THE SUN BLAZED DOWN FURIOUSLY as if to remind the University community suffocating below that this was mid-day in the peak of the dry season. Salome stood in the corner of her kitchen in one of the imposing colonial-style residences reserved for the senior members of the academic staff. She wiped a film of sweat from her nose. The kitchen windows were open to their maximum to catch every breath of wind, but the breeze was treacherous. It wafted heat into the kitchen, mingling it with the aroma of home-made pineapple and coconut juice that hung in the air. She held a transparent jug containing the remains of the juice and hovered over two small empty plastic bottles, filling them meticulously. Picking up a pocket-sized jar of pills beside the bottles, she peered at its contents. There were two pills inside. They shone a glossy pink, like two tiny coral beads.

“Sister Bukola said one,” she rehearsed nervously. Removing one of the capsules, she hesitated for a fraction of a second, and dropped it into a bottle of fruit juice. The capsule dissolved with a faint hiss.

As she stood there, a housefly landed like a large blot on the sticky collar of the plastic bottle. She waved it off desperately. The fly, in apparent vengeance, flew straight into her eyes. There was a flash of blindness before she regained her balance and drove the fly away. The insignificant event upset her and she returned to the bottles on the sink in vague panic. They were identical. Uncertainty nibbled at the fringes of her determination as she capped the bottle on the right with a dark purple cover to identify it.

“P for purple: p for pineapple. I’ll remember.”

She capped the second bottle with an ivory-white cover, in clear distinction from the purple cover, depositing both drinks in the freezer slightly apart from a little crowd of similar bottles.

By the time she made her way to a kitchen chair she was drenched in sweat. Her conscience was rioting. She lowered herself to the kitchen floor, sitting motionless with her legs crossed, yoga-style, her eyes shut and her spine erect.


She relocated to the sitting room. Closing the doors and windows, she turned on the air-conditioner, climbed into a soft arm-chair and shut her eyes again. Joy. Joy had been an issue for fourteen protracted years. Salome’s mind drifted to her first visit to Nigeria, fourteen years back, when Femi, herself and five-month-old Junior arrived after a seven-hour flight from the States.

Femi claimed the baggage while she clutched Junior and tripped a hair’s breadth behind her husband, looking around the Arrivals lounge. Femi had talked to her endlessly about his country but she was unprepared for the atmosphere – Africans on all sides, self-assured, bustling, clamorous, products of a cultural mix that was tangible in their European, Islamic or traditional African attire. She looked through a window. The sky was inky black. Thunder clapped suddenly on a deafening scale, making her jump. A few rain drops splattered on the pane, preliminary to a torrential downpour. Just as suddenly the rain ceased, the darkness evaporated, and the sun was unveiled in glinting splendour.

A statuesque dark-complexioned woman was running towards them, Femi’s mother. She hurled herself at him and mother and son united in a crunching embrace, talking and laughing at the same time. Salome waited until Femi drew her and Junior forward. He was about to speak but his mother didn’t wait for an introduction.

“Femi. So this is your wife! She’s a princess!”

She held her daughter-in-law at arm’s length, surveying her. Salome wore a peach camisole with minuscule straps and had her wavy brown hair caught back in a ponytail, showing off to the maximum her golden complexion. Her blue hipsters, old faithfuls, clasped her firmly. She dimpled prettily. Femi’s mother squeezed her and Junior together, planting an affectionate kiss on Salome’s cheek.

They drove directly from the airport to the family house, their Camry competing with innumerable other Japanese and Korean cars that pursued one another down multiple carriageways. Sam, the driver, was at the wheel. He was a lanky man with a scalp of grey stubble and a permanent furrow between his brows. He listened intently to the family’s conversation as he drove, interjecting an occasional question or exclamation. There was little else he could contribute, since the talk was all about America – at the insistence of Femi’s mother. Sam, a widower with five children to support, had never left his native shores.

By the time the exuberant family reached its destination, even the solemn-faced Sam had cheered up. He held the car door open for Femi’s mother to