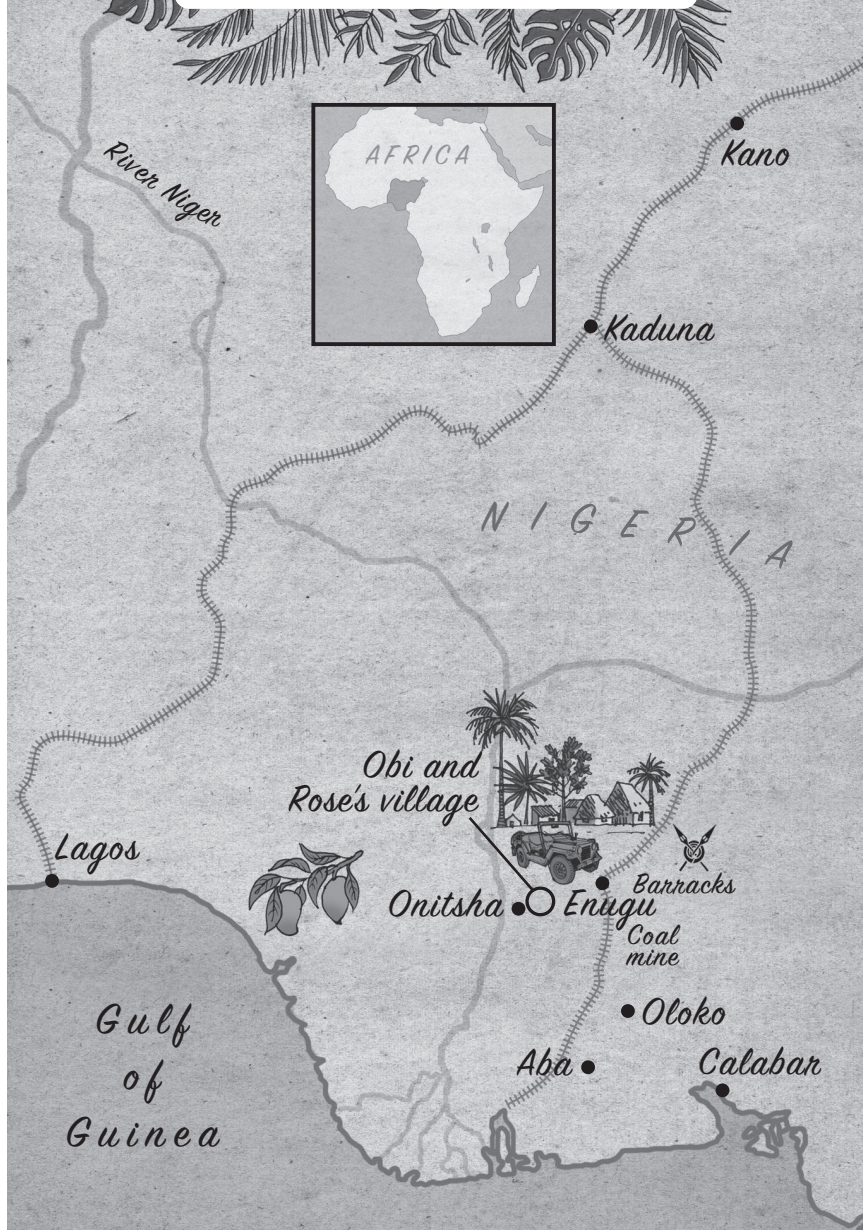
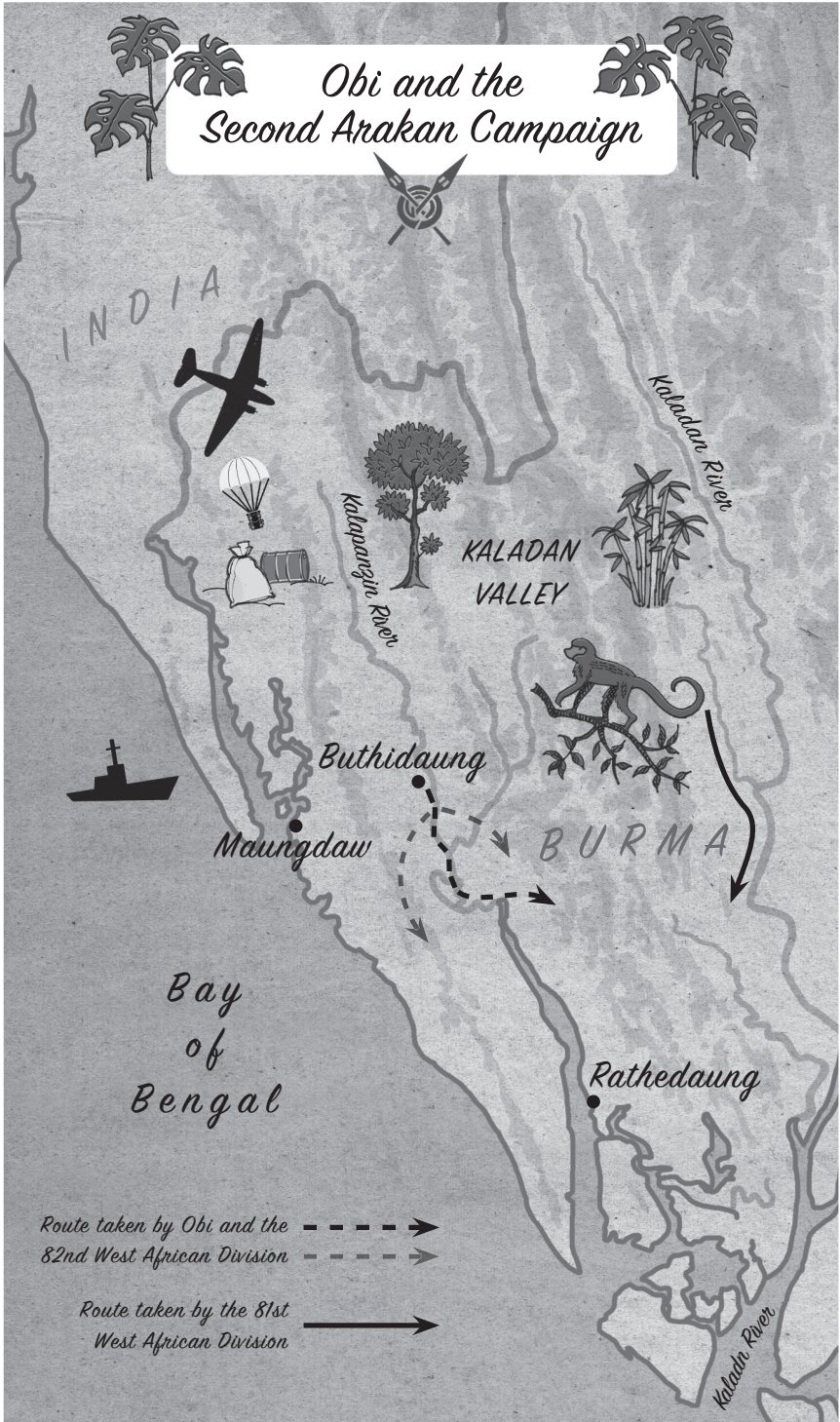


*1940s Nigeria and
Obi and Rose's Village*



Obi and the Second Arakan Campaign



Prologue

The End

Burma, Hot Season, 1945

I DON'T KNOW HOW I arrived here, but the journey to this point has been long and arduous. I mean, how does a man get to the point of wanting to take the life of another? I would have to go back to the beginning to make you truly understand. Yet that beginning seems long ago, and despite the rage and the hot blood that throbs at my temples, I am weary, and so very tired.

I have seen many wicked deeds, so what difference will this one make?

Why should his death matter? For I have taken many a life in this godforsaken war. And yet I know deep down that it does. That to kill him would break the very core of me.

And so I lie on the muddy ground, leaves and twigs crackling beneath me, bamboo stems criss-crossing above my head, shafts of light poking through dense jungle, the sounds of the animals echoing in my ears, before gunfire breaks out once again.

I lift my rifle. My hands shake. The metal feels cool, solid, in my palm, and so I buck the butt against my shoulder, slide the strap out of the way, look down the barrel and aim. I see him. He stands

cowering from the gunfire raining down on us, sparks flying every which way. I can just see his face as he glances over at me. I feel for the trigger with my index finger. I see him put out a hand and signal to the others.

I steady my nerves, sweat pouring down my temples, and take aim. I hear, feel, the pumping of my heart, and as I press down, my finger trembles.

When I started this journey I was young, full of hope, even promise. Rose once called me green. My sweet, dear Rose.

In the months I have been here in this jungle, fighting this war, I have learnt it is not good to feel, have tried not to feel. But the truth is, it is fear that has kept me going. I have lost many a friend, had to leave them to their fate, lying on the jungle floor where they fell. I heard their moans, and groans, and steeled myself, picked up my gun, my supplies, and kept walking. Did not look back, because it was either them or me.

Seeing Ifeanyi fall but a minute ago was the last straw.

We stood by the stream earlier and I watched him roll up his sleeves as he washed his face; we joked about home. I knelt beside him and did the same, then flicked water on him like we used to as boys.

I look over to where Ifeanyi lies on his back, staring up at the trees and scattering of blue sky, still gripping his gun. The sweat glistening off his arm. A hole where his heart used to be, the blood soaking his shirt, forming a pool on the ground. A Japanese soldier lying dead beside him.

I check around for the others, hear my heart pumping loud, and wonder if any are still alive. I stare at the dead bodies that carpet the jungle floor, but I cannot see all their faces. Five minutes ago I was speaking to them, joking with them; I even asked Ifeanyi to pass something or other to me.

Rose and the Burma Sky

And so I hold my gun, the bottom bucked up against my shoulder, pointing it at him. I lift myself slightly, aim at his heart. A heart for a heart, I think. I close my eyes, pull the trigger. Hear a sound. The final pieces at the core of me shatter.

I drop my head down to the floor, but then I lift myself to check, to see if he is dead. I cannot see, so I lift myself higher, and that's when I feel the full force of the bullets hitting my back. I drop my gun, lay my hands on the ground, cry out. I feel the blood gushing out, feel my shirt, my body, soak with my own blood. I turn over to lie on my back, look up at the trees and the sky, and the words 'For what does it profit a man' reverberate in my head. Reverend Nwachukwu shouts them from the pulpit of our makeshift village church. And I wonder how I could have done things differently.

'Am I not a man?' I say on the jungle floor, looking up into the blue Burma sky. Then I cry for Rose.

I see her sweet face. She is smiling. I reach out to touch her. But then, darkness descends.

1

The Beginning

Eastern Nigeria, Dry Season, 1929

WE DID NOT see it coming. How could we? For I was born in the hinterland, in a small village surrounded by African rainforest, not far from Onitsha and the Niger river, into a world that seemed so far removed from the war and all that it brought to us and our generation.

Looking back, I remember our shrieks of joy as we ran naked in the rain, our infantile faces blinking at the sky; we thought our joy would never end. I remember the heavy scent of ripe cashew fruit as we walked along the dirt paths, chatting as we ventured between compounds. The sweetness of Rose's father's guava fruit; we gorged on its pink stickiness when it was in season. I remember the exhilaration of picking big fat snails in the wet season to take home to our mothers' cooking pots. I remember our aunties, for we had many in those days, bent low, their heads bobbing as they swept their yards clean. A group of neat parallel lines left on the ground, which went all the way to the village centre on market days. I remember the six of us, how we were, the day my mother didn't return.

My mother called the Niger 'Orimili', great water. But she was born into the old world, with the old ways, when the Umuada, the first daughters of our village, reigned. Back then, before the colonials, when our village elders governed everything, when the Umuada spoke, the men trembled.

I never truly got to know my mother, for I was a mere boy whose head was filled with play on the day she never returned.

They say my mother was a fighter, that she swung my little brother high above her head, his maleness dangling between his toddler thighs, swung him high, straight on to her back. Then tied her wrapper, well, well-o. Secured him, then the fabric at her bosom, before marching off, leading the women along the dusty road from our village to Oloko.

Well, they say the ground shook as she marched, that her feet pounded the red earth, the dust gusting up in a thick cloud around her feet.

They say that the tremors could be felt for miles around, that she woke villages as she, and the women, passed by. That their voices could be heard as far south as Calabar, ringing out loud, demanding to be heard.

And some women from those villages they passed stopped in mid-action, in the middle of pounding beans for breakfast or sweeping the yard, held their heads still, listened, and without hesitation put down the pounder or the broom in their hands. Began to bark out instructions to the rest of their household. They quickly packed water, food, gathered up the smallest of their children, the ones that still suckled their breasts, and ran out to join the women as they marched along that road to Aba back then, in 1929.

My mother was away for some time, had travelled south with the rest to protest against the threat of more tax; a direct tax on women implemented by the colonials after the great Wall Street Crash. Thousands of women went protesting, demanding their right to

greater representation in the new system. No one expected it to turn into a two-month war, least of all my father.

They say my mother came from a long line of fighters, warrior-like women. That she could silence the village council with just a stare. That she was raised in the old ways, before Mr Kitson discovered coal instead of silver, before Lord Lugard, before the North was joined to the South, before the installation of colonial warrant chiefs and the colonial native courts, which pushed the women aside, silenced them in the new colonial system, way back then when Nigeria was born in 1914.

Well, at least before women like her were sent away to missionary schools; to St Anne's to the west, Holy Rosary to the east, to Queen's College and many more. Where they learnt to speak the King's English, primly pour English tea and don their white gloves to pose prettily for old studio black-and-whites.

They say my mother looked her shooter straight in the eyes, dared him, before falling face down to the ground. And that her blood flowed out on to the soil, a deep red, like palm oil, winding and parting like the Niger on the grainy ground.

They say that the women gathered round, saw the blood, heard the sky above give out a thunderous cry, screamed, then turned, in response to the cry from their god in the sky, to set alight the courts, the buildings and the shops of their colonial masters.

And why do I start this story with my mother? Because through understanding our women, even a little, you will understand what nestled at the core of my dear sweet Rose. What was hidden beneath her smile and her ever-so-gentle demeanour, how I fell in love, and why I lay on a jungle floor looking down the barrel of a gun. Both my mother and Rose were Umuada, the first daughters of our village; they had similar blood running through their veins. They were women who must be heard. I was born to and nurtured by such women.

But Rose was born into a colonial world, with new rules, new desires that shaped her, and shaped me. And it seemed that she was forever hiding between those two worlds. It felt to me, at least, as if she didn't quite feel enough in either, but underneath, at the core of her, she was Umuada.

I remember that December day my mother did not return.

There was something strange in the air that morning; I could taste it on my tongue. There was a heaviness in my heart that I could not shake. The four of us, plus the girls, Rose and Uche, had been in the cornfields playing like we always did. I looked up into the sky, saw an eagle, watched it circle, casting shadows over me. All of a sudden I was filled with such dread, as I watched it flying high, that I turned and ran.

'Obi, what's wrong?' Rose shouted after me.

'Nothing,' I shouted back, for I hoped it would be so.

'Where're you going?' cried out Emeka.

'What happened?' asked Uche, as they stood and watched me go.

I ran inside our compound, heard my baby brother's cry first. My father was standing in the middle of the yard; a group of people who were strangers to me handed my brother to him. I looked around for my mother but she was nowhere to be found, then turned back to my father who was handing my baby brother to Nnenna, his second wife. And I knew. My father stood frozen in the middle of the compound, nodded his head as they told him, but the women let out their terrifying wails. I looked around again for my mother, pleaded for her to appear, but she did not. And I knew.

News of the other mothers came later. They say that fifty-one of them died, gunned down by an automatic rifle.

That evening, the Umuada gathered in our compound. They filled our yard. I watched as more and more of them joined. I was somewhat confused, at a loss for what to do or say.

Rose and the Burma Sky

We, the children, sat by the fireside, outside our makeshift kitchen, trying to force down the food the women insisted we eat. Rose sat beside me. We looked on through the flames towards the centre of the yard as the adults tried to organize themselves. My father sat with the elders of the village, discussing what to do next.

Rose put her arm around me, pulled me close, rubbed my back, and although she was not more than a year older, she felt strong, so I leant into her, put my head on her shoulder.

‘Why?’ I kept asking.

We watched as a party was despatched to bring my mother’s body home, then another to let any relatives further inland know.

The remaining women fussed and raged, calling out my mother’s name as if that alone could bring her back. And when it got too much I bent my head and cried, and Rose hugged me.

Maybe that is where the seed of my love for Rose was truly born, because I knew her strength, had felt it that night. Yet, at the same time, as I got older I learnt to fear it, just as the colonials did who tried to control her, silence her, in the school she later went to, and just like my father before me had feared my mother’s strength, and my father’s father had feared my grandmother’s.

If I could go back now, what different choices we all could have made. But mistakes are easier to see with hindsight, and hindsight cannot change what happened later between us all, or untangle me from the clutches of this love that just won’t let me be.

2

Later

Eastern Nigeria, Dry Season, 1931

TWO YEARS AFTER my mother died, when I was ten and my elder brother was old enough to take over his farming duties, my father left to work in the mines in Enugu.

Things were never the same after my mother's death: a little joy left our corner of the compound, and although my father's pride would never let him admit it, I think her loss left a substantial hole in our family finances.

So we watched him, all thirteen of us and his two remaining wives, wheel his bicycle through the compound entrance, big bundles of his belongings secured on the back. We waved at him as he made his way along the route to open land, then on to the dirt path through the fields. The younger ones were excited, kept running back and forth, clinging to him as he went. Until he finally turned and gave one last wave, hugged the youngest of his children, and sent them back, before disappearing from view among the corn stalks.

And as I watched him go, I breathed out; it was a surprise, for I had not been aware I was holding my breath. My father was not an

easy man. He loved the cane and used it on us, his sons, the most. So there was also a part of me that was happy to see him go.

Sometimes, particularly when my father returned on his short breaks from the mines, I secretly watched him at village meetings chaired by Rose's father, the former warrant chief of our village. Looked down on them from high up in our neighbouring mango tree, which bordered Rose's compound. My father was then as loud as the rest of them. I remember seeing them break cola nuts, share spirit and palm wine libations with ancestors long gone. I listened from on high, hid among the tree's dense leaves, looked down on the bald heads which shone with sweat below. They stooped on old wooden benches, which the womenfolk from both our yards brought out after sweeping the ground clean in preparation for the meetings; then, they quickly disappeared to attend to their own women's business. I watched my father – for even then he was something of a rebel – sitting among the group trying to decipher how best to use their pooled resources for our community, stand to make his point and draw a line in the sand, stamp a stick, point a finger, then stop for full effect, before uttering an old saying, like they did in the old days, before sitting back down.

And at the end of such meetings, when the spirit had freed all their tongues and the toasts began, my father would stand again, take the cow-horn cup and make a toast, remembering my mother, elevating her memory to that of a man's, before downing the liquor, flicking the horn and passing it on. And so I sat and watched my father in those moments after he sat back down, quiet again, solemn, lost in his thoughts, before he finally staggered home, like the rest of them, singing in the dusk, along the dusty paths, giving me a chance to climb quietly down from my perch and join the rest of the children already eating in our yard.

*

My grandmother arrived in our lives one morning, some months after my mother was buried. She emerged from the bush, walking stick in hand, heavy load on head, put it down in the middle of our yard, and called out our names. She demanded a stool and some water, having trekked through the bush to reach us after a dream. We brought them to her. She never went home again.

We loved our grandmother. She was a small woman with tough dark skin, which made her look older than her years. She had a sweet melodic voice, and would gently stroke and pat our heads as she sang us to sleep in an effort to soothe away the loss we felt, especially in those initial years after our mother was gone. Even now, a fully grown man, I still hear her singing to me, easing my sleep when the troubles of this world just won't let me rest. She was a widow, and had tribal scars on her upper chest and back, and when it was very hot she walked around our yard with her wrapper tied at her waist. Her flat, used-up pancake breasts free to the world.

I can see her now, her hand busy waving a plaited fan made from palm leaves, trying to cool herself in the suffocating heat. A very wise and yet funny woman, who I suspected had seen many changes, even horrors, in her time, but who never spoke of them, at least not to us, her grandchildren.

They say I look like my grandmother. We had the same high cheekbones and similarly shaped teeth. We were nothing alike, my grandmother, my father and I, totally different people, except in looks. We, the three of us, looked so much alike that people used to say that my grandmother spat my father out, and he in turn crawled upwards and spat me out.

I believe my grandmother could see things before they happened. She would suddenly look up into the sky and leisurely take the washing into our hut, while my father's wives looked on and pondered why she was doing it. Then the heavens would suddenly

open, and they would have to jump up, run, and rush to take down their half-soaked clothes from the line.

Once, I saw her sitting under our pawpaw tree shelling pumpkin seeds for egusi soup. She suddenly stopped, moved her chair to the side, sat back down and continued shelling the seeds in her bowl, as a pawpaw dropped on the very spot she had vacated.

My grandmother, old and tired as she was, had a piece of land, given to her by my father, broken off from the land my mother had left behind. She farmed that small patch as best she could, sending me, or one of my immediate siblings, to the market to sell the surplus. We dutifully brought her back the money, which she tied up in cloth and hid. I often watched her as she turned her back on me and busied herself with hiding her little coins next to her stash of food: yams, rice bought from the market, dried corn and more. I used to wonder why she didn't spend a little on herself, but in time came to realize it was the reason we never went hungry.

Even during that year when my mother was still alive, and the men from our village disappeared, so half the harvest was ruined and all us children were forced to retire hungry to our beds, I remember my grandmother suddenly appearing in our yard with a bundle of food on her head. She put it down, called to the wives to come and take it, and later vanished once again back into the bush. That week my mother hushed us as we lay hungry in the dark, then secretly brought out her portion little by little in an effort to make it stretch and feed us. Two times that year when we thought we could take it no longer, when things were seriously dire, my grandmother suddenly appeared, as if she knew, bringing food to save us. Some say I inherited my foresight from her; I even believed them – that is, until I found myself among the bamboo stems, lying in a pool of my own blood, wondering if I was alive or dead. But the truth is I have had several revelations, and deaths, that brought me to the point of aiming my gun at him out there in the jungle.

3

Friends

WE, THE FOUR of us boys – Ifeanyi, Emeka, Michael and I – were in the same age grade. We were the best of friends back when we were children, before our troubles began.

Ifeanyi and I were the closest; we came from similar backgrounds. He lived in a mud hut compound like mine at the bottom of the hill, although his father only had one wife.

Emeka was the oldest of five, with two younger brothers, Ike and Nonso, who sometimes tagged along. They lived further up, between Michael and me. The family had spent a little time in the north but relocated when their father found a job nearer to our village; he had served as a clerk at the courts in Onitsha before his passing. Emeka's mother had high ambitions, and when his father died it seemed to me that Emeka was constantly trying to live up to them. We understood each other more in those days – having lost a parent young brought us close – but we were so very different in so many ways.

Michael was the son of the district doctor stationed in our village for a while; they lived the furthest up the hill in the big colonial house with the best of views. Michael was the tallest of us, a handsome chap. His family were not originally from our parts, but from another area of Igbo land, and his father had attended Howard

University College of Medicine in the States, a Black American university, where he met and married his wife. She was a fair-skinned Black American, with loose curly hair. A Carter by birth, a Garveyite by upbringing, whose mother had joined and marched with the UNIA women's division in Harlem back in 1919. I recall that, much later, when we were older, Michael's mother worked on one of Nnamdi Azikiwe's nationalist newspapers based in Onitsha, before Michael and Emeka also went on to work there part-time. She was unlike any of our mothers, but the sweetest of women whenever we returned to their compound from play. The first time she gave us homemade lemonade it slid down our throats, sweet and tangy. It was glorious, familiar and foreign at the same time. The liquid cooled our feverish skin after we'd been playing in the low grass chasing kites, which Michael showed us how to make from old newspapers, string, and sticks found in the bush.

Even today my mouth still waters whenever I think of those rowdy, boisterous days, when we roamed and ran through each other's compounds, letting out loud shrieks, pulling empty, rattling cans along the dry earth, playing football with balls we made from palm leaves or rubber we collected from the rubber tree. We gulped down the sweet lemony liquid with big toothy smiles between us, savouring the last drops once we were cool again.

As for Rose, my dear sweet Rose – who I knew as Nkem in those days – being neighbours, we played together the most. She would join the boys and me roaming the bush. She loved to race, but then she was much taller than us, except for Michael, so for the most part would always win. She climbed and fought and scrambled with the rest of us boys. Her father being a respected man, unlike many other former warrant chiefs, gave her, a girl, that privilege. A privilege that Uche just didn't have, meaning she spent most of her time attending to girls' things in her father's yard, but every so often would break away and join us.

Rose was very bossy, like eleven-year-old girls can sometimes be. We became very close after my mother died. I always felt happy in her presence, but maybe, even then, I might have already been a little in love. Maybe all of us were a little in love. Well, as much as children can be.

But Rose's father was different, their compound was different. Their house was built of brick and concrete. What people would call a bungalow nowadays, with a parlour, which I rarely got to see – it was hidden behind material, or a curtain, which they hung at the front door, so I caught glimpses of it as they would go in and out of the house – and with an elevated veranda, which I often saw the family sit out on in the evenings. Rose's father had only one wife, and four children. He was the son of a priest, a missionary, a freed slave who had made his way back from Sierra Leone. He had been made a warrant chief by the colonials. But, unlike many of the other warrant chiefs they installed, he had not been greedy and had stepped down on hearing of the death of my mother – before the reform of the warrant chief system, which was successfully brought about by the women's riots. They – his family and himself – were very respected indeed.

Rose and her father spent hours together just sitting and listening to their gramophone. The clipped English sounds were a wonder, an introduction to our mother country, England, over there, across the seas. The sounds reminded me of Mr Charles Archie Smith, our district officer. Sometimes, I would look through the stick partition from our compound, over to their elevated veranda, to check it was not Mr Smith breaking out into song, only to see Rose sitting quietly at her father's feet, listening to the gramophone. Other times she would sit just reading him the newspapers that came from Lagos or Port Harcourt through Onitsha.

Rose's father spoke the King's English very well, took afternoon tea on his veranda, and often entertained Mr Smith there. The