

FAITH ADIELE

How to be Nigerian:

Guinea Worm Parables

A university degree...transmuted a third-class clerk on one hundred and fifty a year into a senior civil servant on five hundred and seventy, with car and luxuriously furnished quarters at nominal rent. And the disparity in salary and amenities did not tell even half the story. To occupy a "European post" was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the elite whose small talk at cocktail parties was: "How's the car behaving?"

Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*

Two weeks after the black Mercedes snapped forward like one of the snakes curled beneath the desks in the physics lab, I return to campus to keep my appointment with Mr Z. I wake early, girding myself for the sixty kilometres. At the bus park, two hundred people wait for the sixty-seater government bus that is already three hours late. I decide to walk to the long-distance taxi park and take a shared taxi, which is much faster and much less safe.

There is one nearly full taxi waiting to go, its occupants four brooding Frat boys. Up to now my greatest fear has been breaking down on the road as night approaches. I

stagger back in the shine of eight eyes, testosterone billowing out the open car window like a blow to the face, and resolve to wait for the next taxi, no matter how long it takes. The driver, eager to leave and pick up a return fare, curses me out before the entire park.

I curse him back, then ask to have the driver of the next taxi pointed out. This one teases me gently as I make a big show of checking the tyres and jotting down the licence-plate number before getting in the front passenger seat. “*Nne,*” he jeers, *Little mother*. “Wetin you be tinkin? I no go for to rob you this day—o!”

After thirty minutes, the taxi fills, a tangle of limbs and parcels and struggling chickens, and we depart. Slowly, slowly, my grip on the length of wire holding the car door shut loosens, the blood returning to my knuckles. We speed through lush farmland, the road littered with broken-down buses and taxis, their stranded occupants waving desperately at passing overcrowded vehicles. An overturned truck lies on its side, two-foot-long yams and potatoes scattered across the macadam. Workers who had no doubt been riding on top of the cargo stand dazed and barefoot, a pet monkey perched atop the shoulder of one, its black face ringed in a ruff of white fur.

Two-thirds of the way to Nsukka, the engine erupts in a cloud of black smoke. The taxi chokes and shudders to a halt. Laughing, the passengers disentangle their limbs and climb out to join the driver in looking under the hood at the web of rusty wire and soldered bottle caps. A barrage of Igbo is exchanged. After twenty minutes of poking the surface with sticks and bathing it with handfuls of water and fanning it with handkerchiefs, they all agree that the taxi is in fact dead.

I glance up, checking the sun’s position in the sky, and the others finally seem to

notice that they're stuck in the middle of nowhere with a foreigner clearly on the verge of tears. The road stretches empty for miles. All eyes regard me uneasily.

Twenty minutes later a shiny BMW pulls over to the side of the road. A young man picks up his satchel and bids us farewell. Another passenger begs the student to ask his friends to take him. "I'm a businessman," he pleads. "Please—o. I'm late for an appointment."

"No, sorry—o," the student refuses. He stops and points at me, "You can come."

Up ahead in the car, the men twist around to stare. As he motions me toward the car, they give him the thumbs up.

"Thanks, but no."

"Hey, there's nothing to be afraid of. We're all students."

I smile, shaking my head. "Who said anything about being afraid?"

He smirks, tries another tactic. "That's a big man driving the car. Very rich." He leans in, dropping his voice. "No one here speaks English. You'll be stuck. It's foolish to be afraid."

I turn away.

He shrugs and runs to the car. The businessman runs alongside, begging. The student brushes him aside and climbs into the back seat. The men look back one last time, and the car spins ahead, covering the businessman in red dust.

Eventually a government bus stops, and we're lucky enough to get standing room. In Nsukka village I wobble to the taxi park and stammer "campus" to the first cab. Four hours after leaving the house, I reach the university.

The office of the Secretary of the Graduate College is closed.

“Please, is *oga* coming back?” I ask a clerk in a pale blue safari suit who sits fiddling behind a bare desk.

“*Oga* no dey,” he replies, blinking behind his spectacles.

I call one of the market women patrolling outside and invest in some banana “dash” through the open window. The clerk and I peel the finger-sized fruit together, suddenly friends, and I learn that *oga* is out of town for a few days and no, has not yet done my letter. I ask him to tell *oga* that I will return in one week.

He nods and gulps the last banana. When I ask to use the staff bathroom before returning to Enugu, he tells me there is no water.

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In that breathless moment of stunned indecision on Wednesday morning, while the ring of students stands around the groaning body of the President of the Student Union, two Secret Policemen spring forward and heft the boy between them. *Move aside, move aside*, they order, the third angling for the car, but the students stand firm.

You take for hospital, they warn, their hands still bloodied from breaking windows. *Not for gaol*.

Yes, yes, the policemen agree, their eyes gleaming in the darkness, looking as shocked as the students at how far this has all gone. They settle the President of the Student Union gently into the back of the dark Mercedes that ploughed into him.

The crowd parts slowly, gingerly, the students reaching out to place their palms

on the car's hood and rear windows and boot. It is not until later the students begin to doubt that the police have taken Innocent to hospital. It is, after all, more than likely that they have driven him straight to HQ for interrogation. That way, they won't even have to rough him up. He is probably already strapped to a chair in the filthy, stone gaol, the wire cutting into the flesh of his wrists, his smashed legs twisted beneath him, screaming in that agonized high and low they can't get out of their ears.

Now the students try to remember the route the police Mercedes had taken upon exiting campus. Now that they think about it, they seem to recall that it took the first fork in the road, towards police headquarters, and not the second, towards hospital, at all.

The students decide to retaliate. Someone suggests the campus Security Chief, who from Raymond's account of things has been strangely absent during all this *kata-kata* nonsense with the Mobile Police and the Secret Police. And so the students grab up whatever will function as weapons and march to the Security Chief's bungalow.

Get up and find out what had happened to your student! they shout in Igbo at the Chief, who is sleeping. *Where is our security? Is it not our school fees that put garri in your belly?*

The Security Chief comes to the bungalow door in *wrappa* and undershirt and tells them to return to their rooms. He turns to go back inside, and a student springs forward, just like the Mercedes and the snake before it, and plunges a knife into his shoulder.

I wince, imagining his back arching in the thin cotton undershirt, his lips parting in surprise, the student hanging on behind.

Hefting the Security Chief between them like a leaky bag of rice, the students march outside. As they pass through the centre of campus, the Chief breaks away and flees into the chapel, throwing himself at the foot of the altar. The students drag him out, the blood clotting his thin undershirt.

“*Biko, biko,*” he pleads, just as the hundreds had pled right before the civil war, when the Muslims in the north went on a Sunday killing spree, dragging Igbo families out of church and hacking them to pieces with machetes in the street. *Please, please.* And the Muslims had cried back: “Kill the Infidel!” Most of the students, all Igbos themselves, had been small children then.

The students shut the Chief of Security for the University of Nigeria in an empty water tank. There is no water to be had, anyway. And though he had survived the civil war, in the tank, the students later tell each other, snapping their fingers for emphasis, he cried like a baby.

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By Wednesday mid-morning the police are back on campus, this time shooting bullets, not tear gas. One student is hit in the thigh as he runs for cover, and the rumour spreads that the shot student is not even a protester, just a passer-by. This further enrages the protesters, who, after carrying the shot boy to the bare-shelved clinic, roll another government car in front of the back gate and set it ablaze.

By now the students are beginning to realise that this battle is not about them, the nation’s promise, making their voices heard. This battle is not about education at all.

They are beginning to suspect that no longer will the suffering of their parents and extended families and village improvement societies be rewarded when they, the university students and objects of so much collective hope, step into their senior civil service jobs and are able to pay the school fees of their younger siblings and cousins and build houses in the village and have drivers and car trouble. No longer will they be able to take chieftaincy titles and wear velvet caps from India and carry cow tail whisks while listening to the women's societies sing their praises for having used their influence to bring paved roads and electricity to their local government area.

The students think about their leader now certainly in jail, his legs slowly knitting together in a configuration of crooked bone, about their girlfriends arching their backs under the sweaty potbellied weight of their professors, about the days of A-level and O-level exams they took on stomachs light with tea and boiled yam, chewing bitter *kolanut* to stay awake. And they suspect that a university degree is no longer the answer to development woes. This new power equation involves multinational oil companies, soldiers toting guns, a line of hungry bureaucrats in between—none of whom gives a damn about whether students eat or not.

Now the students hear that the V.C. is in fact still on campus. They chase him, dodging policemen's bullets, as he narrowly escapes in a Volkswagen, no sign of his wife or the houseboy or Michael Jackson's corpse. Once he is safely ensconced at his brother's bungalow in Enugu, 10,000 armed troops occupy the campus. Or perhaps it is one thousand.

The students pour out of the hostels to face the soldiers, forming a similar, smaller

phalanx. They point at the soldier's ragtag uniforms. *Look at your clothes*, they taunt in Broken, *patch, patch. Do you get for last month's pay?* they ask, pulling their eyes downward with their index fingers. *No!*

Everyone knows that government workers' salaries have been rolled back four months. While the puffed-up generals feast on Guinness Stout and goat's head stew, university professors and postal officials and soldiers and policemen have yet to receive their wages. *Take bribe, take bribe*, the students goad the soldiers. *Are you not ashamed?*

"Take, take. Here is twenty shillings," says one of Raymond's friends, who had been beaten at a renegade roadblock set up by policemen.

"Ah," says another, digging in his pocket, "here is twenty *kobo*. Go home now," he directs, tossing the tiny bronze coins into the dirt.

The rest of the students follow suit, scattering their small change with sweeping gestures like chicken feed. *Here is twenty kobo*, the voices chant. *You can go home now*.

When the students start walking towards town, intent on releasing the prisoners in the local gaol, their leader among them, the soldiers fall upon them and beat them with their fists. When the Dean of the Religion Faculty rushes out to stop the beating, the soldiers beat him too.

By the time evening falls, three universities in the southwest—the University of Ibadan, the University of Lagos, and the University of Ife—have all been closed for rioting.

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It is interesting that no one who has ruled this country since independence, which was won more than a quarter of a century ago, has been a university graduate.

Chinua Achebe, *The University and the Leadership Factor in Nigerian Politics*

On Thursday morning the Enugu campus riots. The Amazus and I stand on the balcony of our hilltop apartment and watch the smoke. In the evening Raymond arrives toting his tape deck and five shirts. He reports that the Nsukka campus is officially closed. “It took me five hours to make the trip,” he announces.

We go out to see the damage, picking our way through the rubble, stepping over toppled telephone booths, skirting circles of tarmac blackened from where students barricaded the streets with burning tires. We find a heap of rubble where Nipost, the post office, used to be—a beach of shattered glass, mountains of powdered cement, a lone flame licking. Watchers move like furtive partygoers embarrassed after a night of drunkenness.

On Friday morning the papers report that sixty-one rioters were arrested in Enugu. In Lagos, the old capital, seventeen people were killed and seven hundred arrested. One body, a casualty of the initial rioting on Monday, lay at a city bus stop until Thursday noon.

The young men who come to our flat in the afternoon report that Lagos is still hot, with bootleg photocopies of the *Ebony* article circulating, and students and traders planning to regroup and change strategies. The military dictator comes on television to denounce the unrest and blame it on the leaders of the banned political parties.

Later in the day the University of Benin riots, the market women and one policeman joining the students. They break into the local police station and seize arms

before releasing prisoners from gaol. Watchers predict that Amadu Bello University, the most liberal university in the Muslim north, will go next.

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Three days later I arrive to an empty, barricaded campus. Mr Z, the Secretary of the Graduate College, welcomes me warmly. “My dear,” he says, propping open the door to his humming, air-conditioned office and waving me in, “come in, come in!” He wears a safari suit of metallic-looking sharkskin. He nods to the safari-blue clerk. “Go and get banana and groundnut.” His gaze then shifts to a woman fiddling in the dark behind an ancient manual typewriter. “You there, do an immigration letter for the Commissioner’s daughter!”

“Ah,” he says, sinking into his chair and forming a steeple with his hands. “So you are back.” The steeple parts, and both hands saw the air, buffed nails gleaming dully. “You’ve certainly inherited your father’s stubbornness.” He shakes his head. “You know, he was practically the only politician who wouldn’t take bribe!” He says it as if it is something to be ashamed of—the foolish honest politician.

“So how are things working out with your advisor, Professor Y?”

“You don’t know? He’s gone to Germany.”

“*What?*” Mr Z shouts. “Surely you don’t mean it!”

I nod, and he wipes the back of his hand against the palm of the other to show disgust. “You’ve had too many troubles, and now this hungry, runaway priest of an advisor... *Shah!*” He advises me to persevere on my own.

With what? I wonder.

The clerk delivers bags of banana and groundnut. “Take, take,” Mr Z says, shelling the nuts one-handed, the gold of his watch glinting as his wrist rotates.

University officials pop in and out, carrying small bits of paper requiring his approval. Once inside, they try to outdo each other, making puns on the latest news stories, telling tales of Nigeria’s latest embarrassment. One man has heard about a Nigerian Airways plane taken hostage by a European government for non-payment of fees and repair costs. Another recounts a tale in which a Nigerian schoolgirl travelling home for the holidays gives birth onboard and yet the baby is missing when the train pulls into the station. *Ah, this Nigeria*, is the invariable refrain, accompanied by the gentle shake of head usually reserved for a recalcitrant child.

After the last guest leaves, the clerk brings in the letter, all four sentences of it, and Mr. Z reads aloud for my approval. “Yes? It’s okay?”

“Perfect. Thank you, sir.” Eager to go, I pop up from my chair and smooth my skirt. “I am most appreciative.”

“Ah, you’re a sweet girl,” he says, holding out the letter. As I bend to slip the paper into my schoolbag, he leans forward and bites my neck.

My mind sputters and cuts off, leaving me in darkness. Somehow the back-up generator of my body kicks in. The torso straightens. The arms heft my bag. The legs keep walking toward the door. I step out of the Graduate College of the University of Nigeria.

On the ride back to Enugu, the bus unusually empty without students, I worry the

two grooved half-crescents of teeth marks that the Secretary of the Graduate College of the University of Nigeria has left on my neck. As my finger arcs first up and then down, up and down, I try to order the week's events in my head, account for every play. What happened outside, outside. I recall the Security Chief who spent all night crying in the water tank. Raymond told me that when they released him the morning after, he fell from the tank with a thud, finally quieted. His undershirt, pink from the dribbling wound, heaved with his ragged breaths.

What surprised Raymond most, however, were the man's eyes. They were dilated like those of the market beggars with *Onchocerciasis*, river blindness. Nigeria's rivers are teeming with Guinea worms which enter bathers' feet and swim their way up through the bloodstream, eventually boring holes in their hosts' corneas. You can see the victims everywhere—old men with wooden staffs picking their way through smouldering trash heaps at the roadside. Heads erect under grimy, embroidered caps, they train their eye sockets on passersby like the ends of electric torches, the whites huge and milky.

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Over the next few days, the riots peter out, much like the Nigerian infrastructure. Several prominent politicians and journalists are arrested and charged with something or another, sent north. The university students are levied a fine for damages and forced to sign a note of responsibility. Raymond fumes. "Let them levy me—I can't stop that. But I won't sign anything."

In the weeks following the riots, he and his friends mutter about how Amadu

Bello University hadn't rioted, so no northern universities were closed or levied, only southern ones, which is what everyone always knew would happen all along. It is just like the civil war all over again—or now, with the riches from southern oil fields pumping straight into the pockets of the northern military.

In all the telling and retelling of events, no one is ever found who can claim actually to have seen the infamous issue of *Ebony* magazine.

In the north, construction on the new capital resumes: Abuja, the military's vision of a shiny, new metropolis springing up in the middle of the desert, like something out of science fiction.