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I REMEMBER something my father told me after I went with him on a visit to one oyibo oil executive. I was thirteen, in class three; I wore my Federal Government College Warri white-and-white and had been impressed by the white man's office. He was Canadian, I think, and he had a potbelly that jiggled every time he laughed. The office had that smell of air-conditioned Big Men, like chocolate and tobacco, like cheap cigars—not cigarettes—big cheap cigars that go out on their own if you do not puff on them. When we had left, I told my father that the oyibo man's office smelled of money. Daddy had already put the 505 in reverse. He stopped the car, shifted to neutral, and looked at me.

“Ewaen, money doesn't smell like that. Money fucking smells like smelly fucking armpits, balls, and shit. You understand? Armpits, balls, and shit. The rest is all fucking show.”

My father said “fuck” a lot. He could use the f-word five times in a fifteen-word sentence—the twins and I had counted.

“You have to understand, Ewaen. You do not make money by standing around in clean suits making yanga. You must get dirty and smelly. And on Friday, when your fucking payslip is ready, you can fucking have a bath, splash on some Old Spice, and then smell good. But be under no illusions, sonny. Money doesn't smell good when it's being made, when it's really being made.”

He had a point. I had smelled crude oil, and it smelled like shit—like armpits, balls, and shit. I do not know why I remember this, here at the start of this story of youth and lost innocence. What did I learn that day? That beneath facades was always the smell of dirt? That real life was not clean, not antiseptic? My father always had funny things to say—funny, rude things.

Daddy had made his bones as an engineer with Scallop Oil in the early seventies. He was a Scallop scholar, among the first in a set of exceptional chaps the oil company thought were brilliant enough to be trained as the earliest indigenous engineers for its Niger Delta operations. Daddy had told my brother and me about his training in England. The group had been taught ballroom dancing, etiquette, and other oyibo mannerisms. The company wanted to mold these chaps into highfliers—brilliant and well-behaved young men who would come back home to take control of their country's destiny and protect the industry. Those were the actual words Daddy said the oyibo director used when he spoke to them after they graduated in '69. And it seemed the oyibos believed them too. That is, until Daddy, at the staff camp for the gas terminal in Forcados, broke a snooker stick on an oyibo man's head for saying "Black men lack the intellectual capacity to understand a gentleman's game like billiards."

I once asked Daddy if he did. That is, if he understood billiards. He did not. But that was not the point, he said. He told us in those days the only foreign engineers who agreed to work in the mosquito-infested swamps were ex-mercenaries and such. The goat who had made the comment was a semiliterate expatriate technician—the typical specimen: balding, not properly bathed, with dirt-encrusted fingernails that always scratched at an itchy crotch. Daddy, a London-trained engineer, was not going to take that nonsense from anyone. My father had gone

to university in the UK in the swinging sixties—the Summer of Love, he called it, as though the three years he spent in England had been one big sunny holiday. He was there when, in 1968, the children of Europe erupted in demonstrations and rioting against their parents, who had survived two world wars. My father was “too angry,” “too educated,” did not know when to shut *the fuck* up and bear it. By 1978 he had left Scallop, “resigned,” he said. I think he was fired.

By the early nineties, Daddy was tired of sweat and shit. He wanted to clean up his money. The process had started in '88, when he invested in a bureau de change. After handling dollars for four years, the next step was easy: set up a bank. Daddy drew up the papers and applied for a license to start a building society. Maybe the money the mortgage bank made would smell better than armpits and balls and shit.

IN MID-1992, CNN reported that sixteen-year-old Amy Fisher had just shot Mary Jo Buttafuoco. The report said something about Amy wanting the older woman dead so Joey—the bloody cradle snatcher—Buttafuoco could be free. I remember Amy was my age. Germany was unified, and British MPs had just elected a woman as speaker of the House of Commons. The Soviet Union had been over for less than a year, and the Russian-speaking part of Ukraine was threatening secession. The police officers who kicked Rodney King's head in were getting acquitted for the first time. Grunge rockers were breaking their necks to that song “Smells Like Teen Spirit”—inspired by the smell of latrines, I think—and African reggae singers were in a panic, rewriting songs, rearranging LPs, and pushing back release dates now that Mandela was *really* free. Fuel prices here increased for the first time past the one-naira mark. We had civilian governors and a military president. I was awaiting my matriculation exam results, hoping to make it

into the University of Benin to study medicine. I was learning how to drive on the busy Warri streets. I was being a good son.

By October of the same year, five months after my matriculation exams, I was seething, this feeling of being on the edge of the boil, about to explode, bored but not idle, working but not busy, feeling like a kettle with a hiccupy whistle. It was supposed to be a period to put on weight, to do nothing, to forget everything I had learned in the previous six years of secondary school. I had my university admission and was supposed to have started in early September, but universities were on strike. I was stuck working at my father's bank. I was the purchasing clerk. Daddy was training me to handle money.

MY JOB involved liaising with the on-site manager, supervising the building of the edifice that was to be our head office, and then, armed with a list of requirements, scouring the spare-parts markets and building-materials depots in my beat-up Peugeot 505. This was not as easy as it seemed. Warri's go-slows were notorious. It could take up to two hours to make a run for extra nails and hammers, in part due to the long time it took to haggle.

I was also in charge of the school run, which meant I had to be the one to wake up the twins, prep them for school, put them in my 505, and travel around Warri to both sides of town. Eniye was in SS2 in the Federal Government College (FGC) at Ogonu; Osaze was in the steel company's staff school near Aladja.

One afternoon, I was driving back from FGC Warri with Eniye in the front seat. Eniye was the dark twin; her complexion was like coffee before you poured the milk in. The girl who looked like our father. She still grew her hair long then and in a weave, her cornrows matted close to the scalp in simple designs quite unlike the very complicated head they adorned.

There were small fires on either side of the road. A smoky haze glossed over the dirt and grime of the expressway, making everything seem like a faded watercolor done to the sound of cackling dust devils. Harmattan was about to begin, and soon dust clouds would join the brush fires. The painting would fade even more. My sister had started another argument.

“Ewaen, I don’t know what you’re saying o. I’m telling you, the juniors nowadays are so rude. You can’t even punish them again.”

“Of course you can,” I replied. “The main thing is the degree of punishment. It has to be just right.”

“But we should be able to punish. I was punished. Why can’t I deal—”

“Eniye, you can’t kill someone’s child because you think she was rude to you.”

An insect slammed into the windshield. I turned on the wiper and watched the spray of soapy water fog up the expressway for a millisecond before the wiper blades kicked in. I downshifted, accelerating past a lorry.

“See, it’s not like when you were in FGC. Times have changed.”

This was typical Eniye. To her, I had left FGC Warri ages ago when, in fact, it had been only two years since I was moved by my mom to Osaze’s school after a bullying incident had left my back scarred with the horizontal slash marks of a senior student’s belt. There was no winning an argument with my younger sister. She was like our father. She always got her way, always got her point through. I ignored her last sentence, not needing to wonder what she would do to any junior who tried her. I was tired, and we still had the long drive to her twin brother’s school.

Osaze and Eniye were a paradox—both intense rivals and soulmates. It was as though they had been fighting from inside

Mommy's womb. Their arguments were like two elephants fighting in the rain forest; it was the grass that suffered. If anyone was foolish enough to intervene or take sides, the twins ignored their own disagreement and ganged up on the unfortunate fool. I had many times been a victim of my own good intentions.

We reached Osaze's school. It was nestled in the third housing estate of the decrepit steel company built by the military in the late seventies and run aground by the short-lived civilian regime that followed. On the other side of the estate was the DSC Primary School III, where Osaze, Eniye, and I were legends. We had topped the common entrance exams in our different years, Eniye finishing second only to Osaze. Both schools were built by an Israeli construction company and were intended to serve the children of the nonexistent staff of the steel company. The school buildings themselves looked like something out of a kibbutz—red with faux-brick walls that were solid concrete cast from prefabricated molds, all arranged in a square with the back windows of the classes facing outwards in a defense configuration. It had made dodging class very difficult. The secondary school had evolved into a private enterprise with a reputation for strict discipline reinforced by a principal of the “old school.” Mr. Sambawa did not subscribe to the opinion that caning was bad. He felt that corporal punishment was the best way to keep naughty children in line—liberal doses of it. I remember the shock I felt when I left the FGC, where the law banning caning in federal schools was circumvented by delegating the work to senior students, to come to a small disciplinarian college where the teachers flogged with glee. It seemed to work. There were no reports of the kind of bullying that happened in FGC Warri here.

I parked the 505 and was about to get out when one of my brother's classmates, a girl playing ten-ten on the lawn with

several other pinafores, plaited-haired girls, shouted to me that Osaze had already left. I knew where he would be. I kicked the car into reverse and drove to Wilhelm's house.

WILHELM, ONE-HALF of my crew of best friends, lived on the steel company's estate. His father was an engineer who had made the mistake a decade and a half earlier of leaving a well-paid job in Germany. Although Wilhelm always said his father complained that the Germans were all closet racists—too ashamed almost half a century after the end of the Second World War to show their real selves, which I thought was odd since he married one of them—Papa Wilhelm must have rued his decision to return in the late seventies. Wilhelm said he came back because he wanted to contribute his quota to the building of his fatherland; he wanted to bring his oyibo-trained expertise back home where it was needed. My father said the Udoji salary award of the mid-seventies that tripled the salaries of federal civil servants lured people like Wilhelm's father back. According to Daddy, this increase was made because the Gowon military regime wanted to extend its tenure and needed to bribe its civil servants and appear magnanimous at the same time. What happened was that food prices tripled in tandem. The regime was promptly overthrown in the dry season of '75, although that was scant consolation for people like Wilhelm's father. He had become a poor man with only the slightest of pretensions to Nigeria's long-vanished middle class. Wilhelm believed that their return to Nigeria was also the reason his parents always argued. His mother missed the shopping, hated the sun, and, above all, hated the Niger Wives club for foreign wives of Nigerian men.

Good old Willy; he spent most of the time at home, so if I did not come to pick up Osaze from school early, my brother would go hang out with him. Wilhelm, like me, was "awaiting

admission.” He and I would start medicine in Uniben as soon as the lecturers’ strike was called off.

I drove into Wilhelm’s mother’s garden to find the pair having a kickaround. My brother stood backing the car, a football at his feet. The tall ebelebo tree in the backyard cast shifting shadows on the playing field of loamy, kicked-up earth. Two upturned paint cans marked a four-foot-wide goal on the far side. The 505 was too noisy for him to pretend he had not heard me drive in. From the hunch of my brother’s shoulders, the way he pushed the ball from right foot to left and back, I knew he was about to score a goal, poke the ball through my friend’s legs, or bend his waist in a cruel pantomime of show-me-your-number. Wilhelm, facing us, looked up.

“Your brother don come o,” Wilhelm said, the look of almost-fear clearing from his face. Despite being mixed-race, Wilhelm’s Pidgin English was very good. I think it made up for the fact that he could not speak a word of Ishan, his father’s language.

Osaze turned, waved at me, and ran to the base of a Queen of the Philippines to pick up his bag. Wilhelm, already at my side of the car, leaned in, said hi to Eniye, and turned to me.

“Ewaen, how far na?”

I caught my reflection in his thick glasses. “I dey o, Willy,” I replied. “We get gist.”

“Hmm. About wetin?”

About nothing. I just wanted to whet his appetite for Saturday, for our weekly know-your-mate video game tournament. “No worry, shebi you go come Kpobo house next tomorrow?”

“Of course. I’ve been practicing my Chun-Li. Get ready to be thoroughly thrashed.”

“You wish. No worry, I go gist you then,” I said.

“Okay.”

There was a quizzical look on Wilhelm’s face, as though he wanted to ask what gist I had that I couldn’t tell him right

there. Instead, he turned, shouted Osaze's name, and told him to hurry. Osaze came to the car, started an argument with Eniye about who would sit in front, lost, and got into the back seat.

"YOU ARE a scatterbrain! A useless boy!" It was Saturday, and I was receiving a routine scolding from my father. My mind was on the tournament that Wilhelm and Kpobo would already have started. We lived on the outskirts of town in a two-and-a-half-story brown building behind the Effurun Police Barracks. The "half" was the bedroom wing, which wasn't actually on either story. It stuck out, not quite upstairs and definitely not downstairs, riding on the building like a child carried on its mother's back.

Daddy continued, "I should never have taught you to drive. You go around town fucking around instead of getting your fucking job done."

Fucking around. The words were a family synonym for wasting company time. Daddy's face belied his bad mouth, his quick wit, his swinging moods. He was very handsome—dark, not fair like me—with dark eyes, the eyebrows always close together as if in a thoughtful frown. The sides of his head were beginning to show their first peppering of white-gray hair, the same color as his mustache, a sparse brush that stopped just before either side of his thin, always-pressed-too-close-together lips. Looking at him, you'd expect a brooding personality, few words, small laughter, mild temper, and no rage. I remember when I was shorter, younger, and too young for expletives to be thrown at me. I remember raw backsides.

My parents did not punish their children by making them assume contorted, almost-impossible positions, nor did they send us on impractical errands whose only conceivable motivation could be to register their discontent with any crimes eight-year-olds could have committed. We never knelt with

our arms raised and kept apart, never touching; we never “picked pins,” right index finger touching the ground, left leg in the air, all the weight on a shaky right foot; we were never made to do the “angle ninety” with our backs against a stuccoed wall, knees flexed with bums perched on an imaginary stool. We were never sent to “fill the bottles,” to stand in front of the filter, watching the water trickle into old Treetop Juice glass bottles, swatting away mosquitoes as they feasted on our exposed legs. No. Daddy and Mommy had strict limitations on what they thought constituted cruel and unusual punishment. Instead, they either sent you to a dark room—a veritable dunce’s corner—or they beat you. They beat the shit out of you with slaps, spanks on the bottom, and knocks on the head but never with a closed fist, never with a cane. A cane, to them, was cruel and unusual.

“Imuetiyan, leave the boy alone.” Mommy sometimes let her voice rise above its habitual whisper. It didn’t now. She came into the upstairs sitting room. My mother only called Daddy by his full name when she thought he was being unreasonable. She rested her hands on her kitchen apron, the dishrag slung over her shoulder. Mommy shouted something back at the help, something about watching the soup to make sure it didn’t burn or she’d send her back to the village. Now here was the person I resembled. Fair with a wide, square face, she always had the embarrassment of having to prove she was Itsekiri and not Igbo. This was made more difficult because she spoke Igbo beautifully; she grew up in Aba; her father had been a port official working in nearby Port Harcourt. She always told us that the “curse of languages” was something we had picked up from her side of the family. We only had to look at her and her sisters because not one of them spoke their mother tongue.

She took me by the shoulder and led me out of the sitting room, leaving my father fuming. She had a paunch, a small

bulge that she hid well with her wrappers and an exceptionally sturdy girdle. She blamed the twins for the paunch. I always noted a tone of nostalgia whenever she made this accusation.

Out of earshot of Daddy, she said, "Don't mind him, you hear. He's in a bad mood because one of the new managers at the bank crashed the station wagon."

"I heard," I replied. "The manager forced the driver to let him drive."

"Your father sha, he no dey hear word. I queried him on the wisdom of hiring a fifty-year-old who couldn't drive. I said, 'Tiyán, where has this man been all his life when his mates were learning how to drive?' I mean, what kind of manager can he be?"

"So where are you going to?" She asked the question with her back to me while untying the apron.

"Kpobo's house."

"The commissioner's son?"

"The former commissioner's son," I replied.

"Will you be driving?" She continued, "When you leave your friend's place, try and check me at the shop. Maybe we'll drive back together. Phone first o." She paused, "In short, don't bother. The phones probably won't be working. I'll be there till seven. Just come; don't ride okada back home. Those motorcyclists are lunatics." Singing the words as she turned to face me, she threw the apron over her right shoulder, her paunch bouncing in rhythm to what she said.

She smiled and left me at the half-turn staircase. She was going to her bedroom to get ready for work. She owned and ran a supermarket, although she was a biochemist, a profession she had never practiced because Warri had no universities, no labs where she could have worked. I was born the day before her final exams. She said this was the reason I was brainy; my father said it was the reason I had a big head.