

Tax Collectors

By Obinna Udenwe

Today is not a market day, so we are not packing brooms and beads into baskets to be taken to the market. I am just sitting on the pavement of our house, staring at the birds. Papa is preparing to leave for Nwida market, where he goes everyday to drink palm wine – for papa, everyday is a market day.

“Come on! What are you doing, staring like that?”

I turn. It is Papa. He is wearing his used-to-be white singlet inside out and his long chewing-stick is in his mouth.

“Nothing. I am thinking.”

“Thinking? Go to the backyard and bring my food!”

“Food is not ready, Papa.”

He looks at me like I am mad. I look away and I can see Ofor. He is playing *korosa* with his friend under an *uvuru* tree at the centre of our compound. Mama said the tree grew right on top of our grandfather’s head, on his grave, because our grandfather was a deity.

“Go call me your mother!”

I walk away.

“Where is my food?”

“I am getting it done. Please be patient,” Mama explains. Papa is not listening. He brings out the chewing-stick from his mouth and stands akimbo. He places his left hand on his hip and holds the stick in his right.

“Why is it not ready now?” He is pointing the stick at her face. We are quiet, “You started preparing that food since cockcrow.... Now you are not ready yet. You don’t want me to go out, *abi?*” He moves closer to her.

Mama steps back. “No, it rained yesterday. The firewood is soaked. I have been having trouble drying them.” Mama’s face is contorted now as if Papa is asking her to leave his house. For months now, it seems that there have been wife-sacking epidemic ravaging our village. It started when Johnny who returned from the white people’s country sacked his wife the night he came back. I once overheard mama in the kitchen discussing with her friends about it – she said that Johnny dismissed his wife because when he penetrated her the night he returned, it was not the way he left it before he went to the white people’s country, so he chased her away, saying that other men had been coming to keep her company at nights.

Johnny is the only man in our village who has ever been to the white people’s country. And before he left, the whole village was taxed. Women paid two hundred naira each and never grudged even though it was a lot of money. Men paid five hundred naira, and stopped going to Nwida market to drink palm wine for some weeks because there was no money again. Wealthy farmers and lorry drivers paid higher. Everyone was happy because *nwatibe anyi*, our own child, was traveling overseas. Nobody can tell what he

went there to do, but we don't care. Our village is the only one in the clan whose son has ever traveled to *ali mbeke*. He is back now and dresses in suits and long ties and black shoes. He doesn't speak Izzi again.

Few days after Johnny's wife left, Obiako drove his wife away. He chased her all the way down the village path with a bamboo cane till people came and held him back. She had said over breakfast that 'it fell from me' which was the simplest way for a woman to confess adultery before her husband. A woman cannot pronounce the word 'adultery'; it is too heavy for the tongue, so there are so many ways of conveying it. If a man eats his wife's food after she had confessed adultery, the man would die few days later. If a woman commits adultery without confessing, her children would begin to die. So when Obiako's wife lost her daughter few months earlier and knew what the cause was, she had to confess and lost her marriage. We are still waiting earnestly to know if Obiako will accept her back when she comes with her people.

Two days back, Ipheoma's husband had asked her to prepare for a visit to her family. He had given her a cock to prepare *esusa* soup for the august visit. When they got to his in law's house, he told them that he was fed up with her. His excuse was that she was barren. They had just been married for three years. Everyone had thought they were happy.

So there is wife sacking epidemic ravaging our village for three months now.

Papa looks at mama and says; "You are mad if that food is still not ready by now."

"I am not. Please wait and eat before you go to drink so that there will be food in your stomach," she comes closer to him. "A man without food in his stomach never can tell

what he meets on his way. Relax; the food will soon be ready.” Mama is an obese woman. When she talks, her voice sounds fluffy and unserious and that is why papa beats her, because when she is serious, he thinks she is not serious.

Papa sits on the pavement and puts the stick in his mouth. Immediately, we hear the shout of someone running into the compound. The kind of shout you hear and your feet itch to run.

“Who is shouting like that?” Mama asks.

“Wait. It’s Nnadi’s voice,” Papa says. I am transfixed. Ofor and his friend rush to stay close to papa as Nnadi rushes in. Nnadi is not wearing any cloth on his upper body, his potbelly bounces as he breathes like a wounded antelope, and through a wide gash in his trousers I can see how black his buttocks are.

“Are they here?” papa asks, “Today?”

“Run! Run, Papa Sam!”

That is all we need to hear and everyone zooms off in different directions. Papa runs faster than all of us and doesn’t look back. Not even to know if Mama is following. I grab Ofor and we run as fast as we can into the bush. The birds perching on trees run with us and make noise till we hide behind rocks and logs, some climb trees.

We hear the sounds of motorcycles as they enter the compound.

“It’s them?” Ofor asks.

“Yes.”

“What do we do now?”

Our hearts are beating fast.

“I don’t know. Let us wait.”

Ofor is ten and nine years younger. He squats and I see he is shivering. We hear the strangers in the compound talking aloud and cursing Papa. We don’t care if they curse Papa forever because we have seen and heard so many people do so. People that drink with him. Some nights they come back very late, shouting at each other and fighting too. They beat him up often and when he comes back home he beats mama. Just last week, papa did not pay his bills after drinking from morning till evening. The barwoman beat him up and people were laughing. Before he came back, we knew. Mama was waiting for him in front of the pavement.

“Stupid man! Drunkard!” She blocked his way. His used-to-be white singlet was hung on his shoulder, and razor marks were on his cheeks. He was silent and his face was downcast.

“You are a weakling! The only power you have is over your wife!” Mama’s obese body covered the door such there was no space for papa’s tiny body to squeeze into the house.

“Come out, please—”

“Come out where? Go back to where you are coming from... Stupid man!” Papa slapped her so hard and mama fell down like a huge bag of rice. He nearly stepped on her as he walked into the house.

We hear the strangers make noise and we know they are inside our house.

“It’s like they are scattering things.”

“No,” I say, “they are carting away things. Papa hasn’t paid his tax for a long time.”

“So they take away people’s things when they don’t pay tax?”

“Yes, they do.... They also carry the person away, that is why papa runs each time they come. Papa has been running away all this while. One day they will catch him.”

Ofor scratches at his bushy and lice infested hair. I told Ofor that if you bath often you won’t have lice but Ofor doesn’t believe me. He believes he is fair and fair people are not supposed to bath often because they are fair already. Dark people bath because they want to be fair. Pa. Ezekiel who knows too much said Americans are white and they don’t bath at all. Johnny who returned from their land said it was true. Since Johnny concurred, everyone in our village who is fair has stopped taking their bath often. Why bath when you are white?

“They will not catch papa,” Ofor says.

“They will. One day.”

“Do they catch children?”

“No.”

“So why are we running?”

“Because everyone is running; when everyone is running, you run... I am going in there. I want to see what they will carry away. Just stay here.”

“Come back here. Perhaps they will carry you if they don’t see Papa. Don’t go!” Ofor cautions.

“What if they carry your box of Christmas clothes Aunty Ada sent from Enugu? What if they do?”

Aunty Ada is Mama’s younger sister. She is a hairdresser and has no husband because husbands are not coming. When they were coming, mama said, she was selective. Now Aunty Ada is fat like mama and husbands are not coming again. Mama said for five years and counting, nobody asks her if she is selling or buying. I don’t know what it means when someone is selling or buying like that. It makes me wonder if people sell and buy marriage. Every Christmas, Aunty Ada sends a box of new clothes for Ofor. Sometimes she sends for everyone. Even for papa.

Ofor follows me to the compound and alas the men are coming out with the box. The box is long and large, made with brown leather material. It is the most beautiful box in our house. After the day the box was brought to us from Enugu by one of the lorry drivers that carry truck loads of rice to the town, papa secured the box with a lock. We will see the clothes in the box again only on Christmas day.

We see papa’s bicycle outside, close to their two motorcycles. The men are three. One of them is holding the bicycle.

“Hey! Come here!”

We walk up to them. The one that called us is taller and broad and has beard all over. His lips are large and his face looks as large as mama's.

"Come here... where is your father?"

"Papa is hiding—"

"Shut up Ofor... our papa is at the market. He is drinking." The way he looks at us I know he knows the truth.

"You... You are lying. I know you are lying. Come here!" He drops the box and comes closer.

"Leave me alone, Sir!"

He goes back and begins to tie the box on the motorcycle. In a swoop, we rush and grab the box.

"It is my box," Ofor informs.

"Look at these brats! Your father is a moron. He is a nincompoop... he is a traitor!"

Ofor snaps at him; "You are calling our father names? I will tell him."

The man's face is red with anger

"I am telling you what your father is. A traitor. The government is looking for him. They will kill him when they get him—"

"They will not catch him. Papa said he is not supposed to pay tax."

“What?” the man holding papa’s bicycle asks. He rests it by the pavement and comes close to us. He is short and dark.

“Papa said the government people are not working roads and bridges... our village don’t have water and light. Why should he pay tax?”

“Look at these boys. You want to show us you are wise, *eeh?* Your father has committed another crime. By inducting you into his treachery and unpatriotic acts against the Nigerian state, his offence has increased.”

“What offence?”

“You ask me? He is liable to punishment by a competent court of law governing the supreme state of Nigeria and he will be punished accordingly.” We don’t understand the grammar. Pa. Ezekiel, who is our neighbour and who used to work at the Post office before the civil war once told papa and we heard, that big grammar is evil to the ear.

“They can use big grammar to do anything, even to kill people.”

Ofor kneels down.

“Please don’t punish papa. Please.” I can see tears in his eyes.

I remember what Pa. Ezekiel said and I plead, “Please don’t speak big grammar again.” Since Johnny returned from the white people’s country, there has been chaos in our village; he brought the wife sacking epidemic and crowned it with the big grammar problem. Now wherever he goes, people cover their ears when he speaks because his words are big grammar. Pa. Ezekiel has taken it upon himself to enlighten people against listening to Johnny speak. That is why everyone is in love with Pa. Ezekiel.

When he worked with the post office in Abakaliki, he would tell this story over and over again, a messenger had reported to work late and when their boss, Mr. Gunning, who was a white man, asked why he was late, the messenger looked at his watch, a gift from the white man, and protested that he was not late.

“But you are seven minutes late,” corrected Mr. Gunning.

“I am not late, Sir. This is 7.30 on the dot, Sir.” Mr. Gunning looked skeptically at his own watch and was angry with him. The messenger said;

“Sir, I am not late. Don’t you know that your time is not my time?” The messenger had reset his watch at the entrance to the post office. Then, Mr. Gunning became very angry and started talking very fast, unleashing a lot of vocabulary and slapped the messenger. He fainted. When Pa. Ezekiel and the other staff ran into the office, they found the messenger on the floor, they had overhead the big grammars from Mr. Gunning and since then, Pa. Ezekiel has been campaigning against listening to big grammar.

The man carrying Odor’s box says, “Your father will be sentenced to life imprisonment.”

“What is that?”

“It means when the government catch your father. They will put him in a prison where bad people will beat him every day, forever.”

“You will never see your father again. Never. Tell him to continue running because if we catch him. He is a dead meat.”

“Jesus!” I shout.

“Jesus will not save your father... he doesn't even know your father exists.”

“Jesus doesn't save lazy people. Jesus saves people that respect the constitution of the state,” the third man talks for the first time. We see his teeth. One of the teeth in front of his mouth is out and it makes him look like Ofor when he lost his tooth two years ago. Mama had said she would use the tooth to buy *akara*, so Ofor kept it. Later, she asked him to throw it to the zinc roof so that lizards would eat it and give him a new set of white teeth. He did.

“In the bible even Jesus paid his tax. But people like your father don't pay their tax thinking Jesus will save them when the government will come.”

They begin to walk away and we follow.

“Please. We don't want our father to suffer in prison.”

“Then show us where your father is hiding and we promise you he will not suffer in prison.”

We stop and my head is aching because I am trying to think. I don't know if they will keep to their words and not put papa in prison. I go and hold the box again and we continue to plead.

“This box is not papa's box, it is my box,” Ofor informs them.

“It is in your father's house. If your father wants you to have the box back tell him to come to the tax office, close to the post office, before we leave for Abakaliki town tomorrow, otherwise, you will never see this box again and all the clothes inside.”

I hold the box tight and Ofor holds the man's trouser.

"Give us the box and we show you where papa is."

"Ofor!"

"Leave me, Sam!"

"Don't show them. They will put papa in prison forever and prison is like hellfire. Mama said papa will go to hellfire when he dies because he drinks alcohol. Do you want him to go to hellfire now and still go to hellfire in heaven when he dies?"

"I don't know. But they are carrying the box away."

"Let them carry the box away."

Ofor insists; "No, give me my box and I will take you to papa." I feel like breaking his head.

The men look happy.

"Give them the box," the toothless man orders. They untie the box. I carry it and drop it by the pavement.

"Come. Follow me."

Ofor is leading them to the bush where papa hides all the time. I follow.

"Come out!" the toothless man shouts

Papa is shivering and sweating at the same time. His used-to-be-white singlet is soaked. He kneels down and is pleading. Nnadi is pleading too.

“Come out before I ask my men to descend on you!”

They come out of the thick bush.

“Hey! You peed on your trousers? Stupid man. Carry him!”

They carry papa and Nnadi. Papa’s legs are not touching the ground. He is crying and begging. We get to the front of our house where their motorcycle is and they drop papa and tie his hands together with a rope. They do the same to Nnadi.

“Please, from today I will pay my tax!”

Ofor and I are looking around because we can’t find the box of clothes again. We look everywhere and the men are laughing at us. We wonder if the box developed wings and flew away because we know we kept the box here. Our house is three rooms, with a sitting room and a kitchen made with logs. There are bushes close by and flowers that children suck. We search the rooms and the kitchen and the bush. Nothing.

“Where is the box of clothes?” I ask. The tax collectors don’t look at us at all.

“Which box of clothes?” papa asks.

“Odor’s box; the huge one Aunty sent from Enugu.”

“No. No. No. you can’t take it away. I will pay my tax. It is better you tell me how much I owe than take that box away. You can’t please.”

“Please, tell us how much we owe the government. Don’t take us to the big city, please,” Nnadi is pleading.

“We didn’t take your box away. We gave it back to your children in exchange for your hideout and they kept it here. It seems someone stole it when we left to catch you.”

“Sam, where did you keep the box?” papa asks me. I point at the pavement. He walks and looks around. Nothing.

“What is in the box anyway? Is it not ordinary clothes?” Nnadi asks papa.

Papa goes to Nnadi and whisper to his ears. Nnadi begins to shout just as he was shouting when he informed us of the tax collectors. The collectors are looking at themselves.

“Hold those men to order! Call them to order!” the toothless man shouts. The other two hold papa and Nnadi and throws them to the ground. They begin to beat them. My heart is beating fast and I can hear the sound. Ofor is crying and shivering.

Nnadi is shouting; “Everybody come out oh! They have taken the masquerade! They have stolen the masquerade oh!” I am confused because what is in the box is not masquerade but clothes.

The men stop beating them and are surprised too. Their chests are jumping up and down.

Pa. Ezekiel comes out. Old Soldier comes out too. Old Soldier fought as a Major during the Civil War and he is now in charge of security in our village. At night he roams the village with his long gun and dagger. If someone is going for hunting, he hires the gun from Old Soldier and gives him the head and one lap of every animal killed. If the hunter goes hunting two times without luck, Old Soldier will not hire his gun to him again. Old

Soldier never hunts himself. Every market day, he collects tolls from every lorry, motorcycle, and truck that enters and leaves the market. In the evening, he submits the money to the village council.

“Which masquerade is stolen?” Old Soldier asks. He is sweating too and I know he must have hid in the bush. I can see leaves on Pa. Ezekiel’s white hair. He was hiding too.

“Oh. All the villagers are coming out. I thought there is no man in this village?”

“Today is judgment day for men of this village. You have evaded tax for years now. The hands of law have finally caught up with you. Arrest these other two!”

The two tax collectors approaches Old Soldier and he charges.

“I am an old soldier. If you come near me I will use my hand to cut off your head!”

The men stop.

“I said, arrest him!”

Old Soldier shifts and gets ready for combat.

“If you move near me... I will move you!” he sets his fists ready for boxing, and then begins to dance around, tempting the men to come closer.

The toothless man looks at him disparagingly and says aloud; “You men have committed a lot of offence such as: gross misconduct against the state, treason, treachery, nincompoop, and now. You, Old Soldier, your own crime has increased. Act of militancy is added to your offence.”

Old Soldier backs down at hearing that. He has never heard such grammar come out of one man's mouth all at same time. Not even Johnny's grammars are as threatening as these. The men apprehend him and Pa. Ezekiel. They tie their hands with a piece of cord they cut from their motorcycles.

"I am sorry," Old Soldier is pleading. I look at Ofor and he looks at me. Old Soldier is the strongest man in the village; I am wondering why he is afraid. Is it because the toothless man spoke big grammar?

"We will take all of you to our office where our vehicle is. This evening we will transfer all of you to the State Security Service in the city—"

"State Security?" Pa. Ezekiel asks in alarm.

"Yes."

"God!" Pa Ezekiel was an old village postmaster. He is wearing his white shorts and a polo shirt with a UNICEF logo. They shared the polo when UNICEF came to commission a borehole tap in the village.

"What is that?" Nnadi asks.

"It is the highest security in Nigeria. That is where General Babangida keeps his enemies and feeds them to his crocodile."

Immediately he says this, Papa faints.

"Papa! Papa!" we call and rush to him. The men shoo us away. One of the tax collectors removes his shirt and fan papa till he wakes. Papa is breathing hard.

“Are you alright, Papa Sam?”

“Yes. My head is swooning. Where is the masquerade, Old Soldier?”

“I don”t know.”

Old Soldier begins to shout and one of the men slaps him.

“Keep shut, old man. We are not with your masquerade.” But he is shouting still.

“Run, Sam. Go call everyone in this village. Everyone you can see. Tell them the tax collectors have stolen the masquerade—”

“Shut up!”

“Go, Sam! Tell them the Agaba is gone!”

We take off into the bush. We are shouting.

“Come out everyone oh! Come out! The tax collectors have stolen the Agaba masquerade!”

Ofor is shouting, “They are at Papa Sam’s house now!” our voices are not very loud but because we are in the bush where every villager is hiding, some men take up the shouts and before we get back to our compound we see no one. But we can hear noise.

We see a large crowd not far from our house. Papa, Old soldier and Pa. Ezekiel have been untied and young men have surrounded the tax collectors.

“You stole our masquerade... we will kill all of you today.” Everyone is shouting and talking at the same time.

“We didn’t steal the masquerade.” They nudge and hit the tax collectors on their heads; others slap them hard on their backs

The toothless man says with a brave but quivering voice; “Do you know that you are committing a federal offence? Are you aware that you will be charged to a court of competent jurisdiction for battery and assault, treason and treachery against constituted authority?” The youths ignore him.

“Where is the Agaba masquerade?” Old Soldier asks.

Papa speaks up; “That masquerade was given to me by the villagers to protect against criminals who want to steal it to sell to the white men....” I wonder why the village asked papa to keep the all powerful masquerade. Agaba is the strongest masquerade in our village and the neighboring villages. Papa told us that it is not just a masquerade but an oracle. He said that during wars, the village head will wear the masquerade and lead the war and the enemies will go blind till our village invades and burns their houses. That is why everyone is afraid of it and recently, youths have been stealing masquerades and selling to the white people who stay in big cities and give them big money. When they sell the masquerades, they buy motorcycles and big radios and baggy trousers and marry wives. The elders curse them.

“We are not with your masquerade!”

“Liars!”

“They were four. One of them was hiding and stole the masquerade!” one of the youths suggested.

“Yes! That was what happened!” everyone chorused. The toothless man’s shirt is torn and his trouser is loose. He is holding it with his hands.

“We will call the police,” Old Soldier informs them.

“No! Police and tax collectors are the same. They are all criminals, thieves. They are in this together,” Pa. Ezekiel says.

“What do we do then?”

Women are out and shouting; “Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh!” to them. They clap their palms on their lips to make the noise. Their bare flabby breasts are dancing with them. I can see mama. She is seating like the other women and she seem to be in the front, the way she looks at papa, I know that she must be proud of him. Children are throwing stones at the tax collectors.

“Sam, go and bring tires!”

I rush off and children follow me. We search and bring three old motor tires. They force the men to sit down and hang the tires on their necks.

“We will burn you alive today!”

“Please... Please!” the toothless man is pleading.

The huge man who slapped papa is crying, “I have a wife and daughter. Please.”

The third man is crying too, “Please. My wife is with child. We didn’t steal the masquerade.”

“Shut up. They asked you to come and collect tax. You collected our masquerade. Bring fuel!” Pa. Ezekiel commands. The youths pour fuel on them. They ask the women and children to leave. The tax collectors are really crying now. One of them has urinated on his trouser like Papa did.

“Please. We swear we didn’t steal the masquerade. We swear to God!” they are shouting their pleas because the youth are already singing. They are looking for a matchbox. Papa runs to our kitchen. Mama is following him. He brings a matchbox from our kitchen and run back, mama, at his back, as if giving him security. He did not say anything to her. Mama’s shoulder is high and her eyes sparkling. Occasionally, she unties her wrapper to use the hem of the wrapper to wipe the sweats off her face. Papa has given the matchbox to Old Soldier and he has brought our one matchstick. One of the elders is protesting.

“No, Old Soldier. Wait, don’t do it.” The way he is pleading, I think he is not serious. There is chaos now, the crowd seems divided.

“Burn him! Burn him up!” the youths are shouting and dancing around the captives. Some of the elders are trying to fight Old Soldier. They want to burn the tax collectors.

“You are wasting our time, Old Soldier.”

“No. Do not burn them.” The argument continue. Mama and the other women are silent now and are watching. The way they are staring, I cannot tell whether they want the men dead or not. But I think they want them burnt so they will not disturb their husbands again.

In one of the numerous fights between mama and papa. Mama had said that papa's strength only comes when he wants to fight her.

"If other drunkards like you fight you, they win. If tax collectors come, you will run away with your tails tucked beneath your buttocks like a beast. It is only when you want to fight me that you have power. Stupid he-goat!" Perhaps mama will want the tax collectors to continue coming so that she will always have words for papa.

Old Soldier is demanding for calm now.

"Will you ever come here to steal masquerades?" Old Soldier is asking loudly.

"No, Sir. But we didn't steal your masquerade, Sir!"

"Shut up. Now say; we stole the masquerade!"

The men hesitate.

"Say it and be free!"

They say it aloud; "We stole the masquerade!" They are saying it over and over again.

"Pa. Ezekiel, go bring your pen and paper."

Pa. Ezekiel brings pen and paper. It does not take him long to come back with the pen and paper. I wonder if he had kept it ready for this. As if he had known about this before now. He writes that the men stole the masquerade. They sign.

"Now you will never come to Edda village again. Will you?"

"No, Sir!"

The youths are hitting and slapping them. The tire is hanging on their necks and making them tired.

“Government doesn’t build roads. No electricity. No water. We go to our markets to sell our yams and cocoyam and cassava. Our women till the lands and you come and collect our money for General Babangida’s government... thieves!” Pa. Ezekiel is telling them.

“We will not come again, Sir.”

“What if your government asks you to come?”

“We will go to another village.”

“If you come here again, Ever! We will show your government this and you will end up in your prison of competent jurisdiction!” Pa. Ezekiel says. I like him because he speaks their grammar. The youths like him too. They cheer him.

“Please. Please don’t show the police.”

“Please don’t burn us. Please don’t. We will never come here again. Instead we collect from other villages on your behalf.”

“Good.”

“Now you can go. Boys, remove the tires. Give them their clothes.” The youths obey. The men are saying thank you, Sir.

They give the tax collectors their motorcycles and they ride away. The men and the youths come together and talk in whispers. They ask us to go and we go to our house

and wait. The men come in carrying the box. They are with Johnny who is talking loudly to some of the youths as if he is angry.

“What have your guys just done now? This is a show of tremendous uncivilized cruelty and obnoxious display of blatant arrogance and barbarism!” No one is listening to him at all. He comes close to where we are sitting on the pavement and stands close to papa.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh!” he is shouting, his right hand thrust inside his right trouser pocket. The trouser is well ironed and there is a line as sharp as a long sword from the waist of the trouser down. His shoe is well polished and his white sparkling shirt tucked inside the trouser.

“Oh my gosh! How I wish the government comes to arrest you zombies!”

“What?”

“Yeah men. What do you expect? When you display an idiosyncratic and irrational attitude that amounts to gross misconduct and *unpatriotic* acts against the state and her constituted authority... you get yourself arrested, men. And rot in stinking jail.”

“Hey! This is abomination!” Old Soldier shouts, “You did not just call us Zombies. You just said we will end up in jail. *Hmmn*, Johnny?”

“Is this what we sent you to *ali mbeke* to do? Is this? To insult us and call us names? After we taxed ourselves to send you to the white man’s land?”

The youths are not talking because they have closed their ears not to hear Johnny’s grammar. I am covering my ears too. Papa is not even looking at Johnny. The women

have clustered and are gossiping. They are pointing at Johnny and spitting in his direction in an abhorrent manner.

“God curse his mother. Imagine. We thought that when he is back our village will always be protected. See what is happening now.”

Mama says, “He is even praying that the government should arrest us. And not to say that we paid two hundred naira each for him to travel out. God will punish you, Johnny.”

Johnny is walking away now, his two hands in his pocket. He gets to the entrance to the compound and turn. Everyone is calm.

“Oh. I hate this village!” he calls aloud, “I will have to vamoose from this Godforsaken damn village and go back to Texas!” He turns and is walking away.

Everyone is angry. They are regretting paying for Johnny to travel abroad. Some of the men who objected to taxing the village to help him travel many years ago are laughing and saying, “We told you. We told you. Didn’t we?”

When they have calmed down, they bring out palm wine. They open the box and bring out the masquerade. It is the first time I am seeing it. It is covered with dry blood and feathers. The ear lobes are as long as my arm and it has horns. The youths are singing and drinking and the men are praising papa. Mama is smiling from ear to ear where she is sitting with the other women. Papa is happy because he is a hero and the villagers will respect him henceforth and buy him alcohol.