant were well noted. Periods of delusion, paranoia, and mild incontinence were all on the list. They couldn't explain any of them. Anya was sure that none of the results from her father's experience—from the delusions to the incontinence—would reach the American newspapers or scientific journals.

Anya also wasn't surprised to learn that this same company was now seeking out one-armed American volunteers for their new cybernetic arms. Anya guessed that the scientists had since worked out enough of the kinks to safely experiment on their own citizens. Regardless of what the Americans did with their information, time, and money, she still had to somehow help her mother take care of her changed father.

When she reached the ground, she dusted off her jeans and black tank top and tucked her gourd of sap into the basket on the back of her bicycle. As she rode past the open-air market, she noticed that it was busier than usual. But people seemed to be moving in the opposite direction, some of them leaving their booths. She didn't have time to wonder about this. Thankfully, it made the going easier for her. By the time she got to her street five minutes later, she didn't even have to dodge one *okada*.

Her mother was standing on the front steps of the house.

"Is he back?" Anya asked frantically as she pedaled onto the driveway.

Her mother's face was wet and puffy from stress and tears. Anya didn't need an answer.

"Okay," Anya said, taking the gourd from her bike. "Take this, put it in the refrigerator. I'm . . . I'm going to go look for him." She gasped as she realized something.

"What?"

"Momma, there's fuel shortage," Anya said.

"So?"

"I think . . . momma, wait for me here!" she said, hopping on her bike and riding off as fast as she could. She knew where everyone was going, where the exodus ended. "Papa, what have you done, o?"

All she had to do was follow the people, who she now noticed were all carrying buckets, cups, jerri-cans, large bowls, plastic containers. After a while, she could have also followed her nose, the smell was so strong. It stung and bit at her nostrils and eyes. As she came down the small hill, she saw the situation clearly.

The raised pipelines ran behind several homes, some large and

modern, others tiny and basic, a patch of forest extending behind them all. Her father stood before the burst pipeline, beside the stream of fuel. It was fist sized in diameter and it must have been flowing for over an hour, for a large pool of fuel had formed. It was a dark pink, almost like watery blood. The area was crowded with what looked like over a hundred people, all jostling to get to the pool. Anya's father stood proud, a citizen before his people. Men, women, and a few children knelt on both sides of him, scooping fuel into containers.

"In an orderly fashion!" her father was saying in his gruff voice. He held his cybernetic arm to his mouth as he spoke and his voice carried farther than humanly possible. Anya frowned. When had he built a microphone into his arm? How'd he know how to do that?

"I repeat!" he said. "I broke open the pipeline, so we do this my way! I see you all glancing at my arm. It's right for you to fear it. You don't want it around your neck or crushing your ribs. So stay calm, cool, take your fill, and let your neighbor in."

"Papa!" Anya called as she worked her way down the hill to him. She was still too far for him to hear or see her.

"We are clever pirates! Use your brains! If anyone gets the urge for a cigarette, control yourself until you've returned home and bathed! Turn off your cell phones! Don't rub metal containers together! Be careful as you take, o!"

"Please let me pass," Anya said when she couldn't get past a group of men waiting for their turn. "That man's my father!"

One of the men turned and looked at her and then moved aside.

"Thank you," Anya said, relieved.

"You should take him home," the man said.

"Papa!" Anya said, standing before the pool of fuel. As she looked at her father standing on the other side of the pool, the fumes made her eyes water. When he noticed her, he grinned bigger than she had seen him grin in years.

"See the color?" he said. "Looks like thin weak blood! Ha! It is diesel fuel." His eyes were red . . . everyone's eyes were red. He raised his voice and addressed those scooping up the fuel. "So do not put this in your

cars! Use it for heating!" He looked at Anya. "Unfortunately, because we Nigerians are so stupid, we must send this stuff overseas for proper refining. We have all the oil but we can't make proper car fuel! We need the white people for that. Ah, ah, it's embarrassing."

"Papa, you really did this?"

"Of course!" He flexed his shiny metal arm. "Tore the pipe open like paper. Anya, there are conspiracies, stinging wires, implanted computer chips everywhere. But we should still try and do what we can."

Anya coughed, her chest hurting as she inhaled the tainted air. "It's not safe here."

"I will close it up in a few minutes," her father said. "A little sip won't hurt anyone. Especially since we're all so thirsty."

Anya shook her head, trying to clear it. She was starting to feel dizzy. She had to get her father out of here. She started to push her way past people standing on the edge of the pool but this close to the liquid treasure meant more aggressive and stubborn people trying to get their fill. The pool was about two feet deep. Thinking only about the fact that something could ignite the fumes and gasoline at any second, she decided to slosh across.

"Anya! What are you doing?" her father exclaimed, stepping in to grab and pull her across the pool.

Anya's heart was beating fast. "I won't let anything happen to you this time, Papa," she exclaimed. The fuel soaking her jeans was cool against her skin. "Please! *Biko!* Let's go!"

He looked at Anya's soaked pants. "Why did you have to go and do that?" he asked, looking irritated. "It can burn you!"

"Papa, please."

"No." But he looked at her soaked pants again and frowned. "They owe me. They owe us all! I should be using this damn arm to make them pay!"

Anya could feel her skin beginning to itch. She blinked away tears from her stinging eyes. "You don't know my side of it, Papa," she said. "You don't ask. You think it only happened to you?"

"Yes," he said, a stubborn look on his face.

"Papa, come home." Any moment, anything could ignite the very air.

"I will come when I'm finished here. Go home and wash up. This shit will eat through your skin."

"I'm not leaving you." She looked up at the clear sky. At the shining sun. All it would take was the slightest spark. She leaned against her father, pressing the side of her face to his stubbly cheek. "Papa, we need you. Mama and me. You're still human, right? Nothing concerning *oyibo* can be more important than that," she said. "Nothing."

He didn't move, his gaze falling on the pool of pink volatile liquid that Anya knew had plagued his dreams for ten years.

"It begins to evaporate as soon as it hits the air," she whispered in his ear.

He looked at Anya's wet pants. "I'm going to close it now!" he said. He raised his arm and spoke through his microphone. "Enough is enough, people! I will close this stream now before anything happens."

Anya heard curses and protests from the back of the crowd.

"Wetin dey do you?"

"Na idiot like this that keep us rolling in poverty!"

"What's doing you, old man? Eh? Do you see any Olopa police?"

One voice really caught Anya's attention. It came from her left. The young man stood with three other men, all of whom were filling very large plastic containers. "You close that and I open your head," the young man had said. An AK-47 was slung over his shoulder. Anya gasped, stepping in front of her father. Her legs shook at her own audacity as she looked at the barrel of the gun.

"You want to come and stand up to me, you idiot?" Anya's father asked, gently pushing Anya aside.

The young man took his gun in his hands and pointed it at Anya's father. "My friends and I will finish getting our fill, then you can do whatever you want, sir."

"You have no respect for your elders," Anya's father said, putting his cybernetic arm on his hip. "And on top of that, you're very very ignorant. You fire that thing and we all go die."

The man glared at Anya's father, his large nostrils flaring. He slung his gun over his shoulder, returned to his container and started using the plastic cup to fill faster. Anya couldn't help but smile, though her legs still shook and her sinuses stung. What had gotten into her father? What had gotten into her? She suddenly felt like laughing.

Her father turned to the pink fountain.

"How do you plan to close it?" Anya asked.

"Very carefully," my father said, kneeling next to the stream of fuel. He spread the index finger and thumb of his cybernetic hand and then pinched the steel. The flow immediately stopped. Anya noted the acrid metallic smell even with the fumes. Her heart skipped as she understood what her father meant by "very carefully." Her father was a true mechanic.

He held his hand to his lips. "Go home now," my father announced. "Use and sell what you have taken for good things. Keep your mouths shut and only tell stories of the Igbo Robin Hood Pirate Cowboy Man who took what was owed to him and shared the wealth." Several more people shouted curses at him but that was all.

He brought his hand down and winked at Anya. He gazed at her with clear eyes that reminded her of when he had been a mechanic with two human arms. He held out his cybernetic arm and Anya took his hand. It was warm, the metal hard, his grasp gentle.

"Oh," he said, taking his hand from hers. He picked his own three large buckets of fuel with powerful arm. "Can't forget these."

As Anya led her father away from possible death by incineration, he said, "The cobwebs have become wires, Anya. Those white people owed me three buckets of fuel."

As they walked home, her father carrying his sacred buckets and Anya wheeling her bike, her father laughed. He spoke to her in Igbo.

"You and I," her father said. "We both like to work with our hands. That's why I'm a mechanic and you want to be a surgeon and when you are on break, you climb trees and tap palm wine." He paused. "When someone does something to you and you feel that hot fury, you will react with your hands, too. Those Americans were lucky that I chose

to spill their pink blood instead of their red blood. Crush necks of steel instead of flesh. Those goddamn Americans. Like vampires, even in the Nigerian sun."

"You're lucky both of us aren't fried like plantain, Papa," Anya said. She had a terrible headache and the skin below her knees felt both hot and cold but oddly, she felt good, really good. As if a weight had been lifted from her chest. "Papa, you won't do this again, will you?"

"Why would I?" he said, looking perplexed.

They were silent for a while.

"I've got some palm wine at home," Anya said. "Want some?"

"Fresh?"

"Mhm."

"By your hands?"

"Yep."

He beamed and patted Anya on the shoulder with his only human hand. "It is a good day."