

## *Train Juju*

Presently, he reassembled his family. It made Corporal Nwafanim happy. His three sons, aged five, seven, and eight, returned as he had wished. More importantly, his wife came, too. Where before, when he got off work, he had sat in harsh silence in the scratched arm-chair, closing his eyes to relive the firm weight of his mother's breast in his mouth at age seven, or, at other times, slowly pitching back and forth in the seat as he watched the jerk of the clay lamp's flame on the bare table, now there were the squabbling cries of his little boys to sweeten his evenings.

The round-bellied man who had committed adultery with Nwafanim's wife for four years lived in a tenement on the edge of town. He made a loud scene outside his own door on the night when Nwafanim arrived on his shiny new motorcycle to take back his children. The man moved the frightened boys behind the half-open door, unlatched the gold watch from his wrist, thrust it into his pocket, and stepped out on the fish-patterned doormat to confront Nwafanim.

"For your information, I just want my children. I want to put them on the Suzuki I just bought and peacefully go home. Simple as A, B, C," Nwafanim offered in a firm voice.

He eyed the man's big fist warily, wondering if his rival knew he was a police officer. He did not know the fellow was this large. At the last minute, he had decided to wear this faded T-shirt and cream trousers instead of his uniform, because he planned to intimidate no one here. Now he saw he had been foolish. In a fight, this middle-aged brute would pound him like cassava.

The man snickered. He scanned Nwafanim's angular frame with little interest.

"Remember, no one touches the tail of a tiger's cub, whether the cub be living or dead," Nwafanim threatened. He screwed the bottom edge of his shirt around a shivering finger.

The man punched the wall in defiance.

"Your wife left you for me—equation balanced," he barked. "Look at you. Poor man like you. I'm a confirmed local boy operating on a high level. I visit Lagos in a luxurious bus once every year! Shame on you. You want *sufferness* to kill these children. May abomination flee!"

Hearing these words, Nwafanim felt his throat constrict. All the clever replies he had practiced in bed last night made an incoherent buzz in his head. No, I'm not a poor man, he wanted to say. I own a motorcycle now, just like you. He had learned this person was well-off, a self-made man contracted by "big men" to supply *garri*, bread, groundnuts, and water to laborers at construction sites all over town.

His eyes fell on a bulge in the man's pocket. Was that a lump of naira notes? How many loaves of bread had the man provided to earn that wad?

His heart tripped when he heard his wife's silvery voice calming his sons. Then the amplified volume of a TV inside swallowed her words. She did not come out into the passageway to acknowledge his presence or his challenge. He sensed that by this action, or inaction, she was refusing to make contact with their past. This seeming disdain embarrassed him. He felt like a footloose interloper.

He left in a hurry, shamefaced and empty-handed; some of the man's neighbors opened their doors and looked at him as though he had no penis.

The next evening, his wife appeared outside his hut with the tired children.

Nwafanim heard the sound of knocking. Puzzled, he softly opened the door, which he had shut because of an unpleasant shift in the weather.

His wife bore a dusty bag on her head and held the hand of the youngest child. The middle son stood slightly slouching at her back, his hands in his pockets. Alone on her left, the oldest boy carried a butterfly-yellow umbrella in his arms.

When Nwafanim saw his family standing there in the insufferable dusk chill, he felt himself violently pressing upward, as though an unprepared part of him sought to escape the scene, and he touched the doorframe with his fingers.

At the same moment, the last child looked up with a peaceful gaze at his mother, then released his hand from her grip and walked with slow steps up to Nwafanim. Lifting the little boy clumsily in his arms, Nwafanim felt such intolerable love, such unbearable warmth, that all he wanted to do was lead them—his sons, his wife—to the village river, and there, drown with them.

This woman was, after all, his first and only love. He could not have dreamed he would meet an extra-sensual pleaser like her, a woman who held his erect penis the first time they had sex and said, "I love this thing." He had felt his scrotum tighten. He, who spent five years in the seminary fifteen years ago before abandoning his studies to

join the police. Her moments of light and darkness, her blessings and dissatisfaction, had for a long time provided the ray that filtered his understanding of a woman's world. His mother had of course supplied clues, but a mother's love was not a lover's love. A mother's love was divine, immovable; it was law, secured by birth, high up. A lover's love might be originally earned through a throbbing fight to finish, yet was easily broken by a misplaced laugh. Retaken by another laugh. That was *excitement*. A lover's love hit you low in the stomach, and you bragged to friends about the sensation. You could not boast to companions about a mother's love, sadly.

The next Sunday, Nwafanim took everybody to church, tightly packed on his motorcycle, proud to display his good fortune before God. As they approached the hilltop chapel, his middle son, who sat sideways on the warm fuel tank, laughed when the motorcycle made a turn and the oldest reached out his arms from behind Nwafanim to grab his father's waist in fear. Nwafanim caught sight of his wife in the side mirror: she held the youngest fast to her chest while she cast an admiring glance at the jewel-like twinkle of the exhaust pipe. He nodded, liking the smile on her face.

This smile, indeed, was a thing to note, for his wife was by nature impatient, compulsive, and drawn recklessly to change. When she married him, he had presented an escape from the sex-all-day men who were her former fare. She was the type who preferred flux to stagnation. Doesn't everybody, eventually?

Nwafanim had awoken early beside his wife that morning, picturing his family on the motorcycle, feeling his muscles tight with excitement. Later, as his wife soaped the children at the back of the hut, an unusual restiveness drove him to drop the boot he was polishing with an old sock.

He kicked the umbrella's handle back under the bed and went out to watch his brood. The whiff of the damp wrapper over the door reminded him of triton shells fresh from the river. He recognized the smell as the salty scent of his wife, and whistled an invented tune in proprietary satisfaction.

His sons stood on a big stone in the square bathroom framed by plaited palm fronds. When he stopped by the narrow entrance, the boys tilted up their wet faces to look at him. And this was how he saw fully what he had missed: the four years their round noses, their wide mouths, their pointed chins had grown. This lost intimacy occurred to him as the principal heat of his life. Nwafanim felt suddenly opened.

He farted before he could run back to the hut to release the gas.

Three months passed, every day during which Nwafanim crafted bonds with his family. He called this plan “Train Juju” after a beloved two-wheeled wooden train he lost as a child. It was according to this scheme that he allowed his eldest son, the eight-year-old, to force his tongue into the youngest boy’s cup of Coca-Cola (while the child struggled and yelled) and show a lack of manners while a guest was visiting. It was this plan that made him turn his head the other way when the seven-year-old spat on the floor of the hut and rubbed the spit with his bony heel. Train Juju was responsible for his nodding head when the five-year-old flung himself on the ground, booted the bags under the bed, and wailed in a disagreeing voice, “Jesus is a girl, see his long hair,” if his mother called Jesus a boy. And the project explained why this Saturday morning, Nwafanim stood above his wife holding up a large wooden comb tangled with knots of her hair. “You want to finish my hair?” she cried in pain. “I’ve been telling you, you’re pulling hard! Pulling all my roots.” She dusted the neck of her blouse in a perfunctory preen. The couple occupied the mouth of the hut, one person standing while the other sat on the floor. The children played in their parents’ line of sight, piling moist sand on their feet to build caves.

She leaned and scowled up at him.

He was cutting her hair into thick sections with the comb in preparation for relaxing. The smell of palm kernel oil came from a calabash in the lap of her cockerel-blue skirt.

“Don’t be angry,” he apologized. Though this was the third time he offered to play hairdresser, he was still unused to combing his wife’s hair. He remained fascinated by this hair treatment procedure that she brought with her from the man’s house in town: first her pelt softened after she washed off the wonder-lather, then the strands stretched nicely like a goat’s beard. But he noted sadly that the styling chemicals had ruined the smoky scent of her hair, which he had been fond of.

He hid the comb behind his back, still attempting to pacify her. “It’s a little hair,” he laughed, leaning on the door. The hinges swung backward with a squeal. The heavy curtain, permanently raised on the door to allow for cross-ventilation with the window, started to slide down; Nwafanim grabbed at it to stop the slip. His feet stepped over the white, pungent bar of hair-relaxing soap on the floor beside his wife.

She snatched the soap away, afraid he might crush it with his foot. Their eyes met. She hissed, pushing the soap under the door, far into the corner.

Nwafanim hooked the comb in her springy hair and tried to hide his joy. His wife had almost reverted to her free-ranging temper, and he

liked this. He had been afraid she would abscond again with the children in the first month of their return: whenever he twisted his sons' ears for an offence and told them *I have a cane as tall as you* (like he used to say when they lived with him), she averted her clear, wide eyes and waved regretfully at the boys, as though she saw little point in revealing her true self during what was going to be a brief stay.

"We women like to pretend a lot," Big Backyard had told him at work. She was the friendly but promiscuous young widow who sold ground-nuts and oranges beside the police station's blue- and yellow-painted signboard. She made the comment when he informed her of his wife's strange behavior any time he scolded his children. Each day, he made small conversation with Big Backyard when the sun rested behind a cloud.

Nwafanim prayed his wife did not pretend now.

He dipped a finger in the calabash she had just raised. When he rubbed the palm kernel oil in the partitions on her scalp, the youngest boy walked over, a thumb pushed in his coin-shaped ear.

"We want to eat," he chirped before his mother. Then he turned to observe his brothers, who peeped from behind a hedge of Lemon Princess.

"There's still *plenty* rabbit meat in that *thick* soup your mother cooked in the pot," Nwafanim said quickly, uncomfortable. The boy did not look at his father. With keen interest, he watched his mother return the calabash to her lap.

"How many times will you eat in a day?" she snapped, pointing the mirror at him. The boy bent his head, calculating this question.

"Well done, oh! Partners in crime," she cried in the direction of the older boys, so they would know she understood they had sent their brother.

The grinning boys vanished from their post behind the Lemon Princess.

The message-bearer checked the expression on his mother's face and smiled tentatively. He ran back to look for his brothers, flapping one arm.

Nwafanim gripped the comb and pulled hair midway down its long teeth, upset. He breathed in, trying to control his shaking leg. Talk about food, and clothes, and money always left him tingly and anxious. His wife had left him four years before because his corporal salary was enough to provide just one full meal for the family each day.

He had bought the motorcycle, now leaning beside the back wall of the house, and paid for the fat mattress on the bed with a work loan—

credit he found the courage to ask for after an incident during which he threw himself, to gain workplace favor, between the DPO and a furious girlfriend the DPO had accused of cheating. The flying heel that was headed for the DPO's face landed on his brow instead and left him cross-eyed with pain. Afterward, the DPO peered kindly at his swollen brow and called him a *valuable, valuable* man.

Nwafanim purchased the motorcycle to impress his wife, to show her that after four years he was not poor anymore; he could give his family a meaningful life.

Now, he supplemented their living with the remainder of the loan. But how long would that hold out? Just two days ago they ate the last chicken in the coop, though it was ill with respiratory problems.

He felt like an evil parent for eating the chicken. When his family was away, he used to think of all the chickens as his children. There were days when he let them sleep under the bed, just so he could hear some other being in the room besides himself. For a while, too, he walked through the market every day on his way to work, hoping to catch a glimpse of his wife. He mistook each little boy he passed for his son, and he even searched the faces of little girls, too, just in case the child was really one of his sons garbed in a dress to fool him.

His wife suddenly shouted "See it!" and jumped up. The calabash fell from her lap. Nwafanim quickly bent through the door to grab the lid, but his attempt was too late: all the oil she used for preventing scalp-burn had spilled. Outside, he glared at the dark map of fluid spreading between his arched, broad feet.

He retrieved the lid and gave her an apologetic look, then one of wonder.

"A lizard crawled over me, didn't you see?" she cried, clutching the hem of her skirt up above one knee, darting a worried look in the corner where the household's shoes made a neat pile, then gazing at him. He knew that the one-sided tuck of her lip, as though she struggled to restrain a compliment, indicated her gratitude for his failed rescue of the calabash.

"Oh," he said, his eyes squinting in confusion because he had seen no lizard, though he knew that a redhead often hid in the small crack at the foot of the bed. He watched her throw the mirror into the armchair against the wall, then turn to regard him, her plump face creased with worry. He was thinking that her behavior was unnecessarily exaggerated, this was only a lizard; then he recalled that she had an irrational fear of lizards because of their hard, scaly, *snakelike* skins.

He moved inside the door. "Don't worry," he said, "I'll block that hole near the bed with a stone. It will have nowhere to stay here."

"Cover the entire wall with cement to block all holes," she advised, pushing the table to pass to the bed. Nwafanim frowned. To him, *cement* brought back memories of the town, where she had lived with that man for four years. As though she were comparing the man's cement-made house to his mud hut.

Also, he had always disapproved of her dislike of lizards. After all, lizards were the totem of his people. Afanim, the guardian spirit of his village, often materialized in lizard form in the dreams of childless women. In the last year that they courted, she cried when he told her how his mother was barren for many years until generous Afanim put him in the cup of his mother's womb; how, as a child, his mother took him to worship at Afanim's shrine, after she collected clay for her pottery.

She had gripped his hands hard and told him that from now on she would revere the lizard totems of his village. She would never again cover her face and click fingers over her head to repel the evil eye when she accidentally gazed into the grim, side-looking eyes of a lizard. She would not arm herself with a stone after she passed one.

Following their marriage, she broke every one of her promises. It sickened him.

Sometimes, he felt that she worked to substitute his late mother; that for some unknowable reason she believed his kin lacked something vital, which made full contact with them a burden.

Nwafanim watched his wife sit on the mattress. Her shapely heels struck the cow-brown basin under the bed where the children dumped their dirty school uniforms.

She begged him to consider plastering the walls with cement—please. "My husband, protect me, find the lizard, and chase it out now. You know how I'm scared of this thing," she added, her eyes dark and coquettish.

He stood rigid by the door, emerging from the marvel of an observation. He noted how her body produced symmetrical forms on either side when she moved—regal, seductive; not one without the other. He thought of the paralleled proportion of the clay lamp, modeled like a crooked palm.

This measured walk of hers was one of the pleasures he gained from her company. It filled him now with a temporary excitement.

He smiled to assure her that he would do her wish, advancing toward the table to put down the objects in his hand.



“Mummy!” cried their youngest, tearing in with his panting brothers. “We saw a ninja climbing a palm tree.” The children, who had ducked around Nwafanim, collected on both sides of their mother; they put their hands on her knees.

Nwafanim laughed loudly, very amused by the child’s remark; his voice echoed nastily in the wide room. *Ninja*, he thought, where on earth had the child picked up such an ugly word? Definitely not from Nwafanim, or from the men in this village. Was it from town? The child had probably seen an *onye ngwo* wine tapper in the bush across the road, going up a tree with his brown gourd, knife, and girdle. And the word was not even Igbo. Intent on enjoying himself, Nwafanim paid no heed to the annoyed looks the boys gave him (the middle child sneaked a hand into his shorts pocket and splayed it facing out, attempting to hide the well-known expression of disgust and insolence, but Nwafanim, forgiving, saw from the corner of his eye the unmistakable strain of the insulting palm through the fabric) as he placed the calabash lid beside the wooden comb in the flat rack under the table.

He went outside to find a stick with which to chase out the lizard and crossed the door, careful not to tread in the oil. One of the children had stepped in it. Nwafanim stared at the half-print of a foot struck in the middle of the spill. He frowned. Which son had made the shape?

For some time, Nwafanim had tried to provide his family with a means of amusement while he was away to work, since he had no TV. Several times he went to beg for magazines from the retired principal—rumored to own massed volumes of literature—who lived close to a short-necked leafy tree where a rusty bicycle hung from a low branch. Each time, the elderly principal, who had a scattering of liver spots on his face, rested his chin on his palm, dozed briefly, then unwrapped his wrinkled eyes and told Nwafanim he could not find the key to his mahogany-and-glass box.

So Nwafanim was pleasantly astonished when, on a Thursday afternoon the following week, a smiling young albino boy, the principal’s help, walked into the station carrying a handsome stack of *West Africa* magazines on his head. The boy, who wore his blond hair in neat dreadlocks that fell over the top of his ears, said proudly that he had found the key to the box under his master’s bedclothes and had brought it to his master. Nwafanim leaned his stomach on the counter, his heart drumming. Pointing his pen at the boy, Nwafanim told him he was a *good boy* who should be rewarded. He directed the child to ask for *the biggest* orange from Big Backyard, the woman who sold fruits by the



signboard. "Take the orange home and enjoy it," he said. "I will pay the woman later."

Then, preparing to speak again, he turned to the two recently employed constables who stood shoulder to shoulder to the right of the counter with hands hanging stiffly at their sides.

Nwafanim paused and shut the foolscap notebook on the counter with a crude snap.

He had been copying notes from the yellow legal pad before him, writing down the quantity of branded waste disposal bins that went to each police station in the area, along with remarks. Six pages were completed. The yellow pad, full of tangled scribble, belonged to the DPO. He had asked Nwafanim to transfer his conference notes from a regional meeting into the notebook, because Nwafanim wrote a neat, looping cursive. Nwafanim was happy to show off his splendid writing but disliked this tedious task that he had been at, on and off, for one week, and now was glad for the distraction the child's appearance provided.

He spoke to the constables.

"Stop watching the little boy as if he is a cinema screen, and collect the books from his hand." He dropped his pen on top of the notebook, eager to look through the magazines.

The men did what he asked. The boy thanked Nwafanim and ran out of the station, making a beeline for the orange seller outside.

Nwafanim commanded the constables to wipe the dust from the musty, cobwebby magazines, using a rag he found under the counter next to his rifle. When the constables were halfway through the chore, he took one of the cleaned magazines and held it up with a soft look in his eyes, breathing in the faded, lemony smell, thinking of his family's reaction to this largesse.

Two of his children ran in wide, playful circles outside the house when he got home from work. He carried the magazines under his arm.

"Mummy cook food, oh!" sang the older, taller, child.

"She cook food!" answered his darker brother—the middle son.

Nwafanim stood in front of the door and watched them go around and around, faster and faster, oblivious of his arrival. He felt pride, and a thin, electric thrill, that he had brought them something else with which to entertain themselves. He could hear his wife knocking a spoon against a pot in the kitchen.

"Look here! Come here! I brought you something," he cried, holding out the magazines in both hands.

The two boys stopped running and stood still, their stomachs rising and falling, blowing hard to recover themselves.

The middle son, who was fickle, who gave and withdrew affection for his father without warning and was the only one that watched him when he washed the motorcycle, stepped a foot forward; then he turned back to look at the older boy, who had not moved at all, although his brows had lowered and his eyes had narrowed. This older one was totally indifferent to Nwafanim and liked to carry an unhappy face before him.

Then the younger boy moved and stopped within arm's length of his father. Nwafanim nodded in encouragement, resting the pile of books prudently on his forearm as though it were an infant—the way he used to turn the children on his hand to shush them when they were babies. He opened the top magazine to a picture of a heavily lipsticked Nigeria Airways hostess grinning in an airplane aisle. He stooped to display it to his son.

The child's eager eyes scanned the page and the photo of turbaned Hausa noblemen riding festooned horses on the next page.

Nwafanim gave the smooth magazine to the boy, who promptly ran off with it to show his brother. The older boy collected the book and sat cross-legged in the sand to leaf through it, as if he had waited for the book his whole life. Nwafanim bobbed his head in satisfaction, pleased that the boys had accepted his gift.

The last child leaned sleepily against his mother in the kitchen. She sat on a footstool in total absorption before the large pot of boiling *ugu* soup on the firewood stove. Nwafanim squinted through the steam and smoke and showed her the magazines.

"See, I brought it for you and the children. The man finally gave them to me. He sent his boy. I told the boy to tell him that you and I are grateful."

"What is this?" she asked in a shrill voice. She dropped the ladle—smeared with crossed strips of shredded leaves—on the uneven floor, which was littered with *ugu* stalks and the snapped backbones of smoked fish; she selected one of the books and set it on her thigh with a frown. Nwafanim pressed his hand against the neck of his heavy-eyed son, wondering if the boy had a fever, but the boy was fine.

The child's eyes opened slowly, shining. He teetered around to his mother's back, wrapped his arms around her neck, and lowered his forehead on her body in sleep.

To Nwafanim's enjoyment, his wife watched the pictures in the magazines every day, beginning when the door was opened in the morning. It made his heart feel good, too, to see the children get into animated disputes over which one *owned* what image, as the boys lay on the floor,

flat on their stomachs, peering seriously at several magazines, their legs raised and moving about in the air.

His wife even tore out the picture of a svelte woman in a long black skirt who held up a champagne bottle. She told him she liked the photo very much and hid it in her bag. Nwafanim was delighted when, later, she asked him to write the caption, *Beautiful princess my sister*; above the page in his graceful handwriting—his impeccable bows and curlicues, which she had always praised him for.

But soon the size of the magazines on the rack under the table began to dwindle. When Nwafanim opened one of them he found terrible pencil marks marring the pictures; several pages had been ripped out. He asked his wife who was responsible for the scratches and the rent pages, the missing volumes, and she told him with an impatient sigh to query his sons. The boys, who were all involved (especially the two older ones), said in innocent voices that it had nothing to do with them. Nevertheless, he preached to them the virtues of obedience and being good boys. He told them not to be unruly, because rowdy children grew up to be walkabout drunkards and soon became thieves who went to prison or got shot at the beach.

He thought it would end at that, but one Saturday as he got dressed for work, he looked down at the table and realized that all of the magazines were gone. Irritated, he lined all the children up in front of the bed, in the order of their ages, and asked them, in an angry voice, what had happened to the magazines. His wife sat in the chair, watching, her wrist curled limply over the chair's arm. She had taken out—from under a dish in the kitchen—the picture of the svelte woman in a long black skirt and held it sideways in her lap. She probably tried to get a rise out of her husband with the photo, not assuring him that she was a better steward. After all, the elegant woman in the photo had suffered; her neck was faintly daubed with charcoal; the page was wrinkled and perforated in the center from reckless folding and unfolding. Nwafanim's stylish inscription looked dim and insignificant, spoiled with the rub of thumbprints.

His wife's mouth was tightly pressed together as though she struggled hard to contain some bursting amusement. He gazed at her and took a deep breath—her apathy upset him.

The youngest child smiled at him, then turned and looked pleadingly in his mother's direction.

The oldest boy gave the middle one a dirty look and nudged him. The middle son returned a murderous look, but then he began to speak:

"I carried them to school, and forgot them."

“W-why?” Nwafanim stuttered, bemused. “W-why?”

“Nothing,” the child said, with the obscure logic of children. There was a quiet, expectant stare in his eyes and finally a defiant pout to his lips as the youngest child began to cry.

Nwafanim knew one truth: his sons had not come back. They disliked him because he made his home in a plain hut. They probably preferred that high-level man in town who lived in an electrified house built of cement blocks and who owned a TV they could watch—an outsider who was not their father.

Did they call *him* Father? Someone had told him so; he did not want to believe it.

He was thinking this on a Monday morning, many weeks later. He crouched outside the hut in his new uniform waiting to catch his youngest son. Nwafanim brushed a spider off his arm and noted how the metal buttons on his dark shirt twinkled in the sun.

His son had run off naked, with lather in one ear, as his mother washed him in the bathroom. “I don’t want to go to school,” he yelled over her commands when he got away. “We sit on the floor there.”

Nwafanim had pulled on his trousers in the room, listening through the open window. He heard his other sons give the same complaint.

“Mother, it’s true,” said the oldest son.

“This place is not good, not like Central Model School.” The middle son.

“Many of us sit on the floor during lessons.”

“Our teachers sit outside on their bicycles to mark our classwork.”

His wife laughed in a piercing, absolutely mocking voice that chilled his stomach and made him plonk himself down on the table. Did the man in town put the children in a private school?

He found the rest of his uniform, dressed hastily, and went out to look for his son, to return him to the bathroom, to ensure the child did not suffer some avoidable accident: a dyspeptic old man on a loaded bicycle could knock him down in the road, or a bilious youth full of cigarette smoke might run him over with a borrowed motorcycle.

Now Nwafanim rubbed his knuckles in his eyes, forgetting, for a blank second, why he stood out here.

He felt empty. It seemed a poor man was spared nothing: adultery, debt, the unsophisticated breeding of a village school, betrayal by the very children to whom he gave life.

He dashed off, sighting the child as he walked out of a grove of nearby raffia palms; he could see that the child studied a lengthy stick in his hand.

The naked boy looked up and stopped walking, amazed by the charge, the distance his sprinting father covered in a short time.

And with a longing like grief, Nwafanim reached for his son's dust-marked elbow. As an infant, this child loved to lie on his scanty-haired chest as he lay sprawled on the bed and go to sleep listening to his heartbeat. The only other person the infant favored for a cot in this way was, of course, his mother.

Nwafanim's mother-in-law once tried to trick the child by resting it on her breasts (which still had a youthful hang) in the same position so that her daughter could sit upright and eat; but the child was not fooled; he cried and reddened and shook until Nwafanim put off going to work and placed the newborn on his chest, feeling a soothing warmth as the baby looked in his eyes.

Now this same child, whom his mother took away when he was one, did not even call him father.

None of the boys did.

Had he not stowed his rifle under the counter at work, no longer bringing the gun home, for their own safety? Did he not write their names on all their school notebooks in his fine hand?

When the oldest was three and the youngest two, he used to lift them on his shoulders like an acrobat and carry them to see the Akpodim masquerade, rumored to be the half-human son of the river god, Ezenika, which could rise as high as a palm tree and fall to the height of a broom. He would cut up sugar cane into small cubes, put the cubes into a plastic bag, and feed them to the boys. One time, when they were three and four, he played a game with them, asking them to make "big" wishes. The younger child wished for an airplane, while his brother wanted a car. He fulfilled the wishes the next week when he killed a pigeon with a catapult and had his wife roast it. He gave the bird's wings to the one who wanted an airplane, and, laughing, gave the lean thighs to the child who had asked for a car. He recalled how he used to play soccer with the youngest when he turned one. He would dribble the ball around the youngster, and tease, "You don't know how to play ball, eh. When I was small I was the captain of my secondary school football team."

Nwafanim was seized by a sudden yearning for happiness. Holding his son's remarkably strong arm, he bent by the sandy roadside and puffed his cheeks a few times to steady his breathing.

The child's pupils moved back and forth, scanning his father's dark face.

"You," said the boy, pointing his stick.

"Say, 'Daddy.'"

The boy abruptly raised the stick in his hand and frowned. He twisted off his hand, surprising Nwafanim, who dropped a hand to the ground to support himself. When the little one had run within a few feet of the hut, he stopped, wheeled, and banged the stick repeatedly on the ground. The stick broke.

"You. Not Daddy," cried the child, jubilant.

Nwafanim felt a thick and boundless pain.

At work, in a swirl of sadness, he left the counter—on impulse—in the care of the two constables and stepped outside (the bored recruits immediately resumed yesterday's bellicose analysis of the 1989 soccer match, played a few years ago, between Nigeria and the USSR).

Nwafanim went to tell his problems to Big Backyard.

The afternoon he gave her news of his wife's return (after he told his colleagues), she clapped her hands cheerfully, congratulated him, then warned, "Sugar is sweet, but it gives stomachache. Better use condom to fuck for now, or else rub kerosene on your penis after." Curious, he wondered if she had used kerosene to disinfect the penis of the twelve-year-old neighbor's son she was found having sex with at the farm the day her husband died. He trusted she had washed the boy's genitals with kerosene. The woman had strong common sense.

He scratched his stomach thoughtfully, and said he agreed he should use a condom, only his wife preferred "skin to skin."

"What should I do to get my sons?" he asked now, cocking his head as though he wished her to funnel her words into his ear. He ignored the settling sweat on the back of his neck (it had started to get hot). The warming seat craftily heated his thighs through the thin cloth of his uniform.

Big Backyard did not answer at first. She stood up from the bench and dusted her wide, gorgeous buttocks with deliberate slaps. Wait, she signaled with her hand.

Then she leaned over her great table, selected an unscarred orange from the pile on the small tray, and peeled the fruit with a razor blade she slid out from under the tray. Flies zigzagged over heaps of boiled groundnuts spread on a broad plastic sheet next to the tray.

Nwafanim followed her movement like a sedulous hypnotic, inhaling the tang of coiling rind.

She gave him the orange when she was done, waved her hand to indicate it was a gift, and said, "How is school important, since we will all die one day? Your wife has put your head in her armpit. Sorry, but you came to me for truth. A handsome young man like you doesn't need a woman like that, a woman who's interested in pretense and grade-one materialism."

That was no answer. But for the moment, Nwafanim ate his orange in lifted spirits, stirred by her flattery. He thought benignly of his heavy lower lip, the ugly, fat vein that bent like a finger over his brow.

Once he returned behind the counter, a young man appeared at the door and saluted. Nwafanim asked him what he wanted, and he said he had just been posted to the station. "At ease," Nwafanim told the man, "because you might be my senior." He directed one of the constables to collect the folder in the man's hand. When he looked through the folder and found that the new man was a constable, he told the man to draw near, then started to advise him. "The only way to survive in the force is to obey your seniors," he began. The man nodded. "Never claim hard man or high priest in front of a speeding bullet. Constable, if you see where robbers are shooting, remove your shirt and run. I have been in the force for over fifteen years, so if you want to stay as long as me, 'look before you leap.'"

The man thanked him. Nwafanim directed the constables to begin putting together the rookie's papers.

At the close of work, he walked home with leaden steps, stopping at a medicine store to buy a spark plug for the Suzuki, which he did not take to work—to preserve its shine, he only rode it to church on Sundays.

He went to the back of the hut as soon as he got home, almost afraid to face his family, feeling a cruel, irrational urge to run. Shouts of "Gooooaaal" leaked through the shut window: his sons playing football, kicking the two ping-pong balls he bought them at last month's children's harvest at church.

Nwafanim paused at the sound of his children before he knelt by the motorcycle. It seemed suddenly important to buy a new wall clock and replace the dead hand-wound thing that hung beside the nail hanger over the bed.

"Carry your noise outside," he heard his wife warn the boys, and he held back from working till she finished speaking, as though she scolded him, too.

He removed the spark plug spanner from the toolbox in the side of the bike. Crickets scratched out a rhythm in the collecting dark. It was



when he began to twist out the plug that the upshot of his chat with Big Backyard came to the surface.

Nwafanim withdrew his hand slowly from the spanner and looked at the evening sky: Big Backyard had not reached the root of his problem because the root did not exist. It was all a fancy deception. As a child, he had never recovered his lost wooden train, no matter how carefully he searched, and now, to his dismay, he found that his Train Juju plan was off-track, no matter the fact that he laid it out with painstaking effort.

He, a penniless goat, had fooled himself from the moment he plotted reunion with his family. Would his wife not leave with the children the minute money ran out? Had he imagined that God would bless a man who turned away from the seminary for the gift of marital bliss?

*How do you kill a bad memory?* he wondered. *How do you slash its unbearably thin vein?* He doubted himself now as he had doubted himself on another occasion, in the days of his forced bachelorhood. His handwriting had suddenly deteriorated during one Easter—lasting about a month, for no reason he could explain. His cursives became squished, and the letters hopped childishly along the line when he took notes for the DPO in the DPO's office. He thought he would be fired when the DPO asked that one of the other policemen take subsequent notes, instead of himself. Dispirited, he began scratching his name randomly on the barks of roadside trees with his fingernail, asking himself: *What am I anymore if I'm not this, a man with beautiful handwriting? No one will care at all about me, without this.* The experience made him mistrust everything he knew about himself. Had he caught back his confidence? He was not sure.

At bedtime, following a rare evening bath, he raised his legs over the table, which blocked his path, then stopped for a second to watch his children who lay snoring softly against the wall. The boys had pulled and pushed the table when they returned from school, using it as a big toy car.

After he doused the clay lamp, he sat on the mattress, tied his wrapper securely at his waist, and stretched out alongside his wife.

He could make out her shape in the dark. Her hair was a stiff twisted mass, free of her hairnet. Why was she without it? With gentle pride, he recalled he had bought the net to replace the slack one she brought with her from the man's house.

He could see the solid line of her bra, which she wore to bed since her return, and which, to his silent dismay, she had not taken off the four times they had made love.

In the hope he had exaggerated the importance of his talk with Big Backyard, he reached out his hand and tapped his wife's shoulder.

He would ask her the question he postponed out of politeness the first night she returned—the idea he continued to suspend because he was no longer sure what her answer would prove.

“I’m sleeping,” she said in a distinct voice, thinking he wanted intercourse.

“I need to ask you something important,” he said, passing over her sex-frustration technique, a new thing he hated himself for getting used to.

She said nothing.

He breathed in. His heart pumped fast. He recalled the first time he chased a thief.

“Why—” he began, hesitant, then the rest came out in a rush, “did you really come back?”

He saw her figure move. The wrapper she knotted above her breasts made a slow rustle. Then she lay quiet, and Nwafanim realized her body faced his now.

“Why do you want to know?” she asked, her tone flat and incurious.

“I want to know,” he said.

His voice was plaintive, scared.

She must have sensed his tenor, because she answered straightaway.

“You wanted us to come.”

Nwafanim thought about this. It was a fine reply. But there was something accusing in the modulation. It angered him.

“Why didn’t you come back in the four years before?” he asked indignantly.

She laughed a haughty, high-arched sound.

“Which new woman is giving you the confidence to address me in this way?” she snarled. She did not wait for a reply. “Okay, answer me, mister asker,” she ran on. “Why did you wait four years before you came?”

Nwafanim’s mind went to the motorcycle, the loan.

“Wait. Answer me first, I’ll answer you,” he said miserably.

“Let me answer the question for you,” she said coldly. “You waited four years because ‘A monkey that has not eaten does not jump.’ So, use your tongue to count your teeth, and you will find out why I came. Do you hear?”

Nwafanim said no more. He wished it was someone else whose heart was breaking. But it was his. Of course, he had hoped the appearance of his change of fortune would tempt her to his side. But to hear it come from her? He felt paralyzed.

He wondered when she would leave with his children. What consolation would she leave him with?

The last of the loan, waiting in the two-room community bank, would be spent in less than a month. Then the old indigence would begin to show.

Later, Nwafanim heard his wife's steady breathing. He could tell she was asleep. He wished Big Backyard lay between them now. He would have sex with her in his wife's presence.

He moved his body so his back faced her. He recalled how they met. He had been a virgin. She was a trophy maiden who hunted men as trophies. To her, he was something exotic: young and unspoiled by newspaper or radio.

"Tomorrow I will tell them to return to the man's house in town," he told himself.

He slept poorly. In a dream, he climbed a stolen ladder to the small wooden door of a tall sentry tower built of solid clay. Entering the structure, he found his dead grandfather alive and staring skeptically into the large eye of a sculpted ram head.

All through work the next day, he thought of his sons, though he remained steadfast in the task the DPO had given him—transferring the wastebasket inventory from the yellow pad into the foolscap notebook—until at last the job was done. After the DPO left for an administrative meeting with the notebook, Nwafanim leaned his elbow on the edge of the counter and watched blankly as the confused constables (including the rookie) misspelled names of fresh suspects on a small blackboard on the wall. (Muffled shouts of "Heeeelp!" escaped the walls of the concrete cell two narrow corridors back, where mushy new suspects encountered hardened old ones.)

When a traveler who had just been robbed by the notorious, one-eyed Kano ran into the station in tears, begging the police to help him catch the girl thief, Nwafanim listened patiently and responded, "Police are your friends, come rain, come shine."

"Take down his statement. After that, one person should follow him to the scene," he told his horrified subordinates, then excused himself with quiet, almost comic dignity. He went outside to speak with Big Backyard.

She comforted him with wise and teasing words. She gave him a sly look and told him there were women who wanted him. If he planned to make a baby, for instance, she knew *someone* who would do just that with him. He knew what she meant and let her woo him, liking the odd elegance of her tone.

Big Backyard gave him two oranges. Nwafanim ate the peeled one and took the unpeeled one home after work.

In a wooded area that preceded the river, he saw stones that marked a deep underground cave and walked toward them. Ancient priest-kings dressed in colored beads were buried in this cave. A dragonfly caught the last light on its wings as it settled on the omnibus of large stones and shredded softwood sown in a ring around the top of the hidden cave. Nwafanim, lacing his fingers about the orange, stopped and scanned the peaceful scene—he imagined himself inside his mother’s body, safe.

A man’s sons flow from his breast like the waves of the sea, he assured himself. When they roll away, they will always come back.

His wife was not at home when he returned. He felt a bizarre relief, though he knew his mind remained fixed upon what he would tell her. The children said she had pulled her hairnet over her head and gone to eat honey at the elderly palm wine seller’s shop.

They sat cross-legged on the floor and gazed at the orange in his hand. From the dipping corner of the darkening roof, he removed a matchbox his wife had set between the smooth wall and the slim thigh of a bending bamboo, far from the children’s reach. He lit the clay lamp.

Illumination bathed the boys. It revealed in greater detail the dust streaks on the youngsters’ chins and fine grains down their bare chests, which made Nwafanim smile when he first saw them in the room’s dim light.

Nwafanim placed the lamp on the arm of the chair; he replaced the matchbox, then turned to pick up the orange he had dropped on the bed.

He threw the orange at his youngest; the little boy, a broad grin on his face, raised his dirty hands and caught the fruit.

When he took off his shirt and turned to hang it on the nail beside the wall clock, his older children quickly pulled down their shorts and stood in chameleon-green underpants. They began humming Fela Kuti’s “Lady” to amuse their brother and hopefully win a bite of the orange from him; the boys staggered back and forth in imitation of Fela’s underwear-dance, splaying their fingers out in front of them. They had learned the dance during Wednesday arts and crafts at the other school.

“Your show is funny!” cried the little one excitedly, acknowledging the entertainment that his brothers presented to him for a favor. He ran a half circle in front of the door in delight, then stopped and scowled.

Nwafanim sat on the bed, moving his head to the performance. He watched his sons with a wooden expression. Which one of them would become a doctor? Which would grow the tallest? Which would be the first to remember him, to come to this hut seeking him?

His wife returned when only one son danced; the older one had stopped because his brother took too long to share the orange.

Nwafanim's wife carried a slim tuber of yam on her head, which she bought on her way home. The children embraced her at the door. She greeted Nwafanim, and he answered without any shift in his voice.

After a sumptuous supper of stockfish and yam porridge (he had wiped out almost all the fish, leaving the porridge untouched on the plate he shared with his wife, to her slight annoyance, which he noted but disregarded following the end of the meal), he closed his eyes and waited on the bed until his wife had lifted the sleeping boys and arranged them in a corner of the room, so that when both parents got out to piss in the night, they would not step on their sons' heads. She sighed and removed the orange the last child held tight in his hand. Heading for the bed, she bent down and rolled the orange under the table.

Nwafanim's wife raised her knees past him to get onto her side of the mattress. She yawned.

He stretched for the lamp at the head of the bed, blew it out, and lowered it to the floor.

"I want you and the children to leave tomorrow," he began, when he had leaned back in on his elbow. "I'll give you something for your fare."

He told her about the motorcycle, the loan. He really had no money. Best not to let the children suffer.

Surprised, she asked him how he would survive. He reminded her about the parable of the tortoise and the corn.

"You're ten men inside one," she said with new regard. "Come for us when things are well with you."

He shook his head doubtfully.

At sunrise she left with the children who stared at Nwafanim in conspiratorial silence; she placed the butterfly-yellow umbrella on the head of the youngest when he gestured that he wanted to carry a bag, too. At the low-hanging row of avocados a short stretch from the hut, the oldest boy recalled something and touched his hurrying mother on the arm.

"Won't we tell him good-bye?" he whispered, slowing his steps.

"You!" his mother scolded, not breaking stride, offended that he had corrected something she overlooked. Feeling unfairly criticized, she detached one hand from the bag on her head and pointing a finger at him, said, "I will wash your mouth with soap one day."

At noon, Nwafanim came back early from work, after running a timid fever that left as suddenly as it had appeared. The moment the door opened with a squeak, he saw the daylight color of an orange on the

floor, and he knew he could never have babies with Big Backyard as he had agreed.

He could not marry her either. How could he? Would he pay the bride price with empty vows? Of course, he wanted to have sex with her every day. But she was wrong to bewitch him into making promises by always showing the graceful bulge of her buttocks.

Nwafanim entered the quiet room. He stopped at the foot of the table and picked up the orange—the same one he had given his son yesterday. He studied the smudges at the top of the orange, recalling how the boy made the dirt-prints with his short fingers.

He raised the fruit to his nose and smelled it. His eyes closed. The scent of oil and soil excited his memories.

Nwafanim's head felt incredibly light.

*Why didn't he eat the orange?* he wondered unhappily.

He pressed the fruit against his breast.

"I love you, son," he said.





*"Inactive Duty Sergeant First Class Mike Sprouse, Virginia Army National Guard, veteran of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, with wife, Tammy, and children, Peyton and Colin; Madison Heights, VA," from the series Soldiers' Stories from Iraq and Afghanistan, by Jennifer Karady, 2006. Chromogenic color print, 48" x 48". For the past ten years, Brooklyn-based artist Jennifer Karady has worked with American veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to create staged narrative photographs that both depict their individual stories and reveal their difficulties in adjusting to civilian life.*