

Living
in the
Land of Love

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Land of Love

**Merry life of a white man in Nigeria, the once dreaded
“white man’s grave”**

A Novel

Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo



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DEDICATION

*To my beloved friend Lucy Amueyomo Iseghosimeli
who, with her great sweet and tender affection,
as well as with her constant jovial encouragement,
gave me the hint for this narration,
that is meant to be a passionate hymn and
a homage to the many praises of Nigeria;
a wonderful land, which – tough and once
dreaded as “the white man’s grave” – has
always abundantly disclosed to him,
in the past, as well as nowadays,
the enchanting joys and pleasures of love.*

*To my wife and my mother
who were always so patient with me.*

*To my good African friends
who are very dear to my heart;
among whom, in particular,
the very kind and delightful
Florence and Buki Salisu.*

To another person.

Black Woman

Naked woman, black woman
Robed in your colour that is life, in your shape that is beauty!
In your shade I grew up; the softness of your hands blindfolded my eyes.
And here in the heart of Summer and of Noon, I detect you,
promised land, from the height of a high hill burnt to lime,
And your beauty strikes the bottom of my heart as the lightning of an eagle.

Naked woman, dark woman
Ripe fruit of firm flesh, gloomy ecstasy of black wine, mouth which makes my mouth become a lyric
Savannah of clear horizons, quivering savannah with the ardent caresses of the Eastern Wind
Engraved tam-tam, taut tam-tam which vibrates under the Winner's fingers,
Your grave contralto voice is the spiritual song of the Beloved.

Naked woman, dark woman
Oil that no whiff can ripple, quiet oil on the athlete's hips, on the hips of Mali's princes
Gazelle with celestial joints, pearls are stars on the night of your skin,
Delights of mental games, the reflexes of red gold on your skin becoming like veined marble,
In the shade of your hair, my anguish brightens up in the approaching suns of your eyes.

Naked woman, black woman
I sing your beauty that passes by, shape that I fix in the Eternal,
Before the jealous Fate burns you to ashes to nourish the roots of life.

[Excerpt from the book of poems "Chants d'ombre (Songs of shadow)" written by Mr. Léopold Sédan Senghor (1906-2001) member of the Académie Française and ex-President of Senegal .
Original title: "Femme noire"; translation from French by the novel's author, Mr. Umberto Cordero di Montezemolo]

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APPENDIX: THE LAND OF NIGERIA

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a novel. As in any novel, most of the story narrated here is purely fictional, an author's invention. Consequently, the two main protagonists, Ricardo de Cortes y Montero and his beloved sweetheart Edima Essien, their relatives and various friends, and the many women and young girls he meets and has a love story or a relationship with – as well as the narrated stories themselves – are, respectively, characters and situations of the novel invented by the fervid and somehow oneiric fantasy of the author. Although, as obvious, clear important references are drawn from reality, any resemblance, in aspect or behaviour, to living persons is therefore totally and purely fortuitous.

The narration is however placed in Lagos in a period spanning from 1991 to 1998. Some facts, anecdotes and events mentioned in the tale are real episodes of life which happened in Nigeria and, particularly, in Lagos at that time, of which the author was a direct personal witness or an eager and curious day-by-day reader in the local press. Nigerian States, ethnic groups, towns and localities and Lagos districts, roads and streets, as well as supermarkets, department stores, shops, nightclubs, buildings and places of special interest are indicated with their real names. Similarly, many personages directly evoked in the narration are in fact people who exist – or were alive and died during that lapse of time – and were an integral part of the real life of Nigeria in those years, whom the author wants to heartily and very warmly thank for their involuntary contribution to make the drafting of the novel more interesting and challenging. To all of them a very grateful and cheerful “Thank you!”, and howls of sincere gratitude, together with apologies for the unauthorised mention of their names in this unskilful exercise, are kindly and joyfully addressed.

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1.

Fabulous Africa, breathtaking Nigeria: impressions and fond memories

Ricardo and his friend José Felipe Muñoz y Villanueva were comfortably seated, after dinner, in the armchairs in the living room in his cosy house in Valladolid. They each had a large glass of whisky in their hands. Their wives, Soledad and Pilar, sitting on the sofa, were talking of kitchen recipes and the care of children. Hassan, the faithful Moroccan servant, was washing up in the kitchen; while doing it, he sang a Berber lullaby and smiled at invisible ghosts (most probably, at the cherished image of his relatives that he had left in his country, but who were always present in his mind). Ricardo, who had returned to Spain from his long sojourn abroad only three years before, was enthusiastically requested by José Felipe to talk about his favourite subject, Africa:

“Ricardo, your house is so full of nice and certainly rare African artefacts and there are all sorts of books concerning Africa on your bookstand that they make me wish I could leave on a journey to that continent myself. Please, tell me about Africa: is it really so captivating? Does ‘Africa sickness’ really exist? Do you ever experience it?”

“Of course. Often and heavily. Africa, you see, José Felipe, is an immense land, impressive and diverse. Therefore, full of contrasts. Apart from Egypt with its antique splendour (which however only later on became well known), Africa has always represented for Europeans – since its discovery in the fifteenth century by adventurous Portuguese navigators – wilderness, primitiveness and exoticism. However, to assess the true knowledge about Africa of average Europeans and how involved they may feel with its reality (the best connoisseurs of this continent are the British, the French

and the Portuguese), is an entirely different matter. Most possess only a superficial knowledge. This is particularly true of that part of Africa which lies south of the Sahara desert. When ordinary Europeans who have never been there think of 'black' Africa they conjure up legends, myths and mystery. They imagine thick forests where Pygmies live savagely and savannahs where wild and ferocious animals roam.

For educated Europeans like you, for instance, Africa also evokes the unpleasant memories of enduring fights for freedom and independence, as well as against apartheid. Not to mention tribal wars and, in certain countries, the deprecated extermination of entire populations. The hasty and rather superficial European traveller who spends no more than a couple of weeks there brings back only the reminiscence of vast landscapes, beautiful sunsets, huge holidays beaches and exciting photographic safaris. Perhaps, he also has the memory of nice black girls – prostitutes and others – in the hotel lobbies, casinos and whereabouts, all in search of men to approach. Alas, even for most Europeans who have lived in Africa for a number of years, it has come to represent mainly an easy colonial life style, with numerous servants and a lot of money available for buying the infinite, more or less old, locally manufactured artefacts. When taken back to Europe, these African products decorate European houses as knick-knacks, exciting the envy and astonishment of guests and relatives.

Other fond remembrances include picturesque markets – unbelievably crowded and pervaded with strong aromas and the pungent smell of special unknown spices – where a stranger can talk with ease even to unknown people. However, not one of them has penetrated intimately the real essence of the dark continent's soul – which is nearly impossible for a European, unless he were to live a long time, I mean decades, in close brotherhood with Africans – or even skimmed it.

Unfortunately, the nicely-constructed picture of a fascinating land is often spoilt by series of terrible events. These may be partly due to harsh natural atmospheric phenomena and partly to plain stupid human behaviour. In many countries severe droughts and starvation, as well as catastrophic floods and epidemics are common and constant (malaria, for instance, is endemic nearly all over the continent; only the Mediterranean North, including the desert, is safe from this plague); while in other countries, ferocious wars

spread out wildly and lead to the horrid extermination of whole groups. If wars between different ethnic groups or clans have also in the past bathed those territories in blood, they were at least fought with primitive weapons, such as spears and arrows, so they only rarely involved the killing of masses of people. In my opinion, by the way, it should not be overlooked that in primitive societies bloodshed possibly had a ritual role, maybe connected with the process of fertilisation of the earth. That would explain why the passage of youngsters to adulthood, for both boys and girls, was marked with proofs, such as engraving of symbolic and tribal scars on their faces and bodies, tattooing, circumcision, etc., which all involved the spilling of blood. Alas, today we have the harsh regime of the far more dangerous and lethal Kalashnikov and M-16 rifles and anti-man mines, if not tanks and rockets – unfortunately all manufactured in countries that belong to the northern hemisphere of the globe – moved by financial interests and hunger for power, dictating the slaughter of innocent people and the sudden dreadful disappearance of entire weaker populations. The fault often lies with the ephemeral boundaries of countries, artificially created by invaders and by the so-called colonialists, who took no care in separating – but, on the contrary, in many cases gathered together – ethnic groups with different traditions and customs that have historically always been enemies.

Africans are usually mild and generously friendly: large smiles welcome foreigners everywhere, especially white people, travelling across this vast continent or living and working peacefully in those of its countries where there is no outburst of violence.

There are populations, such as the Ethiopians, the Eritreans, the Somalis, the Maasai, the Turkana, the Fulani (and the Peuls, in particular, among these), the Nubians and the Watusi – to mention a few among those living south of the Sahara desert – who attain a very high level of average great beauty, whilst the Pygmies and the Bushmen are probably, generally speaking, the less attractive ones.

I would say that this is, more or less, how Africa appears to the eyes of most Europeans.

Obviously, all that I have just described is very nice and attractive. But for me Africa signifies something more; I see much beyond this schematic stereotype. For me, Africa represents also a sense of freedom, self-consciousness and enterprise, genuine human interrelations, a warm welcome which is nearly always enhanced by

ample, cheerful smiles, sounds of joyous and carefree laughter and gratefulness, friendliness, togetherness, close friendship and familiarity and – above all – true, sincere and passionate love!

It is, however, also my firm opinion that we white people bear a heavy burden of guilt for having overturned the basic values of life in this continent and I personally feel terribly sorry for what we did and strongly condemn our unfair action. Africa for millennia had been the blessed land, where life was easy because luxuriant nature provided men with all that was necessary. You only had to stretch out a hand to pick succulent fruit from self-sowing trees, to excavate a little to find edible roots and tubers, or to go hunting to catch game meat. There was no need for solid housing to give shelter and no need for clothing in such warm climates. Life was easy, and presented fewer problems than in other parts of the world. This happy condition went on up to the colonisation era.

This was perhaps fruitful and beneficial at the beginning, because it introduced education and social evolution; but later on it revealed itself to be exceedingly dangerous and detrimental as it subverted African traditional principles, as well as habits and customs. In these last fifty years we induced Africans to radically change their needs and expectations. Also in order to find new markets likely to buy – at such a high price, alas! – the industrial products of the more or less saturated northern hemisphere, we created in them desires and necessities that were totally unknown before. We obliged them to jump the gap in twenty, thirty years, mindless of the fact that it took us at least two thousand years to get where we are now.

A target like this cannot be attained so simply and quickly, without terrible quakes and disasters, as is indeed happening in many parts of the continent. Moreover, in a land where barter or, at least, payment with cowrie shells – the ones used by women to ornament their hair or body – had been the basis of transactions and commerce, and only kings had the right to let smiths forge the bronze or copper-cast annular objects they gave in exchange for their acquisitions, we taught them the value and, unfortunately, the power of money. I don't know whether this tale is really true or simply the issue of the over-heated imagination and fantasy of some story-teller. However I was told that Britons, in order to introduce money – their money – in Nigeria, sank many ships loaded with cowrie shells, which they had gathered from all over the country, in the open ocean. Use of money has alas induced thirst for wealth and

corruption. It is much easier to follow bad examples rather than good ones. What can we say for example about the plan for constructing a steel plant based on the electric arc methodology in a country where electricity blackouts are continuous and long lasting - a constant, everyday problem? Isn't that idiotic and crazy or even criminal?

It is however exactly what happened about fifteen years ago. A consortium of firms belonging to two of the most serious and respected European countries proposed just this to Nigeria. I do not want to appear as if I'm making nationalistic propaganda out of this, but one of these countries in particular is really at the top in Europe and is rightly ranked among the leading industrialised nations in the world. As everybody knows, Nigeria is eager to enjoy the most up-to-date systems in technology, so they accepted enthusiastically - not least because, with a project of that magnitude, there was a huge amount of money which could flow as dash - or bribes - into various individuals' private pockets. This is how they constructed the Delta Steel factory in Warri.

The consequences were obviously catastrophic. There was a long blackout which caused the entire fusion process taking place in two of their four furnaces to solidify, thus forming a huge block of pig iron intimately soldered to the furnace walls. In these conditions it was absolutely impossible to restart the fusion process, and so they had to dismantle the two ruined furnaces. But whose responsibility should it have been to anticipate this risk? The Africans, still unfamiliar with the dangers connected with these modern technologies? Or ourselves, the Europeans, who did not even warn them of this possibility? You can easily imagine what a vast waste of money this mess caused.

Furthermore, what about the four gigantic incinerators installed at various sites in Lagos with the aim of burning the huge quantity of waste produced every day in that megalopolis? In principle, they could have been a good idea (apart from the possible production of the much dreaded dioxin). But they have remained idle subsequently and totally unused, like immense cathedrals in the desert, while waste continues to be dumped in enormous, hideous heaps all over the town.

Oh, I tell you frankly, José Felipe, as a European and a white man I feel so ashamed. I sincerely cry for my dear Africa and its autochthonous inhabitants. With our individualism, selfishness and

lack of care, all in the name of progress, we white people have greatly offended and largely contributed to spoiling this wonderful land! Now it is going to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find a remedy for all this havoc.”

“Tell me more about Nigeria, the country where you lived for nearly a decade, Ricardo.” prompted José Felipe.

To be asked to talk about Nigeria was for Ricardo equivalent to an invitation to a wedding party. He loved that country and was always eager to speak of it. And generally he spoke in its favour in enthusiastic terms. He therefore went on with pleasure:

“Like many countries in this continent, Nigeria, the ‘Giant of Africa’ as it is commonly known, has no natural boundaries – whether geographical, ethnological or historical. It was drawn on the African map by British colonialists and therefore includes within its borders a very large variety of different ethnic groups, speaking differing languages. Anthropologists and ethnologists estimate that almost 270 different languages are spoken in this country. Often, the inhabitants of one village cannot talk in their own language to the villagers living just a couple of miles away from their home, because they would not be understood. English, mainly in its modified form of pidgin English, has therefore become Nigerians’ lingua franca. When they speak pidgin English between themselves, they evidently understand each other, but a foreigner joining in their conversation – unless he has lived quite long time in Nigeria and has become accustomed to it – can hardly make sense of what they say.

Nigeria, with a surface area of around 924,000 square km, has the largest population of any African country: somewhere between 100 and 120 million inhabitants (the last census was taken many years ago and the population growth rate is quite high). A great part of its inhabitants still live in the villages in the bush, and a large expanse of its territory (especially the Niger Delta area) is covered with an intricate system of rivers and swamps, which is partly salty (because of tides and lowlands invaded by sea-waters) and the realm of mangroves. But there is also a high rate of urbanisation; this is substantially due to increasing poverty and the consequent necessity of finding remunerative work. As a matter of fact, in spite of the sensible industrialisation of the country (in this respect, Nigeria, in Africa, is probably second only to South Africa), unemployment is quite high.

Although the real basic skill of Nigerians is amply shown in trading (men are keen businessmen and women, in particular, openly demonstrate how skilled they are in this field, being large independent entrepreneurs), they have also become very industrial. There are indeed very skilled workers, such as mechanics, electricians and electronic equipment repairers. For instance, when Nigeria was affected by a severe shortage of tyres, vulcanizers with their small stand-by generating sets promptly appeared on all street corners in order to repair tyres and tubes on the spot. The main fault confronting the nation is their total lack of a concept of preventive maintenance. This means that they are always completely unprepared for dealing with breakdowns when these suddenly happen, and among the most affected industries are the four oil refineries that Nigeria has constructed on its territory.

A great variety of human types can be seen there. In the North of the country, inhabited by Hausa and Fulani, there is some general similarity, as the members of those ethnic groups are all more or less tall and slim. But in the South diversity is sovereign and there are people varying from the tall and big 'Mandingo'-like to very small individuals – commonly stocky but also sometimes slim. Men, who are usually taller than women, are often very well formed, with bodies that are astonishingly muscular considering the rather poor nourishment they enjoy. Women are frequently fleshy. Only rarely does one meet really skinny persons. This is only common among very old people and among beggars. Complexion ranges from the very dark skinned to surprisingly clear, especially among women, who are generally paler than men and whose skin can sometimes be as light as that of a well-tanned European, although a little more olivaceous or sallow.

Obviously the latter cannot just be cases of natural variation, and a white ancestor would most probably be found if it were possible to explore the ancestral history of such persons. Almost certainly, the local populations welcomed very warmly the ancient Portuguese sailors who landed on this coast around 1480 A.D. Considering how white men are still now desired by the female populace, I am convinced that women must have been happy to concede their most precious and intimate graces to these 'extra-terrestrial' beings, as well as welcoming consequential pregnancies by them. And, taking into account not only the genuine and novel attractiveness, but also the dedication, the tenderness and the sexual ability of black women,

those sailors would not have been able to resist their coquettish advances. There are also many albinos, with red or yellowish hair, whose non-pigmented skin and weak eyes are severely affected by sunlight.

Umbilical hernia is not so frequent nowadays and only rarely do you see men or women and, especially, children affected by protuberance of the navel. On the contrary, gynaecologists and maternity nurses are now able to cut very nicely-shaped navels in the newborn babies, especially in girls. In the past, however, it must have been one of the most evident deformations, because all the old Nigerian wooden and clay statuettes are carved or sculptured with enormous and sometimes even obscene navel protuberances, resembling phalluses even in the female forms.”

“What are Nigerians *like*?” asked José Felipe, eagerly.

“Although some Nigerians, at first sight, may appear arrogant and conceited, this behaviour conceals and masks a mild and amicable nature, as well as generous consideration towards other people’s feelings. As a matter of fact, especially if belonging to the same ethnic group, but also between unknown persons, they often address each other as ‘my brother’ or ‘my sister’ and often, if they want to demonstrate their good mood and friendly disposition, they even use these appellations with foreigners and with the whites. In the market, a young girl will commonly be addressed by the familiar term ‘auntie’ – or ‘little auntie’ if she is very young – not only by the young vendors, but also by older women wishing to attract her attention in order to sell their goods.

In Europe, if somebody in the street sneezes or coughs violently, nobody cares; in Nigeria, on the contrary, such is the courtesy of people that those who are around the suffering person personally join in his or her discomfort by immediately saying ‘sorry!’, as if they were to blame for that inconvenience. The same surprising volley of ‘sorries!’ occurs if a person drops a handkerchief whilst blowing his nose, or a wallet, a letter, or a parcel. Typical not only of Nigeria, but common to all Africa, is a strong attachment to and compliance with the concept and rules of the ‘extended family’, together with a deep sense of brotherhood and altruism. Those who have assets or income, for instance because of a remunerative job, have to take care not only of their own family – such as wife (or wives) and children – but also of brothers and sisters and living ascendants, as

well as of a wife's (or wives') family of origin.

There is among white people an erroneous belief that black people are dirty. Nothing is more false! As soon as they have water at their disposal, Nigerians think of nothing else but washing, bathing and taking showers. They adore washing; given the chance, they would do it continuously. Some of them, it is true, emanate a strong and sometimes unpleasant odour but this is most probably due to the terribly spicy food they eat, which then passes out of their body through perspiration. Strange to say, they appear to be more affected by the heat of the sun than white people and frequently perspire heavily, especially during the dry season. This might well be caused by the thick pigmentation of their skin, which makes them resistant to sunrays but at the same time somehow or other hinders the natural epidermal evaporation from their bodies.

In spite of their love of water and washing, they do not seem to mind living near sewage systems of the open air ditch type, which are found all over the country – apart from the new capital, Abuja, which enjoys new construction concepts. Very often, vendors' stalls are situated along or over such gutters, and their owners stay there all day waiting for customers, apparently oblivious to the fetid miasma emanating from it. Herds of children and babies play and sprawl inside the ditch itself, as if it were a 'must' to follow the natural rule of the survival of the fittest. Infant and child mortality is indeed quite high, which is very unfortunate because children, I assure you, are often exceedingly charming and enjoy an indescribable beauty, which many lose though as they grow up.

Many Nigerians are madly fond of having a title preceding or following their name, especially on visiting cards. Those Moslems who have accomplished the Koran's prescription of the holy pilgrimage to Mecca indicate their journey with the title of Alhaji for men and Alhajia for women. But for others it is a real problem. So they have invented the title of 'Engr.' for engineers, which does not exist in British custom and there is the designation of 'Dr.' for those who have graduated in foreign Universities, even those not possessing a higher degree. However, the most longed-for title is that of 'Chief', and this has given birth to the conferment of a vast variety of Chieftaincies separate from the old traditional ones. Almost all industrialists, even foreigners, can now be adorned with such a title. I knew only one foreigner, a European, who was granted

a traditional title of Chief. This meant that he has the right, in the place where that title was awarded to him, to have four virgin girls a year, to receive revenues and homage and to exercise justice over about 1,500 subjects.

It appears strange and even ridiculous to European eyes that children and even newborn babies always have some title accompanying their name. If they are mentioned in newspapers, or in announcements of any sort, their name is never unaccompanied by 'master' for boys and 'miss' or 'lady' for girls. Nigerians are so keen to possess and be able to present a business card that even the small tailor, who strolls around in the streets in search of customers carrying his sewing-machine on his head, boldly hands you his business card. On this you will find a heading in capitals – maybe in ornamental gothic – which states as follows: 'Tailoring Services', and then a surprising, pathetic and perhaps comical: 'Mr. So-and-so, *Managing Director*'. The cards come in any shape and size. The variety is really impressive: white or coloured ones, mat, glossy and even iridescent, with an enormous choice of different fonts.

In regard to religious belief, Nigerians are intensely dedicated to divinity. In their speech and dialogue the expression 'Thank God!' is frequent, and any prayer or mention of divine intervention, as well as any term of endearment addressed to people they love, is always followed and punctuated by an 'Amen!' Apart from limited episodes of intransigent fanaticism (an infamous name here, above all, is Maitama Sule, the leader of a movement of ferocious fanatic Moslem murderers) and in spite of the recent introduction in the Northern States – mainly inhabited by the Islamic Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups and therefore basically Islamic – of the Sharia, the Islamic law, they are rather tolerant towards any religion and do not bother about people's method of worship or their habits and customs. Nearly half of the population is Islamic, and Islam had easily penetrated the region partly because of its permissiveness of polygamy, as many Africans are polygamists.

Christianity exists as a result of active proselytisation carried out, especially in the southern part of the country, by missionaries who, together with education, have introduced and taught the principles of the Holy Gospel. Very often, however, Christianity was superimposed and consequently coexists with former pagan customs and beliefs, so that – apart from Catholicism, which is intrinsically more rigid and is therefore unaltered – there are a lot of strange

mixtures and fancy so-called Christian Churches. For example, the 'Celestial Church of Christ', the 'Apostolic Church of Jesus', the 'Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Seraphim', the 'Native Church of Africa'. These are amongst the most popular, renowned and frequented ones. Their clergymen are called, depending on the rank attained in their respective religious organisations, by fancifully biblical and purposely impressive, resounding titles, such as Prophets, Apostles, Pastors and Rabbis. On the occasion of ceremonies, they normally distinguish themselves from the other worshippers by wearing on their heads white crown-like caps and by being dressed with much richer, overflowing ankle-length gowns. A curious belief among members of the Cherubim and Seraphim sect, which I witnessed, is their credence that Jesus can return any day, coming back to the earth walking on water. For this reason they would gather in the evening at the extreme right end of Bar Beach, dressed in their long white cassocks with yellow or red waistsashes, and pray, prostrating themselves flat on the sand, in front of the ocean. There are even Christian polygamous families. A good part of the population, especially in the southwestern part of the country, is still animist, with a large pantheon of natural gods and goddesses.

Europeans find the mortuary customs strange. Funerals can last up to three days and the families of the deceased can become ruined by paying for food and drinks for a huge crowd of mourners. Mountains of cartons of beer and soft drinks are on such occasions offered to sate their unquenchable thirst. Nigerian adults, both men and women, are indeed heavy drinkers and adore beer (very good beers of European origin are brewed in the country and sold in big 66 cl bottles). In order not to incur such heavy expenditures, poor families are sometimes compelled to conceal the death of their relatives, burying the dead person surreptitiously under their hut, or leaving the corpse of the dead alone, as that of an unknown person, lying on the public street or floating in the lagoon and in rivers.

Payment for publication of obituaries in the press is also very expensive, since it requires the renting from one fourth to an entire page of a newspaper (not just one usually, but three to five), with a big photograph and indication of the age of the deceased person and all the full names of the survivors: wife (or wives) or husband, children, grandchildren and, in some cases, great-grandchildren. Once, I counted 39 people mentioned in one announcement. As for age, it is incredible how many people die between the ages of 20 and

40. However, there are also many very elderly people, between the ages of 80 and 90. I once read the obituary (published with the photograph of a big man sumptuously dressed in rich brocade, similar to a king's regalia) of a man who died at the declared age of 140. This, to be frank, was almost unbelievable and even a little absurd - especially as they do not yet possess a general registry office and it was, therefore, quite impossible to calculate so accurately the age of a man born, presumably, in the previous century. Furthermore, the ages of such elderly people are calculated in relation to ascertainable historical facts they mention in their tales, but what is frequently not taken into account is the fact that oral traditions are easily mixed up and confused with the tales told them in their youth by parents and grandparents. In the non-Moslem part of Nigeria, often, especially for important people, funerals are simply considered preliminary ceremonies that have to be repeated, with greater emphasis, clamour and honour, after some time, varying from one month to even ten years.

In Lagos, in the Ikoyi cemetery close to Obalende, there was in the 1980s a statue of a lady pertaining to a tomb which overhung the enclosure wall because of its height: it was therefore possible to see, even from outside, that this statue was dressed in real, rich clothes and a fashionable high head-tie, which were regularly changed every week."

For José Felipe, as with most men, the main curiosity and interest resided in knowing as much as possible about the women of that country, who appeared dreamily exotic to his eyes. He therefore fervently urged Ricardo to talk about man's favourite topic of conversation:

"Tell me about women. What are they like there?... Beautiful?... Intelligent?... Passionate? ... How do they behave towards white men and what sort of feelings do they harbour in their hearts for Europeans? Tell me, Ricardo, please, tell me: I want to know everything about them!"

Ricardo sipped a long draught of his whisky, then answered José Felipe's question:

"Women, including the most corpulent matrons and mummies, generally have very beautiful, straight backs and their shoulders are round and plump. Such attractive shoulders recall the consistency of earth, because of their mat colour and the soft and musk-like aspect

of their thick skin. This upright posture must be the result of the custom of carrying extremely heavy weights on their heads since childhood, carefully balancing them whilst walking and working, holding their hands free. This practice may have internally deformed their backbone with scoliosis, but has given them externally a very attractive silhouette. Unfortunately, what probably does deform and spoil a woman's spine is the habit – widespread in all Africa – of carrying babies on their back, bound to the mother's torso by means of wrappers. This continues up to a very advanced age (as much as 3 to 4 years and therefore up to a time when their children have become quite heavy). Often very small girls can be seen carrying around their brothers and sisters in this way. This habit of carrying babies on the back makes the baby happy at enjoying continuous contact with its mother's body. But on the other hand it exposes it, defenceless, to large swarms of flies which gather around its eyes and mouth, perhaps causing outbreaks of glaucoma or other eye diseases.

A large part of the female populace in Nigeria, including tall and slim young girls, tend to have large and protuberant buttocks, which may be the heritage of ancient forms of highly-praised *steatopygia*. This becomes increasingly evident with the advancement of age. Often it is only by looking at them in profile that one notices this particular characteristic of their silhouette, as when the rest of the body is well-shaped it looks totally normal from a frontal view.

In many cases, the nice shape of women – especially that of their breasts – is quickly spoilt by having children. Because of the poor quality of food it is common to breastfeed children up to their third and sometimes even fourth or fifth year of age. This, of course – although fully admitting that the high nutritional characteristics of mother's milk are of great benefit for the child – is bound, along with the continuous carrying of babies on her back by means of wrappers tightly bound with a knot right over her breasts, to be very detrimental to the beauty of the woman. In this way, she is indeed terribly exploited from a purely physical viewpoint. Alas, under such strain, even the nicest and hardest breasts soon droop and wrinkle and the finest figures get obese or distorted! I tell you frankly, José Felipe, there is unfortunately, for me at least, no more pitiful sight than a young woman, often provided with an exceedingly lovely and attractive face and a generally desirable body, with saggy and dangling breasts.

The Nigerian population may not on average be the finest in Africa. There are however very fine girls and sometimes even real and rare beauties, blessed with features likely to turn many men's heads by their stately walk and enabling them to compete victoriously in any world-wide beauty contest. But what characterises Nigerian women and really marks their difference is their intelligence, the astonishing cleverness in reasoning and acknowledging problems, their ability to talk on any topic, their skill in managing and solving intricate problems, their rapidity in making decisions. They are fine observers of the reality of events and of life and are attentive and interested conversationalists. One can talk freely with them – even with only partially educated ones – on every subject. They are really open and ready to receive severe criticism, if these have a sound basis, are constructive and amicably-disposed. Such behaviour is rarely shown by men, who still have a 'colonisation complex' and are always suspicious that if a white man attempts to criticise them, he does so with the aim of marking his superiority, not in a friendly spirit.

Although as I said before many Africans are – especially in men's mentality – inclined to be polygamists, the Nigerian girl who lives in town and is therefore acquainted with the European style of life and aware of modern customs is usually against polygamy and wants to be the only wife of the man she marries. This is a very widespread sentiment, even among girls born to polygamous families. Unfortunately for them – and in spite of their relative freedom and indisputably keen and open minds – Nigerian society is still very male-oriented and they will later on be obliged to accept the will of their husband.

Having always been accustomed, from one generation to another, to extremely frequent marriages between very young girls and elderly men, girls do not consider at all the age of a man. If they like him, they can have without the slightest problem an intimate relationship with a man who, by his age, could easily be their father, or even their grandfather. This obviously is good fortune for expatriate men who – whether single or married with families living abroad – are normally posted in that country because of their acquired wisdom and work experience, and so likely to be men of ripe age. They can easily have a romance with indigenous girls engaging in their very first experience of love, as these girls are ready to accept such a situation, which is certainly uncommon in Europe and the rest of western

society. Furthermore, as already mentioned, many Nigerian girls long for a romance with a white man. I do not think that they aim to have a relationship with a white man purely out of thirst for money, although it is evident that, given the abyssal disparity of wealth between an expatriate and a poor local girl – often jobless or with poorly paid work – it is nearly obligatory for him to help her financially.

There are indeed lots of girls who are exceedingly romantic and sentimental and fall deeply in love with the ‘white’ foreigner they start a romance with. This is amply demonstrated by the length of these relationships, which can last for decades - as long as the expatriate man lives in their country and sometimes even beyond. A total lack of sensitivity and faith in their sentiments and an unbelievable brutality is, however, shown by some expatriates – mostly field geologists, geophysicists, drillers and flow-station operators – who lock their mistresses inside their rooms at oil field camps when they go to work, for fear that they might meet other men: what sort of mutual understanding and romance can then exist between such couples? It is evidently only a matter of sex, not of deeper sentiments. For me, this is a totally unjustified violation, which should not be tolerated by these girls!

Women, especially young girls living in towns, are very skilful in making themselves up; the use of mascara and beautifying tints of various kind and colour for eyes and cheeks, as well as that of lipstick and nail (also for toes) polishes is well known and widespread. Some women know well how to manage in order to make a soft and delicate use of these embellishments, which render them really irresistible (just a little bit is more than sufficient, since nature has already given them such a nice skin colour). Others, unfortunately, over-exaggerate with colours that are too brilliant and make themselves look like puppets or parrots, in a fashion similar to many middle-aged and older ladies’ behaviour in Europe. Furthermore most girls in towns regularly shave their armpits, although it shouldn’t really be necessary, because the great majority of them have here only very small tufts of short curly hair which do not look unattractive; and those who need it (Africans are in general rather glabrous and women, therefore, usually have smooth, hairless arms and legs) remove hair from their legs. Following the dictates of the latest western fashion, some of them carefully pluck their eyebrows as well to make them thinner and arched.

Many young women are well aware of the use of Tampax tampons and of ad-hoc pads to help during their critical days and are accustomed to using them regularly, when the necessity arises. However, the majority of women make big rolls with toilet paper (if they have it, otherwise they use any other sort of paper) to protect their intimate parts; in a house with a woman in such a condition, the consumption of toilet paper increases substantially in those days.

In general, I assure you, Nigerian young women are entirely suited to marrying white men and not only those from the medium or lower classes – as already happens sometimes – but also those coming from the upper class. Many of these women ardently desire this, and they can make marvellous wives for them, believe me. I am convinced that racial integration, which is highly desirable, can only achieve success through a substantial increase of marriages between white men and black women - more so than between black men and white women, which, currently, seem to be the more frequent type of union. Women, as I already mentioned, are more intelligent than men and can more easily adapt themselves to new situations and to foreign customs and traditions. Once taken to Europe or America, they quickly integrate themselves and become marvellous Europeans or Americans. For men it is, on the contrary, more difficult to forsake the old customary traditions and, even when they are educated abroad, they return to their ancient habits when they go back to Nigeria, mindless or apparently careless of what they have seen and learnt in more modern foreign countries.”

With his vivid and interesting tale based on his own direct experience, and with the kind words used in favour of Nigerian women, Ricardo had engendered in his friend a great desire to know a lot more about them, making him imagine fabulous nights of love with magnificent black beauties. José Felipe was therefore possessed by tremendous excitement, and asked him outright:

“All right, Ricardo, but what about sex? Is it true, as white people commonly believe, that black women are very hot and make love in an exceedingly arousing and particularly satisfying way?”

Before answering, Ricardo poured a second shot of whisky into the two empty glasses. José Felipe gulped a good fifth of it, then exclaimed with enthusiasm:

“Thank you, Ricardo, you have enabled me to discover a new brand of whisky. I have to admit that your 12-year old pure malt

Cardhu whisky is excellent: with its fine, slightly peaty aroma and its delicate taste, it is one of the most delicious I have ever drunk!”

“I am happy that you like it. I also have and appreciate a lot Glenmorangie, 12-year-old Glenlivet and Macallan, whilst I must say that strong peat-tasting whiskies, such as Laphroaig and others, though much sought after by fine connoisseurs, are too exaggeratedly aromatic for my taste and I don’t like them much. I tell you, I’m personally a real fan of Cardhu, the taste of which, in my opinion, is very finely balanced.” said Ricardo. Then, reading the impatience fretting in his friend’s eyes, he continued his tale: “In respect of sex, the Nigerian woman is in general very sensual and enjoys very much making love to a man she likes. She is, generally speaking, a sumptuous and passionate lover. Sex habits are simple, but the woman is used to and enjoys performing oral sex, which is widely practised. In African couples however only women perform fellatio, since men often consider cunnilingus as an unworthy and degrading action for them and moreover, when having sex, may not care much about a woman’s pleasure. It is reciprocal only between white men and African women and this is another reason why Nigerian women – who are fond of sweet preliminaries and seek tenderness and care for themselves when making love – are so eager to have a European lover.

Perversions are practically unknown. Anal intercourse is however moderately widespread because women’s buttocks strongly attract African men, who crave for it. But the practice is disliked and despised by women and, whenever possible, they refuse it. Although they like petting very much and adore to be kissed and licked all over their body (and, obviously, especially on their sexual parts) many women do not like profound kissing – which they call a ‘French kiss’ – with a man’s tongue deeply inserted in their mouth.

Girls usually have their first sexual experience at school, at an average age of 16 or 17, only occasionally earlier, at 14 or 15 and, even more rarely, at 13. They generally do not take any precautions to avoid pregnancy. Press campaigns lament the fact that the age of first experience is going down and that there are, for this reason, more and more early pregnancies. The abortion rate among youngsters is therefore quite high. Also strong are press campaigns to warn youths about the danger of contracting HIV and, as a consequence, AIDS. In general, girls have their first experience out of pure curiosity and not because they are in love with their partner.

They look for real love only later, when they are teenagers no more. All over Nigeria, women from the southeastern region, Akwa Ibom State and Cross River State, are considered to be the keenest and most skilled lovers. By the way, they are also reputed to be the best cooks, and their cuisine, especially their selection and use of herbs of various kinds (with which they prepare, in particular, the renowned vegetable soup ‘foofoo’), the most sophisticated and varied in the whole country.

Female circumcision is unfortunately a very strong and tenacious tradition and is still practised in many parts of Nigeria: men are indeed convinced – it is difficult to say on what grounds – that in so doing their own pleasure is increased whilst women become disinclined to have sex and, as a consequence, are more faithful. The most frequent form of female circumcision is the excision of the clitoris. More rare are complete infibulation and cutting of the lips of the vulva, commonly practised in other African countries. What is strange is that in villages old-fashioned-thinking women, for the sake of mere compliance with the long-established tradition, still accept and openly favour this absolutely insane male wish and vision of life. They thus submit with a light heart their daughters, nieces and granddaughters to horrible and dangerous mutilations, which, in some cases, can even lead to death or, at least, to vaginal infections and, later on, cause sexual intercourse to be painful and detestable.

On the other hand, male circumcision is such a widespread practice all over Nigeria that even Christians and, among these, in particular, Catholics do it. The justification for these ritual operations among the latter is indeed that Jesus Christ was circumcised, ignoring the fact that Jesus was born to human life within a Jewish family. He had therefore to submit himself to the laws and customs of His people of origin, but he did not impose those same prescriptions on His followers and worshippers.”

“How do Nigerians dress? Are they still naked or half-naked as can be seen in old drawings and photographs?”

“Oh, no, what are you thinking! Nigeria is a civilised and modern country, full of commercial and industrial activity and very conscious of being in the 21st century. It is not a wild land where people, living like in the Stone Age, still carry on a primitive life! Maybe in the deep bush and inside their compounds (where, often, men at leisure like to wear a simple towel wrapped around their

hips) they can still be seen half-naked, especially old women with unattractive, flat and withered breasts dangling from their chest down to their belly. It is true that the traditional dressing of the Chiefs of the 'Oba' (King) of Benin is still nowadays a naked bust with an ample, long white gown – mostly made rich-looking by the use, as for their King's clothes, of fine and costly lace – wrapped many times around their waist.

But in towns, apart from a few mad people who go around lonely and totally nude, mainly ignored by the many passers-by, most Nigerians like to wear traditional, fully-covering clothes. In the North they wear loose flowing caftans, as well as 'tobes' and 'rigas', while head and neck are covered with big, bright turbans, which protect them from the burning sun and from the blasts of sand blowing in the wind. In the South you can see men in ample 'agbadas' – often made richer and gaudy with fine and complicated embroideries, usually stitched by hand by men even with gold or silver thread, and precious Swiss-made Sankt Gallen laces – and matching caps or soft berets.

Women wear 'bubas' or 'lappas' (called 'iros' in Yorubaland and therefore also in Lagos, where Yoruba is the most used native language) and finely patterned dresses and wrappers, sometimes, especially for feasts and ceremonies, embellished with sumptuous and varied starched turbans or head-ties. Despite the considerable production of expensive, locally handcrafted textiles, most common women's dresses are fashioned from colourful 'made-in-Holland' cotton fabrics.

The habit of wearing traditional clothes is particularly common in the north of the country, while in the southern part nowadays western clothes are more accepted and used, particularly by civil servants, employees in foreign companies, workers in the construction field and by young people. On Sundays and other festivities, entire families – father, mother and five to seven children – all dressed in the same sort of fabric, often vividly coloured crinoline, can very frequently be seen. Also on Sundays, at Mass or the Holy Service, many women dress in sophisticated western dresses – though, surprisingly, with puffed sleeves – but in a very old fashioned style that recalls the characters in Mark Twain's novels, or the times described in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'."

“What other peculiarities can you tell me about Nigerian customs?”

“Well, since we are on the subject of clothes, I can tell you more about that. When Nigerian men are dressed in western fashion they usually do not wear any sort of hat. But when they are wearing traditional clothes, they *always* wear a cap or a beret and, strangely enough for a country with a rather hot climate, they never remove it from their head and put it down, not even at home or in friends’ and in other people’s houses, at the office, or in a car, or even when sitting at the table eating. Frankly speaking, this habit was very surprising for me in particular as I normally never wear a hat and hardly put the regulation cap on my head during my military service and constantly used to take it off as soon as possible.

Women, for their part, have discovered the value of a bra to keep their breasts firm and steady, as well as to sustain their weight or to keep them high. Women’s cunning artifices to trick and confuse men have found a fertile soil also among these black beauties. Just to mention a typical one I’m fully aware of: a lovely, very close Nigerian friend who has small breasts normally uses padded bras in order to give the impression, at least when dressed, of being endowed with larger ones. So nowadays they wear them very proudly on every occasion. And, obviously, this is also used as a fashionable piece of clothing. For instance, while performing their traditional dances in native dresses, they ought to be naked-breasted as they used to be in the past. But now they triumphantly wear a bra. And if you make a tour in the indigenous quarters of the towns, you can see women peeping out of their houses and just wearing a bra – mainly white, only sometimes creamy and very rarely black – as the sole garment to cover the upper part of their body in the harsh and oppressive heat.

At the markets, there are entire stands selling only bras, although not very elegant ones (lacey and fancy ones, for instance, are almost systematically ignored). These are openly exposed in full view, with very large displays and ample abundance of sizes, though the most requested one is the extra-large!

Much of the time, not only at home, but also at the office, under their desk, Nigerians, both men and women, keep their shoes off and remain barefoot. At first I thought that this was due to their ancestral customs and their lack of familiarity with them, exactly as this is still the case nowadays amongst peasants and people who live in the countryside here in Spain – a country deemed to have made,

in these last years, enormous steps forward on the path of progress. But later I discovered that even many Britons do it too. How can we blame Nigerians for it then, if the so-called colonisers, those who are supposed to have brought civilisation, modernity and culture to their land, and have been their teachers, behave in this way themselves?...

Another curiosity is that at the Mass in the two Lagosian Catholic parish churches of Holy Assumption in Ikoyi and in Apapa, the practice had been initiated of having a second collection of alms at the end, in order to get a contribution from worshippers for the reconstruction of part of the church and parish-house. Whilst the first collection was performed by the matrons, members of the parish patronage, who moved from bench to bench with their big alms-collecting bags, the second one was carried out by placing a large open wooden box at the foot of the altar, in front of the consecrating priest who sprinkled the donors with holy water. These had to move forward, queuing, towards the altar in order to drop their money into the box. The procession was solemnly accompanied by rhythmic music from percussionists and by songs performed either by the church choir or by one of its soloists, normally a woman, a soprano, blessed with an exceedingly beautiful and enchanting voice. Most of the offering worshippers, especially older women, would advance to the altar dancing – sometimes totally enraptured by the music – while the assembly clapped hands to the rhythm.

Another aspect of African worship that I found rather endearing was their habit of not keeping an upright position (as kept by myself and the other whites attending the Mass) when kneeling on the benches of the church. More or less all the blacks, men and women, though prostrated on their knees, kept a half-seated position, leaning their behind backwards against the seat, especially during the Consecration of bread and wine. As a joke, I would say that this was due to the weight of their normally very protuberant buttocks, which made them incapable of sustaining such a heavy load for a long time and compelled them to find a support to alleviate the permanent fatigue imposed on them by nature.

As a third curiosity, I can tell you that at the regularly huge traffic jams which Nigerians call 'go slows' and which happen especially at peak hours, an incredible crowd of vendors, selling the most disparate items, go from one car to the next along the nearly-

immobilised queue, offering their goods. Imagine, José Felipe, occasionally they even sell ice-creams in that way even though, having been kept for hours in the stifling heat of the burning sun, they soon become completely molten in their pots! Nigerians, however, do not mind that much and buy them just the same, and greatly enjoy eating – or, rather, ‘drinking’ – them. Innumerable vendors sell USA-made ‘Vicks VapoRub’ tablets, ointment and inhalers, especially during the dry season when the Harmattan – the wind from the far Sahara desert, bringing the finest, dusty particles of the desert sand up to the ocean in suspension – blows and everybody’s lungs and bronchia are affected. Also crowds of beggars and especially lame people and cripples move begging from one car to another, skilfully installed on fast-moving trollies made from a wooden plank mounted on small rollers or ball-bearings.

I don’t know whether it can be considered typical of Nigeria, but as a fourth curiosity I want to tell you a rather shocking episode that happened to me, which is alas not uncommon. Once, for reasons connected to my work, I had to meet an important member of the Ruling Council. My secretary had booked a date and I had therefore been given a precise time for meeting him. But when I was introduced into his lobby, there were several other men, all Africans, waiting to be received by him and I had to wait many hours for my turn to be admitted to his office. At a certain moment, a rather elderly man seated just in front of me – who could be identified by his clothes as a Northerner, probably an Alhaji pertaining to the Hausa ethnic group – slipped his feet out of his half-shoes (shoes having only the front part, shaped like moccasins, but like sabots, without the hind part). He put his feet ostentatiously on the sofa, first one, then the other, and started impudently and shamelessly ‘cleaning’ them, scratching with the fingers of his right hand between his toes.

I tried to look sternly at him to show clearly my disapproval and disgust at his impolite action, but he continued undaunted until the time arrived for him to be received by the person we both had to meet. And I was thinking, horrified, that this man would now shake hands – using that same hand which had just scratched at length between his toes – with that ‘big gun’ of the State I too had to meet later and, in turn, shake hands with. Frankly, I would have welcomed the possibility of warning him: “Don’t shake hands with this ‘gentleman’, please! Keep your hand clean!”

Another curiosity is that in the two Lagos quarters of Ikoyi and Victoria Island you can often meet broken-winded or limping horses on the streets – alone or in a group of two or three – quietly wandering around, grazing on the verges or calmly walking and even resting or, sometimes, sleeping right in the middle of them. Most of these horses – lean and emaciated – have been released from the Polo Club, where they are literally exploited to death, after they break a leg or get broken-winded and therefore become useless for riding and playing polo. Their owners, mainly Alhajis from the North, do not dare kill them (I think because of some rule in the Koran forbidding it) and so get rid of them in this easy way, just letting them loose until they die naturally or collide with some vehicle or stumble and fall into some open sewer. And when this happens in a gutter alongside a compound, it becomes the compound owners' or tenants' business and trouble, as happened indeed to me, to dispose of the immediately stinking carcass.

Everywhere in Nigeria there is a heavy consumption of oranges. But Nigerians don't eat oranges as we do: they mainly just suck the tasty juice by squeezing them by hand into their mouth, and then throwing the emptied segments away as waste. So, you can see small benches at every street corner with heaps of oranges stacked in pyramids on them and women at their sides, alone or in groups, all busily and patiently peeling the oranges to sell to passers-by. Hot and hurried or lazy customers, for the price of a few coins, can easily refresh themselves in this way – while pausing for a short moment from their respective engagements or pastimes.

Now I wish to tell you about the common ability of Nigerians for creating great and unbelievable imbroglios: they have in that field a real mastery and creativity which can hardly be equalled by any other people in the whole world. Even Seville's gipsies, Neapolitan crooks, Turks, and Levantines in general must be considered as simple amateurs or naïve children by comparison with them. A singular one which was invented recently works in the following way, in order to get hold of the current bank account numbers and signatures of industrial entrepreneurs and businessmen from all over the world, which are then used later to forge fake money transfer orders. They send these people a letter signed by a so-called, mysterious official in a Ministry, indicating that they need to deposit a huge amount of money (generally, 35 to 50 million US dollars) into a foreign bank as a mediation fee for a commercial transaction. Should the addressee

of the letter help them by putting at their disposal his current account for such a deposit, he will receive 10% of the said sum. Various entrepreneurs in Spain who have received this sort of letter asked me whether this operation was correct and seriously practicable. I warned them very firmly against falling into the trap and risk seeing, afterwards, their current account being drained by their own (but faked) transfer orders to some unidentifiable Nigerians. For fear of undesirable imitation, Nigerians themselves commonly sign in a very complicated manner, and often their signature does not reflect their real name at all.

Finally, typical of Nigeria, but, in general, also of all Africa, are the open-air 'beauty salons' along the sides of roads and streets where hair dressers – usually, men for men and boys and women for ladies and girls – openly and publicly arrange the hair of their customers. The colourful and sometime very humorous plaques and tables set out with painted portraits of men and women wearing different hairstyles are funny and extremely attractive. For a man or a boy the most common cut is very simple and is quickly performed, since it involves the use of a trimming device (nowadays possibly electric) to shave their heads and leave them with bald or nearly-bald scalps. But there are obviously also more fashionable ones. The coiffures of women and girls are much more complicated and time-consuming, since very often exceedingly elaborate and sophisticated arrangements are carried out – some of them extraordinarily beautiful also to European tastes, and some much less attractive to their eyes.

Use of wigs, toupets, added hair and braid-attachments is common, making the work certainly very hard and lengthy. Myriads of braids are made with long, fine hairs that are dressed as plaits and finely and tightly attached to single tufts of the customer's hair, minutely separated from each other. If it is not artificial, where does all this huge mass of hair come from? Probably from the Far East, but – considering how massive is the recourse to this fashion skill by African women – I really wonder how many millions of women have to sell their hair in those far lands to supply the market. A normal hair-dressing session for a woman can easily last between two and three hours and in some special cases it stretches to six hours. Ladies and girls have enormous patience and goodwill, and wait quietly and willingly until the whole job is completed.

A very complicated hairstyle may be worn for one month, but

many girls like to change it more often, every two weeks. With such elaborate coiffures worn for such a long time I suppose that itching must be very great and tremendously annoying. Personally I feel terribly bothered by severe itching three days after washing it, even though my very thin hair is always cut rather short! But they pretend they can wash their hair anyhow, without destroying the fine work performed on their head. Hairdressers are willing to go to a potential client's house and perform the work in her courtyard if so required. The cost of a lady's hairdressing session can involve a lot of expense, between 2,000 and 3,500 Naira, depending on its duration and the skill or dedication required to perform it.

Many more curiosities could be told about Nigeria, which I don't remember right now. But, believe me, it is a country which never fails to surprise or even startle you. Practically every day something strange and curious – often also annoying and frustrating, especially for people unaccustomed to the country – might happen.”

“Ricardo, I hope you will not mind and won't be annoyed with me if I ask you one more question. How does Nigeria stand in respect of modernity?”

“In my opinion, the biggest and toughest clash between old traditions and modern lifestyle – and probably the most severe hindrance for Nigeria in becoming a modern, autonomous and fully organised country – is represented by the superimposition of the current centralised republican State structure, such as the Federal Government and its administration, onto a feudal system, and their resulting coexistence.

The feudal regime is constituted by a myriad of kingdoms which still are real recognised entities, retaining great and indisputable power. The many Emirs and Sultans in the North and the thousands of local 'Obas' or 'Obis' (kings) in the South – whose sovereignty is often limited to the boundaries of the village, but in certain cases extends to territories as large as entire provinces and also States – exercise a power over their subjects that surpasses by far that of the Federal Government and its representatives. Subjects still prostrate themselves flat on the floor before their so-called 'traditional rulers', and do not dare to look straight into their eyes (it would be considered a sign of great disrespect, and a punishable offence). When the audience is finished, they are not allowed to take leave by simply turning their back to the ruler, but have to shuffle backwards

to the entrance door constantly facing him, in most cases kneeling, until they have exited. Only then are they entitled to stand up and turn around to go away.

Oba – or, occasionally, in some places, Obi – is a general term indicating the sovereign. But they also have local, specific dedicated fancy titles and names, such as, to mention a few, Oni (of Ife), Ajorimwin (of Irawo), Alafin (of Oyo), Alahun (of Imore), Alake (of Abeokuta), Amanyanabo (of Bonny), Are (of Ibadan), Arinjale (of Ise), Ataoja (of Osogbo), Atta (of Idah), Awujale (of Ijebu-Ode), Bale (of Gbogun), Dagburewe (of Idowa), Deji (of Akure), Eze (of Nri), Igwe (of Nnewi), Lamido (of Adamawa), Mai (of Kanem), Mingi (of Nembe), Obong (of Calabar), Ogoga (of Ikere), Olu (of Warri), Onjo (of Okeiho), Ore (of Otun), Shehu (of Bornu), Timi (of Ede). But there are many others I don't remember now.

Sometimes their name incorporates that of the relevant town, or of the capital of the territory under their jurisdiction, such as Alaketu of Ketu (a Yoruba town nowadays included in the Republic of Benin), Alaye of Efon-Alaye, Aseyin of Iseyin, Ekoi of Ikom, Elerunwon of Elerunwon-Ijebu, Olu of Ilaro, Olotta of Otta, Olowo of Owo, Olowu of Owu, Olupopo of Popo (this too nowadays in the Republic of Benin), Onikoyi of Ikoyi, Orangun-Ila of Ila and so on. The succession varies from site to site, in some places it has the form of a hereditary monarchy, in others it is by virtue of elections among a restricted number of families, called 'king-makers'. When speaking or writing of them, people never fail to let their specific name be preceded by the obligatory and formal, fundamental homage formula of 'His Royal Highness'.

Nigeria is a relatively young country (it became independent on 1st October, 1960) and Nigerians are also attached to their old traditions. However, they did not find it ridiculous and strange to have imported, and still totally accept, customs which are typical only of the British tradition and considered anachronistic and out of fashion by all other countries in the world.

For instance, their Justices, solicitors at the Bar and lawyers proudly wear white wigs (long and completely enveloping for Justices, with innumerable rows of curls, and smaller ones for solicitors and lawyers), scarlet or black robes and jabots. If robe and jabot are still distinguishing symbolic insignia in numerous Nations of the world for people involved with such professions, wigs, in particular, have long since been totally abandoned even by countries,

like the USA, which can rightly be considered as rib-bones of the UK. It is therefore surprising that a newly-born Nation has not rejected them, not least because a black man wearing a wig unfortunately recalls the seventeenth century European pages and waiters holding flares along grand palace corridors and staircases, who used to tint their faces with black dye – especially for feasts and ceremonial occasions – in order to look like exotic black servants or even as the landlord’s personal African slaves.”

It was into this crucible of peoples and complex medley of beliefs, ideas, customs and behaviours, that this 53 year-old Spanish chemist, Ricardo de Cortes y Montero had been posted as mud specialist by Santa Fe, his oil drilling company, leaving at home in Valladolid, Spain, his wife and three sons. Being a man of extensive culture, open and not racist at all, with a lot of interests and a great thirst for improving his knowledge of the world, he had there the chance of meeting people, making friends and learning much about Africa, its peoples and customs. But for sure, when he arrived in Lagos, the old capital of Nigeria and still the main commercial town of the country, he did not begin to imagine how his whole life would be gladsomely upset and magnificently enlightened by his casual encounter, around one and a half years later, with Edima Essien. Edima was an adventurous young girl of 22, who had left her native Calabar, capital town of Cross River State, to settle in that same Lagos in search of work, a possible career, a life worthy to be lived. Ricardo and Edima met by mere chance in the late afternoon of a Sunday, almost a week before Christmas 1992.

Their relationship rapidly became a perfectly delightful symbiosis. He got from her not only floods of physical pleasure and mental satisfaction, but also a real new joy of living. She found in him the solid rock on which to base her own life: she blossomed indeed and grew up to womanhood and full maturity under the protective wing of his remarkable personality, sound experience and wisdom. She really was a rare splendid pearl of inestimable value for the quickness of her brain and the soundness and tenderness of her pure and passionate sentiments and unexpectedly – to Ricardo’s maximum enjoyment and happiness – became crazily fond of him. He experienced with her for many years an incredible, wonderful season of intense, true and sweet love which he lived with great passion and total dedication to her. He loved her with an intensity he had never

felt for any other woman before. Since their first meeting, Africa assumed for him the sweet features of her pretty and beloved face and no evoking of reminiscences of this land would ever be possible without the immediate appearance in his mind of her captivating and very attractive smile.

Since their glasses were empty again, Ricardo asked his friend hospitably:

“Shall I pour you more whisky, José Felipe?”

But the latter replied that it was already late and time to go home. José Felipe then got up, urged his wife to bid their hosts good-bye and went out, saying to Ricardo as he reached the doorstep:

“Your tales about Africa and, more specifically, Nigeria are really very interesting and enchanting. Frankly speaking, I am really fascinated and I’m eager to know more about those fabulous lands and the life and behaviour of their exotic and charming black people. I am convinced that you lived marvellous adventures there. You will tell me the rest of your own experiences next time we meet; in my opinion, all that is so terribly exciting, indeed!”

As a matter of fact, José Felipe was very happy to have induced Ricardo to talk about Africa and to have heard his dextrously coloured tales. With his bright and clear comments, and the vivid remembrance of episodes occurring during his personal long stay in Africa, Ricardo had given him an exciting evening and amply stirred up in him great interest and curiosity. Certainly, after this couple of hours spent listening to Ricardo, he knew more about Africa than he had ever learnt from books or newspapers.

Ricardo, however, did not welcome José Felipe’s request for a continuation of his tales. He was perplexed, his mind full of contrasting thoughts, his heart of ambivalent feelings. He did not want in fact to upset his friend, who looked so keen to know from him more stories about his beloved Nigeria. But he was convinced he had told José Felipe all that was fit to be told. ... The rest? ... His own experience? ... Oh *no*, the rest was too personal and intimate, a story that Ricardo wanted to keep hidden in his heart and could *not* easily reveal to his friend.

His reaction was the natural consequence of his character and life-long behaviour. He normally did not like bravado and showing-off and his personal code of conduct imposed upon him a prohibition against boasting with other men about successes attained with

women. That he considered as empty and outrageous gossip. In this particular case he also felt a sense of firm and profound loyalty towards these charming creatures who had so warmly benefited him with the great gift of their affection and passionate love, filling his life with joy and pleasure. No, Ricardo was very determined: he would not tell José Felipe what had happened to him personally during his stay in Nigeria. And, in any case, it certainly could not be told openly in the presence of his wife.

He did however tell it to me: and I have written it down for him.

2.

Settling down in Lagos

General Ibrahim B. Babangida (or IBB, as he was normally cheerfully called in his country, especially by the press) was the Head of State when Ricardo de Cortes y Montero arrived in Nigeria in July 1991. He had seized power in August 1985 with a bloodless internal coup against General Muhammadu Buhari who had been proclaimed Head of State after the military putsch of 31st December 1983, which had overthrown the elected President Alhaji Shehu Shagari and his Civilian Government. Despite the general consideration that the military are accustomed to discipline and soberness (which was indeed shown to a certain extent during Gen. Buhari's tenure of power, especially thanks to the rigidity and integrity of his deputy, the severe and earnest General Idiagbon) it cannot be said that corruption – the very unfortunate, real great plague of Nigeria – had been eradicated. Big guns and civil servants of his regime, as a matter of fact, were said to have increased quite substantially their personal wealth. But at least, under him, many industrial and civil projects saw a happy end (or a long awaited and therefore highly welcomed start), and remarkable works had been carried through to completion.

On his arrival, Ricardo inherited from his predecessor in the same position in the Company both the flat in Victoria Island, at No. 12 Adeleke Adedoyin Street, where he would happily live for the whole length of his stay in Nigeria, and the steward, a Beninese, whose name was Benoît Hunkpé. Benoît was a very good cook and Ricardo was therefore happy to have the chance to eat delicious meals at lunch and dinner. At the beginning, before becoming well acquainted with the town and its facilities, he let the steward take

care of buying fruit and vegetables at the market or at the various street-stalls existing all over the district. He went shopping only for meat, other foodstuffs and household items at the 'UTC' department store at the far end of the Marina on Lagos Island or, for a few less important items, at the small, nearby 'Park 'n' Shop' supermarket in Kofo Abayomi Road. The time dedicated to shopping was obviously Saturday morning and, since he used to spend anyhow a couple of hours at the office also that day – but going there late, at about 10 or 11 a.m. – he always finished his shopping trip very late, and could not have lunch before 2.30 p.m.

When he was used to the town, and especially after having obtained a Nigerian driving license, he decided to buy fruit and vegetables himself. After that he would get back home so late that he never succeeded in having lunch before 3 to 3.30 p.m. As for the market, he used to drive to the Jakande Estate market on the Epe expressway, about 15 km from Victoria Island because this, according to his steward's judgment, was a fruit market of better quality and cheaper cost than the neighbouring street-stands. When he went to 'UTC' – and was already headed in the right direction – he drove further and bought vegetables and fruit at the Apapa central market. This latter market had been indicated to him by friends living this side of the town as the very best one. Here, however, the struggle among vendors to monopolise customers was always very tough and Ricardo felt himself pulled by his sleeves, all the time, from one of them to the other. He often had to protest vehemently at some overly aggressive vendor and to refuse to buy anything, as well as to defend himself against the crowd of beggars.

At the Jakande Estate market he had found two stands, in particular, run by two buxom country girls, who when they saw him approaching ran towards him with great signs of joyful welcome and appeared happy to serve him. He disliked however the way they addressed him, as they called him 'Baba' and he deeply detested being called that, because – although it normally means father (or grandfather) – it is also an honorary title reserved for elderly men, as a tribute to the supposed wisdom they acquire from their advanced age. But Ricardo, five feet ten and a half inches tall, and still a slim and juvenile man in spite of his 53 years, felt and claimed to be too young to deserve such an appellation. Moreover, he was convinced that he was still able to break women's hearts and consequently likely to conquer them, and he hated being considered an old man

by the objects of his desire.

From the very first time he went to that market, he was helped by a young boy of 10 years to carry one – or sometimes two – big basketfuls of fruit and vegetables to his car. This boy, whose name was Samuel, had a large round bald head and big intelligent and smiling black eyes. He was extremely kind and joyful and ran towards his car – which he had learnt to recognise from afar – as soon as Ricardo was approaching the parking place. If he was not around at the moment Ricardo arrived, the other children, who had noticed the friendly rapport established between that foreigner and their comrade, instead of disputing among themselves to serve him, rushed to call Samuel:

“Samuell ... Samuel, come, your ‘master’ is here!”

Ricardo liked his smiling chubby face and talked willingly with him, asking him for news about his family and about his results at school, recommending that he behave properly at home and at school, as well as studying zealously and then usually gave him a generous tip for the service. The boy liked this white man too, who did not disdain at all to talk in an open and agreeable manner to a small African child; he even dared ask him shyly for some more money when he had some urgent need.

A huge sale of fish, at very attractive prices, occurred every day under Falomo Bridge, on the Victoria Island bank of Five Cowrie Creek, where the motor-boats and pirogues of fishermen berthed early in the morning to unload their nocturnal prey. To achieve the best prices, it was necessary to buy the fish in the late afternoon, towards sunset, when the sellers – mainly women – were eager to sell and, in accordance with the saying that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, were more inclined to consent to a price reduction, rather than running the serious risk of having the fish rot by delaying its sale until the following day.

In order to buy enough fish to last a couple of weeks Ricardo would spend 500 Naira at the beginning of his stay and – due to the increase of prices - 750 Naira at the end of it. An even greater change took place however in the size of the fish (which were initially much bigger) and in their kind and quality: indeed, at the beginning the amount that he spent also bought giant squids and prawns; but not later on. Anyway, he always sent Benoît to buy the fish, for two reasons: Benoît knew better than him how to select really fresh fish and, being African, he could get far better prices.

From time to time nice big crabs could be bought on the upward ramp at the junction between Ozumba Mbadiwe Avenue and Falomo Bridge. Whenever young men selling crabs were showing their catch to passing motorists, Ricardo used to stop the car along the sidewalk, on the ramp, and buy all of them, thereby obtaining a good price. He liked crab-meat very much.

After some time, Ricardo discovered that good meat – not being a fine connoisseur, beef fillet, pork chops, chicken and sausages were in fact the only sort of meat he dared buy – was also sold, and at a cheaper price than at ‘UTC’, at the much nearer ‘Pay-Less 2’ supermarket situated at Shakeera’s Plaza off Ahmadu Bello Way in Victoria Island. He therefore stopped driving up to the Marina for his normal shopping – he only continued going to ‘UTC’, from time to time, to buy bacon in pieces that was not sold at ‘Pay-Less 2’ and a few other items he could only find there – and started shopping at this more convenient supermarket.

Later on Ricardo practically totally abandoned shopping at the distant ‘UTC’ when ‘Park ‘n’ Shop’ opened their big store in Adeola Odeku Street, since bacon in pieces was sold there. Then, when he learnt from some friends that they were buying fruit and vegetables at good prices at the Bar Beach market stalls, inside the gate at the right end of the beach, he also stopped driving to the faraway Jakande Estate market – although worried about Samuel’s fate – and started doing this particular shopping there.

The two places, Bar Beach and Shakeera’s Plaza were in the same area; therefore it was more convenient and much quicker for Ricardo to move from one to the other to perform the entire shopping for the whole week. These, as well as the other supermarkets spread all over the two districts of Victoria Island and Ikoyi, were literally full of all sorts of good things as well as of absolutely superfluous items: to mention a few of the former, besides the various sorts of traditional English Cadbury’s chocolate (plain chocolate or filled with hazelnuts, with raisins, with Brazil nuts), there were also Swiss (Nestlé’s, Kraft Foods’ – maker of the lovely Toblerone – and Lindt’s: really delicious especially the variety filled with coffee cream), Italian (Perugina’s and Ferrero’s) and Dutch (Droste’s) chocolate, Bulgarian rose-jam, Lebanese and Greek sweets and cakes, Italian ‘Mulino Bianco’ biscuits and ‘Barilla’ or ‘Ponte’ pastas of all varieties, Italian ‘Nutella Ferrero’ hazelnut and cocoa cream, Spanish olive oil and vinegar, Dutch and German

long-life UHT milk, Danish, Irish, Dutch and French butter, Turkish pistachios and dried figs, French, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian wines, French champagne and all sorts of international-label liquors and alcoholic drinks, every kind of Indian spices, etc. It was unbelievable how the Indian and Pakistani traders who owned or ran the supermarkets had subverted the old customs concerning the sale of items in department stores and started a regular importation of goods from all over the world.

Moreover, it was now also possible to find three or four brands of locally produced yoghurt, two of which were of very fine quality. At Bar Beach stalls as well, Ricardo always used to buy from the same young ladies, as they were very nice to him and liked him. One of them even used to embrace and kiss him affectionately when he arrived there. But after a couple of years, he realised that his expenditure for fruit and vegetables had increased dizzily – he was now spending between 1,300 to 1,500 Naira a week simply for these items – and he decided to return this specific task to Benoit. The expenditure, for more or less the same quantity of goods, dropped drastically down to a maximum of 800 Naira.

From time to time, he also bought fruit from the sellers at Tarkwa Bay, in particular mangoes, pineapples and bananas (the fattish, very tasty ones with red peel were his favourite), sometimes grapefruit, more rarely dry coconuts. The three ladies from whom he bought fruit were Evelyn, a charming and always jolly girl of 20 who studied graphics and embroidery, and her mother, as well as Elizabeth, an ever smiling young lady always accompanied by one or both of her two usually silent daughters. Evelyn normally traded on the external beach facing the ocean (the extension of the Lighthouse Beach towards Tarkwa) where she also helped her father rent shelters and deck-chairs to Sunday-vacationers, whilst her mother and Elizabeth were trading in the bay itself, walking up and down from one shelter to the other along the shore. They used to take around their wares in big and heavy enamelled tin basins, apparently balanced on their heads with incredible ease.

Ricardo also used to buy a fresh coconut from an old woman, whose name he never discovered, and drink its delicious milk immediately. This woman, whose English was exceedingly poor, was so eager to sell her coconuts and feared so much the competition of other women that she rushed towards him as soon as he had landed at Tarkwa Bay, and he had to calm her every time by promising to

buy the coconut later on, from her only. Elizabeth was very gentle and had gained so much confidence in Ricardo that she trusted him to the point where, if she had nice fruit he would like to buy, but had no money with him, she would give him any amount of credit from one week to the other. And if by chance, for any reason, he did not go to Tarkwa Bay the following Sunday and she had therefore to wait longer to get paid for the fruit she had already given to him, she did not complain at all. She was really a very nice person. In fact, when she had mangoes to sell, she always gave him a fruit to taste first, in order to verify its ripeness and sweetness, and normally added one or two more fruit free of charge to the dozen Ricardo used to buy. Astonishingly for her age, in Africa, Evelyn, who was a very carefree and friendly person, told Ricardo and the other men sun-bathing at the beach that she was still a virgin and did not want to make love to anybody until she'd met *the right man*, meaning the one who could possibly also deserve to become her husband.

To go shopping was always a real enterprise, since one had to take an entire bag of banknotes. The biggest denomination of Nigerian currency at that time was 50 Naira, though since then they have at last introduced 100 and 200 Naira banknotes too. But often these were missing and it was necessary to make do with 20 Naira and even 10 Naira notes, for an average expenditure for a full week of around 2,000 to 2,500 Naira. This only refers to normal shopping and not to much larger expenditure as when buying household items such as a piece of furniture or a refrigerator or video-recorder and TV set, where more than 20,000 Naira had to be taken to the shop (the use of cheques in Nigeria was still limited to cashing money from one's own current account at the banks)!

The 5 Naira note also existed, but had become rather rare (Ricardo used them uniquely to distribute alms to beggars), whilst the 1 Naira notes had totally disappeared and had been replaced by coins. There were also 50 Kobo ($\frac{1}{2}$ Naira) coins. The spread of coins was however rather limited. Nigerian currency notes can easily be considered among the dirtiest money existing in the entire world. People have a habit of holding them all crumpled up in the palms of their hands, thus impregnating them with sweat. In this way, they quickly become thin, weak and rotten and emanate a horrible smell, whilst the picture rapidly discolours and fades.

One day, when Ricardo was about to start his breakfast, he was informed by Benoît that a Beninese hunter had come to his house, bringing what he indicated as a 'biche' (sort of small antelope, a dik-dik) that he had just killed in the night. Ricardo knew very well how good and tasty these kinds of game are and was therefore very happy to have the opportunity to buy it. He had believed that there was no game left in the southern part of Nigeria, around Lagos, and that the huge population had killed and eaten all the wild animals living in the rain forests and Guinea savannah. From then onwards, that hunter used to arrive from time to time at his residence around 5 to 6 a.m. with the fruit of his chase, dik-diks, gazelles, antelopes. When they were too big, or he still had much of that meat in his freezer, Ricardo used to share the beast with a friend or a colleague, chosen in turn among those who appreciated game (to his surprise there were some who did not at all).

Once he was brought an antelope, which was so big that it had to be shared among four people, each one receiving, as his quarter of it, a very large quantity of game meat. Benoît, with the help of the gardener, regularly took care of skinning the beasts and cutting them into pieces. They usually kept for themselves, besides the skin of the quartered animal, the head, the entrails and the lower part of the legs.

The first girl Ricardo made the intimate acquaintance of, Janet (he never knew her surname), was very young. She said she was 18, but he suspected from her behaviour that she was even younger. Their encounter took place, in a strange way, just a few months after his arrival in Lagos. One afternoon, coming back home from the office for lunch, he found Benoît, his steward, at the gate of the compound where he lived, quarrelling very toughly and vehemently with Ayo, one of the gardeners, the latter being supported by a nice young girl. Of course Ricardo was obliged to intervene in order to keep the peace. The girl appeared to be very impulsive and pugnacious, and threatened to slap Benoît. So Ricardo said to her:

"What a fighter you are! Stop going like a wild thing for your adversary, who is by the way my steward, and be quiet a moment, please!"

This seemed to be taken in by her and calmed her down, since she laughed cheerfully and smiled nicely at him. The quarrel, which had been caused by the steward accusing the gardener of inviting too

many unknown people into the compound was obviously quickly over once the 'master' was there, and he could enter the house for his lunch. He did not think about this event any more.

Some days later, a Saturday afternoon, Ricardo was gardening: although he did not have green fingers he wanted to try to repair the damage caused by the gardeners to the plants around the residence. These so-called gardeners were in fact a disaster; he used to call them 'the destroyers' because of the way they also cut small branches with the machete. The only thing they were able to do in an acceptable manner was to trim the thick low hedge delimiting the front garden and to sweep old dry leaves away. Even for trimming the two big mango-trees and the palm-tree branches it was necessary to call in specialists able to climb up into their high trunks.

Ricardo was cutting the spoilt boughs and twigs more carefully with a pair of garden shears, when he suddenly perceived that he was being watched and had the clear sensation of somebody's eyes on his back. He turned, thinking that it was one of the gate watchmen wishing to talk to him, or simply observing his activity; but he discovered to his great surprise that it was in fact that same young girl standing there, staring at him with inquisitive eyes. That evening a party was being held by his servant in the boys' quarters, so he thought she had come to participate in it, but when he asked her whether that was the purpose of her presence there, she simply and candidly replied with a transitory blink of her beautiful eyes:

"No, I came *for you!*"

"For me? Are you sure of that, or did you just say it to pull my leg?"

"I am pretty sure. As a matter of fact, you intrigued me the other day. I liked you and wanted to get to know you better!"

Ricardo was so astounded that for a while he did not know what to say, his mouth wide-open in an "Oh!" of surprise and wonder, as he had almost totally forgotten the episode and, in spite of her gracious aspect, had not attached particular importance to it. But he was strangely struck and captivated by the straight approach and the earnest and naïve sincerity of the girl; eventually he invited her to come into the house. As a matter of fact, he was perspiring heavily as it was terribly hot outside because of the dry season. She hesitated noticeably and then asked whether the steward was at work in the house, because she did not want Benoît to see that she had come purposely to pay 'his master' a visit. Only after Ricardo's assurance

that the steward was not there did she agree to go inside.

They sat in the small parlour and Ricardo asked her name, which he found out to be Janet, introduced himself and offered her a drink. She asked for a coke, which he gave her. He also had one himself. Ricardo was very eager to know something about Nigerian ways, traditions, customs, so he asked her a lot of questions concerning her native village and ethnic group. She told him that she came from the south-eastern part of Nigeria, close to Calabar in Cross River State, but he did not gather whether she was from Cross River itself or from Akwa Ibom State, nor whether she was an Ibibio or an Efik girl. For her it was the first time she had had a confidential conversation with a European, an 'oyinbo' (this term, which translated literally means 'without skin', is how Nigerians, as well as other African populations – with some small variations, such as 'oyibo' – call white people in their native languages) and she felt somehow shy. She was therefore laughing quite nervously all the time, also due to her young age.

While talking, she did not stop for a moment touching and caressing his arms and hands the skin of which, she said, she found 'so incredibly smooth and soft'. He felt astonished and amused by this girl's strange behaviour and by her statement. His arms were in fact rather hairy and he did not deem his own skin particularly smooth. On the contrary he found that her hairless skin was very soft and pleasant to touch. She was small, had a nicely shaped face, regularly oval, with big brown eyes and a rather small mouth, but with fleshy lips. Her body was slender enough, although plump by nature. They talked cheerfully at length and then she stood up to leave. When she moved past, Ricardo managed to touch her breasts with his arm, without letting it be seen as deliberate. He could feel that they were very well developed and firm.

Janet came to visit him several other times, wearing different dresses, sometimes in simple modern fashion, sometimes in more sophisticated national attire, and with different hair-styles. He snapped some nice photographs of her. On her second visit, he kissed her and the following time they started petting. She had indeed an attractive bosom, with a very large dark areola – much darker than the rest of her rather light complexion – around her small nipples. He liked to lick and suck her nipples and she enjoyed that a lot, but most of the time she continued to laugh in a juvenile manner while he was doing it and this irritated and upset him.

However, what mostly annoyed him and made him literally crazy was the bad habit she initiated of raiding his room at every visit, looking into the wardrobe and drawers to see their contents and asking him to give her T-shirts, shorts and whatever other clothes or objects might attract her desire. When Ricardo met Janet once more she had deep scratches on her breasts – real scars that showed up too on the pictures he snapped of her – and when he inquired about how that had happened, she simply replied, laughing:

“Oh, I scratched because I was itching!”

On her fifth or sixth visit, she was wearing a sweater and jeans and let him, laughing as usual, undress her so he could have her totally naked in his arms. But, despite the exciting contact of her lovely and soft body against his own, and although she took his penis in her hand and rubbed it lovingly against her own sexual parts (he too had quickly undressed in the meantime) he did not become aroused. As a matter of fact, Ricardo was both surprised by her easy surrender and anxious that he would not be capable of performing sufficiently well for this young person.

So, in spite of the very intimate situation created between them, and of her desire and evident disposition to be penetrated, he did not even make an attempt to enter her. He simply contented himself with stroking, kissing and licking libidiously her body and, especially, her vulva. In turn, she played with his penis and liked to caress it at length (for the first time in her life, she was seeing and learning about the prepuce in a man’s phallus) but did not want to carry out any fellatio on it. She said that the release of sperm into her mouth had shocked her greatly on a former occasion when she had performed it. She declared to him that she had been disgusted at receiving it inside her mouth and did not want to go through such an unpleasant experience again. Janet enjoyed anyhow Ricardo’s delectable loving actions. While holding the ‘labia minora’ of her vagina wide open with her forefingers and thumbs in order to enable him to reach her clitoris with his tongue, as well as to insert it as deeply as possible inside her, she shouted ecstatically:

“I like it, ... I like it!”

Nothing else happened and, after some more sweet caresses, nice kissing and the usual raid and consequent request for gifts, she left.

The next time she paid him a visit, she announced that she was leaving the following day for her home village, because her grandmother was seriously sick. She was meant to be back after

twenty days, so since Christmas was approaching and he had planned to spend it at home in Spain, they bade each other farewell with the promise to meet again the following year, in January. But, on his return to Lagos she was not yet back, and he did not see her at all for a very long time. Not seeing her, after a couple of months, he gathered his courage and shyly asked the gardener whether he had news of her, but the reply he got was that the gardener too had not heard anything about her since her departure.

Nevertheless, Ricardo did not feel himself really missing her. Despite the obvious physical pleasure he got from caressing her desirable body, when he was with her he quickly felt annoyed with her immature behaviour, which still bothered him a lot, and in reality he had not become fond of her. Janet reappeared suddenly one day, many months later, when he had already met other women and had a love-affair with one of them. She slept with him on two or three occasions, spending the entire night with him - but arriving at Ricardo's residence late in the evening, after Benoît had retired to the boys' quarters for the night, and leaving very early in the morning before his arrival to start serving in Ricardo's flat, in order that Benoît did not find out that she had become Ricardo's mistress.

She liked him and adored to be caressed, kissed and licked by him. His kind manners and skilful action in fact gave her, besides agreeable excitement and physical pleasure, also great happiness and bliss. She complained that as she was the very first girl whom Ricardo had made the acquaintance of, she deserved to get his love rather than simple acts of affection and sex. But no sound and stable relationship was established between Ricardo and Janet, because no real intimate and tender romance ever started between them.

In the meantime his steward got married. The marriage was to take place in the coastal town of Badagry near the border with the Republic of Benin, where his fiancée (a Beninese too) lived. So Benoît asked Ricardo to let him use his Peugeot 505 car and of course his driver's services to take him there and bring him back with his bride. It was a Saturday; they would leave very early in the morning and they were supposed to be back by three or, at the latest, four in the afternoon. Ricardo gave his permission, and prepared to spend most of the day at home himself, reading a book and listening to his beloved classical music. He had in fact brought from Spain his portable CD player and a certain number of CDs and

he had bought some more, at an acceptable price, in the 'Quintessence' shop at the Falomo Shopping Centre in Ikoyi.

But when the time for their return arrived, there was no sign of the car at all. Many more hours elapsed; he had to give up the idea of going to the Ikoyi Club to play golf, since he had no way to travel from his residence. It was impossible to go there on foot carrying the bag of clubs. The Club was in fact rather distant from his house. At last, the car came back at around half past ten at night. He was obviously very angry. However, when he went out to scold his driver, Tajuddeen, as well as his steward for being so late, he found reasons to become even more furious. They had had an accident on their way back to Lagos. Another car had crashed into the back of the Peugeot after Tajuddeen had stopped suddenly and unnecessarily. As a result of this, they had had to go to the Police station for the formalities concerning the accident, therefore wasting a lot of time. But what was even worse, the car was very seriously damaged: it was shortened by practically a couple of centimetres!

The following day, Sunday, Ricardo wanted to go to church for Mass and then on to the jetty to get the boat to be taken to the beach, Tarkwa Bay. He did not dare drive the car himself – as he normally did on weekends – with it in that condition. So he ordered Tajuddeen to come to work in order to perform his duties and take him to those two places, and also to collect him on his return from the beach. On Monday, he then compelled the driver to report the accident to the Transportation Office of the Company and make the necessary steps for getting a replacement car for himself during the repairing of the Peugeot.

As a consequence, Tajuddeen was suspended from service for a long while and Ricardo got a spare car - an old Peugeot 404 which unfortunately did not have very efficient air conditioning - and a new driver, a charming and very serviceable young man whose name was Laurence. Ricardo was obviously sorry for Tajuddeen; he did not wish such a drastic punishment on him, since the man had a wife and four children and was – apart from that accident – a good driver. But he could not do anything in his favour, given the Company rules.

Ricardo was invited to the opening ceremony of a gas re-injection plant in Rivers State, which was to be commissioned by the Head of State - who had arrived there by helicopter - surrounded by his Chief

of Army Staff, various generals and high-ranking officers of the Army, the Air Force and the Navy. They were all wearing their military uniforms. The ceremony was to take place on a tarred esplanade, where canopies had been raised over comfortable sofas and armchairs for the afore-mentioned guests of honour. However, to Ricardo's surprise, all Army officers, including the Head of State, had shooting-sticks with them of the type used by British people at the races or at the golf course and probably by officers when they are in the field on military manoeuvres.

Ricardo was seated in the second row, not far from the Head of State, just behind one of his generals. At the playing of the national anthem, all the military men, as well as the entire audience, stood promptly on their feet and came to attention. Ricardo had to jump backwards, because the general in front of him swung his shooting-stick with a rapid and very martial gesture into a horizontal position under his left armpit, risking hitting – and, maybe, wounding – Ricardo with its sharp ferrule. Moving his eyes to the back of the person standing beside the general, Ricardo saw that it was a high ranking Navy officer, a rear-admiral or at least a commodore, wearing a perfectly ironed and perhaps starched immaculate white uniform fit to arouse the envy of any European officer.

What however mainly attracted Ricardo's horrified attention was a shoehorn peeping out from under this Navy officer's armpit. Ricardo could not believe his eyes and was really startled: a shoehorn, it was unbelievable! Looking closer, he could see that attached to this shoehorn there was a sort of handle in the form of a horse-whip. He then understood that it was the type of item sold in some department stores or in fashionable and pseudo-elegant shoe-shops, whereby a mean tool of homely, daily use like a simple shoehorn has been embellished with a peculiar, uncommon handle to transform it into an object for self-elected snobbish people. The Navy officer had probably bought it in London and was therefore very proud to show to everybody what an elegant man he was! His mistake was perhaps to assume that such an item, because purchased in London, must surely be a suitable adornment for a Naval officer's uniform copied exactly from British ones. But no ordinance on uniforms anywhere in the world could foresee that a Naval officer would equip himself with a horse-whip, and least of all a horse-whip terminating in a shoe-horn. Ricardo could do nothing but laugh silently until tears flowed.

He recounted this episode to his friend Hugo Garcia, who had been living in Nigeria already for about a dozen years, expressing his stupefied concern:

“What was also alarming was that the colleagues of this Navy officer, and the assembled guards and even the Head of State himself, did not seem to have noticed the incongruity.”

“Don’t be too surprised,” Hugo said to Ricardo, after laughing amusedly, “the Navy has been the protagonist in several controversial incidents here. One Sunday about ten years ago, as we arrived at Tarkwa Bay for bathing, we noticed the superstructure of a ship towering over the dunes at the far right end of the bay. Sentries were stopping people from going to the external beach, the one facing onto the ocean. Pushed by great curiosity, I myself, together with Guillermo Bandera and an Italian gentleman, Umberto Montezemolo, made a large detour, passing behind the village of Tarkwa and arrived at the external beach about mid-way from the lighthouse; then we approached towards Tarkwa Bay bank.

I cannot begin to describe to you the incredible spectacle that came under our astonished gaze: a corvette was completely stranded, with its bow beached on the dunes at the end of the shore and only the stern and some forty to fifty feet of her hull drawing in the shallow water! You can’t imagine how big a corvette is when completely out of water and seen from its lowest point, the keel: it is absolutely impressive, it looks immense, a real mountain! Umberto would have liked to have had a small camera with him in order to immortalize the scene and be able to show it to his father-in-law, Admiral E. Giuriati, who had formerly been the Italian Navy’s Chief of Staff (unfortunately not also to his own father, an ex-Navy officer as well, because he had already died by that time). He was indeed sure that his father-in-law had never seen, in his whole life – not even during World War II possibly with a torpedoed ship – such an unbelievable spectacle. An armed sailor immediately came over to send us away, but we had already seen enough.

The show had not yet finished, however, because they tried to tow her back to sea by means of one small Coastguard’s vedette and this capsized as soon as they opened up the throttle, obviously because the relative weights of the two craft were totally unbalanced and the thrust was not sufficient to overcome the resistance created by the sand. All the men aboard the small vedette were thrown overboard into the sea – rumours had it that the Navy Chief of Staff himself

was among them – except one who was below deck at that moment and remained trapped in the sinking ship. It was necessary to cut an opening in the inverted hull to rescue him. Luckily enough, it was made of fibreglass and this was therefore an easy and quick exercise. The vedette was left there and its hull - half-sunk in water and sand and with the big square hole in it - could be seen by all Lagosian bathers when they were readmitted to the beach after the rescue of the corvette was completed. After a while, due to the movement of the waves, she became totally covered with sand.

To try to rescue the corvette, they at first dredged a lot of sand into Tarkwa Bay itself by means of big hydro-pumps. But all the effort was useless. In the end they had to call on a specialist Dutch recovery firm which, I suppose, had anyhow to cut off the screws in order to be able to raise the ship by putting the sand in suspension with the help of water-scooping machines before towing her back. The corvette had then to be sent to a dockyard in Germany for appropriate repair. But here the really intriguing aspects of the episode begin. Everybody was obviously eager to know what had happened. The press remained totally silent about the event. But rumours ran that the corvette was chasing smugglers who were on board a small motorboat or a rubber dinghy which could rapidly change course when they got near to the shore, whilst the big ship could not turn because of its weight and of the consequent greater momentum, and so ran ashore.

After a couple of weeks the press eventually published a short article stating that the corvette had been riding at anchor at large, when strong winds rose during the night which made the anchor drag and pushed the ship ashore. Imagine the implied scene, Ricardo: to have stranded the vessel in the position she was, with her bow directly perpendicular in relation to the shoreline, the winds would have had to be intelligent and selective enough to push the ship by her smaller section, the stern – rather than by a side which obviously presented a larger surface – while the corvette moreover could only have been anchored by means of the very small stern anchor and not with the much bigger and more secure bow one!

This is not plausible. If you want to know my opinion, I have my own idea about this misadventure of the Navy: I sincerely fear that both the helmsman and the officer on duty were drunk and mistook the colour of the lighthouses at the entrance of the channel leading to the port; maybe the corvette had to join the frigate which lay idle

permanently berthed alongside the dock in the Navy dockyard sited half-way along the channel, who knows? And instead of keeping the green light on their right and the red one on the left to enter safely into the channel, they thought they had to keep the red light to starboard so they navigated to the left of the channel and found themselves on the beach!”

Hugo’s theory was clearly very speculative. But it was fascinating and plausible, and could very well offer the best explanation for this incredible and dramatic display.

One Saturday morning, several months after his arrival in Nigeria, Ricardo was driving along Adeola Hopewell Street to turn into Akigbo Salvage Close and reach Adetokumbo Ademola Street to go to Eko Hotel and buy a Spanish newspaper. A group of policemen – real armed policemen, not those traffic agents who, because of the colour of their jackets and their constant eager quest for money, are popularly known by the nickname of ‘yellow fever’ – who were resting under a tree in Akigbo Salvage Close, jumped out and stopped him, intimidating with threatening, levelled rifles:

“You were driving too fast! Show us your documents!”

It was clearly an excuse, because it was not true that his speed was higher than that of the other drivers he was following. Luckily Ricardo had his driving license with him, but was unable to find where his driver kept the car documents: he looked everywhere, in the drawer under the dashboard, in the pockets of the two front doors, as well as under the central elbow-rest arm, but all searches were in vain. He felt very vexed, since the papers seemed not to be in the car. He also cursed Laurence for what he considered a lack of care for letting him drive the car outside his residence’s compound without the relevant documents on board (though the following Monday, when he asked Laurence where the car documents were kept, the latter, quietly lowering the sunshade blade, showed him that the much-sought papers were there, inserted in the pocket at its back: he frankly had not thought about this hidden – though evident – place to hold papers). One of the policemen then confiscated his license, and got into the car, saying roughly:

“Let’s go to the police station!”

Ricardo wanted to call the Company patrol through the mobile radio he always had with him in the car when going out, but the policeman threatened him wildly:

“If you use your radio, I’ll throw this hand grenade onto you!”

While uttering his warning, he showed him a cylindrical object he had in his hand. Ricardo was not sure at all that it was really a hand grenade (it looked actually like a long coke-can), but – not knowing what Nigerian grenades look like – he had to comply with the policeman’s injunction and laid the radio down. As they drove away, the policeman ordered:

“Drive slowly!”

They drove along Adetokumbo Ademola Street and then Ahmadu Bello Way with its open, attractive view over Bar Beach and the policeman started saying:

“*Your crime* is subject to a fine of 2,000 to 3,000 Naira; how much are you prepared to pay?”

Ricardo – although he had on him the money necessary for shopping – replied that he had not a great amount of money with him, he could only pay 300 Naira, but the policeman said it was not enough. They started bargaining until they arrived at the junction with Adeola Odeku Street. The policeman, at this point, abandoning totally the manner adopted up to then of the severe traffic control official, complained that he had to share takings with his comrades and the amount proposed by Ricardo was not sufficient.

They agreed at last on 450 Naira. Ricardo gave him the money and the policeman returned his driving license, then got out of the car near the Chinese Embassy. Ricardo was absolutely furious, but had learnt his lesson and was very careful after that not to fall into police traps. This plan succeeded totally and he was never again caught in similar tricky encounters: he only had to pay from time to time very small amounts of money – 20 to 50 Naira, which he willingly and almost happily gave them, sometimes even anticipating their request – to the policemen and soldiers in camouflage battledress and helmet usually patrolling a street check-point at Falomo Bridge.

From the windows on the top floors of the staircase of his Company offices, Ricardo could enjoy a magnificent view of the skyscrapers of the Marina skyline in the far distance. Often, in the evening, at sunset, when he was leaving the office not too long after closure, that landscape assumed an unbelievable fairy-tale aspect. Everything was warmly coloured in red and the western sky and the sea mingled, welded together in what appeared to be an almost indissoluble bond, in a phantasmagoria of incredible, violent

colours: pink, yellow, red and violet. The sun sank into the sea to yield place to the incumbent night, leaving behind it a fantastic and nearly unreal fully-coloured wake. An absolutely sensational picture, a marvel of nature where it gave free reign to its so creative imagination!

Sometimes, after rain, one or at times even two magnificent multicoloured rainbows shone in the sky over this attractive landscape. Ricardo was fascinated by this view and every time remained transfixed for several minutes, totally enchanted and unable to move, admiring this spectacular natural show. He always intended to bring his camera with him to the office to immortalise this wonder, but in the morning when preparing himself to leave home for the office he always forgot to take it, so he did not have a physical record of what had so vividly attracted his astonished attention.

There were many animals living in Ricardo's compound. The steward and the gardeners raised chickens and, for a certain time, also ducks and a couple of black rabbits. They were all supposed to stay in the backyard attached to the boys' quarters, but to Ricardo's despair were obviously wandering at will – especially hens with their broods – around the whole compound gobbling at fragments of waste or toddling and pecking in search of seeds and little worms. He had the sensation of living on a poultry farm and therefore gave severe orders to the watchmen to chase them from at least the front garden. Inevitably, however, nearly every day when going back home from the office, he had to do it himself, because of the negligence of his subordinates.

Since his most tender childhood Ricardo had always been told that in Europe cocks crow at dawn, when the first light of the rising sun in the sky breaks the black shadows of the night, thus serving as an alarm-clock for people, especially peasants, whose daily work starts as soon as the new morning begins. Here, to his great astonishment, cocks used to crow strangely in the very deep of the night, between midnight and 2 a.m., when very few people are happy to be woken, therefore failing completely in their mission as sentries of the new-coming day. To Ricardo's eyes, this appeared to be a world upside down!

Besides this, and also astonishing for Ricardo, who had never seen anything like it, was the behaviour at night of those fowl, both cocks

and hens, as they used to roost in trees, even on quite high branches. And it was very funny to see them, at evening when getting ready for their rest during the coming night, squabbling among themselves for the highest branches. Ricardo had never realized that chickens, commonly considered as terrestrial bipeds, were able to climb up to such considerable heights, as if they were real flying birds. In Europe he had always seen these fowls staying and nesting at ground level, or perching on low poles inside henhouses. But in the compound of a friend, he saw even turkeys behaving in the same way.

One day, surprisingly, Ricardo saw that a batch of chicks had been vividly painted with red paint. When he made inquiries with Benoît to find out the reason for this behaviour, he was informed that it was a way of blurring the vision of high-flying hawks. He was totally unaware of this cunning practice and found it clever, but wondered how hunting hawks could be so easily disconcerted by a simple change of colour from the natural one, especially as the chicks maintained their usual way of frantically wandering around.

For a certain time the steward also kept a small bush-dog; a stupid dog that barked and even bared its teeth at Ricardo every time he tried to take the car out for a drive himself: it must have been convinced that the driver was the owner of the car, and probably did not like white people (it often happened indeed that dogs belonging to the whites did not like the blacks and vice-versa). Luckily, after some months, the dog disappeared. Ricardo thought that Benoît had realised that the dog had to eat and was expensive to maintain. For a couple of months also a small monkey made its appearance in the compound. One day when it was tied with a chain just outside the kitchen door, Ricardo gave it some biscuits, which it accepted willingly, but on another occasion it started jumping from one side to another shouting and making a lot of noise, as if it was scared by him, so he decided not to approach it any more. There were also lots of cats, which regularly gathered outside the kitchen door to get food at mealtimes, but these were so wild that Ricardo never succeeded in approaching and stroking them. One queen at one point decided she could trust him and would come mewling to rub herself against his legs, but then she too suddenly decided that his time for stroking her was over and treacherously raised her paw to scratch him.

Many birds, even quite large ones, used to come into the

compound to rest on the branches of the many trees growing there, but the strangest animals inhabiting it were the big colourful lizards who used to run after one another on the house walls or on the boundary wall surrounding the compound. Their darting was very rapid, but usually rather short and they would stop suddenly to lift their heads and chest repeatedly up and down. TV documentaries explain that this act is done to cool their body temperature, but Ricardo had the impression that it was in fact a menacing gesture against invaders of territory, or a sexual call. While the females are an odd greenish-brown colour, males are brilliantly red-and-blue coloured when young and then change to intensely black as adults. Inside the house from time to time, some less coloured, translucent and evanescent wall-geckos made their timid appearance and Ricardo always marvelled at their rapid progress on the room walls – rendered possible by their toe pads.

As said earlier, in the compound there were many trees: two big mango-trees – one of them, in particular, really majestic, with luxuriant thick foliage and long rich branches – one avocado pear-tree, three different clumps of banana-trees, several frangipanis and three small hibiscus-trees which were always blooming, covered with magnificent deep-red flowers. Two of the frangipanis, one on the side of the building, another just outside the main gate, were of the variegated sort, all the others had cotton-white flowers. Ricardo would have liked very much to have as well the varieties with totally purple or entirely yellow flowers, which he could see in other gardens and which were really spectacular.

There was also a bougainvillea climbing up at the left side of the front of the house. The flowers of the frangipanis and of the bougainvillea were regularly picked by his steward and put in pots on his table whenever he invited friends for dinner or lunch. Finally, there were also seven palm-trees: five in the front garden – two of them at either side of the main entrance gate – of the short, rather stocky type and two in the back yard with, in contrast, very tall and elegant trunks. None of them however were coconut palms. A tree he was literally fond of for the exceedingly attractive colours of its flowers was the tree called ‘flame tree’ or ‘flame of the forest’ in English-speaking Africa and ‘flamboyant’ in the Francophone one, but there was none in his compound.

All these magnificent fruit-trees however never gave him the pleasure of eating tropical fruit from his own garden (he adored

mangoes and avocado pears, as well as paw-paw) simply because they had decided they were tired of reproducing and were no longer fruitful. As a matter of fact, during the eight years he spent in Nigeria, Ricardo only once saw three quite large mangoes hanging from a high branch of the biggest mango-tree – while the other trees of that kind which could be seen in other gardens were totally covered with hundreds of fruits – and never saw a single avocado pear on the tree in his garden. He had to argue forcefully on three separate occasions with his staff in order to get bananas from the only regularly fruit-bearing trees existing in the compound, the products of which were therefore shared among all the expatriates and the Africans living there.

After a couple of years, however, on his return from a Christmas holiday, he could not find the avocado pear-tree and one frangipani which grew in front of the entrance porch, nicely projecting its protective shade all around. When he asked the reason why they were missing, he was told that a strong windstorm blowing for one whole day had brought them down and it had then been necessary to cut them into pieces to clear the place. Ricardo had read that a strong and pleasant scent is always hovering in the air around frangipani plants. But despite the presence of so many of these trees, with plenty of flowers, there was not much perfume in the compound where Ricardo's residence was situated. This fact was probably due to the high levels of humidity present in Lagos – and also to the unlucky existence of strong air pollution – which covered all scents. This indeed makes Nigeria so different from other African countries, where, on the contrary, the nostrils of a traveller emerging from an aeroplane are immediately assailed by a pungent and enjoyable perfume of flowers and spices.

There were florists at some stands on the streets of Victoria Island and Ikoyi who sold very beautiful tropical flowers – at last Nigerians had discovered that this could be a remunerative business and nurseries had sprung up all over Victoria Island and Ikoyi. In particular, the splendid *Nicolaia elatior*, also called *Phaeomeria magnifica* by botanists and popularly known as 'rose of porcelain', in both the delicate pink and dark-red varieties (big magnificent flowers pertaining to the Zingiberaceae family that have nothing to do with roses, but take their nickname from the fact that their very gaudy wax-like bracts appear similar to imbricate, fancy-coloured

petals in various concentric rows – like roses – and these ‘petals’ are thick, coldly vitreous and very glossy, thus giving the impression of being made of porcelain); and the ‘heliconias’, other very decorative flowers (a variety of the ‘Scitamineae’, pertaining to the Musaceae family) presenting spikes with bracts resembling pendulous opposed series of inverted red and yellow parrot-beaks.

Although they had practically no perfume, Ricardo was fascinated by the spectacular beauty of these flowers and used to buy a dozen or more of them to bring home each time he travelled to Spain to spend his holidays there. His wife, as well as his sister were in fact very happy to receive them and be able to beautify their houses with such imposing exotic flowers. It was always a problem boarding the aircraft with these cumbersome flowers possessing such long, big stems without damaging them, but he often received kind and thoughtful help from the air hostesses, together with their astonished, but joyous congratulations for his magnificent choice. He usually also bought either these splendid flowers or the more common and also beautiful – but less impressive (and, in particular, less expensive) – ‘strelitzias’ (these too considered by some botanists as pertaining to the Musaceae family) to adorn his own flat when holding a dinner for important guests.

3.

Intriguing ladies

In the week preceding Christmas, before he left to spend his holidays in Spain, Ricardo was invited by a friend who was the managing director of another Company to come to their 'End of the Year Party'. When he arrived and entered the hall where the party was taking place, there was a big crowd of managers and employees of the Company everywhere and only a few places remained free. Ricardo found a seat beside a middle-aged lady dressed in smart national costume and wearing a large, very attractively fashioned turban. He thought that the man sitting on her other side was her husband, but learnt that this man was only a colleague of hers. She told him that she was not accompanied by anybody, since she was a widow. She was 41 years old and had five children. She was an accountant and worked in the wages department of that Company.

Bunmi Akinloye, as this was her name, was medium-size and had a perfectly oval, beautiful face with large, intriguing eyes and a nicely patterned mouth. Her body, though not slender, was nevertheless well-shaped, but she had a typical Nigerian posterior, rather large and fleshy. During the party, a very nice show was arranged with traditional and acrobatic dancers and dancing was also organised for the attendees; Ricardo therefore invited Bunmi to dance. She moved nicely and in perfect accord with the rhythm of the music on the dance floor, so he enjoyed dancing with her at length. She seemed to appreciate very much his company and the attention that he gave her.

At the end of the party - rather early for his own habits - because all the employees had to return to their far-away homes, she warmly bid him farewell and moved off to catch the bus put at their disposal by the Company. Ricardo remained a while longer, talking to the

dancers, since two or three of the girls were very beautiful, and he invited one of these to go with him to his house for food and drink. She was willing to go with him though rather hesitant, and under pressure from her colleagues to leave quickly for the place where they were lodged, she eventually thanked Ricardo for the invitation and went with them. Laurence, the driver, who had come over in the meantime with the car to fetch him and witnessed the scene, was very amused and congratulated him on his open and polite manners towards African women. He also thought sincerely that Ricardo was very successful with them and told him this frankly.

On the last Sunday before leaving Ricardo went to Tarkwa Bay with colleagues and friends. They had decided to prepare a barbecue for lunch. When the meal was about to be ready, he was sent to see if any of them were still on the external beach, in front of the ocean. There was just one of the younger men, lying on the shore. Ricardo, noticing that at a very short distance there were also an astonishingly beautiful African girl and a boy playing with water on the shoreline, said to him:

“Come to the bungalow; the food is nearly ready.”

But the young man replied:

“Not now. I’m not very hungry. Perhaps I’ll come later on.”

Ricardo then decided to go back, but as he passed by the attractive girl he let a long intense glance fall on her. He walked on rapidly. When he had nearly arrived at the inner bay, he heard a female voice behind him saying:

“Why are you hurrying like that, instead of waiting for me?”

It was the girl; she had run behind him, to join him. He stopped and waited for her. When she was beside him, he could look at her well. Though very young, or maybe just by virtue of her apparent youth, she was really magnificent: smaller than him, but wonderfully shaped, she had a small round face with enormous smiling black eyes and small mouth, a splendid bosom, a perfectly proportioned round bottom. Ricardo was thrilled and seized by her beauty: ‘She is really perfect’, he thought. ‘That’s a very rare sight.’ She asked him again:

“Why are you rushing like that?”

He answered:

“Because our lunch is ready.”

She responded hungrily:

“Lunch? Oh, may I come with you and have some, as well?”

He would have liked very much to be allowed to invite her, in order to become better acquainted and to have the opportunity of keeping her longer with him; she looked in fact so wonderfully beautiful, but he knew well the unbreakable rules established by the Company when it rented the bungalow for its employees’ leisure and said:

“I am sorry, unfortunately you may not come. Our bungalow is strictly reserved for Company expatriate employees, hence, in effect, to white people; I’m therefore afraid I’m not allowed to take you with me, though I would like very much to do so, believe me.”

The girl replied: “OK, if these are the strict rules, it doesn’t matter. If you like, I can see you another time.”

“I would be delighted,” said Ricardo and, since he was then near the bungalow, left her. He dared not tell her that he was leaving three days later for Spain and would not be back in Lagos until January. He saw her later on for a short moment, in the middle of a crowd of Africans, when he was walking on the beach with his friends to take the boat to go back and they waved good-bye to each other; but never again after that, despite his desire and search for her on his return. She simply disappeared, as though he had only seen a ghostly vision. ‘If it was so’, thought Ricardo ‘then Nigeria is a land likely to produce really marvellous, enchanting ghosts’.

The expressway to the airport passed, by means of a fly-over, through the Oshodi district centre and big market place, which was considered one of the most dangerous places in Lagos. This was due to the terrific traffic-jam generated there by the huge and chaotic concentration of vehicles: panting buses (the ill-famed ‘molue buses’: old, asthmatic, with the rusted plates of the body rotten or torn off, or sometimes botched together as best as one can), minibuses (popularly called ‘danfo buses’), with their bawling drivers shouting their destinations at the top of their voices, old and slow lorries with sides and back covered with vividly-coloured drawings – each one with its picturesque motto most of the time glorifying the Lord – as well as cars of all dimensions, makes, ages and conditions stopping everywhere, even in the second, third and fourth lanes. A frantic crowd was constantly spewing out from them or wishing to get aboard, pushing strenuously and even fighting violently to achieve this. Furthermore, there was always an interminable queue

of strolling vendors, at times running fast behind cars containing potential buyers, and of innumerable beggars and handicapped people demanding alms. To disentangle and force one's way through such a throng was an arduous and sometimes almost impossible task. It therefore always took a long time to clear such an oppressive accumulation of vehicles, with long stoppages forced on those passing by, which were in consequence subject to possible attack by bandits.

A couple of Ricardo's friends were attacked later on. One received rifle shots at the car which luckily did not hit either him or the passenger riding with him - an Italian pianist who had come to Lagos to give a concert at the Muson Centre in Onikan. What a tremendous impact with harsh reality for the poor artist on his first experience of Nigerian society! What a dreadful outburst of dazzling and booming welcome! This notwithstanding, he performed with relative ease and rather well the following day. Ricardo met him after the concert and, speaking with him about what had happened, found him tranquil and jolly. Luckily, he had taken his alarming adventure very sportingly. The other had the windows of his car broken with blows from cudgels.

Both friends managed to escape - thanks to the robustness of their car, which in both cases was a Toyota Land-cruiser - by forcefully pushing away other cars in order to open an escape route. The likely aim of each attack was robbery of the car itself. Ricardo did not have a very sought-after car, but whenever he was leaving for Spain or was arriving in Lagos, and had therefore to pass through Oshodi, he used to take off his gold wedding-ring and small neck-chain and put them in the little waist-pocket of his jeans, to avoid losing them in the course of a possible attack, but luckily nothing ever happened.

Apart from the fear of passing through such crises, the most incredible vision which could be enjoyed from the fly-over was looking down at the market below: a gorgeous mass of people, like an immense formicary, perpetually moving everywhere - but it was impossible to say where they were going to or coming from - standing, sitting. Anywhere, anyhow. And in the darkness, in the evening after sunset or at night, a myriad of flickering lights, engendered by kerosene lamps, lanterns, torches, small fires and candles, could be seen. It was a real apocalyptic vision of a huge humanity in its most diversified variety. So Ricardo, remembering that in St. John's Apocalyptic vision humanity will have to

congregate after the end of the world in Jehoshaphat's valley for the last judgement, started calling the Oshodi market site by the biblical name of 'Jehoshaphat's valley'.

When he came back from his holiday in January and was unable, in spite of all his searching, to find the girl he met before Christmas at Tarkwa Bay, Ricardo went and paid Bunmi a visit in her office and gently courted her, then he asked her for a date. She was very flattered and felt a great attraction for this 'oyinbo' who demonstrated such evident and insistent interest in her. However she politely refused to agree to a date and said that she was leaving two days later for holidays until mid-February. On her return to the office, if he was still eager to meet her, maybe an encounter could be arranged.

He waited patiently and on the day she was back he phoned her. She was surprised that he remembered so well the date of her return – in her opinion, this appeared to mean that he was serious and really interested – and felt very happy for that. They arranged to meet that same day after office hours at his residence. By closing time, contrary to his habits, since he used to stay at his office till late, he managed to finish every task very rapidly and hurried home. Despite rush hour traffic, he could be at home before her arrival.

When she arrived and rang the doorbell, the steward was still in the boys' quarters, as it was still quite early for the preparation of food for dinner, so he had to open the door to her himself. He escorted her into the living room and offered her a drink. Because of the heat, she had suffered quite a lot in the taxi she took to get to his house, which, as is the habit in Lagos, had picked up many passengers on the way. In Lagos taxis are in fact considered quite a cheap collective means of transportation, and if you want to travel in one all alone you must inform the driver in advance and will, of course, then pay a higher fare, which in most cases becomes unaffordable by Africans.

After they had drunk and talked cheerfully, he stood up, went to her, kissed her gently and delicately on her mouth and, taking her by her hand, said, modulating his voice to the softest possible tone, but almost imperiously, not leaving room for any objection (which she however had no intention of raising):

"Come!" and led her to his bedroom. When they were in, Ricardo kissed her passionately; then started unfastening the top button of

her blouse. She understood immediately what he desired to do and, while promptly dropping on the table her earrings and necklace, asked him in a suave tone:

“Do you want me to undress completely?”

He answered quietly:

“Yes”.

She undressed quickly, without shame or further hesitation. She knew very well that she had come to his residence for that and was therefore excited and full of expectation for an enjoyable experience. Although not slender, but rather stocky and fleshy, her body was attractive and her flesh very firm and steady. She still had beautiful and plump big breasts which she enjoyed very much to squeeze together into his mouth. Ricardo liked to play with them and to lick and suck them, as well as to bite them gently and softly. He sucked her voraciously. Bunmi’s thighs, though rather chubby, were firm and exciting.

In spite of his decided preference for slim women, Ricardo liked her and deemed that she was sexually attractive and desirable. He felt that he was totally seduced by the very dark complexion of her skin, which was almost totally black. He could see the reddish orifice of her vagina open, but dared not do anything to push forward their sexual actions as his recurrent fault, the lack of voluntary full erection because his libido had weakened and grown less with ageing, inhibited him. She anyhow enjoyed so much what he did to her that she felt contented and happy and seemed not to notice his non-fulfilment or to miss a complete interlude.

She was even happy not to be penetrated, because she feared very much getting pregnant, as in her situation and at her age this would have been very awkward (and likely to provoke a real hurly-burly and, in this case maybe, even a scandal among her neighbours on the discovery that an incidental pregnancy of hers could be the result of a secret relationship with a white man!). Moreover, she was also extremely scared at the thought of getting some sexual disease. He on the contrary felt extremely embarrassed and ashamed, especially because every night he got very violent erections unconsciously and his penis became so stiff and hard that it even hurt him and regularly woke him up. When Bunmi left after a couple of hours gladly spent together, Ricardo let her be taken home by Laurence in his car, since she lived in a far away district of Lagos.

Ricardo and Bunmi met many other times during the next three to

four months, always at his residence on weekdays after office hours and always with the same routine. Every time, she was literally enchanted by his kind and sweet manners and liked the way he treated her very much. By tenderly stroking and kissing her face and body, as well as by licking and sucking her voraciously, he was able to bring her to the highest excitement and ecstasy and to let her come, attaining strong, very agreeable orgasms. She openly declared to him her delight and pleasure:

“Ricardo, you are wonderful!”

Bunmi told him that there was an African man who was courting her and who seemed, according to his declarations, ready to marry her; but she was not very attracted to him and, moreover, did not want to change her status out of a sort of regard vis-à-vis her children.

Ricardo and Bunmi also planned to spend a weekend together or to travel somewhere during some of the yearly festivities, when she could easily arrange for her children to stay alone and not have to worry about their mother's strange changing of routine - by being absent on her own for more than 24 hours. But then the opportunity to do it never occurred.

Their relationship lasted until she felt she was going to be too much involved, because she was getting too fond of him and she was frightened of her feelings towards this white man bound to leave Africa sooner or later. When she thought about this, she realised that she would have her heart broken later on, at his departure from Africa. Bunmi therefore preferred to stop meeting Ricardo, although she maintained extremely delicate, rewarding and romantic behaviour towards him whenever they had the occasion to meet at her office during his visits to her bosses.

On his side, although Ricardo felt in his heart that he needed to have a closer relationship with a woman, who would remain with him also during the night, he liked her sincerely and always regretted not having had full sexual intercourse with her. When he made a discovery later on that changed his sexual life drastically, he regretted not having found it earlier and been able to give Bunmi more pleasure and love.

One evening when he was out for dinner at a friend's house, where only bachelors or men whose wives were at that moment abroad were gathered to eat and feast together, at the end of the very

delicious dinner that had been served to the pleasure-loving and noisy guests, somebody launched a proposal:

“Let’s go to the Coco Bar!”

The proposition was welcomed with enthusiasm, and a queue of cars was immediately formed to get there. Ricardo had already heard some of them talking about this place, but he had never been there before. He was told that it was a place attended by a conspicuous number of African girls eager to meet men, and that the Italians jokingly used to call it ‘Camillo’s Bar’, referring to the name of the Managing Director of Agip Nigeria Plc., on whose property it had been set up. As a matter of fact, when the group of friends arrived there, the place was full of girls, who immediately rushed towards them and only allowed them to choose a table with difficulty; then flew all around them. Ricardo had to admit that some of them were of rare beauty. They mainly claimed to be University students, coming from various places all over Nigeria. Most of them however declared themselves to be from Port Harcourt. He wondered whether it was true or a sort of fancy declaration, intended to impress foreigners’ mind with the name of a well-known locality outside Lagos, which was the capital town of Rivers State where a great number of the largest Nigerian oil deposits lay. The group of men chatted with the girls and also offered them a drink, but when they left the Coco Bar they were all alone, to the girls’ obvious great disappointment.

These girls were certainly ready to sell their love, but some of them secretly hoped to have the chance to meet there the right man and initiate a real romance, especially with a white man, which they often dreamt of. In most cases, anyhow – although they were going to that bar regularly, practically every night, with the specific purpose of meeting men – they did not like to be considered harlots.

Unfortunately, prostitution on the streets of Victoria Island and Ikoyi was increasing every day. This process evidently indicated an increasing poverty among the population, since some years earlier there were no whores at all in the streets. Girls in search of men, in limited number, usually attended the various casinos annexed to the town hotels. Sanusi Fafunwa Street and Akin Adesola Street had become the real centre of prostitution in Victoria Island and Kingsway Road and Thompson Avenue (especially at the junction with Webb Road and at the crossroads with Glover Road) the centre in Ikoyi.

The girls in Victoria Island were usually more beautiful and more elegant than those in Ikoyi. Many of them were dressed in the latest fashion, which showed that they were not ignorant people coming from the bush, but young women of the town, well aware of what was happening also in the world outside Nigeria. Most of them, of course, were wearing miniskirts, amply showing their breathtaking, well-shaped long legs (at least, so they appeared from the vantage-point of the driver or passengers seated in a car, especially at night in the flashing beams of car headlights). Whilst all the girls in Victoria Island were normally dressed in 'western' fashion, a few of the girls showing up in Ikoyi liked to be dressed in national attire: this probably reflected the kind of male populace they wanted to attract. At the junction between Sanusi Fafunwa and Akin Adesola Streets, where drivers wishing to turn towards Falomo Bridge were compelled to brake steadily in order to reduce sufficiently the speed of their cars, each decelerating car was assaulted by a troop of girls. The same scenes occurred often at the crossroads between Thompson and Glover Roads, where speed-breaking bumps were placed on each side of the street. To avoid the assault, it was necessary to press on the accelerator as soon as possible.

A totally different kind of assault – but carried out similarly – was practised on Sundays by the beggars at the exit from the Mass celebrated at the chapel of the Apostolic Nunciature in Anifowoshe Street in Victoria Island. At the very beginning, when Ricardo arrived in Lagos and started attending the Mass there, only a few beggars would be waiting outside the gate of the Nunciature. But by the end of his stay there were 30 to 40 of them rushing towards worshippers at the end of the Mass.

The absurd aspect of this was that those beggars mainly came from the northern part of Nigeria, belonging to the Hausa and Fulani ethnic groups, and were therefore all Islamic! The catholic Mass at 10 a.m., which was customarily celebrated in Italian, was not only attended by the Italians, but also by numerous Spaniards, South Americans, and Filipinos, in addition to a large Nigerian community. All of these probably used to distribute generous alms, and the word might have spread among Moslems that maybe they stood a better chance there than at the Mosque. Ricardo was convinced that he had never seen such a huge concentration of beggars, not even at roundabouts or at common heavy traffic-jam points where there are gatherings of disabled people, mainly blind men or cripples.

In order to satisfy more than just a couple of them, he used to ask for change in 5 Naira banknotes at the supermarkets on Saturdays, which he then distributed on Sundays. He always took care – despite the assaulting crowd – not to benefit only certain people, and to favour disabled people, old women (weaker and less rapid than men in grasping money) and children who claimed to have watched the car against possible theft. Among those beggars there was often a small and slim middle-aged man, always dressed in western clothes, who was totally handless, because of leprosy that had evidently eaten both his hands away. When he was around, Ricardo always tried to reserve a banknote for him, which he seized with his two stumps, bowing down and smiling gratefully. But even if by chance, Ricardo failed to see him because of the surrounding crowd, and distributed all the money he brought with him before noticing him, and had to tell him that he couldn't give him anything because the money was gone, this unfortunate man still smiled kindly at him – bending his head in courteous greeting and sign of homage – in spite of his disappointment.

In April the Company management decided to replace its general managers' cars with new ones and to pass on their cars, which had less than two years' use, to the managers. So Ricardo was given the General Manager for Drilling Activity's car, a Seat Toledo, but with the car he had to accept also a change in the driver entitled to drive it. Laurence was actually a freelance, not a Company employee, and therefore could not do it. The name of the new driver, a young man from Rivers State, was Sunday Nwachukwu.

At first, Ricardo felt very annoyed at this change, because he had learnt to trust Laurence for his kindness and care, but the new driver soon revealed himself to be a valuable person, careful and wise in driving and a very gentle and serviceable chap. He was full of attention for Ricardo and complied entirely with his wishes and expectations for the remainder of his stay in Nigeria. Sunday had a peaceful and mild nature and did not behave aggressively with other drivers, as was generally a common rule in Lagos. He always drove the car with competence, care and calm ('Even too much so' thought Ricardo sometimes, especially when, for one reason or another, he was in a hurry. 'I would like to know why it never comes to his mind that his boss too might be trying to avoid being late, instead of letting long queues of other drivers overtake us or cross

the path in front of us!’ Despite this feeling, however, Ricardo never pushed him to rush and enter the fray, in order not to risk letting him lose his good temper). The car itself was far more comfortable than the Peugeot 404 and had – at last! – a working air conditioner, which Ricardo appreciated a lot.

After some days, Sunday told Ricardo that he wished to go to the Alaba market and buy a 150-Watts amplifier for his stereo set. Ricardo was astounded that his driver was looking for such a powerful amplifier and told him:

“In my house, in Spain, I have an amplifier of 42-Watts per channel and I have to keep it at very low volume, because, I assure you, that is enough to hear the music very well. Why do you need to have an amplifier of that power, since you live in a much smaller room, which measures only 3 by 3 metres?”

Sunday gave him an answer that left him totally without words:

“You see, sir, with such an amplifier, if I keep the volume low, I have a reserve of power which will enable it not to distort the sound.”

Apart from some exaggeration, the idea in itself was surely correct. Ricardo knew it very well, but he was absolutely astounded that the driver – who had probably left his hut in the bush village only a few years before – could have the concept of reserve of power and of sound distortion. How he could be aware of this was a real mystery to him. He was indeed sure that in Spain itself, a country with, on average, a more highly educated population, only a few people knew that. Incredible and surprising Nigeria, erroneously reputed to be a backward country: evidently Nigerians, on the contrary, must have progress flowing within the blood in their veins!

The following month Ricardo decided that he had saved enough money and was therefore able to buy a TV set and a video-recorder. Consequently, he started an accurate market survey and observed the prices in many different department stores – such as ‘Cash and Carry’, ‘Park ‘n’ Shop’, ‘Take and Pay’, ‘Pay-Less 2’, ‘MegaPlaza’, ‘Landsmark’, ‘Bohjons’ – to find the cheapest one. He also searched in the Alaba market outside the town – in the vicinity of the Festac complex, the International Trade Fair Centre, along the expressway to Badagry – which was commonly called ‘the pirates market’ because many of the goods sold there were the fruit of hold-ups of entire containers, made either straight on ships riding at anchor outside port entrances or inside ware-houses.

However, the rich choice of items once existing at Alaba (the most up-to-date electronic apparatuses could only be found and bought there) was evidently no more. Prices as well, which had been very favourable in the past, had lately increased there too and had become comparable to those practised by the department stores in town. In order not to run the risk of being cheated it was therefore always necessary to know well the prices of the town and bargain strenuously.

He finally bought at 'Landmark' a Japanese Sharp 21" multi-system model for 21,700 Naira, while for the video he preferred to buy, as it was cheaper, a Korean Samsung video-player with recording possibility which he found in the central market of the Lagos district of Apapa at a price of 10,000 Naira. He could therefore start watching TV (but unfortunately NTA, the Nigerian Television Authority broadcasts were in general rather poor) and videocassettes. Up to then he had spent his late afternoons and evenings listening to classical music CDs and reading books (of which he had brought an ample supply from Spain).

He had enjoyed reading a lot, amongst other things, novels, novelettes and biographical tales written by Nigerian authors, such as the Nobel Prize Winner for literature Wole Soyinka ('The Man Died', 'Aké. The Years of Childhood', 'The Interpreters'), Ben Okri ('Stars of the New Curfew', 'The Famished Road', 'Infinite Riches', 'Songs of Enchantment', 'Dangerous Love' - this latter however read only later, on its publication in 1996), Buchi Emecheta ('The Bride Price', 'The Slave Girl', 'Second-Class Citizen'), Amos Tutuola ('The Palm-Wine Drinkard', 'My Life in the Bush of Ghosts') and Ogali A. Ogali ('The Juju Priest'), naturally all - apart from Buchi Emecheta's 'Second-Class Citizen', mostly relevant to her own life in London - set in Nigeria and dealing with its peculiar, charming, extremely variegated reality and characteristic fabulous aspects. Most of these books were original editions, published in English, but a few of them were edited in Spain and therefore obviously translated into the local language.

One evening, while he was watching TV in the small parlour of the night section of his flat, before going to bed, Ricardo heard a loud buzz of voices which seemed to be coming from the living room, in the other section - the day area - of the flat. (For security reasons, the two sectors were separated by an iron gate, kept closed when he

retired for the night by means of a big and robust padlock). Astonished and alarmed, he got to his feet, opened the grid and went silently to the living room. Inside it, in the dim light existing there – light from the external security lamps penetrating through the curtains – everything appeared to be calm and quiet.

It turned out that the voice was coming from outside. Ricardo went tiptoeing to the large window and, looking out through the curtain without moving it, discovered the origin of the loud murmur. Comfortably seated in one of the garden cane armchairs under the adjacent porch (Ricardo's flat was in fact on the ground-floor of the building) one of the night guards – maybe a Moslem – was reciting his prayers aloud, reading from a book, in a sort of declaimed singsong. Ricardo was a practising Catholic and could only praise the man wholeheartedly for his laudable act of paying, albeit in a different religion, due tribute to the Almighty. He therefore decided not to disturb him; he did not send him away but let him continue his psalmody. Though a bit annoyed by his noisy way of praying, from then onwards Ricardo tacitly allowed him to sit under the porch, in his own armchair, for reciting his prayers.

During the daytime, on these same armchairs under the porch – which for this reason rapidly became spoiled and therefore no more usable – Ayo, the gardener, and the watchmen, used to sit whilst engaged in playing relentless games of draughts. Fierce matches often took place between them and the bawling which followed any disappointment or deception by one or another of the players was always very loud. Ricardo however did not want to appear too rude and despotic and usually let them stay there to play their games. However he liked to eat in peace, without all that din just outside the large glass-door of his living room, so at mealtimes Benoît, the steward, took care to send them away. If he did not do so and the noise became too loud and bothersome, Ricardo himself would ask Benoît to invite the players to stop their game and leave the porch.

Having noticed one day that they had lost some draughtsmen and were replacing them every time with small stones or pieces of wood, he decided to present Ayo with an entire set of 24 men (12 brown and 12 black) which he had bought in Spain on his first trip back for the Christmas holidays. When he gave the set to Ayo, hoping to make him and his friends happy with the gift, he was however told that they could not use such a set since their game required the use of 40 men (instead of 24 as it is normally the habit in Europe).

Ricardo had seen that they were playing on a very large draughtboard, but had thought that this was due to the fact that it was the result of amateurish handicraft; frankly he hadn't noticed this difference between African (or Nigerian, or more simply their own?) and European draughtboards. He was therefore compelled to buy a second set of 24 draughtsmen on his next trip to Spain in order to enable them to fully use, with great appreciation and satisfaction, his 'precious' gift. They could even enjoy 8 spare pieces for substitution in case of any loss!

One Friday evening Ricardo drove to Eko Hotel, as he often did, to buy a Spanish paper. Football matches of the Champions Cup tournament had been played in Europe on the Wednesday, two days earlier, and he wanted to know about the performance of the Spanish team Real Madrid, which he supported. He had not managed to catch the result on the radio on Wednesday night. He left the car in the Hotel parking-place, at the foot of the small hill on which the building of the Hotel had been erected and went to the newsstand in the Hotel lobby. He found the newspaper he was looking for and bought it. When he went back to his car, there was a tall and slim young lady leaning against it, smoking a cigarette. He greeted her and asked her gently to give him space as he wanted to drive away. In her turn, she asked him whether he could give her a lift to Federal Palace Hotel on Amadu Bello Way. Since it was not far from his residence and it did not compel him to make a large detour, he agreed. However, when they were about to arrive at Federal Palace, she suddenly changed her mind and asked him whether he could offer her a drink, more precisely a beer. Ricardo conceded, but, having taken with him only enough money to buy the newspaper, he had no further money to buy a drink in the Hotel bar; so he decided to take her home.

When they arrived there he took her into the drawing room and offered her the lager beers he had: Gulden or Harp, but she did not want any of them and asked for a stout. He therefore had to call for Benoît and send him to buy a Guinness beer from one of the wives of the various stewards selling drinks on the sidewalk outside the compound. While drinking her beer, the young lady surprised Ricardo by taking off the kerchief she wore on her head and placing it on the armchair. He could therefore see that she had a nice round face with beautiful mascara-rimmed dark eyes and very short curly

hair. She looked as if she were around 23 to 25.

She told him that her name was Amina and she was from the Hausa ethnic group. Formerly, she used to live in Kano, but now she lived with a sister of hers in Lagos, in Adeola Odeku Street. She further told him that she had been divorced for three years. She had been married to a Hausa man who, at the wedding, had solemnly promised her to remain monogamous, but after one year, while she was pregnant, had broken his oath and decided to marry another woman. Being a Moslem, he had every right to do so, and also the law was on his side. But she had not accepted this unilateral rupture of a fidelity pact and took the decision to divorce. Her husband agreed, but as soon as breastfeeding of the child could be stopped, one year after its delivery, he arbitrarily relieved her of all maternal authority for their baby boy, who was considered by the existing law as the *property* of her husband alone, and sent her out of the house. She had not seen her son since then – three years before.

Amina was obviously very sorrowful, and suffered because of the fate of her baby. While expressing her pain to Ricardo, though speaking plainly and calmly, she was shaken by sobs, and tears welled up in the corners of her eyes. She evidently felt the need to weep out her sorrow and open her heart to somebody who was a stranger and in particular, as in this specific case, a foreigner like Ricardo. He listened to her sad story with great attention and felt a sincere sympathy for this unfortunate lady, and cordially manifested it to her. She appeared happy to have found so much understanding and sharing of her sorry experience by an ‘oyimbo’, and thanked him with gratitude, smiling at him with gleaming eyes.

Ricardo understood that she was longing for tenderness; therefore he moved from the armchair where he had been sitting up to that moment and sat on the sofa near her. Then he embraced her tenderly and eventually, finding no resistance, but, on the contrary, a rather evident encouragement, kissed her passionately. Amina was eager to receive such attention by a man, which she had been deprived of for a long time, and clung tightly to him. Ricardo felt that she was ready to push further their tender effusions and therefore led her to his bedroom where she promptly undressed, remaining completely naked. She had a very beautiful and attractive slim body, with very well shaped globular high breasts. However the most astonishing feature of her overall figure was the size of her nipples. To Ricardo’s surprise, in fact, Amina had very big nipples.

In his whole life, Ricardo had never known of or seen a woman having such big nipples, but Amina's were enormous. Their diameter and, consequently, their circumference were twice or even three times bigger than normal-sized nipples, even for a woman having breastfed many children (though she had had to do it only with one baby).

Another characteristic feature was that their ends were not dome-like as most women's nipples are, but perfectly flat. They therefore rose from the breast-tops like huge polled towers or broken columnar gemstones, in particular like dark topazes or tourmalines, especially when delicately titillated and potently aroused. Their size and density gave him particular pleasure when holding them inside his mouth, while softly licking and sucking them. Though Ricardo and Amina did not have complete intercourse because of Ricardo's usual problem, she was exceedingly excited and moved her body jumping from one side to the other, while lying under him, shaking and stretching out her long thin arms and legs. She did that with frenzy, as though frenetically enacting a horizontal dance on the bed, which gave Ricardo the impression that he lay stretched out on a gigantic human-shaped spider. She enjoyed his kissing and licking her body very much and wanted to perform fellatio on him with great pleasure and gusto. For the first time in three years, she felt happy and somehow relieved – a bit, at least – from her sorrow and painful condition. Afterwards, while preparing to leave, Amina said to Ricardo:

“You are a nice and kind man, a real perfect gentleman. ... If only my ex-husband were like you or at least behaved as you do, I would probably still be happily in love with him!” then, with a sudden enlightenment in her eyes, added: “I like you. ... I wish you were my boyfriend! ... Would you agree? ... I frankly need a man to keep me with him and at the moment have none!”

Ricardo thanked her warmly, but replied that he could not accept her kind proposition because he was about to host a colleague who was meant to spend a long period of time in his house.

While driving back home, after having dropped her in front of her sister's house, he thought with a very heavy heart: “Though Nigeria is, in many respects, such a civil and modern country, how heavily male-oriented Nigerian society still is! How hard and penalizing is the law for women! Women really have no rights here, even no right to keep with them the creatures they have carried for nine months

inside themselves and have given life to. The product of their own womb itself *belongs* entirely to the overly dominating sex: men! Men, these absolute monarchs, always and uniquely, men! Is this suppressed condition of women by chance perhaps just an excessively harsh revenge by men against ancient forms of matriarchal rule? Are Nigerians really incapable of perceiving that, in modern life, this behaviour is exceedingly incongruous and even monstrous? How sad is this unequal conflict between the two sexes! When will this situation evolve and modernize, and women's rights and equal dignity to men be recognized?

Ricardo never met Amina again. This was partly because he had a bad surprise fifteen days later: he discovered that crab lice had infested his pubis. It was the very first time in his whole life that something of that sort had happened to him, and he felt annoyed and frustrated. Though he was not at all sure that it was her fault (he had had to travel to Europe on a short mission for his Company in the meantime and the contagion might have taken place in the hotel bedroom or bathroom, as well as in the airplane) and despite her nice appearance and behaviour he preferred not to risk repeating such an unpleasant experience. He had anyhow to go shamefully to the doctor to get medicaments to free him from the infestation. The doctor gave him a powder that made the crab lice disappear completely in less than a week.

In the meantime many vendors and merchants had started coming to his residence with lots of different beautiful and precious goods, in particular carved ivory objects, bronze casts, carved wood statuettes and images, masks, as well as linen and leather fabrics. Ricardo was fascinated by the huge quantity of unusual and possibly antique objects that were shown to him. Generally speaking, he did not like African wooden statuary: apart from a few very attractive objects, he found it too dramatic, exaggerated and sometimes even grotesque in its symbolic representation of a certain reality or of contemplative spirituality. Furthermore, when particularly complex and overabundant in figures, he considered it very difficult to interpret. Although it was highly sought after by worldwide museums, as well as by European and American collectors, it was not normally particularly interesting to his taste. He liked very much, however, objects carved in ivory and bronze, brass and copper casts.

A couple of those traders in particular became his devoted

personal suppliers. They used to go to him to offer their goods before visiting any other potential buyer. One was a Malian, by the name of Mohammed, who made bags, wallets, belts and shoes in all kinds of leather, but particularly in crocodile and lizard skin. Ricardo bought from him many crocodile skin bags to take home to Spain, as well as belts, wallets, shoes and also a pilot-type briefcase made in lion skin for himself.

The other, whose name was Ibrahim, was a jolly Guinean, who used to travel through all the countries of West Africa collecting traditional objects, which could be old, made for indigenous use and not modern artefacts for tourists. Ricardo bought from this trader many beautiful and uncommon objects, also objects which could easily find a place in a fine minor African art museum, such as: Nigerian ceremonial swords, both in ivory and in bronze, ivory and bronze necklaces, ivory carved plaques, typical ivory-handled wooden African combs with nearly three-inch-long teeth (but of second-rate quality ivory, probably from hippos', not elephants', tusks), a wooden hand-bell glamorously representing a beautiful, kneeling, naked woman with a superb hair dressing filled with cowrie-shells as in a high diadem, Cameroonian bronze armbands and ankle supports, Ghanaian cotton tablecloths with fine-pattern embroidery and woollen blankets and also a Dogon (Mali) sculpted wooden window-post.

He always deeply regretted however not having had enough money to buy it the day Ibrahim came with an old side-blown trumpet made from an elephant's tusk 70 to 80 cm long, worked on the outside to become polygonal, and stained maybe with tea or with some other herbal infusion, to a dark-reddish hue. He also exceedingly regretted that he had not bought an extraordinary object which was a perfect copy of the superb bronze 'pot on a stand roped together' – pertaining to the ancient Igbo Ukwu art (circa 9th century A.D.) – which is exhibited at the National Museum of Lagos, and which had been brought to him by a third vendor soon after his arrival in Nigeria. This artefact could in fact be transformed easily into a very beautiful and unusual stand for a table lamp of abat-jour type for a European house. At that time however he did not earn enough money to be able to afford the expenditure necessary to buy it: the price requested (which could obviously be reduced through strenuous and lengthy bargaining) was more than twice his monthly salary!

Other interesting objects that he bought from a fourth vendor, whose name was Sonny, were an ivory pot made out of a hollow elephant tusk, with a solid lid surmounted by the finely-carved statuette of a Portuguese armoured harquebusier mounted on horseback, and some nice small, vividly coloured terracotta masks. With those objects he did not mean to keep for himself, he was able on return to Spain to make munificent and gaudy gifts to relatives and friends – all of which were received by the recipients with enthusiasm, high appreciation and gratitude.

To confirm the rarity of such objects, it has to be said that Ricardo never saw similar ones on the stands of curio-sellers in front of the main hotels of the town or on the stalls of the Jakande Estate market. Only one of the most important industrialists of the country had on the display-shelves of the large reception-room in his residence two copies of the bronze pot (Ricardo could see them, when he was invited to dinners and parties held in his house), but neither was as beautiful and in such perfect condition as the one offered to Ricardo on that occasion.

Both Mohammed and Ibrahim became so confidential with Ricardo that they used to spend a long time talking with him of their life and problems and even dared borrow money from him when they found themselves in severe necessity. Mohammed, for instance, told Ricardo that his father, who owned a herd of cattle in Mali, wanted him to go back to his country to take care of the cattle, but this was against his own wishes as he had learnt a good and remunerative trade as leather-worker. He did not want to go, therefore, and asked Ricardo's advice about it.

However, later on he probably had to go back to Mali, because Ricardo did not see him any more in the last months of his stay in Nigeria. He had, strangely enough, vanished without announcing his departure (and unfortunately for Ricardo, along with a big travel-bag in good soft leather that Ricardo had bought from him and paid 15,000 Naira for, but required him to make some modification to). Ibrahim, after Ricardo lent him money – that he, later on, regularly reimbursed – used to greet him with a gentle 'mon père', equivalent to 'my father'. He even said to Ricardo several times that he wanted to come one day to pay him a visit together with his wife and little son in order to introduce his family to him, but this occasion never materialised.

A third trader, with whom Ricardo entertained a good relationship,

was Mr. King (and because of his stately countenance, he always called him: 'Mister King'). Mr. King was a fabric trader, specialising in tablecloths, who normally operated on weekends at the beaches, in particular at Tarkwa Bay, but Ricardo met him on a couple of occasions at Eleko Beach too. He used to pass from one shelter to another carrying on his head innumerable very beautiful cloths of different colours or printed patterns. Ricardo needed a tablecloth for his dining table, but considered the size of the cloths normally made in Nigeria – also those sold by Mr. King – were all too small for his long table. He asked Mr. King, when this trader came to him the first time, whether it was possible to have a tablecloth of much larger size. Mr. King said that he could let the firm producing those cloths make a special one for him and kept his word (Ricardo suspected that Mr. King must have shares in the ownership of the firm).

A magnificent tablecloth was produced, with colours matching the furniture of the dining corner of Ricardo's living room and splendid printed drawings of different tropical fruit. Also for the napkins, which were usually sold in bundles of 6 to 8, and were rather small in size, Ricardo requested there should be instead 12 of them and four times as big. He was quite content, both with the work done and the price agreed upon. He therefore introduced Mr. King also to his friends and other colleagues, who were all fully satisfied. Mr. King was very grateful to Ricardo for that and, from then onwards, always came to greet him extremely cheerfully whenever he met him.

There were however some other items that Ricardo bought in abundance: paintings. One day a man carrying a very large portfolio full of drawings and paintings arrived at his house to show him his work. He came from Ife (the ancient centre of Nigerian artistic life, dealing, in particular, with the production of terracotta and bronze casting) and his name was Funsho Adeniji. He was a naïf painter who adopted a rather strange technique: he sketched the subject of the represented scene, with a very soft pencil or with charcoal, on the back of transparent drawing paper and then laid oil-colours on the front of it. His imagery mainly depicted village scenes and native people in traditional dress and customary activities. From an artistic viewpoint, the representation itself was very naïf and somehow coarse, but Ricardo liked it and decided to buy a couple of his paintings. Since Funsho, afterwards, galvanised by the acquisition of this new customer, went to his house many other times – whenever

he travelled from Ife to Lagos – Ricardo bought several other works by him, up to ten paintings, until he got bored when Funsho arrived too often, practically every two weeks, at his door. Ricardo framed four of these paintings and hung them in the dining corner of his living room. In that context, they looked really superb, cheering the room up powerfully.

He also bought two large, colourful canvases from another artist, Lamidi, also from Ife, which represented, respectively, in fancy and naïve drawing – but very elegantly and glamorously – an elephant and a slave in chains escorted by two armed guards. The technique adopted to paint them was extremely interesting and attractive: colour-filling of figures was effected by drawing a myriad of coloured rings to fill the dresses of the portrayed men and the skin of the elephant, while the parts of men's naked skin were filled up with a series of longitudinal lines and inscriptions.

It goes anyhow without saying that, though he appreciated the work of these artists, his favourite and most esteemed Nigerian artist by far always remained Bruce Onobrakpeya. Bruce was a man of great and honoured artistic talent and temperament (one of his works was said to have been given a place in the Vatican Museum), as well as a really charming and fascinating person, a couple of whose works – an 'Ekuoregbe' and an 'Annunciation II' – Ricardo had already long since owned. In spite of his great admiration for Bruce, however, this time he had been unable to go to his studio and workshop, having completely forgotten its location and the exact address; he remembered only that Bruce lived in a very crowded district of Lagos, somewhere off Agege Motor Road.

To these artists, as well as to all the vendors who had established a trade relationship with him, he willingly gave the addresses of his friends and colleagues to help them to increase their trading opportunities.

When it rained, the noise on the corrugated iron roof was impressive and it passed nearly instantaneously from the light patter of the first drops to the intense drumming and finally to the tremendous roar of the heavy shower. When such sudden showers poured from the sky during the night, one was abruptly woken up by the heavy hammering and bombing on the thin roof, which made it clang and resound awfully as if it were about to tumble down. Ricardo, however, who was used to frequent harsh summer thunderstorms in

Spain, was immediately afterwards lulled by the drumming of water and every time quickly fell asleep again.

With the beginning of the rainy season, an incredibly vast number of frogs and toads would come out everywhere from their holes and hideouts in the mud and from under dry leaves and dirt in ditches and open sewers and start their 'concerts' from dusk to dawn in the most varied tonalities. The noise made by their croaking was so loud that it could easily be heard even from inside the house and sometimes it obscured the audio when Ricardo was watching the TV with the volume low. So he feared that he would not be able to sleep because of it, but it turned out not to disturb him to that extent and he always slept very well despite it.

That year, the rainy season was marked by particularly violent and heavy rains (and when it rains in Nigeria one has the sensation of being under the impressive Victoria Falls because of the huge mass of water pouring down instantaneously from the sky). On these occasions, the sewage system, which, as said before, is of the open ditch type, becomes inadequate for draining the huge mass of water – a problem increased by the very small difference in altitude, especially on Victoria Island, between the sea level and that of the ground – so that water pours violently and irresistibly out of it. As a consequence, all streets are transformed into real, impetuous rivers, on which litter and any other sort of dirt floats. The depth of water may easily reach to a pedestrian's calf height, and lap on the lower edge of cars-doors, and sometime penetrate inside them.

One morning, in particular, it had rained so much during the preceding day and all the night long that there were floods everywhere in Victoria Island and in Ikoyi. The distance between Ricardo's residence and his office could be covered in only five minutes on Saturdays and Sundays, though in the morning traffic on weekdays it usually took 15 minutes to get there, but that specific day there was a real and serious mess in all district streets. The poor Sunday got literally crazy driving around, searching for a way to get to the office. In most of the streets, water was a good half-metre high, in some places even 80 cm and passage there was hindered by cars stalled in the middle of the road, unable to move, because water had invaded their engines and exhaust pipes. After an hour of touring along the streets of the district, they found themselves still at the level of Ricardo's house, but in the parallel street. No progress at all had been made. They finally succeeded in getting to the office

after two hours of tough endeavours.

Beatrice Amenobi was the girlfriend of a French man, Jean-Claude Lamotte, who was to leave Nigeria 'for good' by mid-year. She came once with him to Ricardo's house some months before his departure when Jean-Claude wanted to talk with Ricardo about the possible sale to him of his sailboat (however, after discussing the matter at length with his friend, Ricardo, not being a particular fan of sailing, but a simple amateur in this field and being unwilling to devote his weekends uniquely to a single attractive, but fatiguing sports activity, had decided not to buy the boat). She was very nice and beautifully shaped, with an attractive slim silhouette; had beautiful black eyes, long hair, rather fair complexion and a small but very noticeable, round darker birthmark on her left temple.

One evening, while Ricardo was just finishing dining with the colleague who shared his house and was about to go with him to the small parlour and watch TV, somebody rang his doorbell. He thought that it was, as it normally would be, one of the watchmen announcing the late visit of some vendor. Benoît went to open the entrance-door and came back to the living room announcing that a young girl, who had come to the doorstep accompanied by one of the watchmen, was asking for 'master'. Ricardo was not expecting anybody, so he was very curious to know who that girl could be (as a matter of fact, the only girl he knew was Janet, but it could not be her, as she did not like to be seen looking for him by the steward - because of the old clash she had had with him, when she was supporting Ayo, the gardener).

He stood up, went to the door and, to his surprise, he found that it was Jean-Claude's girlfriend, Beatrice Amenobi. She said she was looking for Jean-Claude and since apparently he was not at home, she had thought that he could be there. Ricardo told her that he had not seen him for three days and said that he could presumably be at the Company guesthouse. As it was rather late, he did not like to let her go around alone, so he offered to take her to the guesthouse in his car. She accepted willingly. This way she did not need to look for a taxi and pay the fare.

Ricardo said to his colleague that he would be back immediately and stepped out with Beatrice to the back of the house, where his car was parked. When they got into the car, before starting the engine, Ricardo was assailed by a sudden wish to embrace this lovely young woman and turned to her:

“You are very nice, I like you. May I kiss you?”

She agreed. He kissed her at length, her mouth was sensual and soft and she responded warmly to his kiss. He then started the engine and drove away. Along the way to the guesthouse, she rested the thin fingers of her small hand upon his hand which held the steering wheel, and said to him:

“Do you know that Jean-Claude is about to leave?”

Ricardo answered:

“Yes, I know.”

She added in a soft and somehow dreamily, romantic tone:

“I like the way you kissed me. If you like, after Jean-Claude’s departure I shall come and see you.”

“I would be pleased if you did.”

He dropped her in front of the gate of the guesthouse. Before getting out of the car, she rapidly turned towards him and gave him her sweetest little kiss on his cheek.

Two or three weeks after Jean-Claude had left, when Ricardo’s colleague had already moved away from his house and was back in Port Harcourt, Beatrice suddenly arrived one evening at Ricardo’s house with a girlfriend of hers, whose name was Antonia. He ordered his steward to prepare the table for three persons and after dinner they sat chattering in the parlour. Both girls asked for liquor that they had seen in his dining room open cupboard. He gave them what they requested, one whisky and one cognac. He got a small glass of ice-cold vodka for himself (for this purpose, a bottle of vodka was constantly stored in the deepfreeze), just to keep them company. He was not accustomed to drinking liquor after meals when he was alone. Even with meals, when there was nobody eating with him he did not drink wine or beer; he normally drank only water.

As they chatted and drank, it became late. Antonia asked Ricardo if she could spend the night in his house since she dared not go back to Apapa, where she lived, at that time of night. She said it was dangerous to be out, with so many loafers and rascals around in the streets. He agreed willingly – she was indeed a nice person – and, after preparing for her the bed in the second room of his flat, he took Beatrice to sleep with him in his room. The second room of the flat was empty, as in the meantime his colleague, as said before, had been posted by the Company to Port Harcourt in Rivers State, near to the fields where the drilling operations occurred. Ricardo and

Beatrice in his large bed simply kissed each other gently and fell asleep. However, in the night, when he got his usual nocturnal erection, she felt it and, waking up quickly, raised herself on her elbows exclaiming:

“Put on a condom!”

Although he hated to use such devices, he did it and she came on to him and they made love. She was keen and enjoyable. Being very skilful, she performed sex with evident pleasure and enthusiasm and tenderly sucked him with great fervour.

The following day, in the afternoon, Beatrice and Antonia wanted to go to the hairdresser and she asked him to give her money for that. Beatrice also wanted to go home and fetch some personal objects and a change of clothes. He let Sunday take them to Apapa after dropping him at his office. Beatrice had a very beautiful hairdo when they returned in the evening. Her long hair was arranged in a myriad of thick braids with a garland round her forehead. She looked very feminine and attractive. After dinner, sitting in the small parlour, she told Ricardo that she was only 20 and when he said that he thought she had great sex-appeal, and especially manifested his appreciation for the beauty of her breasts, she exclaimed:

“Can you believe that my breasts, which you see now are nice and well-developed, only came out this last year? One year ago my chest was almost breastless, practically flat!”

“I understand then that what is commonly believed and said in Europe about African women, that they develop and mature earlier than white women, is not totally true: among you black girls too, there are those who develop earlier and those who only later get a well-shaped body?”

“According to my own personal experience, I would say that this is exactly what happens.”

Antonia left Ricardo’s house one day later, whilst Beatrice remained with him two more days. She then said that she had to go home to stay a while with her mother. She came back to Ricardo’s house the following week, also this time accompanied by a friend. Not Antonia, but another one. Beatrice’s girlfriend was small and rather fat and, unlike Antonia, spoke and laughed in a boisterous way, therefore Ricardo did not like her at all. He was very disturbed by her presence, as he hoped to have a romantic time alone with Beatrice, but he could not, for politeness, send her away and was compelled to take the rough with the smooth.

After dinner, since Beatrice's friend did not seem willing to leave, he was compelled half-heartedly to order his steward to prepare for her the bed in the second bedroom. Benoît did it, as usual, barefoot. He used to wear sandals only in the day section of the flat, the entrance, living room and kitchen; when he had to enter into the night section of Ricardo's residence, parlour, bedrooms and bathrooms, to clean them or to put ironed items in the wardrobe and in the drawers or to prepare beds, he always left his sandals at the threshold of the corridor and went barefoot.

They remained three more days in his house; before leaving, Beatrice told Ricardo she would travel the next day to her home village to spend the summer holidays there and therefore said goodbye to him very warmly and cheerfully. He was happy she was going, because he too was about to leave for Spain on holiday.

The following day, however, he noticed that a bronze cast object in the form of an annular ring, used as money in ancient times, but now just a knick-knack for tourists – and which he had bought to take, as already promised, to a friend of his in Spain – had disappeared. He asked his steward whether he had removed or seen it and received a negative response. He then remembered that the previous day Beatrice's friend had been using it as an ashtray of sorts while she was smoking, and therefore it must have been taken, deliberately or mistakenly, by one of the two girls.

He immediately sent Sunday to Beatrice's house to ask her to give it back or send her friend to deliver it to him, if the latter had taken it, but Sunday came back saying that Beatrice did not have the object and was currently unable to join her girlfriend. She had given Sunday, as pledge for the restitution of Ricardo's object, a complete manicure set. Since Ricardo was leaving the following day, he told Sunday to keep the set until his return. However, when he got back to Nigeria and sent Sunday to Apapa to look for Beatrice, she was not there and nobody knew of her whereabouts. She had completely vanished. So Ricardo lost his object and had to replace it with something else to make his Spanish friend happy. Sunday however, because of this incident, gained a manicure set free of charge.

Beatrice reappeared again much later in very strange circumstances, which will be narrated below.

Benoît (who afterwards even formalised his invitation with a written note) requested Ricardo's attendance at a ceremony that was to take

place on a Saturday afternoon in the boys' quarters, and which he termed a 'liberation ceremony'. Ricardo responded immediately that on Saturdays he was usually engaged in golf matches with friends and, therefore, could assure his presence only for a short time, but was intrigued by the word 'liberation'. He learnt then that, as Benoît's wife was a tailoress (Benoît proudly described her work with the pompous sentence 'elle fait de la *haute couture*', i.e. 'she is involved in *high fashion*') and was teaching dressmaking to a number of girls, one of her pupils, having completed the course, was now about to receive the appropriate certificate.

When, at about 3.30 p.m., Ricardo went to the boys' quarters in order to attend the ceremony, he found that a huge crowd, mainly composed of Beninese (there were also two officials of the Beninese Consulate who were immediately introduced to him) had gathered and were seated there whilst a girl was kneeling on the laterite ground. He was welcomed with warm applause and cheers by the audience, to which he responded by applauding, himself, in turn to the crowd. He was given the best chair and offered a soft drink, despite his attempt to decline. Many of the attendees, especially the men, wanted to address the girl with a speech and at the end of each, people stood up to stick banknotes – of 5, 10 or 20 Naira (depending on the donor's wealth and on the appreciation that he or she had had for the speech) – on the forehead of the girl or of the speaker. A tray was also circulated to collect money.

Only a couple of speeches were in French which Ricardo knew very well, all the others were in the Beninese language and so he did not understand a single word. One of the men, presumably a priest – although dressed in traditional native attire – was not content with an extraordinarily long (and, for Ricardo, very boring) speech: he continued to give many blessings, making three to four signs of the Cross on the girl's head every five or six words. Ricardo knew very well that the invitation he had received was mainly granted in order to receive from him a contribution to the expenditures met by the hosts of the ceremony (to give everybody drinks and food) and had for this purpose appropriated 350 Naira that he wanted to give to his steward. Although he had seen on some former occasions that satisfied guests used to reward in such ostentatious form musicians, singers and performers taking part in a ceremony, he had not expected that on this specific occasion money should also be collected in this strange manner. Therefore, he only once plastered a

banknote on the girl's sweating forehead (obviously not on the speaker's, since he did not catch what he had said) and then put the money on the circulating tray. He left at 10 to 5 to get dressed for his golf match. Before leaving, he gave Benoît the rest of the sum he had set apart.

The ceremony continued after he left, probably for a long time. During all that time the girl never stood up. How curious! Ricardo was astounded that somebody being awarded a common and totally secular, work-study professional certificate, should be compelled to endure hours in the sunny and hot afternoon, kneeling on gravel and receiving all those blessings. He never participated again in a similar ceremony. Whenever Benoît again asked him to attend, he preferred to simply grant him a certain amount of money to signify his personal participation in the event.

A couple of months before starting his relationship with Beatrice and before his colleague was posted to Port Harcourt, one Sunday, while he was swimming at Tarkwa Bay, Ricardo had noticed a girl who was learning to swim, supported by another young woman. Since the former Sunday he had already taught a young African man – a very dark black and tough chap, with hair dressed in a big mass of braids – how to improve his swimming, he felt an expert in the field. That man had remained very grateful to him and greeted him warmly every time they met. Therefore, he approached the girl and showed her how to float alone, without help, and then start the first rudimentary swimming strokes. He remained close to her for quite a long time; then he returned to the shore. She rapidly joined him and asked him whether they could meet afterwards, but he responded that this was quite impossible, since a colleague of his (towards whom he gestured, since he was also at the beach that day) was living with him in his flat.

In September Ricardo was at last able to buy a stereo set. After conducting, as before, a market survey, his choice fell on the Japanese Aiwa compact disc stereo cassette receiver, model NSX-333, which had a four pre-set positions equaliser and the space to load 3 CDs at a time, which he found at 'Pay-Less 2' shop. From that moment onwards, he could listen to music in a more pleasant and satisfactory way than through the small and simple, weak speakers connected to the portable CD player he had brought with him from Europe.

At the beginning of October, therefore, a month and a half after his return from Spain and when there was as yet no sign at all of Beatrice, Ricardo saw that girl on the beach again. She was walking along the shore with some girlfriends. He decided to approach her, but, before he started moving, she recognised him from far and ran immediately towards him. She inquired eagerly:

“Do you remember me?”

He answered:

“Yes, I remember you very well. Have you learnt to swim?”

She replied fervently:

“Not very well, in truth. I missed your teaching.”

Glancing around, Ricardo perceived that in the meantime many other girls had approached and were milling around them. One of those girls, Laura, with whom he had once exchanged some words, started talking to him, but the girl he was now interested in seized him by an arm and pushed Laura away, saying:

“He is mine!”

She then asked him whether this time they could meet later and he said to her that, since he was now alone at home, she could join him there. Therefore they arranged to meet one hour later at the Tarzan jetty at Maroko, where he would come with his car to fetch her. He then went back with the Company boat to the Paradise jetty in the Zabadne’s premises, where the boat was usually berthed and where he had parked his car, collected it and drove along Ozumba Mbadiwe Avenue to Maroko. When he arrived at Tarzan jetty she was already there and was drinking a coke with a girlfriend at the bar. He paid their bill, they said goodbye to her friend, and he took her home.

She was rather nice, nearly as tall as Ricardo and slim. She did not at all have the typical fat buttocks of Nigerian women. She had a long face, always very serious and nearly severe (she seldom laughed and even simple smiles only rarely appeared on her face), with distant big eyes and a very strange forehead, going a bit upwards above her eye sockets, and then cutting sharply backward. Looking at her profile sideways, it seemed to be made by two different bones coupled together at mid-height by a horizontal line, like a hinged joint. Ricardo learnt that her name was Maude Oghari. She was a young Urhobo woman from Warri, but lived in the Tarkwa Bay village with some relatives. They had dinner and then she slept with him. The following day she had to return home and promised she

would come again the following week to stay for longer, so Ricardo gave her 1,000 Naira and let Sunday take her to the jetty in front of the Federal Palace Hotel to get a ferry to Tarkwa Bay.

The following week, as promised, she went straight to his house. She stayed with him seven days. Ricardo liked her and enjoyed being with her very much. They took a lot of photographs, which she was eager to keep. She did not want to appear posing, so she always wanted to have her picture taken whilst doing something, such as talking on the telephone, reading a book, looking at photographs, looking at the flowers or even gardening in the garden, as well as in his company, etc. She always wore a nice old-fashioned small collar round her neck, made from a black silk ribbon with a pendant, which amused Ricardo very much, since it reminded him of his grandmother. He could not believe that a young girl – moreover, in Africa! – liked to dress in such an old-fashioned way.

On Saturday afternoon, Maude wanted to take an excursion out of the town; so she let Ricardo drive to Alpha Beach, a beach known to few people only – and therefore not equipped at all to receive trippers – located not far from the Chevron Offices roundabout, shortly after Jakande Estate, off the Epe expressway. It was previously unknown to Ricardo who was, therefore, very happy to find this new quiet site, sufficiently near to his residence to be reached easily by car. The following day, a Sunday, Maude took Ricardo to a beach where a lot of Lagosians used to spend their Sundays – but which Ricardo had not seen before – with a splendid, very long beach and an extremely attractive thick palm-grove along it, for kilometres, as far as the eye could see.

This place was called Eleko Beach and was situated at about 50 km from Lagos and only 15 km away from the much smaller town of Epe. Ricardo was delighted to have at last discovered this enchanting place which he had heard so much about from his friends. The palm-grove was in fact really luxuriant, and the shore extended for kilometres, with the capacity to cater for an immense crowd of holidaymakers, both Africans and Europeans.

One evening she wanted to go out and asked Ricardo to take her to the Coco Bar. They went there and drank a coke and a beer. Maude knew some of the girls who were there and greeted them cheerfully, proud of being with a white man who, in the eyes of those girls, appeared not to be an occasional acquaintance, but a permanent boyfriend. However, after a while, not seeing her best

friend and somehow disliking the music that was played there, she wanted to leave and asked Ricardo to drive to Vicky's Bar located on Ozumba Mbadiwe Avenue, right in front of the end of the ramp coming down from Falomo bridge. As her friend was there, they decided to stay for a while with her and her boyfriend. A Congolese band was playing a type of pleasant Caribbean music and singing nice songs in French. Ricardo invited Maude to dance and greatly enjoyed dancing all the various dances (mainly shakes and sambas). Ricardo never went to Vicky's Bar again, because shortly afterwards it suffered an arson attack and was almost completely destroyed. The reconstruction took a long time and had hardly been finished when he left Nigeria for good.

After some days of Maude staying in his house, Ricardo was informed at the office that his colleague was coming back from Port Harcourt the next weekend and would once again be lodged in his house. It was therefore necessary that Maude should leave. After lunch on Friday, before returning to the office, he organised her departure and, offering her 2,000 Naira, asked her to return one month later (this being the length of his colleague's stay in the Company headquarters in Lagos).

However, at that point a terrible and unexpected quarrel arose, due to her finding the amount he offered her inadequate. Ricardo had assumed she had stayed with him because she liked him, but discovered that she was, on the contrary, a mercenary person who wanted to obtain the maximum profit possible from their relationship. She had indeed thought, making a rapid calculation, that if he gave her 1,000 Naira for one day she had spent with him, she should receive up to 7,000 Naira (not less than 5,000, as a minimum!) for seven days. It did not matter at all that Ricardo was asking her to come back one month later: in her opinion, anything might happen in one month. For her, a bird in the hand was worth two in the bush and she preferred to obtain immediately all that she could without regard to the future.

Ricardo was astonished and rather startled by her violent outburst. She shouted wildly and threatened to go to the Police and denounce him as having been raping her. He told her that she sounded like a prostitute and she replied with effrontery:

"What else did you think I was?"

He had to return to the office and he did not want to waste more time, so he called his steward, gave him the money and asked him to

persuade her to accept it and leave. He further recommended that he watch carefully to make sure that she did not take anything from the house. He feared that, in revenge, she might steal some of the cherished objects he had filled his house with.

She was in such a state of anger that she undressed without shame and remained like that, impudently nude, in front of Benoît as well, and said:

“I shall not move from here, until I get all *my* money.”

At these words, Ricardo laughed sarcastically and commented dryly:

“What money are you talking of? *Your* money? Until I give it to you, it still is *my* money, not yours!”

Then, not caring about her actions or words, he left for the office. On his return however, although he had presumed to find his house empty, she was still there half-dressed, sitting on a chair in his bedroom, with his steward sitting on the floor at its threshold guarding her. He collected the money back from Benoît and sent him to prepare the dinner. He added 500 Naira to the former amount and said to Maude:

“This is all I can give you. Either you take it quietly and go or, when the patrol arrives, I will order them to throw you out.”

He was referring to the security patrol, which had the task of watching over the safety of various compounds. At this point, Maude backed down from her previous demands and preferred to dress properly and wisely take the money, but still shouting all sort of insults and threatening to come back whilst his colleague was there to tell him how badly Ricardo had behaved and other wild threats. Then, since Ricardo had called Sunday to take her to the jetty, she got into the car. However, as the car moved out of the compound, Maude was still shouting her threats through the open window, furiously and ferociously abusing and cursing him. This was however the very last time Ricardo saw Maude. He never met her again, not even by chance at Tarkwa Bay.

Despite his best efforts, however, Maude had still managed to steal something from his house: a music cassette that she had often liked to listen to. He only discovered that this cassette was missing from the shelf in his living room, when looking for it a fortnight later. However, Ricardo did not mind so much about this theft, because he did not like all the songs contained in that cassette; there were in fact only a couple of songs that he really liked much. She had

probably already taken it earlier and put it in her bag, since she was under the severest surveillance while leaving his house.

This was indeed the saddest and most unfortunate experience that Ricardo had with women in Nigeria. He had been completely unprepared for such an unhappy conclusion to his relationship with Maude, primarily because he had at first sincerely desired her return and secondly because all the encounters he had had with women before and after this were both pleasant and full of sweet memories. Fortunately for him, shortly after this sad event, it happened that he met a splendid person who helped him to utterly forget this unlucky affair with Maude. An encounter, which would happily and seriously mark his life. It would be the start of a wonderful love story that he would never forget.

4.

Meeting sunshine

That Sunday, fate had decided to allow Ricardo to touch the sky with his finger. The day had nearly entirely elapsed, in a routine and rather boring way. Having decided to spend it at the seaside at Tarkwa Bay, he had stayed in the Company's bungalow, read the papers, chatted with friends and colleagues, swum in the bay – openly showing all the bathers his skill in swimming – and eaten 'suyia', the typical very spiced flat slices of meat that Nigerians prepare laid with sticks on charcoal barbecues.

It was about 4 p.m. when he decided to go to the shoreline and talk a little with Daniel Philips, the young Nigerian who hired wind-surf boards. Though the water was rather calm inside Tarkwa Bay and it would therefore be possible to swim at ease, there were only a very few swimmers. Most of the huge multitude of Lagosian Sunday trippers were resting under the shelters along the beach. Some Europeans and Arabs (Lebanese and Moroccan people, mainly) wishing to get tanned took strolls along the beach or played beach-tennis with large wooden bats, having hired the services of some little boy from the nearby village as a ball boy. Those Africans who did not fear the sun (surprisingly, Africans also can tan and they generally don't like to become too dark) merely enjoyed splashing in the water or playing in couples or in groups and trying, with big efforts and meagre results, to swim with the help of lorry inner-tubes.

Most of the young male populace, having planted two sticks vertically in the sand to mark the goals (usually very narrow ones, just 4 to 5 feet wide) at each end of an imaginary football-ground, were involved in tough football matches on the strand. They were very keen on this sport. Mainly they played with a ball smaller than

the customary regulation size, but it seemed as though they had prehensile feet, so great and skilful was their ability to master the ball. It was as if it was glued to their bare feet. They were very fond of dribbling, to the point that this seemed to be almost the entire object of the game. The result was not so much a team game, but a succession of individual performances. Until a few years ago, a European fond of dynamic football quickly became bored watching even their professional matches because of the lack of the sense of a collective game with the aim of scoring a goal. It was often possible to see a player who, having dribbled past one or more opponents, instead of heading straight to the goal or passing the ball to a teammate, retraced his steps with the ball stuck to his feet in order to dribble again past the same, recently-overcome adversaries.

Then two Dutch trainers, Messrs. Ben Hakker and Jo Bonfrere (known in Nigeria as Bonfrere Jo) followed by a Serbian, Mr. Bora Milutinovic, came, one after the other, to coach the national team, popularly known by the bold and cherished name of 'Super Eagles' (whilst the Under-21 national players are known as 'Flying Eagles' and the Under-17s as 'Golden Eaglets'). These coaches, especially the two Dutch ones, taught them the concepts of modern football so well that Nigeria soon became one of the most impressive and feared teams in the entire world. Daniel was a nice young man and Ricardo used to give him the Saturday and Sunday papers, after having read them, whilst he normally gave to his driver, Sunday, the weekday papers at the end of the daily run. Nigerians are always eager to read dailies and those who cannot afford to buy them regularly are very happy if somebody gives one to them as a gift.

He had just finished talking with him and was bidding him goodbye when he noticed the head of a woman – swimming alone at a distance from the shore – appearing on the surface of the sea. Because of the distance and because of the low sun on the horizon, which reflected straight in his eyes, he could not see her face well, but he could sense immediately that she was swimming in a strange way. As a matter of fact, she was raising her arms correctly out of the water, but then letting them fall softly into it practically without any impulse and spring. Her effort – if it could be called that, given the feebleness of her movement – was of no practical use and her advancement in the water nearly zero. He therefore decided to enter the water and teach her how to make her stroke more adequate and profitable. While he was moving ahead, two little African boys of 6

to 7 years started quarrelling on his way towards the swimming lady. He stopped and asked them the reason for their quarrel; luckily, they understood and spoke English and one of the children said:

“He hit me and hurt me!”

Ricardo consoled him and said:

“I am sure that your friend did not really want to hit you. He certainly did it by mistake.”

Addressing the other child, he added:

“Is this not true?”

The child answered without hesitation, apparently unashamed to talk openly to an ‘oyinbo’:

“You are right, sir. I did not want to cause him pain.”

Ricardo then felt like a High Court Judge and solemnly said to this boy:

“Then, apologise to your friend and make peace again!”

The two children did what he recommended and started playing quietly together again. He continued on his way towards the woman, who now appeared to be a young girl. When he got near and could see her well, at first he did not really like her very much: she had a large chubby face (all his life he had preferred women with long, ‘horse-like’ and even bony faces) and her arms, coming out of the water in a swimming motion, seemed rather fattish. But he said to her:

“The way you use your arms is not very useful for progress in the water. You must plunge your arm with a certain amount of force and pull the water hard backwards, if you want to swim properly!”

She had noticed this strange ‘oyinbo’ stopping and talking gently to the quarrelling children and was surprised that he was now also talking to her. The way he did that was indeed rather uncommon: not all white passers-by would take the trouble of settling a quarrel between African children, and he had succeeded so well. He looked kind and well-mannered. So she decided to accept his attention and follow his suggestions. They remained in the water for fifteen to twenty minutes, during which time Ricardo made the girl practice her swimming and repeat over and over again the relevant necessary movements. Then she went to the shore and Ricardo followed her.

When she was out of the water, Ricardo could have a good look at her and noticed that, although strong as a healthy Nigerian sports-woman, she was not fat at all, but, on the contrary, very well shaped and toned. She was neither tall, nor small, about five foot seven and

a half inches, and wore an old-fashioned swimming suit, one-piece but in two colours: grey in the upper part and pale blue in the lower. She sat on the sand and smiled sweetly at him. She had a rather strange face, with round cheekbones, a small turned-up French nose, large dark-brown eyes and fleshy but not big lips, of almost clear colour. Her lovely head, that she proudly kept upright on a fine long neck, was surrounded by a crown of short curly – but relaxed – hair. Black, obviously, but with Titian-red coils at its ends. He found her face funny, but pleasant.

However, what was most captivating about her was her really unique smile: it was marvellous, naïve and fresh and showed an ample set of glossy, very white regular teeth (but not the gums as many people with large smiles often brutally show, to Ricardo's strong distaste); when she opened her mouth in a smile, in fact, the lovely curves of her parted lips ended exactly in line, respectively, with the upper and lower edges of her teeth. Ricardo deemed her smile to be extremely charming and attractive. He felt seized by her plain simplicity and asked her:

“What is your name?”

“Grace. And yours?”

Though high pitched, she had a melodious, very pleasing voice.

“My name is Ricardo. I am a Spaniard.”

Then Ricardo asked her whether she came frequently to Tarkwa Bay, since he had never seen her before and she answered that it was only the second time that she had come to that beach, as she lived in a very distant district of Lagos. After this, she said:

“It is already late. I have to go. I am here with some friends I now have to join.”

Then, rising to her feet, she looked straight into his eyes and added hopefully, with a flicker of a smile:

“Can we meet again?”

Ricardo was perplexed because, although undoubtedly pretty, she did not exactly correspond in features to the beauty canons of the woman he had in mind and was looking for: a tall, slim girl like those he had had the opportunity to see with Jean-Claude Lamotte or Antonio Mendoza. But their eyes had met and a spark of mutual attraction and liking had somehow or other ignited. He was indeed delighted by her simple but direct manners and said:

“Certainly. I would give you my telephone number, but I have nothing to write it on for you. What can we do?”

She replied:

“Don’t worry. Just tell me and I shall remember it. I work as a secretary and I am used to remembering numbers.”

Ricardo gave her his office number and she left, promising she would call him very soon.

He was still there on the shore, looking at the water and wondering whether this girl, whom he had just made the acquaintance of, could be the right one to have a sound friendly relationship with, when she hurried back towards him. She said:

“I am terribly embarrassed to ask you this, but my friends have already left and I therefore have to take a bus home. Unfortunately, I have no money with me. Please, can you lend me 50 Naira?”

Ricardo said to her:

“Wait a moment, please. I’ll need to get it from my beach-bag which I left at the Company’s bungalow.”

Having collected it, he gave her the requested amount, though thinking: ‘This is not a good start, at all! Although it is a little sum that she requested, maybe she is that sort of woman who only seeks money. It would be a pity, because she appears such a nice person.’

The following day, Monday, Ricardo waited all day for Grace’s call. He was convinced that she would like to arrange a meeting immediately. He waited in vain. At the end of office hours, since she had not called, he thought that she might have forgotten his number. He thought to himself that it was a pity, as the girl was attractive, but he had no way of finding her, not having her address.

On Tuesday morning, at the office, he got a phone call; a feminine voice asked:

“Ricardo?”

“Speaking!” he replied promptly.

However, it was not Grace, as the voice was speaking in Spanish, although with difficulty and with a strong foreign accent. After mentioning some of his friends without revealing her identity, the unknown lady at last asked:

“Can you guess who am I?”

He answered:

“Sorry, no.”

“I am Monique, your friend Julio’s nanny. I want to see you. May we meet this evening, since my master is out for dinner?”

He was surprised, but also flattered, because he had never

suspected that Monique, a rather attractive Cameroonian woman, married with one child, could be interested in him and so enterprising as to call him. They arranged to meet at 8.30 p.m. He would go with his car and fetch her from Julio Jeanot's house nearby and afterwards take her home again.

One hour later, Grace called. He was upset. If only she had called earlier, he would not have accepted the date with Monique. Between the two women, his preference was by far in Grace's favour, even if he did not know whether he could have any chance of success with her. It was on the contrary utterly clear that Monique had called him because she wanted to have – once, at least – sexual intercourse with him. For a moment he even thought: 'I'm going to call Monique back and tell her that I cannot see her tonight, because I forgot I had a former engagement.' But then he realised that it was neither fair nor really feasible, so he decided to give Grace a date for the following day at 5.30 p.m., after office hours, at his flat. She was decidedly disappointed – since she would have liked to meet him that same day – and this was betrayed in her voice. However, after Ricardo told her that he was engaged for the evening and could not do otherwise, she accepted his proposal. She only asked to make the time 5 p.m., as she did not want to be back at her house too late. He agreed and gave her his address with instructions about how to get there.

That evening, after Ricardo had fetched Monique and while they were riding towards his residence, Monique told him that she wanted to have an affair with him in order to take revenge on her boyfriend who had cheated on her with another girl, whom he was keeping as a girlfriend in Port Harcourt. She added:

"You know of whom I am talking, don't you? ... My boyfriend is Carlos."

Ricardo knew Carlos Llosa very well, of course; he had been invited several times to dinner at his house and often played cards with him at 'bachelors' evenings'. But although Carlos had been living in Nigeria for many years Ricardo had never suspected that he might be having an affair with an African woman and, in particular, with Monique. He conveyed his surprise to her regarding the well-hidden secret, but not in regards to their relationship, as she was a sufficiently attractive woman to find a European lover. Later, when they were making love, she even revealed to him a secret detail of Carlos' physical features:

“You know, Carlos has ‘un petit zizi’ (a small prick), but I like him all the same.”

So, to his great surprise, he discovered a hidden side of Carlos, but he kept that to himself and never revealed either to Carlos himself or to anybody else that he was aware of the existence of such a romance between the two of them. It was, indeed, Ricardo’s normal behaviour never to reveal what he had discovered about people by chance or had been told to him in confidence. Monique was well perfumed, perhaps too much so, but she had also smeared her body with a greasy cream that soiled his hands, making them clammy and sticky whilst he stroked her, and he disliked that. He did not greatly enjoy making love to Monique, partly as a result of the fact that his mind was occupied with thoughts of Grace and partly because she sucked him in a rather furious manner that made his penis almost sore.

Monique called him only one more time – desiring to have sex with him again, but no lasting relationship ever started between them. Obviously, Ricardo saw her many other times when he went to Julio’s house due to some invitation or simply to see him - but on these occasions their relation, though remaining considerate and very cordial, was conducted in a strictly formal manner.

On Wednesday, at the office, Ricardo had so much work to do that he could not leave early enough to be home in time to keep his appointment with Grace. He was late and when he finally arrived at his flat, she was already there, sitting in one of the armchairs of his living room, looking at some of the magazines laid on the table. She only looked at the pictures because she could not read the writing, which was in Spanish. Fortunately, the steward had been polite enough to ask her whether she was thirsty and had served her a drink, a tonic water that she was sipping when Ricardo arrived. Ricardo put on some music and apologised for being late and said that this was the result both of a late departure from work and of the heavy rush hour traffic. Grace was dressed in an elegant ensemble: blouse and long pleated skirt – mid-calf length – of the same printed fabric and had on a light make-up which made her appear particularly charming. Ricardo had to admit that he found her very attractive, or, better, even fascinating.

Although she could not be classified as *a beauty*, Ricardo discovered that she had an exquisite and seductive charm and he was

very intrigued. He tried to be humorous and self-mocking as much as was possible, in order to capture her interest. He was usually capable of doing it at the beginning of a new acquaintanceship, when he desired to gain a woman's favour, but it was not his normal behaviour. He then asked her:

"Obviously, Grace is your English name, but I suppose that you also have a native name, don't you?"

He knew in fact that most – if not all – Nigerians, even those bearing an English name, have an indigenous one too. Grace replied:

"Yes, my name indeed is Edima, but my relatives and close friends call me Edi."

"Which name do you prefer and how shall I call you: Grace or Edima?"

She said, "Call me Edi."

"All right, I shall call you Edi, then. I like that name, it sounds sweet and intimate."

Edima had actually chosen the name Grace to give to people she knew but with whom she did not have a close relationship or when she did not want – for one reason or another – to reveal her real name. The name however did not exist in her official papers. Then Ricardo asked her:

"What is your surname?"

"Essien."

"It is a short name, easily remembered. Mine is a longer one: de Cortes y Montero. Will you be able to remember it?"

She answered with a proud assuredness, in a persuasive tone, eager to show him her quick-wittedness and ability, as well as to please him and make a positive impression upon him:

"I will, of course."

Edima told Ricardo that she came from Calabar, the capital town of Cross River State and was the product of a polygamous, though Christian, family of the Efik ethnic group. Her mother was the fourth wife of her father and had had five children by him, one boy and four girls. Edima was the third born. First came the brother, Ndubuisi, then the second born, Comfort, and after Edima the other two sisters, by the names of Pearl and Loveliness, respectively. Edima's father had died when she was only sixteen and at that moment her mother had been compelled to take her out of school for lack of financial means.

Although Edima was on good terms with her father's other wives and especially loved the first one – whom she mentioned as 'my step-mother' – she declared to Ricardo that she wanted a monogamous family for herself. In her opinion a monogamous family made more sense and was more in tune with modern times. Furthermore, she explained that after her father's death, her mother had difficulties with her elder stepsons, who wanted her, as the last of their father's wives, to leave the paternal house. Nevertheless, Edima entertained good feelings for one of her stepbrothers who worked for the Obudu Cattle Ranch in the Cross River's northern hilly region close to Cameroon and with another one who lived in Enugu (the town specially known for its important – although, at present, drowned and not yet rehabilitated – coal mines and for having been at the centre of the civil war).

For a young woman who had not totally completed her secondary school education, Edima spoke remarkably good English – rich, fluent and refined – but, of course she spoke pidgin English as well, which she normally used with people in the town. Ricardo was eager, as usual, to become acquainted with traditional indigenous customs. He asked her whether in her land female circumcision was practised and Edima answered that removal of the clitoris was certainly an Efik tradition. She herself had however escaped such a horrible mutilation because, when the time arrived for her and her sister to be submitted to it, they protested vehemently against this cruel, barbarous and anachronistic practice and refused to undergo the operation. Their mother, at their request, agreed that the excisions should not take place. However, her aunts were not happy that she had allowed them to avoid the ancient tradition. They were treated as traitors to the long-lasting unwritten law.

Ricardo listened attentively to all that Edima was telling him and avidly drank in everything that she was saying. He was fascinated and bewitched: she had such a marvellous and melodious voice, which was like angelic music to his ears! For her part, she told Ricardo all this rather easily, because she felt that he was a decent man, eager to increase his knowledge of the world, not one of those white men who despise Africans and their traditions. She understood immediately that he was a real gentleman. An intimate mood had been created between them. Strangely, a perfect understanding had arisen so rapidly that, after only a few minutes of conversation with him, she felt as if she had known him forever.

While listening to her, Ricardo examined her minutely and systematically with critical eyes, as though seeing her for the very first time, but could not spot any minimal defect or imperfection in her person. She had a lovely patterned round head, proud and fierce – even authoritative – which was kept erect on a fine slender neck, the perfect continuation of a superbly straight back. Her cheerful face, that he had already defined as ‘funny’ on Sunday, three days ago, with that potato-like nose planted on the middle of it, was so radiant and gleaming, so open and carefree and sunny. Her smooth and glowing skin seemed like light brown satin. She had magnificent, smiling and intelligent charcoal doll’s eyes, with long, curly, silky black eyelashes, which were boldly self-expressive and they spoke of a clean, pure, genuine, good-tempered, honest person, not stupid or weak at all. Her determined chin indicated that she possessed a strong character and will, likely to keep situations under control. Yet she was romantic and sentimental. Her delightful mouth, with those two delicate rather rosy lips – as if designed to be eaten by kisses, Ricardo thought at once – was so sensual and desirable. A touch of fine scent emanated from her body. Ricardo deemed that she was really superb and delectable: a fine, seductive princess, beautiful as only princesses in the world of fairytales can be. Enchanted and mesmerized, he found himself totally flustered.

Then Edima approached to look at the CDs and cassettes he owned, in order to choose more music, and sat relaxed in the armchair near the shelves on which his stereo set was installed, while he was sitting on one of its arms. Having her so near to him, he was taken by an urgent and irresistible desire to enjoy her charms better and asked her audaciously but politely:

“Edi, may I kiss you? You have a lovely mouth and I would like to taste the aroma and the fragrance of your lips.”

Edima felt a strange, yet indefinable feeling for this ‘oyinbo’: a mixture of attraction and curiosity – maybe it had been more curiosity than attraction up to that moment – but she liked the delicate and gallant expression he used to put forward this direct request and therefore condescended to let him kiss her. Ricardo leaned down towards her and kissed her: in order to prepare her gradually and not to risk upsetting her, at first he just skimmed her lovely lips, caressing them gently with the tip of his tongue, then he gave her a series of little kisses, softly squeezing her lips very briefly between his own; only when he felt that she was excited and fully

responsive to him, as well as ready and desirous of a more consistent and significant gesture, did he give her a long and passionate kiss, introducing his tongue deeply into her mouth.

He enjoyed to the utmost kissing her: her lips were delicate and warm, extremely attractive and desirable. Ricardo was literally inebriated, but still capable of acting wisely. Edima was a romantic girl. She was therefore enchanted and very pleased: for her, he kissed in a delightful and exciting manner. His way of kissing was sweet and, at the same time, voracious, yet full of attention for his partner's pleasure and satisfaction. She, being a very sensual young woman, abandoned herself to such a wonderful sensation of intense delight.

At that point Ricardo became taken by a great excitement. He started kissing her ravenously on her magnificent, gleaming eyes, her ears (she had very small ears and Ricardo wondered why – since there is always a rightful reason in natural phenomena – so many Africans, who have much bigger lips than white people, are on the contrary often provided by nature with smaller ears than them) her neck, and her neckline; then, unfastening the first button of her blouse, slipped his hand under her right breast and pulled it delicately out of the bra. Her breasts were undoubtedly splendidly appealing and tempting. They were as though singing a real hymn to the praises of nature, Ricardo thought thankfully. He gently caressed the delightful, plump roundness of the living hemisphere, kissed it tenderly and eventually sucked her nipple avidly. A little nipple – surrounded by a very small and nearly indistinguishable areola – that obviously rose up triumphantly turgid and aroused. But Edima, freeing herself from his grasp, protested:

“No!... No, please, Ricardo, don't do this!”

Blushing instantly like a schoolboy, he withdrew immediately to let her free and – believing that he had offended her – felt very guilty and fearful and thought: ‘I was too greedy and so I went too far; I have probably upset her now and she will not want me any more! Is she then so inaccessible? Nevertheless, she has clearly demonstrated that she feels something for me and was pleased to receive my kisses, as well as responding willingly to them!’ Ricardo promptly apologised and asked in a persuasive voice:

“Edi, do you want to be my girlfriend?”

And he began to tell her about his sad, negative experience with Maude. Edima was very surprised at his question; she did not expect

at all such a direct demand. She felt intrigued and, in her astonishment, did not know how to answer him. However she felt attracted to this kind and strange white man and did not want to lose the opportunity to know him better. She was very curious to discover what sort of relationship might be established between herself and an 'oyinbo'. Following an earlier brief but rather unhappy experience, she was eager to know if she could deeply trust a white man and have a sound friendship with him. She therefore remained rather vague but – while weighing her words – did not want to close the door to the possible birth of a deeper sentiment and responded:

“Ricardo, let’s see first what the future holds for us.”

As a matter of fact Ricardo was leaving the following evening, Thursday night, to spend the Christmas holidays in Spain. Therefore they decided to meet again at the beginning of January, after his return to Lagos. Ricardo said to her:

“I shall come back on the 7th of January; call me and we’ll arrange to meet as soon as we can.”

Then Ricardo asked Edima:

“What sort of Christmas gift would you like me to bring to you from home?”

She was pleasantly surprised: he was then a good man, capable of nice thoughts!

“A make-up set,” was her immediate answer, without hesitation or thinking. She had something very particular in mind when saying this, but she dared not specify what sort of model she would like to receive. Ricardo said:

“OK, I take note of your desire and will not forget to buy it in Europe. Trust me.”

It was already late and Ricardo wanted to shorten her journey home, so he took her in his car to Broad Street on Lagos Island, in front of the Investment House building, where she could take a minibus straight to the district where she lived. When he dropped her off, he asked her whether she needed money to pay the bus fare and handed her 200 Naira, but she did not want to take the money and said:

“I do not need it, I have enough money.”

She kissed him quickly on his cheek and left for her ‘danfo bus’.

The following night Ricardo flew to Spain. He spent a peaceful but short holiday there. During his stay in Spain he needed to buy a lot

of things for everybody. His steward, driver, watchmen and gardeners, all expected gifts from Europe. For Edima he bought the make-up set that she had requested, choosing the big model made by 'Pupa'. It had a corrugated red enamel case in the form of an ocean wave. Then, on the plane on his way back – since it was cheaper than in town shops when sold duty free – he also bought a bottle of Christian Dior toilet-water called 'Dune'.

He flew back to Nigeria, as arranged, on 7th January, which was a Saturday. Three days later Edima called. At the sound of her voice, Ricardo's heart leapt: 'How lovely that voice was!' He scolded her for not having called immediately, but she justified herself by saying that she had forgotten the exact date of his return. He invited her for dinner on that same day and she accepted, agreeing to arrive at 7 p.m. When he went home for lunch, he advised Benoît that he was going to have a guest for dinner in the evening. For the rest of the day, at the office, Ricardo was very excited and was not able to do much work, as all his thoughts were on Edima. He longed for the evening to come quickly in order that he could see her again soon.

That evening, when she arrived, he welcomed her very warmly. He was really happy that she was there; as a matter of fact, he already felt a strong feeling for her. Edima as well was glad to see him. She told him that she was about to resign from her office, as she had not been paid for the last two months. She was working for a one-man company, as secretary to the owner/chairman. It was one of those many companies that rise in Nigeria out of the dream of some more or less rich business man or woman, but are bound to dissolve like fog in the sun as soon as business decreases and revenue is lacking.

When Ricardo gave her the gifts he had brought from Spain, Edima did not believe her eyes and was full of joy and manifested it with a series of giggles and open tender smiles at him, exclaiming loudly:

"Oh, Ricardo, you are great! This make-up set is exactly what I had in mind when I asked you to bring me one, but I dared not indicate to you that I wanted exactly this model! Thank you a lot for choosing it so carefully and for the very fine perfume, I am really grateful!"

And she kissed him tenderly. He felt happy and rewarded by her evident joy.

Edima however had got a horrible cough, so after dinner Ricardo

decided they should go and seek some medication to alleviate it. Since by that time of the night all the pharmacies were already closed, they decided to go to MegaPlaza in Kofo Abayomi Street, which was open till 11.30 p.m. and where there was a small drug department. They found there one specific syrup made expressly for cough relief. However, by that time it had become too late for Edima to go home; Ricardo then proposed that she sleep at his flat. She hesitated and was a bit reluctant, but she realised that it was really not safe for her to be around in the streets in the dangerous district where she lived at that late hour of the evening. Therefore, she accepted his proposal. When they were back home, Benoît had already finished washing up and had retired to the boys' quarter for the night; so, not willing to disturb him further, Ricardo said:

"I could prepare the second bedroom for you, but I feel really tired. If you do not mind, you can sleep in my own bedroom, as my bed is so large that three people could sleep in it without bothering each other at all."

This said, he led Edima into his bedroom and showed her that he had not told a lie, since his bed was a king size one, as these sorts of beds are called in Nigeria. He showed her which side of it he slept on - though to tell the truth, he inverted the positions, as, being used to sleeping most of the time on his right side, he wanted to present his face to her, not show her his back all the time. Then he added:

"I usually sleep here. You can sleep on the other edge, so you will not be bothered by my presence."

She took her dress off and just stayed in her shirt and panties, because she had not intended to spend the night away from home and therefore had no nightgown with her. So that she did not crumple her shirt in bed, Ricardo decided to lend her a pair of his pyjamas. She put them on much amused. Ricardo thought that it was very lucky for his pyjamas to be covering - once, at least - the lovely features of her splendid body, rather than his own more ordinary form, and he found her very glamorous and seductive in them. She then gave Ricardo a long and sweet goodnight kiss and went to bed. Soon after she was asleep. She slept like a baby, profound, not hearing any noise. Ricardo was happy to see that her sleep was not light: in this way indeed she would not hear him snoring and would not wake at its sound and perhaps be annoyed with him the following day for keeping her awake.

He went out of the room and sat, thoughtful, in the small parlour for a good while. Of course, he desired her, but he wanted to show her that there was no hidden purpose in his proposal to spend the night in his residence, nor in his offer to share the same bed. He did not want to put any pressure on her, he wanted to leave her totally free to decide whether or not she liked him enough to be willing to make love to him. He wanted to show her that he was capable of behaving like the gentleman he really was. Their first night together was therefore a very chaste one: they spent it like any brother and sister sharing the same bed.

The following morning, Ricardo woke up, as usual, early enough to prepare himself for going to the office. Edima though was still sleeping; she only opened half an eye at the moment he left the room. He said:

“Edi, I’m going to the office. You can stay and sleep as long as you like, I’ll tell my steward not to disturb you. But I have a further proposition for you: remain here also for lunch, please. You can go home in the afternoon. When you get up, ask the steward to prepare breakfast for you in the way you prefer.”

She just nodded, “OK” and fell asleep again. Ricardo had his breakfast, then, before leaving, he advised Benoît:

“The young lady who was my guest at dinner yesterday evening is still sleeping in my bedroom. Do not disturb her until she wakes up. When she does and comes out of the bedroom and goes to the drawing room, then give her a good breakfast, as she wants. She will also be staying for lunch, so prepare it for two.”

It was not really necessary to ask the steward to prepare the meal for two people, because there was always so much food to eat, enough not only for two but even for three persons. But the steward needed to know how many pieces of meat to cook in case he decided to serve chicken legs or pork-chops. Ricardo never told his steward what to cook at lunch or dinner, but left him totally free to select the meal to serve. It was indeed very relaxing for him not to be compelled to think every day about what to eat and in that way it was always a surprise when he returned home. Benoît had enough initiative and inventiveness to vary the food he prepared often and make sure he came home every time to a good and fine meal.

Generally speaking, African male servants were always glad to serve in white men’s private houses, because they were normally treated better there and received a higher salary than with black

people. They did not however like to be directed by and receive orders from ladies, because of their custom of considering women as inferior beings practically lacking any human dignity. They were therefore very happy when they could serve in a bachelor's house, or in the house of a man living in Africa without his family. Also, because that man, at least during weekdays, was out most of the time at the office or in the field, they could do what they wanted without being bothered by his (or his wife's) presence.

If they scarcely accepted the presence in the house of a white lady, they disliked even more that of a black woman as their master's mistress (what else could a woman be who had spent the night in his bed? There was bound to have been a sex interlude!) especially if he, on the contrary, treated her with high honour as a lady to be respected and having the same prerogatives and privileges as he himself. They regarded any black woman, especially a young girl, as merely equal to themselves, if not inferior, but only more fortunate by virtue of her seductive powers, successfully exerted on their white master – who could be considered as a weak man, incapable of resisting her feminine coquettish arts and therefore destined to succumb to any black harpy. In their heart, they often secretly detested and despised her for having given herself to a white man – that is a foreigner in every way, both in citizenship and by race – for what in their opinion was only thirst for money, well-being and prestige, deeming it a totally venal relationship and disregarding completely the possibility of a true love involvement.

However, they obviously could not protest openly, and did not dare disagree with their master's will and decisions. The only weapon they had in their hands was passive resistance, by somehow displeasing her. But Edima was such a lovely person, amiable to everybody, that Ricardo was sure Benoît would be willing to serve her well and make her totally happy.

When Ricardo went home at lunchtime that day he found Edima watching TV. When she saw that he was back, she got up and rushed towards him, embraced and kissed him gently. He found it extremely agreeable to have somebody waiting for him and welcoming him so nicely. They had their lunch and Ricardo had his usual coffee after it. He asked her whether she would like to have one too, but she refused, because she was not used to drinking such strong coffee as Spaniards do, along with Italians, Portuguese, some

French people and, in part, Greeks, Turks and Egyptians.

He had to go to the office again, so he suggested that Edima stay there and watch TV as long as she liked and, on his return home after office hours, he would accompany her to the bus station in Broad Street. She accepted. When Ricardo came back, he took her again to Investment House in Broad Street and at the moment of dropping her he again offered her 200 Naira for her fare. She refused as before, but he insisted, knowing that as she had been without a salary for two months it was very useful for her to have some extra money for travel. She did not want to take it however, so he had to insist again and rather vigorously. At last she took it, although reluctantly and rather ashamed to admit she needed it. Ricardo drove back home with the sweet vision of her funny, pretty face in his eyes. He felt really happy that he had met such a neat and lovable person.

Edima, on her side, felt a strange, strong attraction for this new friend, who had been able to sleep close to her, in the same bed, without trying to harass her and behaving as a perfect gentleman. She appreciated greatly this evident care for her. She knew very well in fact that she would feel disappointed and offended if he had tried to get her, but she was convinced that an African man would never behave like that. She did not yet know the exact amplitude of her sentiment, but she realised that although she liked Ricardo's physical aspect very much she was mainly seduced by his gentle and gallant manners. In her opinion the difference between African and white men when courting a woman resided in such manners.

Two days later, on Sunday evening, Edima went back to Ricardo's. He was so happy to see her when she arrived at the door of his house that he was totally unable to hide or simply dissimulate the great joy he was feeling. She felt the warmth of his welcome as if it were palpable and appreciated it intensely. She felt totally captured in an atmosphere of tenderness and sweet mood that matched perfectly with her romantic character. Therefore, when Ricardo, after kissing her passionately, said:

"Edi, I think I'm getting fond of you!"

She looked at him with twinkling eyes, and admitted frankly:

"I am feeling that, too."

Then Ricardo apologised for the poor quality of the food he could offer her that evening. On Sundays, he explained, he used to give his

steward a full day off and therefore he had, as a meal, only pancakes that had been prepared by Benoît on Saturday evening. Edima willingly agreed to share the pancakes with him, stuffing them with peanut butter and jam or honey. After dinner, Ricardo took Edima's hands in his own, drew them to his lips and kissed them delicately on both back and palm and then, continuing to hold them tenderly in his gentle grip, said fervently:

"Edi, if a man holds your hands in his own while he is talking to you, as I'm doing with your hands at this moment, it means that he is really feeling something for you and is deeply interested in you!"

Although he had always liked small and thin hands with long fine fingers, he still liked Edima's hands, which were on the contrary rather big and thick, but terminated with tapering fingers leading to very thin tips. On the whole, anyhow, her hands were long and elegant. Besides, her nails were cut at a correct and discreet length, which he appreciated much, and the pink polish she used to paint on them suited her complexion particularly well. From that first evening onwards he therefore did not miss any opportunity for holding her hands in his own and used to lead her from one room to another by taking her gently by the hand. They then watched a film on videocassette; since it was dubbed in Spanish and Edima could not understand it, Ricardo translated it simultaneously into English for her. It was a very difficult exercise for him, as he was not used to hearing a tale in one language while at the same time speaking in another. However, although from time to time he lost some sentences, he performed rather well overall and, thanks to this, she could not only follow the plot of the film but also understood and knew exactly what the various characters were saying.

When they went to the bedroom to prepare themselves for the night and Ricardo was lovingly holding her hand with their fingers tightly intertwined, Edima knew that this time she was willing and ready to make love to him. In spite of her natural reserve, she therefore did not hesitate to undress completely and stood naked in front of Ricardo like a splendid live statue of Aphrodite, a bit shyly but openly. He looked at her with growing admiration: she was even more beautiful and attractive in the nude than dressed. Edima was indeed very sexy and her magnificently shaped body, chocolate in colour (a colour that made Ricardo literally crazy), was really marvellous and majestic.

She had beautiful round shoulders, those two wonderful high hard

globes with their lovely little nipples triumphant on her chest, a narrow waist and very feminine slightly X-shaped strong legs terminating in full plump thighs. In between, at the lowest part of her abdomen, shone a lovely, tiny black layer of silky, curly hair. Its triangular shape was so perfect that Ricardo could not take his eyes off it. He felt irresistibly attracted by it and altogether by her magnificent beauty, as well as by the sensuality emanating from this wonderful, very seductive creature. He thought that she was simply superb, the nicest woman he had ever had the chance to see so intimately in his whole life. A vision undoubtedly likely to take his breath away!

Ricardo admired her at length in silence and, if it had been possible, would have literally eaten her with his eyes. He was totally spellbound. She was looking at him, with dreaming and desirous eyes, straight into his own eyes. He held her in a passionate embrace, kissed her as tenderly but also sensually as he could, while stroking and squeezing delicately – with his right hand shaped like a cup to hold them properly in it – her splendid, prominent heaving breasts and then took her to bed. In so doing, he could fully appreciate how soft but firm her flesh was, as well as how delightfully warm and smooth to the touch her beautiful, gleaming brown skin! His touch on her naked body increased her excitement, causing her a shiver of pleasure and a surging of desire to have him in her. Now. Immediately. Edima abandoned herself to the growing wave of sensuality that had established between them and was totally pervading her. All that was incredibly sweet and tender. With warmth, pushed by an impulsive sentiment of affection for this man that she now deemed to be so lovely as to deserve her entirely, she hugged him tightly to herself.

After letting her stretch out on the bed, Ricardo lay gently on her soft and willing, so charming body. With eager hands, which were slightly trembling from the emotion, he delicately explored all her splendid figure, lingering over her intimate parts and gently interlocking his fingers within the short, soft, curly hair of her pubis, which he liked to caress at length, enjoying with great excitement its enclosure in his cupped hand. He then started kissing her all over: he kissed her eyes with tender care and the warm lips of her half-opened mouth with great voluptuousness, then her magnificent pointed breasts and sucked and fondly bit her nipples, which became swollen and turgid like little penises in full erection.

Inebriated more than ever by the fine and lovely fragrance of her skin, Ricardo went forward kissing her navel, her belly, and downwards to the internal part of her thighs, which he licked voraciously, and then, gently biting her 'mons veneris', took into his mouth the soft carpet of her shining pubic hair, smoothly straining it with his lips and finally kissed and licked tenderly her vulva at length. Edima felt as though she was lost in a fantastic whirlpool where happiness, joy, pleasure and libido were mixed up together. She closed her eyes in ecstasy, and felt an enormous wave of bliss falling on her and overwhelming her. She had the impression of being killed little by little by his tender and most intimate caresses.

At this point, however, just at the apex of pleasure and desire, Ricardo feared that he would not be able to perform adequately and consequently would disappoint her. He therefore started – despite the strong desire he felt for her – to cool down gradually, first himself, then also her, by stroking her gently and tenderly, but much less voluptuously. Edima, who had mentally already prepared herself to be penetrated, was in her heart rather disconcerted that he did not take to its natural conclusion the sexual action he had been carrying out with such sweet skilfulness and so enjoyably up to that moment. However, she did not give any evident sign of her disappointment and kindly joined in bringing to an end the effusions that they were exchanging with each other.

She slept peacefully in Ricardo's arms. Ricardo held her tight, creating around her a sort of cage by putting both his arms about her bust and twining his legs about her hips and thighs, gripping her to himself. She felt like a prisoner, but a prisoner kept in an extremely sweet and agreeable prison, a real 'golden prison'.

The following day, when taken by an irresistible impulse, they started again to give free play to their passion and they both attained again together a perfect climax, the apex of libido and voluptuousness, Ricardo, kissing her tenderly and murmuring sweet nothings into her ears, felt growing up peremptorily in his body a bursting desire to possess her. He therefore deliberately pushed his penis with his hand towards her vulva – generously offered and fully exposed and open as a crimson rose just blossomed in the dark greenhouse of her pubis – and to his surprise he noticed that it was entering into her vagina easily.

So he made this totally unexpected discovery: it seemed that among many West-African women the lips of the vulva, in particular

the 'labia majora', are not like the two thick folds of flesh covering the vestibule of the vagina as is normally the case with white women. Instead they seem more similar to two rather small longitudinal ripples of the skin or two hardly perceptible swellings like low hillocks situated at a certain distance from each other at the sides of the vagina, not obstructing or protecting its outer opening at all. Thus, when a woman parts her legs in a compass-like manner to receive the man who is going to penetrate her, her vulva is practically wide open and wholly disclosed to him. The vaginal orifice is in this way immediately accessible and can be entered by a semi-flaccid or, in certain cases, even by a soft penis, without requiring full erection.

A baton-like rigidity of the man's penis is therefore not necessary in order to perform penetration, since the penis can so easily be introduced into the woman's vagina, but only as a means of reciprocal enjoyment and orgasm. Obviously, after penetration, the friction against the vaginal walls and the copulatory thrusts inside it, together with the exciting contact of vaginal juices moistening it and the psychological effect of being inside the woman's organ, make the penis swell up erect for ejaculation. Moreover, their round and quite developed buttocks form a sort of cushion under their hips when they lie on their back, which raises their lower abdomen upwards; their vagina is in this way offered to penetration in a nearly vertical, rather than horizontal position, making the action itself easier and immediate.

So Ricardo felt he now understood how it happens that African men can still make love and, consequently, beget children at a very elderly age and why, some eight months before, he could easily and openly see the reddish internal part of Bunmi's open vulva when she was sitting, open- or cross-legged, on his bed.

Inside Edima, Ricardo attained a very high peak of bliss and pleasure. It was a marvellous and really unique sensation! He thought he had never experienced anything like it. He felt as though Edima's vagina was the natural place – and the only one – where his penis could lie and give him happiness and joy. He would have liked to be able to enter it completely, with his head and his whole body, and not just with this very minimal, though absolutely vital, part of himself. Held between her thighs which she kept wide open about him, Ricardo had the mental feeling and the sweet physical sensation that her body was the exact counterpart of his own, like two halves

of the same apple, and that she was the mould in which he himself, as clay in the adroit hands of a skilled artist (God? Fate? Destiny? Nature?), was going to be moulded.

‘Certainly, she has been created and was born for me and for me alone!’ was his thought. In all his life he had never achieved such an intense pleasure and so much happiness. At the pinnacle of these marvellous sensations, he exclaimed:

“Edi, I love you so much!”

Edima was feeling a deep tenderness for this man who was now inside her and enjoyed in ecstasy the pleasure that his presence in her was giving her. She was happy because she understood that she had started loving him and felt that something important had happened to her, which could agreeably fill her life. She therefore watched him with gleaming eyes and said with delight:

“I love you too, darling!”

She had started indeed calling him ‘darling’ and used this term continuously, talking to him: darling ... here, darling ... there; it was a real volley of darlings and she never stopped addressing him in this way. Ricardo, laughing, said to her that if she called every man darling she could be sure not to risk making a mistake when deep in thought by calling him by another man’s name, or calling another lover by his name. But she replied:

“Oh, *darling*, you are awful!”

It was however only a joke, as he knew very well that she was a serious girl, already deeply immersed in a happy romance with him, and not eager to have another affair. During their life together, Edima betrayed Ricardo only once, at the very beginning of their relationship, as she herself told him later on. She went to bed one night with another white man, a mate in the hash running club. But it was mainly a test for herself, since at that time she still felt uncertain about her feelings for Ricardo and wanted to ascertain their nature and solidity. In fact, she did not at all enjoy sleeping with another man and, instead of getting pleasure from this interlude she felt, on the contrary, terribly guilty and ashamed for having been unfaithful to a man whom she deemed the only one worthy of receiving her love.

Before meeting Ricardo, Edima had had three men in her life. The first one, Dennis, was the schoolmate who had deflowered her when she was seventeen. The affair with him lasted nearly three years until she left Calabar, the main town in Cross River State where she lived

with her family, to settle down in Lagos. Then, there in Lagos, she had one short relationship with another African man and one absolutely very short affair lasting only a couple of weeks, which was a matter of 'being attracted by the different', with a white man – the very first 'oyinbo' she made the intimate acquaintance of – when she started attending the hash.

None of these episodes had left a significant impact and a nostalgic memory in her; she considered them as compulsory in a woman's life and simple adventures. She had forgotten those men completely and did not miss them at all. When she met Ricardo and felt initially that she liked him and, later on, that she sincerely loved him and started living with him, it was therefore as though a totally new life – a truly sentimental one, no longer a simple adventure – had been disclosed to her, into which she had to dive enthusiastically. Her heart was still that of a naïve, pure virgin, open to the future and ready to receive love, pleasure and happiness. Ricardo understood well this fresh and genuine condition of her being and felt intimately as though he were her very first man, because she felt that this was her first important sentimental story and let it shine through as such. She behaved accordingly: very soon indeed Ricardo became so important for her that, in her mind, there had never been anybody before and above him. Ricardo was absolutely delighted and continued saying to her:

"Edi, you have such a beautiful heart, that nothing can be nicer! So far as your heart and mind are concerned, you are a real virgin and I am honoured and extremely pleased that you chose me as your man! I can't believe that I have been granted by God – Whom I sincerely thank with all my heart – such an immense favour as to meet you and I even wonder whether I really deserve such a wonderful and peerless gift!"

Invariably she would answer:

"Darling, I love you so much and I am totally and only yours!"

In this way she thrilled Ricardo with great desire for her and attached him more than ever to herself.

At a party in the house of the Counsellor to the Embassy of Spain, Ricardo met a very kind and exceedingly ceremonious girl, whose name was Ibronke – normally shortened to Ronke – Giwa. Unfortunately for her, in spite of her nice nature, she was not particularly beautiful. But she liked going to parties very much and

loved to dance and to listen to music. Ricardo invited her to dance with him.

When the dance was over, she asked him whether he would be interested in becoming a member of an organisation named 'Legacy', which took care of the preservation of traditional monuments in Nigeria and was about to organise a visiting tour through the Brazilian-style houses built on Lagos Island. Ricardo answered enthusiastically that he was certainly interested in knowing a lot more about Nigeria and its hidden treasures. He felt he still knew too little to quench his thirst for knowledge, and willingly expressed his commitment to the excursion. Ronke told him that the participants were due to gather two weeks later, on Sunday morning at 8 a.m., at the Marina by the petrol service station opposite the beginning of Abibu Oki Street.

On the date set, he woke up much earlier than usual for Sundays and arrived at the meeting point at the due time. Ronke was not there, but there were other organisers of Legacy who took care of the attendees. Ricardo met the president of Legacy, Mr. John Godwin, an English architect who had lived in Nigeria for 42 years and was a passionate lover of art and antiquities. John was a really fine connoisseur of secret Nigerian treasures and a fabulous and extremely pleasant guide. Ricardo was fascinated by the beauty of these old houses, mainly built by ex-slaves, who had returned to Nigeria after having been freed, and who followed the style that they had become acquainted with during the period spent as slaves in Brazil. The nicest of all, thanks to a recent complete restoration, was the Lumpkin House dating from 1890, located in Abibu Oki Street and used as offices by the Leventis Foundation who owned it. But many more had a very attractive aspect – either because of their façade and the entrance door or the front porch or the ornament around the windows – despite the miserable condition in which they now sometimes found themselves. They all rightfully deserved restoration, since they were certainly an historic and artistic patrimony of Lagos, in particular, but also benefiting the whole country, both as a vital testimony to old times and as tourist attractions.

At this point, due to the choking heat that made everybody nearly collapse, cold drinks were distributed free of charge by Legacy's organizers to the excursionists, in order to refresh them a little. Afterwards, John Godwin also took the participants in the walkabout

to the Holy Cross Roman Catholic Cathedral - so called because of the huge wooden cross erected on the site by the Brazilian community in 1864. Later in 1878 a first pro-Cathedral had been initiated there under the direction of the repatriate Senhor Francisco Nobre, and finally the existing church was built in neo-gothic style in 1934 by the Italian masons G. Cappa plc. He furthermore showed them some old buildings used as administrative offices during the colonial era, as well as the interesting and lovely Shitta-Bey Mosque in Martins Street, commenced in 1892 under the direction of Senhor Joao Baptista Da Costa, himself a repatriate from Brazil.

Over a period of time, Ricardo took part with great enthusiasm in three other very interesting field trips organised by Legacy, which he enjoyed very much: a visit to explore Lekki Peninsula, another long one to Epe and, especially, Sungbo's Eredo and, finally, a trip to the fascinating and intriguing Oshun's Grove shrines of Oshogbo.

The first of these was a chance to see the remains of some trading posts erected during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries along the Nigerian coast, including the old 'Regis Aine' trading station, where remains of Portuguese inscriptions were discovered. In the village near Eleko Beach, the members of the party could see the grave of an old German sailor, whose name was Georg Schlaikier and in the village of Lekki they could make the discovery of 'London Stock' bricks made in England. Off the Epe expressway, a village of fishermen using the channel branch joining Lagos lagoon with Epe lagoon could be visited as well. This trip also provided an occasion to visit a nicely and wisely preserved natural area in the marshland, the Lekki Conservation Centre, the entrance to which was situated right opposite the Chevron compound. It was said to be inhabited by crocodiles and monkeys living in their natural habitat but, although Ricardo sharpened his eyes - gazing from the well-constructed footbridges or suspended walkways (totalling an overall length of 1.8 km) flying over the marsh - in an effort to detect their shape in the water or among the thick ranks of trees and twigs, none of them could be seen.

Ricardo had passed many times in front of this reservation for flora and fauna while driving to Eleko Beach, and had noticed the fine hut serving as reception hall; but he had never suspected that it was open to the public and was such an attractive resort.

The second tour began with homage and greetings paid to the new Olu (King) of Epe, the lagoon town situated east of Lagos and using

the same lagoon system on which Lagos itself lies, the two towns being interconnected by a channel. The Olu was happy to welcome the party and to show them some halls of his palace and the famous big war-sword proudly kept hanging on the wall of a specially dedicated room. Since this trip was made on the eve of the Moslem feast of Eid-el-Kebir, the courtyard of the palace was full of large rams, who were also allowed into the residence itself.

Then the Olu left the party in order to don his full regalia and go out to the Mosque. Usually Nigerian kings are literally covered with coral beads for official ceremonies. These beads are used not only for the confection of necklaces (worn in great number and generally made with really enormous beads) but also for fabricating coats of mail or corsets, helmets or head-caps, arm- and leg-sets, gowns, as well as often for face-curtains - especially in the past when subjects were not allowed to see their King's face, so that the latter had to be covered when appearing in public. Coral objects are almost certainly not autochthonous, as Nigerian coasts are rather sandy throughout their length. So it would be interesting to know where these customs and fashions come from, and where such a volume of attractive ornaments has been imported into Nigeria from.

After the visit to the old Mosque of Epe where – despite the huge crowd of worshippers inside and outside the building – finely carved wooden doors and interesting wall-frescos could be seen, the trip moved on to the Sungbo's Eredo site, which lies about 7 km north of Epe. The attendees could view part of the ditch and ramparts of an 80 km long wall that surrounds Ijebu-Ode and which is said to be 1,000 years old. The ditch was cut straight in the laterite rock, then the rampart was created by dumping earth above the 'walls' of the ditch, so that now these appear to be some 10 to 12 metres high. These heaps, so created, were then topped with massive forest growth to hide them from view (which is also the reason for their rather recent discovery). A narrow causeway which crosses the ditch by means of a bridge is said to have been used by the Portuguese slavers who, after paying a toll to the indigenous tribes, would lead their caravans of slaves to the coast for embarkation towards the distant but facing shores of Brazil, as well as later on by Carter's forces in the Ijebu wars of 1895.

A crystal-clear stream was also seen flowing outside the big rampart. This had its source in a ravine densely planted with trees at the end of a rather precipitous and meandering path, and was used

by local villagers to supply water - and by the Legacy visitors for refreshing themselves after the long walk inside the ditch. Some African members of the group even drank that water, but Ricardo and the other Europeans did not dare to, for fear of catching amoeba. At home Ricardo would regularly drink the water coming from the town distribution network, although - because of the breakages often occurring along the lines - it was not safely sealed. But for safety reasons, this water, said to come via an aqueduct from the central Plateau and to be pure from a bacteriological viewpoint, was boiled by his steward for thirty to forty minutes to ensure the killing of all germs, and then - after cooling - passed through special filters to remove coarse residues. He kept some bottles of mineral water in his store-room for offering to very fearful guests, such as his European boss who, whenever he came on a visit from Spain, insisted to Ricardo's great amusement on using mineral water even for cleaning his teeth.

Despite the pleasant chill found down there, coming up back to the road level caused all the excursionists to again become covered with perspiration because of the stifling heat.

The trip to Oshogbo was organised not only with the aim of visiting the renowned open-air shrines and sculptures made by Susanne Wenger, but also with the specific purpose of providing her with the donation of bags of Portland cement necessary for the restoration of the Oshun Grove. The Legacy group therefore gathered at her house, met her and had an amiable introductory chat with her and then visited the grove with her, during which time she explained her work and talked extensively about her hopes and fears for maintaining the site, which was now ranked as a Nigerian National Monument. Mrs. Susanne Wenger is an Austrian-born lady who was married to a Swiss businessman and went to Nigeria in the early 1950s. There she fell under the spell of the local customs and traditions, divorced her European husband and married a Nigerian, who was a player of the traditional 'talking drums' and also a priest of an animist religion worshipping Oshun, the goddess of waters and forests who is said to reside in the river flowing just outside the town of Oshogbo. Nigerians give the name 'talking drum' to an hourglass shaped drum, with ropes attached from one end to the other all around it. By pressing these strings together in various ways and combinations, and changing the pace of beating on the skin, a sound is produced which is similar to a murmuring voice.

Susanne built some shrines to these gods of nature in the woods, using cement and clay supported by iron rods, and also some statues in an open meadow surrounded by a wall with an interesting and intriguing gate. In addition to an undeniable talent and an undoubted genial personal style, her work certainly shows traces of the study of very renowned modern artists. To an educated and sharp observer the curved wall of one of her shrines recalls the work of the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, while the vertical portal betrays a vague similarity to the Finnish Alvar Aalto's very pointed structures. A group of statues representing several human bodies superimposed on one another recalls, with their slender, elongated forms, the statues around the fountain in front of the Opera House in Stockholm and other recumbent figures appear to be influenced by the English sculptor Henry Moore. Other incomparable statues of great size and power are also very impressive, one of them certainly meant as a phallic symbol.

After the death of her Nigerian husband, Susanne Wenger succeeded him in his function and became herself an 'Olorisha' (priestess) of the Oshun's rites. She lived, in a totally Nigerian way, together with other families, in an old fashioned Brazilian-style house (built however in the 20th century) full of her works – wooden ones and starch and wax batiks that she composed and dyed herself – and inside which animals like a sheep and chickens too were allowed to stay undisturbed and to circulate.

One Saturday morning, when he was still half asleep in bed, the doorbell started ringing insistently. Annoyed, he went to the main door and opened it. Benoît's wife stood outside the defensive grid with a bleeding face. She told him that her husband, drunk and in a fury like a madman, had beaten her severely, because he erroneously and without any reason thought that she had started an affair with the gardener's brother. He had also stolen the money she had earned with her tailoring services, which she was saving for the wedding of a niece. She was therefore asking for Ricardo's intervention and help in bringing Benoît back to reason and mental stability. Ricardo promised he would come but calmly took his time, as always, to shave, shower and dress.

When he was ready at last and - although angry for not having had his breakfast prepared - went to the boys' quarters, he learnt that Benoît had still been screaming and threatening everybody when the

Company patrol arrived for its normal surveillance tour and so had been taken away by the patrol-men in order to control, scold and scare him. 'It is better this way,' thought Ricardo. 'This will probably cool him down.' When Ricardo came back from his usual Saturday shopping, he found Benoît at work calmly preparing lunch as if nothing had happened. He still had to tell him off however for the trouble he had caused by getting drunk. He therefore treated him to a long lecture on the advisability of good behaviour and, especially, sobriety, telling him how by drinking too much one may be driven to imagine things which do not exist at all – such as his wife's betrayal – and, consequently, to act like a wild man.

Ricardo also told the steward that he was absolutely convinced that his wife was in fact a wise, honest and faithful woman who did not deserve at all the ugly accusation that Benoît had raised against her. Benoît promised not to behave as a drunkard any more in the future and to make peace with his wife. He also assured Ricardo that he had not stolen the money she had saved.

On account of his undisputed authority and wisdom, associated with a particular ability to deal firmly but gently with Africans, Ricardo was delegated by all the expatriates occupying the various flats of the building to intervene with the subordinates when something went wrong in the compound. Because he was a man who considered the dignity of the residence where he lived important, he also took care that everything in the compound was properly in order.

Therefore, although he strenuously followed the principle of 'live and let live', Ricardo often had to intervene in order to prevent the Nigerian and Beninese servants who lived in the compound transforming it into a little African village. For example, after a company with many employees came to settle in the building on the other side of the street, formerly a private family house, just in front of Ricardo's compound entrance, the gardener's wife started selling food cooked by herself in the back courtyard to occasional customers outside the compound. In the beginning she had placed her benches at a certain distance from the main entrance gate, then gradually she came nearer to it in order to make the transport of loads to the selling point easier and quicker. Eventually she was – to Ricardo's great annoyance and anger – just at the side of the gate, with customers thronging in the gateway. Ricardo had to scold her and oblige her to move her stall to the corner of the boundary wall.

Among his main concerns and worries were the appropriate use of water and efficient working of the standby generating set during the frequent electricity breakdowns which disrupted water distribution from the town network. The water consumption in the compound was really enormous, because of the presence of so many people, so he had to prohibit laundry operations totally and limit showering drastically during such blackouts. The backyard resembled a real laundry farm when the Africans washed their garments, as so much washing was hung on improvised ropes or spread out on the fence and on the grass to dry. Ricardo often got furious at seeing the tap in the backyard left turned on with water flowing out uselessly. And he also got desperate at the number of times this same tap got broken because of mishandling by his African subordinates. He frequently found the tap in his own kitchen broken too, and he had to protest vehemently to Benoît and scold him rather severely:

“How is it possible that this tap is broken so often? I have been living here for some years now and the tap in my bathroom has *never* gone wrong; it is therefore evident that the fault is in your way of handling it, which is not correct! Can't you really try to be more careful and respectful of things that do not belong to you?”

He tried as far he could to carry out appropriate repairs himself, as he hated bothering people too frequently: he did not like to have to keep calling on the workshop for assistance, and also for the water-tanker and the diesel-oil-tanker (especially during fuel shortages) to refill the house tanks. He therefore always recommended that the standby generating set be run only for a limited number of hours, despite the tremendous heat in the house when the air conditioning was not working, and the consequent protests of the other inhabitants of the building.

Ricardo also had to intervene to defuse quarrels bursting out from time to time among the African subordinates living in his compound, Beninese stewards and Nigerian gardeners or watchmen, as well as between these and their counterparts living in the neighbouring compound. One day, for instance, he was called out by a man and a woman who claimed to be his neighbours and requested his intervention with his staff whom they accused of having stolen a mattress which had been laid to dry on the boundary wall. He was therefore compelled to make an inspection in the boys' quarters to ascertain whether the disappeared mattress could have been hidden there, and then show these people that their suspicion

and accusation were entirely without foundation. All the stewards were very upset and protested that they would never be willing to have a mattress in such pitiful condition as the one in question. As a matter of fact, the mattress was not found, and it was learnt later on that other people living in the same neighbouring compound had removed it from the wall.

Another time, while he was watching a videocassette after dinner, Ricardo was advised by the Company patrol that Benoît and other stewards had all been jailed together. What had actually happened was that a terrible tussle had burst out between them and the neighbours, for reasons to do with the sale of food and drinks which all of them were performing on the sidewalk outside the boys' quarters exit gate. Somebody had called the police and when the policemen came they started throwing away and destroying the various sale benches and tables. The stewards, including Benoît, who had been drinking there and had joined in the scuffle – though his wife was not involved in the dispute, as she was a professional tailoress and therefore not operating as a food vendor – tried to resist and for this reason the police had decided to put all of them in the district prison.

So Ricardo, to his great vexation and anger, had to go himself to the police station – together with the other expatriates whose stewards had been jailed – and try to rescue them. He spoke politely to the commandant of the station, who said that unfortunately by that time it was too late to free them, but promised to do so the following morning. The commandant also explained gently to Ricardo that the sale of items on the streets after 10.00 p.m. was strictly forbidden. Ricardo had seen shops open and free selling of *suyia* and other foodstuff occurring well after that time in the African districts, such as for instance Obalende and Oshodi, which totally ignored any such rules, but clearly he had no intention of copying that. He was of course very worried, but thought that maybe spending a night in prison was a good lesson for Benoît, who might perhaps be careful henceforth to behave more wisely and appropriately.

5.

Living genuine, intense love

Ricardo and Edima started living together. Since she had no more office engagements, she could easily move to Ricardo's flat in Victoria Island and go home only from time to time or stay there when Ricardo's colleagues were hosted in his flat. He put at her disposal an entire wardrobe in his bedroom, where she hung many of her dresses and laid a lot of blouses, T-shirts, panties, bras and shoes; she also placed make-up kit, manicure-kit, nail-polish and solvent, shampoos, combs and hair-brush, tooth-brush and paste, perfumes, special medicated Tura soap and pots and jars of body creams on the bathroom shelves.

Edima truly cared for her body: every day, after bathing or showering, she anointed all her body with a special cream that left her skin smooth and shiny, though absolutely dry. From time to time she relaxed her hair with another special cream (and Ricardo loved to see her with this cream on her head, because with her hair all stretched backwards and glued flat onto her head, white with cream, the perfection and beauty of her head was even further enhanced). If she had to go out, she put a lot of care into making herself up to perfection, and spent a long time on it.

The entry of Edima into his house could not pass silently and unnoticed: she was in fact like a turbulent cyclone and a real force of nature and literally lightened up Ricardo's gloomy and desolate flat, with her luminous and positive personality and her joy of living infusing him and bringing unlimited happiness and contentment into his life. It was not purely a matter of sexual satisfaction and pleasure – though this played an important role for both of them and was immense and intense, as their physical accord was really excellent – but also a fact of a fantastic mutual understanding and

completeness, which their meeting had engendered and togetherness had then enhanced and fully developed. It was not long before their closeness became so powerfully tight and solid that nobody or nothing could have the slightest chance of separating them. The bonds that linked them to one another were indeed stronger than blood ties, stronger even than those of the flesh created by the great physical satisfaction they gave to each other; they descended straight from the very firm union of their spirits. Though having such different origins, culture and education, their affinity in conceiving and realising life and their reciprocal understanding were really exceptional and exceedingly high. Their constant agreement was so perfect and they integrated with one another so well that when they were together they became as one single person, thinking and acting exactly in the same way.

She was certainly, in all respects, a magnificent and fascinating woman, full of accomplishments, and Ricardo admired her realism and really liked her determination and strength of will. In fact, Edima was amply provided with that good sense for living, which is typical of unaffected persons, and fundamentally a patrimony of country people. Moreover, her overflowing vitality noticeably moderated the bad side of Ricardo's character and let him relax and lose part of his rather boring austerity and tedious self-control. He was so totally seduced by her joyous and lovely – though strong – temper that she succeeded in passing it on to him and soon made him behave like a 30-year-old.

Over and over again Ricardo just remained gazing at her and felt joy and happiness warming up his heart simply by seeing her jovial and smiling face and her wonderful and desirable body. And Edima instinctively and immediately realised that he was a man on whose solid backing and help or on whose wise advice she could constantly count for any necessity which might arise. For the first time in her life, a man whom she could liberally and safely trust was at her side all the time, near her with his free and gratifying support. She felt thoroughly protected and therefore heartily entrusted herself completely to him. On his side, he felt happy and proud to be able to back such a marvellous, very special woman wholeheartedly and did it, whenever the occasion arose, with great joy.

Edima soon became the real queen of his house. Ricardo wanted to demonstrate the high regard he had for her, and to impose that same high respect for her onto his steward too. Respect,

consideration, loyalty, faithfulness in regard to everybody and dignity of the person, as well as parity of human rights and lack of prejudices or qualifications were a constant aim in Ricardo's mind and, whenever he had the opportunity he always tried to instil these concepts also into his servants' mentality. It was exactly for this reason – to raise him to his own level – that he always addressed his steward, when speaking with him in French, with the formal 'vous', rather than with the more confidential 'tu' normally used by all the whites with their francophone servants. Similarly, when he had to talk of her with Benoît, he always referred to her as 'Miss Grace'; he never used simple terms like 'the girl', or 'that young girl', or her simple name 'Grace'. Edima anyhow maintained her humble attitude constantly and, not domineeringly imposing her presence in the house, always spoke to Benoît gracefully and kindly.

The first Sunday that Edima spent with Ricardo, she asked him to take her to the 'Happy Hours' organised every Sunday by the bar of the Sheraton Hotel in Ikeja. Ricardo did not very much like to spend time drinking in a bar – he did not drink much, and normally drank only at meals and when really thirsty and considered the money and time spent for such purpose as wasted. But he agreed to comply with her desire. When they arrived there, she ordered a Gulder lager beer and he ordered a coke. Nigerian women and young girls generally prefer and ask for stout – dark and more expensive Guinness is therefore their favourite beer – but luckily Edima liked lager quality. When she asked for a second beer, he also got a Gulder beer (Gulder, Harp and Star were indeed his favourite brands).

While they were quietly sipping their drinks, a friend of Edima came up and started talking with her in their native language. Ricardo took advantage of this to go around and look at the various shops in the lobby of the hotel. He had been at the Sheraton on some occasions, but always for meetings and he had therefore never had the time and the opportunity to explore them. He was observing the objects displayed in the show-window of a souvenir shop and thinking that the items he had bought from the tradesmen visiting him were far nicer than those on sale there, when an attractive young woman, elegantly dressed in a white well-cut suit, unexpectedly materialised as though she had sprung from nowhere and approached him asking gaily:

"Do you find these objects nice and intend to buy any of them?"

He commented:

“No, I have already bought much better ones, which I have at home.”

“Do you need company?” she suddenly went on hopefully.

“No, thank you. I am here with my girlfriend,” and, indicating Edima to her, Ricardo added: “You can see her, she is sitting there, at the bar.”

The young woman looked disappointed and disappeared instantaneously; he went back to the bar and finished his beer.

When Edima was ready to have a third drink – giving the excuse that during the so-called ‘Happy Hours’ drinks were sold at half the normal price – he said that they had spent enough time there and wanted to leave and go home. Edima was let down and Ricardo learnt later on through Sunday, his driver, that she – not yet knowing him enough to judge his behaviour properly – had complained to him:

“What sort of man is your master? Is he so mean as not to offer me a drink?”

Apart from these initial misunderstandings, mainly due to the poor knowledge she still had of him, the life of Ricardo and Edima passed merrily and contentedly. Their relationship became tighter every day and their love deeper and deeper. They were really inseparable. He was delighted to come home at lunchtime or in the evening and find this wonderful woman waiting for him and welcoming him in such a sweet way. She used to come out from the little parlour where she was watching TV and rush towards him to fling her arms round his neck, embracing him with the utmost tenderness. Open sentiments of adoration for him were clearly depicted on her face and in her eyes. Ricardo was totally enraptured every time and held her very tightly in his arms and kissed her parted lips tenderly and voluptuously at the same time until she felt her strength draining away as though she was about to faint and yelled out:

“Ricardo, my legs! ... Darling, ... my legs!”

And he had to stop and release her in order to let her breathe freely.

Edima had a favourite sport: the ‘hash’. This name, which was given to it by an Englishman in Kenya, where he first organised it, meant running – a sort of cross-country jogging with one participant

playing the role of 'hare' and the others running in pursuit on his trail – followed by a gathering of runners and supporters to eat and drink and have a pleasant time. Its inventor, it may be pointed out, had had a precise aim in organising such sporting events, since he was the owner of a restaurant in the bush where, after the running, hashed meat was offered on sale to the participants: that's how the name 'hash' was invented for it.

There were three groups of hashers in Lagos. The most important one was that of the so-called 'Harriers' of Ikeja, who had their meeting point at the Crocodile Bar off the expressway to the International Airport and used to have their running exercises on Saturday afternoons. The second group had their basis in Ikoyi and their events took place on Mondays on the roads and streets of the Ikoyi and Victoria Island districts. The third group of hashers was based in Apapa and their meetings were organised on Thursdays. Edima had joined in these running activities on her arrival in Lagos and was enrolled with the Apapa group, because her cousin, who lived in that district, had introduced her to it. Her preference was however decidedly in favour of the Ikeja hash, because it was doubtless the hardest one - since it took place in the bush outside the town and the participants often had to run in swampy areas, cross small rivers and run through woods.

When she went to live with Ricardo in Victoria Island, she started attending the Ikoyi hash regularly also, which was not in her normal programme earlier. Edima's nickname in the hash was 'Jumping Grasshopper'. All hashers had a nickname, which was ascribed to them in accordance with their physical characteristics, behaviour or running performances. Most Saturdays, Ricardo drove to the Crocodile Bar to accompany Edima there after he came back home from shopping; then he returned home to have his lunch. As said before, he always had a very late lunch on Saturday.

Nearly always, Edima did not go back to Ricardo's house after the Ikeja hash was over, because by the time all the eating and drinking was finished it was too late and, at the end of it all, they were rather tipsy. She spent the night in her own house, initially in the far-off district of Lagos, then, when she got a residence there, in Ikeja. Sometimes, before attending the Ikeja hash, Edima wanted to pay a visit to a friend of hers who lived in the Aguda district – from where afterwards she joined the hashing party – and therefore asked Ricardo to drop her there rather than at the Crocodile Bar. To avoid

making him enter into the labyrinth of streets in the district, from where he might have difficulty getting out, Edima let him simply drive to the main road, Abatan Street, where she got out of the car in front of the district school. From there she could get to her friend's house by taking the 'Okada' transport (the fast motorbike service, for a few Naira, commonly used in Lagos for avoiding traffic jams).

One Monday evening, coming back from the Ikoyi hash at the end of which she had had a lot of drinks, beer and heavy spirits, Edima was in such a state that she went straight to bed and fell immediately asleep. She slept a very deep, numbing sleep and since she was very hot from all the alcohol ingested and flowing in her blood, she lay totally naked on the bed, having pushed the bed-sheet and blanket aside. Ricardo found her like that when he, in turn, went to the bedroom.

He then decided to snap some nice photographs of her. He felt that she was so beautiful that she rightfully deserved to be immortalized in her splendid and naïve nakedness for both his own pleasure and – why not? – that of posterity. To his eyes (and from the unconscious pose assumed by her prone body) she looked like a wonderful and sensual Nude painting by Modigliani, although this prolific artist, in his magnificent world-renowned work, had never portrayed black ladies. Even for the intriguing and less known painting titled 'Mademoiselle Grain de Café' (Miss Coffee-bean) which might seem, at first sight, to represent a black woman because of the brown colour of this caryatid's skin, the model was in reality a white lady, apparently the Russian poetess Anna Akhmatova. Maybe he only had brown colour left on his palette, although he did not have in mind portraying a black lady.

Edima continued to sleep heavily and did not notice anything, neither his movement around the bed, nor the noisy click of the camera shutter. However, although he was happy to have portrayed his beloved Edima in her magnificent nudity, in his heart he felt like a thief for having photographed her like that without her previous and conscious consent.

On the second Sunday when there had not been any hash meeting on the preceding Saturday, Ricardo took Edima to Alpha Beach. There were only some villagers and no other people; some of them were picking up broken coconut-shells and others were collecting

seashells from the sand in big bags. Edima and Ricardo sat on the sand in front of the ocean and opened the little bag of chips and the packet of crackers they had brought with them and ate them. Then they had a long walk on the beach, having thus a lovely view on one side of the lonely and nearly empty ocean (where just a few fishermen's pirogues could be seen in the distance) and of the palm-grove along the shoreline on the other. Finally they came back and again sat under the palm-trees. There was a very peaceful and romantic atmosphere – it was so wonderful and exciting to have the entire beach to themselves! – and they were sentimentally overwhelmed by deep tenderness for one another.

The villagers did not pay any further attention to them, after their very first glances of surprise at seeing them there together - a white man with a black girl visibly in love. Freely living the romantic and lovely natural mood surrounding them, they passionately embraced and kissed each other at length. Then Edima asked one of the women whether she had palm-wine and, following her positive answer, bought some of it. She invited Ricardo to taste it, saying:

“It is much better fresh like this, and sweeter than the one you can find in bottles at the super-market.”

Ricardo sipped it, but did not find it so particularly sweet as she asserted it was. The acidic smell was in fact strong and it had for him a strange taste that he was unable to define. After having let it ferment, Nigerians extract from it by distillation a rather heavy alcoholic drink called ‘ogorogoro’, much appreciated by all people from youth onwards and quite widely available, although its production is prohibited by law. Due to its high alcoholic content it easily leads people to undesirable and usually troublesome drunkenness, especially men – who make overabundant and often excessive use of it.

Despite the sweet and romantic atmosphere found at Alpha Beach, they never went there again. As a matter of fact, after that first time when they did not want to bathe or lie on the sand in the warmth of the sun, but simply watch the ocean together in peace, all the other times they went to the seaside they preferred to drive to Eleko Beach. Although this lacked such a sweet lonely ambience, it was well organised to receive and welcome Sunday visitors. Only on a couple of occasions did they go together to Tarkwa Bay: the first with the Company boat – and as this was reserved solely for

'expatriates', Ricardo declared that she was the daughter of a colleague who had been entrusted to him for that day – and the second with a private boat belonging to a friend.

On top of this, Ricardo once borrowed a motorboat from his friend Nigel Green and took Edima along the Badagry Channel. Ricardo had to take great care in steering the boat clear of the many sandbanks at various points along the channel and of the large and small wrecks of boats filling the channel. However, apart from the different hazards spread at the bottom of the channel (though luckily wrecks could be seen easily – and more carefully avoided – since, because of their size, they were also visible above water-level), the navigation along it was easy and peaceful. The water was calm and smooth all over.

The only turbulent place, which might represent a relatively difficult point for a boat of that sort with a low draught because of its seagull-wing-like hull, occurred at the exit from Five Cowrie Creek. Here, starting at the Lagos Yacht Club berthing site and extending up to the Apapa Quays frontline, the stream descending through the creek from the internal lagoon – situated at a higher level – met the mounting tide flowing in from the sea along the channel leading to the haven. This created a vast area of big wild billows. The boat was heavily shaken by the turbulent waves and jumped a great deal from one to the other, thereby launching all around it (and also inside it) huge water-sprays, real heavy showers. It was therefore necessary to reduce speed quite substantially.

After around 20 minutes of navigation, they berthed at a jetty where a man had been making ample signs to them from afar with his hand, and visibly calling them. The man took care of the boat when they landed. A boy showed them the path, which crossed the entire island, skirted a village (at the side of which the ground was covered with cows' dung, indicating the existence there – although not in view at that moment – of a considerable herd) up to the beach by the ocean.

There were some cottages there which were evidently to be rented to vacationers for the whole season or just for the day, especially on Sundays. Many wealthy people in Lagos used to rent bungalows and cottages outside the town on a long-term basis, especially at a site called Agaja, at 30 to 45 minutes' (depending on the boat speed) sailing from Lagos. But very few people, practically only Africans and Lebanese people, used to land at such a short distance from it.

Most cottages were therefore empty.

Ricardo however, since it was already late and he did not want to spend the whole afternoon there, did not really mean to rent one of them, and would have preferred to sit on the sand in front of the ocean. But Edima did not want to stay there, because it was too exposed and sunny. There were no trees at all to give any shade. So she looked for shelter under the patio roof of a nearby cottage where, after a while, Ricardo joined her too. Luckily, they were not asked for payment when they left. Ricardo had some difficulty in starting the boat's engine when it was time to go back, but with the help of the man who had been looking after it he at last succeeded in getting the desired ignition and leaving.

On the way back from Eleko Beach, Ricardo usually gave Edima driving lessons, letting her drive his car from the junction of Eleko Beach road to Epe expressway up to the Chevron offices roundabout near Jakande Estate. She had of course all the hesitation and made the common mistakes of any beginner, but she learned quite quickly how to drive with sufficient ease and confidence. Ricardo only once let Edima drive right to his house, but he regretted it a lot, because she drove too speedily through the villages along the road, and did not care much about crossroads, other vehicles and pedestrians crossing the road or walking along it. Three very crowded villages had to be crossed: the village adjacent to the entrance of Victoria Gardens Estate, the one near Jakande Estate and then the nearest to Lagos in the Maroko area. Moreover, as she entered the gate of Ricardo's compound she skimmed the pillar in a way that frightened Ricardo very much. Apart from this occasion, when he thought he risked getting more white hairs on his head, Ricardo was generally very satisfied with his pupil.

He advised her to go to a driving school to get theoretical instruction, together with some better practical lessons, in order to perfect her driving skill and be fully prepared to pass the test for her driving licence. Edima did it and, to Ricardo's astonishment, succeeded in getting the driving licence at her first attempt. In spite of his constant great admiration for her cleverness and skill, Ricardo had a vague suspicion that, this time, she had perhaps paid to get it. In Nigeria indeed *everything is difficult* (very often big and, at first glance, insuperable hurdles are inexplicably raised against simple and stupid matters), *but nothing is impossible*, ... especially if you pay!

However he did not want to hurt or humiliate her and did not reveal his suspicions to her.

They were at Eleko Beach one Sunday morning when a fisherman brought ashore a wooden pirogue that had both edges carved with drawings painted in vivid colours. He was a tall and well-shaped man, equipped with splendid muscles, which were clearly manifest and sprang up agile at his every move: he definitely looked like a sea-god, a Neptune, with his naked torso and shorts and immediately started selling the object of his nocturnal or early-morning catch. This consisted of a large number of long and slender, medium-size fish. A conspicuous crowd of market-women and children quickly gathered around him and started bargaining in loud voices for his precious booty.

All wanted to be served first, and some of the purchasing ladies even started quarrelling among themselves over their choice of fish, while the children, very inquisitive, climbed into the pirogue in order to get a close view of the fisherman's catch lying at the bottom of it. Most were busy playing among the women, but three of them, very little and totally naked, came out of the crowd holding three fish triumphantly in their hand as though they had seized a precious and important treasure. They looked so proud that Ricardo, amused by their bizarre behaviour, couldn't help bursting into a jolly and cordial laugh. He seldom laughed so openly; therefore Edima enjoyed that very much and willingly joined him in loud laughter. He also took some pictures of the attractive and exhilarating scene.

One evening, while they were driving in the palm-grove to find a secondary way out, they met a fisherman with a big basketful of nice big fishes, rather round (like a full moon) and silvery in colour, but with big yellow fins and tails. He was offering them at a very reasonable price. Ricardo stopped the car and – though contrary to his habit, because he always delegated his steward to buy fish – bought all of them, as they were really magnificent and incredibly cheap. Ricardo did not know what they would be like, because he had never seen this kind of fish being bought by his steward; but he supposed from their attractive appearance that they ought to be good. Edima as well bought some fish, but of a different species, very long and slender, to take to her home. Later on, at home, Benoît found those fish very beautiful and was impressed when Ricardo told him how cheaply he had bought them. When Benoît cooked them, they turned out to be very good and succulent.

Although Ricardo had decided to put aside the sum of 2,000 (later on increased to 3,000) Naira a week for her, Edima started a business with her cousin Kenneth: at the wholesale market they bought big bales full of clothes – new and used – coming from USA and then picked out the best articles and resold the bale at a slightly lower price. Their profit came from the separate sale, at a very good and remunerative price, of the selected articles. The income earned through these sales was not however very conspicuous and, moreover, totally irregular, partly because they often sold their goods on credit to some of their customers.

When she went to the market, Edima used to dress in the simplest and cheapest way, wearing a pair of sandals that made her look like a peasant. Obviously, when she returned home, she was covered with dust and mud and had to wash herself thoroughly. She enjoyed washing a lot. She could easily take three showers a day, with pleasure and great delight. Often, if Ricardo wanted to embrace her on her return home from the market, she protested:

“But, darling, I’m all dirty and sweaty! Don’t touch me, please. Let me take a shower first!”

Most times, Ricardo did not listen to her request and did not mind so much about how she was. She always looked magnificent in his eyes, whatever her condition, and he felt the need to demonstrate all his affection and tenderness to her. He therefore used to kiss her anyway, delicately on her soft and warm lips, and to lick the splendid groove between her breasts which peeped out above the neckline of her T-shirt. He utterly adored a short, simple pale-blue dress (that later on she left to her sister Loveliness) which had to be tied at the back with a big ribbon-knot. She wore it to look humble, but in his opinion it made her particularly sexy and attractive.

Most of the time, after having been out to Ikeja and other districts of Lagos, Edima told Ricardo about what had happened or what she had seen. She was a real chatterbox and he enjoyed and literally adored hearing her talking: ‘Her voice had indeed always that marvellous, angelic sound he perceived the first time he met her!’ Sometimes, when she got particularly excited or full of enthusiasm for a specific topic, she started talking like a machine-gun or using some pidgin-English expressions and he – not being able to understand what she was saying – had to stop her and ask her to repeat everything in a clearer way. When Edima had something to

tell Ricardo, she used to start her tale with a funny interjection, saying:

“Darling, do you know what?”

He would answer promptly:

“What?”

At this point, she would go on with her tale. But after a while, it became a real game between them. She would start asking: ‘Do you know what?’ and he, laughing with great enjoyment, invariably replied: ‘What?’ But her question was a sort of simple introductory formula for initiating talking with him and did not necessarily need an answer. Therefore, sometimes, when she had in effect something important and urgent to tell him, she went on easily with her tale; at other times, on the contrary, his intervention with that ‘What?’ made her lose the thread of the conversation and, after her initial introduction and Ricardo’s amused and inquisitive stealthy glancing at her, she remained silent.

Edima liked to pull Ricardo’s leg very much and did not miss any chance to do so. It goes without saying that Ricardo very often laid himself open to her jokes and making fun of him. He was a rather touchy man and normally did not like somebody making a fool of him, but he allowed Edima to do everything and was even capable of laughing at her jokes, sometimes even sharp and fierce jokes, against him.

For instance he had a bad habit, when he was not really sure – for one reason or another – of what had been said, of asking:

‘I beg your pardon?’ or: ‘What did you say? Please repeat that!’

At first Edima did it, but then, when she understood that it was a general weakness of his, she started enjoying not repeating things she had said, leaving him unsure whether or not he had caught the meaning of her words. It should be said though that Ricardo did that to make sure that he had understood properly, because he was often lost in other thoughts and did not always listen carefully to what people were telling him. Obviously, too, this lack of attention when people were talking to him could well be considered a bad habit.

One of Edima’s jokes that Ricardo did not like at all was the nickname ‘Mister Lady’s legs’ that she gave him because of his straight legs. He protested vigorously:

“But how can you say that my legs are like a woman’s when they have big muscles at the thigh and at the calf and bony and knotty

knees like this? If you want to know my frank opinion, a woman with this kind of legs would be – in my eyes, at least – very unpleasant and unattractive!”

Alas, his claims were made in vain and she continued calling him, especially in the evening when, while wearing shorts, he was going to the living room or, later, to the bedroom ahead of her:

“Mister Lady’s legs, Mister Lady’s legs!”

He went crazy every time he was called that, but she amused herself a lot and laughed loud and long.

Another of Edima’s ways of mocking Ricardo’s habits was to reply, ‘I already mentioned it.’ whenever Ricardo, in response to a ‘Thank you!’, used the courtesy form ‘Don’t mention it!’ Astonishingly indeed, Nigerians – although permeated with classical British culture – prefer and normally use the more modern American expression ‘You are welcome!’ or simply ‘Welcome!’

Ricardo was not a very humorous man, so he did not easily manage to make her laugh, but when, by chance, he said something comic enough to do so, he was literally enraptured to hear her open and bright laugh, capable of manifesting and disseminating joy all around her. She used to spend a long time watching TV and, when having meals, she poured pepper in abundance on all foodstuffs to make them spicier – because, in her typically Nigerian way, she found Ricardo’s meals rather tasteless. It has to be noted in fact that one of the most appreciated and most frequently eaten dishes belonging to the Nigerian diet is the renowned, very spicy ‘pepper-soup’. So Ricardo gave her the nickname ‘Miss Peppertele’. Since it matched her behaviour perfectly, she had to accept this nickname he had forged for her.

It goes without saying however that she was a humorous young woman and was therefore amused whenever he used it. As a matter of fact, Edima liked to watch TV at any time of the day. In the morning, for instance, when he got up to go to the office, she usually continued to sleep, except for some particular days when specific programmes she was interested in, especially some soap-operas, were broadcast: on these days she woke even earlier than him. She jumped silently out of bed and sat in front of the TV set to watch her chosen transmissions. Sometimes, when they were over and she had nothing special to do, she returned to bed to go on sleeping.

One thing which made Edima laugh a lot – as it did also all the

other young women Ricardo said it to – was when he gave the name of ‘chickens’ dance’ to the traditional dances of women, especially big and corpulent matrons, in Nigeria. He called their dance that because they used to dance leaning their head down towards the floor, with their posterior on the contrary raised upwards, waddling and shaking it fast to attract men’s attention. The buttocks are indeed the part of woman’s body which most African men – with their love of full plumpness and roundness of features – seem to look at with most pleasure and desire. For Ricardo they looked like hens attracting the cock, or pecking the ground in search of food. Ricardo used also to mimic the moves of the dancing ladies, which made his female audience split their sides with laughter.

Ricardo and Edima were making love very often, practically every day and sometimes two or, more rarely, even three times in a day. They always got enormous pleasure from it. In the morning, Ricardo’s alarm was set to ring early enough to give him time to prepare himself for going to the office, since it usually took one hour for him to get ready, for shaving, showering, dressing, combing his hair and breakfasting. Every morning when it rang, Edima – if she was not already sitting at the TV – half awake, half still sleeping, would introduce her hand inside his pyjamas and started caressing very softly and delicately his chest and his genitals. He was amazed at how she could do it with so much tenderness and exciting softness, just skimming over him. It was so terribly delicious that he would be thoroughly delighted and totally captivated by pleasure. If he did not have to be at the office very early for meetings or appointments, he indulged in that daily ritual and – being aroused by her wonderful touch – he made love to her.

The ways they made love were few, but specifically selected: in the normal position, with him on her, or in an inverted one, with her upon him. Their favourite one was however a position where their bodies, lying on the bed on their sides with legs mutually interlaced, were nearly at a right-angle to one another, because by keeping his knee against her back or her abdomen, he could press his penis with his thigh and lock it well inside her vagina, either from the front or from behind. When he was lying on her in the normal frontal position he used to put both his hands under her buttocks, in order to raise her abdomen even more upwards to facilitate penetration and to keep it very tight to his own, thus increasing the pleasure of mutual contact.

When, vice-versa, she was seated on him, he liked, after entering her, to raise his trunk up and stay sitting on the bed like that, with his penis in her, as in this way he could enjoy her entire body, surrounding it with his arms and caressing her back and glutei, while kissing avidly and passionately her face, her neck and her breasts.

Apart from on the bed, the only other place where they used to make love was under the shower, when they were showering together. They were both intimately convinced that sexual excitement and pleasure, which require a good deal of concentration, descend straight from simplicity of action and are connected to relaxed comfort and ease rather than to fantasy, and that physical effort and mental distraction are enemies of true pleasure. They therefore never looked for fancy places or strange positions – such as those suggested in the Kama Sutra or those illustrated in modern sex manuals – as many couples do in order to try to increase their enjoyment. In bed indeed – or under the shower – they always got full satisfaction, great pleasure and very intense enjoyment.

Only once, but merely for fun and as a joke (they were in fact laughing aloud like mad people while doing it) Ricardo penetrated her while Edima kept both her legs raised over his shoulders. They also liked to stretch their arms out together, opened wide as if the bed were their cross, and hold each others' hands, with their fingers tightly intertwined. In these cases, when her arms were outstretched like that, he also liked to kiss her armpits. But Edima did not really like it and she always quickly escaped from his ardour. While making love Ricardo always took constant care to express with kindness all his deep affection for her, softly murmuring into her ears tender nothings and sweet words of love in order to make the action more enjoyable and pleasant. Edima responded to these giggling softly, or in the same enraptured and exciting way. He often used to say to her:

“Edi, my love, nothing in this world is nicer than your pretty funny face and your superb, incredibly attractive and desirable body. I adore touching and caressing you. I love you with all my heart!”

And she, as in an enchantment, replied cheerfully:

“Darling, I too *adore* to be touched *by you*. Your caresses thrill and excite me at the highest level. I never experienced anything so pleasant in my whole life before knowing you. I didn't even imagine that such high peaks of pleasure could be attained. Please, go on

touching me so softly and hold me tight in your arms: I love you too!"

An idyllic, intimate atmosphere had so strongly formed between them that their love blossomed easily and sincerely and grew stronger and stronger as an orchid in the fertile humus of the rain forest.

Every time he was inside her, he had the same exquisite sensation of being in a sort of fantastic dream, which he would never have expected could be so lovely and from which he did not want to be parted by waking up. This was also due to the fact that Edima was capable of behaving like many other women who are aware of how to master and exploit their physical possibilities – allowed by the natural characteristics of their body – in order to make their man fully enjoy penetration into them. (This is in truth typical of women not yet enfeebled by the laxities and comfort of modern western-type life, as it is found among country women in the west just as in Africa and in the Far East.) She could perform an exercise that doubled Ricardo's pleasure and enjoyment. Most times, though she did not happen to do it every time they made love, Edima was able to contract the muscles of her lower abdomen surrounding the walls of her vagina and, as a consequence, her vagina itself. This made Ricardo feel as though he was being clutched by the jaws of a vigorous annular vice that was toughly, but delightfully and spasmodically clenching his penis and potently sucking it more deeply inside her vagina, thus increasing enormously and exalting to the utmost his pleasure at being in her. This gave him an unbelievably splendid, ecstatic sensation which he had never experienced before. No woman he knew, neither his wife nor the other women he had made love to in the past, had been able to contract their abdominal muscles as Edima did in such masterly manner.

On her side, she was a bit put out that he normally came so quickly because though she was very sensual she had a certain difficulty in attaining orgasms, and he often had to manipulate her manually to help her to come. Edima pretended that it was not a natural difficulty of hers, and that she delayed her orgasm voluntarily as much as possible, in order to increase and prolong the pleasure she was experiencing. But Ricardo seriously doubted that this version of the facts was true. In any case, when they did happily come together – which was unfortunately not too frequently, but

luckily did happen sometimes – it created for both of them an outburst of immense pleasure and a great joy. In these cases, Edima always exclaimed triumphantly and loudly:

“Ricardo, *you got it!*”

Usually she would protest vehemently if they were making love some time away from her periods and Ricardo was about to come and withdrew from her in order to ejaculate outside, so that she did not get pregnant:

“Don’t get out! ... *Stay inside me!* ... Leave your semen in me! ... *Give it to me!* ... Darling, do you think you know better than I whether and when I am safely infertile or not?”

When they were making oral sex – which they both liked very much to practise mutually, either concurrently or in turn – and Ricardo ejaculated in her mouth, Edima used to swallow his semen and lick his penis up to the very last drop, to the point where she could joyfully mock him when he wanted to go to the bathroom and wash: ‘What do you want to wash? I already cleaned it perfectly with my tongue!’.

He appreciated and liked that very much, considering it a real gesture of true love, because he hated the way some women rushed immediately to the bathroom to spit out their bed-partner’s sperm into the washbasin or toilet bowl. ‘What is the point of spitting it out, once they have received it in their mouth?’ was indeed his personal thought on the subject. When he inquired about this habit, trying to understand why they did it, he got different answers; one woman said: ‘Because sperm is very acidic and bitter,’ which was probably the most plausible and acceptable reason.

Another answer, which he would later on receive also from his so delectable and dear friend Catherine, and made him laugh a lot, was: ‘Because I do not want to get pregnant.’ He obviously needed to explain that the digestive system and womb are totally separate from each other, and have absolutely no possibility of interconnection, but he did not know whether he would be believed. Although he tried to explain that man’s sperm would undoubtedly provide a concentrate of energy for a woman who swallows it, a third answer was: ‘All I want in my stomach is food.’

When they went after lunch to the living side of the room where Ricardo was served coffee by his steward, Edima used to sit on his knees like a little girl, as if abandoning herself to the protective custody of his generous and amicable lap, and in a lovely and tender

gesture to place her head on his shoulder. He liked that immensely and was very happy at her doing it, as it fully demonstrated her confident dependence on him, as well as her wish to seek and rely entirely on his masculine strength and wisdom, but sometimes she disturbed him while he was drinking the coffee too, making him spill it on his tie, shirt or trousers. Once – for this reason – he had to change his clothes completely before going back to the office, and his trousers had to be sent to the laundry for cleaning. Edima herself took care of taking his trousers to a laundry she knew in Ikeja. Luckily, the dry-cleaning laundries in Lagos are quite good and a nice job was done. Often, when she was sitting on his knees, at times folding her legs under her in a little girl's posture, she would suddenly exclaim:

“Darling, you are beautiful!”

The very first time she said that, Ricardo obviously felt very flattered, but thought: ‘Nobody ever told me this before, not even my wife at the time we were courting. How nice it is to be thought of so tenderly! Probably, however, she’s using the term incorrectly, not knowing that the right adjective for a good-looking man – if that is what she considers me – is ‘handsome!’ But then he had to change his mind because, when talking about other men, Edima used the term handsome very appropriately to indicate their fairness. It was therefore evident that she absolutely meant to indicate how much she really liked him, and from then onwards Ricardo was on cloud nine whenever he heard her saying it. Edima indeed liked Ricardo so much that she had also started taking great care of his physical appearance. One day, when he came back from the barbershop where he had let them cut his hair very short, as he normally used to have it in Africa, she noticed that some of his eyebrow hairs were becoming rather long and commented:

“Darling, your eyebrows are getting bushy; let me trim them for you.”

Ricardo had never started trimming them for fear that, once done it would become compulsory to intervene quite often, since their growth would be encouraged, and also because he deemed it something naturally connected with ageing (he had always noticed how elderly men have longer and rather heavy brows). After some initial hesitation, he then acknowledged however that it was in effect a necessary action and willingly agreed to let her do it. She carried that out with evident love for his person and such a tender care and

ability, making his face look like that of a younger man, that he was highly delighted. After that she regularly trimmed his eyebrows every four to five months, to their mutual pleasure.

Ricardo developed the habit of leading her into the bedroom after coffee had been drunk and saying:

“Now, I need my drug!”

He would let her lie down on the bed then, hooking her with his knee under her groin, would drag her well in the middle of the bed and lie on her. Sometimes, especially when the food had been abundant or heavy, she protested:

“My tummy! Please, darling, do not squeeze my tummy!”

She wanted to warn Ricardo to be aware of the state of her over-full stomach and therefore not to throw himself impetuously on her body but to lie down delicately. From his dominant position, towering upon her, he could stare downwards at her and every time he was surprised to discover how her face – which looked longer and thinner as gravity pushed the plump flesh backwards from her cheekbones – appeared extremely beautiful and charming. In those moments he was literally fascinated by her charm. There was for him *no* nicer woman in the entire world and he could not refrain from expressing his feelings to her. Over and over he repeated to her:

“Edi, my Baby, *how beautiful you are!* You are impressively pretty and charming and I feel totally bewitched by your beauty. *I love you so much!*”, or:

“Little You, when I met you, although you were not the type of woman I normally prefer, I thought that you were very attractive and liked you nearly instantaneously, but I could in no way imagine that I would become so fond of you. Now, I admit it frankly and beg you to believe it, I happen to love you with all my heart, my mind, my strength! In all my life, I *never* loved a woman as much as I love you!” (He had started calling her ‘Little You’ or ‘my Baby’ when they were in intimate and love conversation, because of her young age in respect of his own). She invariably answered him:

“Darling, I love you too. I belong to you and *am yours*, with all my heart!”

They kissed each other passionately and Ricardo used to hold her lips – upturned and clung to his – into his own and stay still like this, as though their lips were glued together, and he inhaled gluttonously the air expired by her through her mouth as if it were for him a real

breath of life. He used in fact to say to her:

“I am now breathing your breath, so *you give me life.*”

Ricardo adored doing this and enjoyed it utterly. Then they usually started rubbing their pubes slowly and gently against each other. Most of the time, they had to stop after a while because Ricardo had to go back to the office quickly, but Edima, feeling all wet, would let him notice the state she was in, by taking his hand and bringing it under her skirt to touch her panties. Sometimes, however, they got so excited that Ricardo yelled:

“Edi, I want you!”

And she promptly and peremptorily answered, with her eyes shining at him:

“*Take me!*”

In these cases, he quickly lowered his trousers and underwear, then slipped her panties off her and entered her. Despite the lack of time for preliminaries, their love-making in these situations was always very intense, joyful and completely satisfying. They knew very well in fact that it was not a mere physical act obeying a simple sexual impulse. It was, in idealistic purity, the practical materialisation of a true deep feeling which they had for each other.

Sensual passion was certainly involved and played in fact a determinant role, but was never, not even for a second, detached from the urgent need and desire to manifest to one another the immense reciprocal affection on which their relationship was based. Of course, when this happened and in spite of all the haste, Ricardo would be late at the office afterwards and was therefore compelled to make up the lost time by staying there till late in the evening.

Whenever, enraptured by the heavenly sensations he was feeling every time he made love to her, Ricardo said to Edima:

“Edi, my Baby, you are fantastic: when I am inside you, I do not exist anymore, I am melting in you and become part of you. Your skill in making love and in giving a man pleasure and sweet sensations is really unique!”, she used to answer:

“Ricardo, darling, *you* taught me.”

And when, at the apex of pleasure, he used to exclaim:

“Oh, Little You, my love, you are going to kill me!”, she constantly rejoined:

“It is *you* who kill me!”

They were so much in love with one another that everything appeared unreal and as though in a fairy tale. When having sex, they

felt as if they were no longer two distinct persons, but had mingled their flesh in just one single body, with one common brain, two hearts beating in unison and doubled limbs entrapping each other in delightful, tight embraces. Their love was so great and sincere and they were so keen on giving each other intense pleasure and love emotions that their union was really perfect and utterly happy. Edima had in any case become so familiar to him that Ricardo could not even see a difference in the colour of their respective skins: no racial diversity existed between them any more; to his eyes they were absolutely identical and, for him, she was no more black, but white just like himself (or was it *he* who had become as black as her?) or some other colour. Whatever, both of them were exactly the same colour.

One day, after they had made love, Edima said openly to Ricardo:

“Darling, I was told and was therefore frankly convinced that white men are all depraved people who like to piss and shit on their partners’ bodies. But I am very happy to see that you are not like that!”

Ricardo just laughed and answered:

“No, my sweetheart, I am certainly not that sort of man. But I must frankly say that I doubt very much whether what you have been told is true and corresponds to reality.”

He did not want to go further on this subject and let it drop, without inquiring how and from whom she had learnt of such horrid and perverted habits.

Once Edima wanted Ricardo to accompany her to her house, to see it. Ricardo dared not drive to that remote district of Lagos, because it was very complicated to get there, so he asked Sunday to take them to the place. The house where Edima had lived up to her meeting with Ricardo was a one-storey building. It was rather isolated, the very last in an unpaved road full of big holes – real ravines – and there were meadows at its sides and back. There was a little porch in front of it and a central entrance door opening onto a long corridor with rooms on both sides. They were all rented and occupied. All sorts of shoes, mainly sandals, were laid at the threshold of the various doors in a rather disorderly way, as most Nigerians, especially the lower classes, remain barefoot inside their houses.

Edima’s room was on the left-hand side, towards the end of the corridor. Although at ground level, it was well lit. It was neat and in

order. There was a medium-size bed, a chair, a refrigerator, one shelf with dresses hung underneath and baggage and bags closely packed on top. On the floor lay a linoleum covering and a big fan was hanging from the centre of the ceiling. On a wall hung a big poster with the image of Jesus Christ offering His Sacred Heart in His hand. Certainly, it did not indicate luxurious life, but it was not miserable at all. But Edima told Ricardo that she intended to move to another district, because that house was really too far from any business centre of Lagos and from good and well-supplied shopping centres. Ricardo and Edima sat on the bed chattering while she changed her shoes, then they went back to Victoria Island.

Since the 'Maison de France', the French cultural centre, was not too far from Ricardo's residence, Edima decided to enrol on a course for beginners to learn French. Although French pronunciation was rather difficult for her and, despite her efforts – and his too, in teaching her – her accent in fact remained almost execrable, she started attending the courses with great zeal and with help from Ricardo carried out her homework with diligence.

She met there, as course-mates, a very wealthy girl who lived in Apapa whose name was Beatrice and also Ibimina Williams who was an acquaintance of Ricardo, the daughter of a Bonny Chief and an employee of Nigeria LNG Limited and who, having lived a long time in England, spoke really perfect – and polished – English. After the courses were over, Beatrice went many times to Ricardo's house, invited by Edima, but never wanted to accept Ricardo's invitation to have lunch with them and waited quietly until they had finished eating, sitting in one of the armchairs of the drawing side of the room and listening to some music. Edima explained to Ricardo that Beatrice was dieting, since she deemed she was too fat. Ricardo agreed that she really needed it. Beatrice told Ricardo and Edima that she was eager to enter Abuja University.

Ricardo accompanied Edima several times to pay Beatrice a visit in her house in Apapa, but he always remained outside Beatrice's compound while waiting for her. Edima however only attended the French course for some months; then she gave up because she found learning that language rather difficult and above all quite useless for her, as she did not plan to go to a Francophone country.

Ricardo talked very freely with Edima about every topic, in particular about the political and social situation in Nigeria which

she discussed intelligently with him, showing a very remarkable competence and skill, not getting angry with him at all, even when he was rather hard towards her country. In general, Ricardo had discovered that it was easy to talk to women in Nigeria. They were very open-minded and willingly accepted discussion and even criticism without feeling offended and getting angry. They usually understood immediately that Ricardo talked of all this as a real friend, not as a racist or with a sense of superiority.

This was generally much more difficult with men, who always suspected that the critics of their country were guided by a colonialist attitude which, in their opinion, always lurks in the background of any white man. So they did not like this sort of conversation. Only with Dr. Thomas C. Amu did Ricardo have very friendly and open discussions regarding Nigeria. But this was a man educated in Europe – he had graduated in Chemistry in Sweden – who was sufficiently open-minded to catch the differences still existing between his country and Europe. Dr. Amu was an employee of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, seconded to Nigeria LNG Limited, the Company set up for liquefying gas, which was building up a plant for such a purpose on Bonny Island in Rivers State.

Ricardo used to say that any change of the political system, even if democracy were introduced again in the country, would not bring a real change in use and wont largely established among the Nigerian populace, especially among ‘big guns’. Similarly the handing over of political power to a civilian government would not change the habitual corruption and carelessness for the real needs of the population. In order to really and drastically change the situation, a revolution would be necessary - and could be successful. He said this in spite of his own beliefs, since he was by personal political inclination a conservative and even a reactionary man. Ricardo admired Edima’s vivid intelligence very much and had an immense esteem for her. He therefore used to say to her:

“Edi, since you are so bright and clever, you must take the situation into your hands and create in your future shop a sort of focal point attended by the intelligentsia of the country, where you can discuss where your land is going and make plans for solving its problems. Then you must organise and lead the revolution. But be careful, because a revolution is, by its nature, always very bloody and if you don’t stop it at the right time it can take over and you don’t

know where it will lead. Once you have swept away all the corrupt politicians and rotten private individuals you must be able to disengage from it and disarm your followers and supporters too and hold free and democratic elections. Run for the presidency, but as a liberal. I certainly will not still be in this country at that time, but if you are elected president of Nigeria, I will be extremely happy to be able to proclaim in Europe or wherever I am: 'I know this lady; she is a fantastic and intelligent woman and she will be a very good president'."

They always laughed together at all these reveries and considered them half as senseless, speculative dreams, and for the other half – why not? – as concrete possibilities for the future.

Edima considered Ricardo a very elegant man and liked the clothes he usually wore. She admired the care he always put into wearing perfectly matching shirts and ties, as well as socks and shoes to go with the suit he had selected to wear on any specific day. He never wore the same suit or tie for two consecutive days and changed his shirt, underwear and socks every day. In the morning she was usually asleep, but very often when he was going back to the office in the afternoon she used to stare at him from the threshold and to say to him, full of admiration:

"Darling, you are terribly smart, a real cutie!"

This happened especially when he was all dressed in green or brown, because these colours suited him perfectly and he took particular pride in having a matching 'shade on shade' for the various parts of his clothing.

Ricardo was puzzled to see how certain concepts and customs typical of social living in white men's civilisations, which had developed over thousands of years, had already caught on and penetrated into the black African culture. For instance, one day Edima, coming back from her business at the market, told Ricardo that she had happened to sit next to a very handsome Nigerian man in the minibus, one of the so-called 'danfo buses'. She had started talking with him and the conversation they got into was interesting and pleasant.

"Until I looked at his hands. At that moment I stopped finding this man attractive." she said. Ricardo asked:

"Why?"

"Because his nails were dirty and black."

Ricardo tried to challenge her:

“Well, I understand that it is nicer to have clean nails, but I don’t think it is a good reason to refuse to talk to a man – who in your own words is handsome and attractive for his intelligence – simply because he has dirty nails.”

Edima exclaimed upset:

“But, darling, *you never have dirty nails!*”

“But my job is a cerebral one. I do not make things with my hands. That man might be a manual worker, you do not know, and might have just finished his work.”

She replied:

“It does not matter. When by chance you do some manual work and, as a consequence, you soil your nails, you don’t stay for a long time or go around like that, you immediately rush to the bathroom to clean them!”

With this, for her, the discussion was closed and despite his endeavours to convince her, Edima did not accept any further objection by him on the subject.

On the contrary, when Ricardo tried to teach Edima to behave like he himself had been taught to since his childhood, he got a straight refusal from her. For instance he wanted to induce her to hold cutlery politely from the tip of its handle with only some fingers while eating and not to grasp it with the entire hand for its whole length, but she would not agree to follow his example. Every time he objected to her behaviour, she reacted commenting:

“Darling, you want to make a lady out of me, but you forget that I am a simple country woman. I shall never become a lady. Besides, I don’t even want to!”

He felt sorry and frustrated by her refusal to improve her manners, because he sincerely loved her and wanted her to be cordially and joyfully accepted everywhere by anybody – even by a king or a prince, or by European aristocrats, should she have the chance of meeting such disdainful people – without risking criticism of her behaviour. Sometimes it was done by her as a joke to make him get angry about how she behaved. He indeed wanted her, when she was thirsty and her glass was empty, to ask gently: ‘Please, may I have some water?’, instead of simply indicating the bottle with her forefinger. He insisted on the word ‘please’, that for him was one of those *magic* words which enable fair and smooth co-existence among people. He used to enumerate these courtesy words, like: please,

thank you, sorry, excuse-me, may I, I would like, do you mind if, good morning, good evening, good night, good-bye. But she resisted all this and continued to indicate the bottle silently with her finger, just to make a fool of him. And he kept feigning not to understand what she wanted, so that a short challenge was sparked off every time between them about which of them could hold on longer to their respective positions.

One Friday evening, coming back from the office, Ricardo found a girl in the living room, conversing with Edima. She introduced the new comer:

“Darling, this is Pearl, my sister, who has come to spend some days in Lagos during University holidays.”

Pearl was a nice young woman, as tall as Edima, but a bit slimmer than her; she had a small round face, with a nicely patterned small mouth showing European-type thin lips. Ricardo was pleased to get acquainted with a relative of Edima and invited her for dinner (though Edima had practically already done that) then arranged for the second room to be prepared for her. The following day, while Ricardo went for his usual Saturday shopping, the two sisters went out to the market. Edima did not go to her hash and remained all the time with Pearl. In the afternoon, when Ricardo went to the Club to play golf, they talked at length – they had so many things to tell to each other! – and watched TV.

On Sunday, Ricardo suggested taking them both to the beach and he decided to go to Eleko Beach, on the way to Epe. Pearl borrowed a bathing suit from Edima, since she did not have one with her. They did not take any shelter this time and remained on the open beach. Ricardo took a lot of photographs of the two girls, especially of Pearl who was eager to have pictures of herself at the seaside. She amused herself a lot jumping and splashing joyfully into the foamy surf like a baby in its bath, both by herself and with Edima. She laughed aloud, like a child, while Edima remained more serious all the time. They had brought from home some pasta, the remains of the food eaten the previous day; they ate this, as well as some *suya* and ‘boli’ (fried plantains, a variety of big bananas, normally only eaten cooked, either fried or baked), bought on the spot.

Pearl remained with them up to Tuesday; then she went and spent the rest of her stay in Lagos in Edima’s house. Before going, she

made Ricardo promise that he would send her the pictures he had snapped of her when they had been developed.

Although Edima was an excellent dancer and liked music and dancing very much, Ricardo only took her twice to a dance hall. One evening he took her to the 'City Tavern' in Awolowo Road, nearly in front of Falomo Shopping Centre in Ikoyi. There was an enormous crowd – nearly all Africans, very few white people – dancing and drinking and they danced till very late in the night. Edima showed all her skill and he enjoyed a lot not only dancing with her, but also simply watching her. She was very attractive and sexy and her moves were particularly fine. Ricardo had to acknowledge that Edima had rhythm in her blood.

The second time they went to dance was a Saturday, nearly one year later, and she was absolutely determined to go to a place she knew well, called 'The Pub', in Marine Road in Apapa. Ricardo had never been there and did not even know of its existence or where it was. He only knew where Marine Road was because some friends of his living in that street had often invited him to dinners at their residence. On their way to The Pub they met a patrol of policemen who understood immediately where Ricardo and Edima were driving to and requested a tip from them, since "We are watching out," they said "for your security."

Ricardo gave them 50 Naira and they let them pass very cheerfully. When they arrived at The Pub it was still quite early, so Ricardo was able to find a safer and more comfortable parking place inside its compound. A nice girl, though short in stature, whom Ricardo did not recognise immediately, came quickly towards Edima and greeted her very warmly, embracing and kissing her as if they were very good friends who had not seen one another for a long time. Then, turning towards Ricardo, she asked:

"How is Beatrice?"

He thought that she was mentioning Edima's fellow-student at the French courses, so he answered:

"She's well."

He wondered however why she had put this question to him, rather than to Edima, which would have been more appropriate. Only later on did he realise that that small girl was Antonia, the girl who had been to his own house about two years before together with that Beatrice Amenobi, Jean-Claude's friend, and whom he had not seen since. So it was this Beatrice that Antonia wanted to have

news of, not of Edima's French school friend. It was funny that this same girl also knew Edima who lived in a totally different and far-distant part of Lagos, but by the time it came to Ricardo's mind who she was it was too late to talk to her, as she had already gone away.

At The Pub, there were many Europeans and Americans – men and women – all drinking heavily at the counter. None of them was dancing; the dance floor was occupied only by Africans. Ricardo, on the contrary, drank little – as usual – and danced much, but only with Edima, although many of the African girls who were there without a man tried to approach him, especially when he was left alone by Edima while she was talking to other friends she had met there. He invariably said to the girls who wanted to start a conversation with him:

“I am sorry, but I am not alone, I am here with my girlfriend.”

Edima asked Ricardo for money to offer drink and food to some of her friends – as they served a fish soup and also cheese in that pub. She was, as always, very generous, but Ricardo was a bit annoyed that he had to pay for people he didn't know and didn't even meet. Anyhow he enjoyed the night and the place very much, especially because Edima was so splendid and exciting when dancing. They spent practically the whole night there. In fact, since it was dangerous to move late in the night through Lagos Island between Apapa and Victoria Island – because of the possible presence of bandits and vagabonds who used to assault motorists on the connecting road – they had to remain there till dawn and only got back home at around 5 a.m.

After having given birth to two political parties, on 12th June 1993 General Babangida called a general election for the handing over of power, as he had long since proclaimed, to a civilian government. Although the turnout of voters at the polls was rather low, it appeared that the winner of the election was Chief Moshood K.O. Abiola, a very rich businessman coming from the Yoruba ethnic group, who was openly said to have gained the favours of voters through his conspicuous wealth.

Babangida did not like this result – indeed he did not have faith in Chief Abiola as a potential good President for Nigeria – and therefore he simply ignored it, declared the result invalid and said that it would have to be repeated. The voting figures were never officially revealed. However, as he had already embarked on his own

resignation from office, which he had promised to the country, Babangida decided to form an interim Government and conferred the task of Interim President on a man of his choice, Chief Ernest Adegunle Shonekan.

This Government was composed nearly entirely of civilians, as the only military man was the Minister for Defence, General Sani Abacha, the same man who, as spokesman with the rank of Colonel, had given the announcement of the military putsch against Shagari on the Nigerian radio, almost ten years before, during the night of the 31st December 1983, as well as later, of Babangida's seizure of power in 1985.

At the office one day a young man who used to pay him a visit from time to time handed Ricardo the business card of a young lady who wanted absolutely to make his acquaintance. It had a hand-written message giving her telephone number and asking him to call her. He phoned her and gave her an appointment for the following day.

When she came to his office, he learnt that she was from Port Harcourt, but had been living in Lagos for a very long time. Her name was Jill Elebeche and she was 27. Despite her visible and very marked make-up, she could undoubtedly be considered an attractive young woman. As a matter of fact, although a very dark black, she had fine features, rather more European than typically African. As she herself immediately told Ricardo, she had until recently been the girlfriend of the Military Attaché to a European Embassy, but since his departure from Nigeria for good she had not had any other man. She was indeed looking for one – a white man, of course – and that's why, when she heard about Ricardo from her friend, the young man who often went to his office, she had hoped he might be interested in her. Ricardo laughed at this sincere admission of the real purpose of her visit, but apologising said that even though it was kind and undoubtedly tempting he could not accept her proposition as he already had a Nigerian girlfriend he loved very much. Jill then asked him to find a boyfriend for her, but he answered that it was not easy to get the right one she certainly deserved to have. She anyhow wanted them to become good friends and started giving him a ring from time to time and paying him visits at the office.

One day Edima had invited her friend Rose for lunch. During the meal, Ricardo joked with the two girls and at one point said that

Edima was a witch who had totally bewitched him. Although he saw that Edima was launching black and belligerent looks at him he did not care very much as the three of them were seated so far apart from each other (at the large table in the dining corner of the living room) that she could not reach him and poke him in the ribs, as she would have liked to do. He went on to add that sometimes she had behaved in a strange way, exercising all sorts of witchcraft on him, until he had succumbed to her power and become her prey.

Obviously, saying this was simply a joke for him and a way of keeping the two girls' attention on him. But, after lunch, when Rose asked to be allowed to go to the bathroom, Edima seized Ricardo by his arm and told him off:

"Darling, are you crazy, saying all those things about me? I know that you simply wanted to pull my leg and keep us jolly with your jokes, but Rose firmly believes in witches and witchcraft and now she will be convinced that I really am a witch!"

Ricardo was astonished and could not believe that a girl, apparently modern, educated and absolutely rational, could really think that Edima was a witch whose witchcraft had to be feared. But Edima was very upset and confirmed that Rose would certainly believe it. It is true actually that in Nigeria superstition and belief in all sorts of witches, sorcerers, wizards and witchcraft, as well as in bad spirits and spells is very strong. That is why Nigerians often go around carrying charms to protect them against evil deeds.

Ricardo got further confirmation of Nigerians' strong belief in supernatural and evil forces from another episode. One of the lady guards at NAOC Ltd., Mrs. Rhonda Ademola, had one leg which was almost entirely white, of a pink complexion even clearer than that of white people, as if her skin had been severely scalded. If this was not what had happened, then it was an evident case of lack of melanin, but when Ricardo, noticing her strange condition, spoke to her about it, she told him that somebody some years before had put a bad spell on her, a 'juju'. She was so absolutely convinced of this, that there was no way of getting her to accept that what had happened to her was a totally physical phenomenon. 'Juju', which usually indicates a fetish or an evil spirit (but can also be used in the positive sense, as protection against acts of sorcery and evil influences) is a very well known word and, when evoked, easily scares people.

Everybody is aware of the fact that rural electrification and road

planning, for instance, have to take care of the existence of sacred woods or places where it is believed that Jujus live and which cannot therefore be crossed by electrical lines and roads. So, very often these lines and roads go straight for hundreds of kilometres, then suddenly turn around a forest or a single tree or a tomb. They only start going straight again in the same direction as the former stretch when they have completed the detour of the places where the Juju is supposed to reside.

Nigeria is also full of secret societies and strange hidden cults, some of which still allow human sacrifices and ritual murders. Sometimes you read in the press that such deeds have occurred, especially on University campuses. And, in spite of all the public blame and accusation printed in the press, these secret rites continue to take place rather frequently. On another occasion, while talking of traditional customs, especially of the Efik people, Edima told Ricardo that in her motherland, when there are raids by 'Masqueraders' in the villages, everybody has to stay locked in their houses, because those who are caught outside can be killed by the men wearing masks. No police intervention or investigation would even take place, because it would not get anywhere.

Mrs. Ademola however remained so enchanted that Ricardo had shown a personal interest in her features that she definitely wanted him to go and see her fourth daughter, Marietta, soon after her delivery. He therefore went to her house just a fortnight after the birth of the baby girl bringing a pair of cotton baby shoes as a small gift for her. Ricardo was astonished to see what a pale complexion black babies have at their birth: this child, whose skin had just started getting brownish, still had hands and feet lighter than his own! He mocked Rhonda about this, saying, though smiling openly:

"Oh, Rhonda, Rhonda, you must have been misbehaving and made love with a white man, not with your husband!"

This obviously friendly joke made all the people who were present burst into loud, amused laughter.

In 1993 a very agreeable cultural entertainment had started to take place regularly in the newly built Agip Hall at Muson Centre, in Onikan. Throughout the months from September to June, the various foreign Embassies and some local industries competed in organising classical music concerts, by inviting to Lagos performers and artists from their respective countries. Up till then it had only

been possible to have some concerts sporadically, either at the Metropolitan Club in Kofo Abayomi Street in Victoria Island or in some Embassies, such as the Italian one, which possessed a suitable, very large reception hall.

The new series of concerts usually took place on Fridays and Saturdays. Ricardo who loved classical music was really happy to have the chance of attending them and regularly used to go to the Friday concert, having dedicated Saturday evenings to playing his beloved golf. Even if it was not possible to have the most world-famous musicians there, Lagosians could still enjoy the presence and the performance of some very good artistes, of international level, capable of giving absolutely fabulous concerts.

Among the best, there was a Bulgarian cello player, number two in his country, two or three excellent pianists from Poland – one of them, in particular, was very inspired and played Chopin's works tremendously well with enthralling intensity and romanticism, which threw all the onlookers into raptures – a French violinist, a Cuban pianist who was a real virtuoso and played Lecuona's musical compositions – obviously! – in an admirable, imaginative way.

A very funny act was performed by a Russian duo, pianist and violinist, who played a Mozart sonata: while the pianist tried to stick to the late-baroque music of the composer, the violinist played the piece in a romantic way which Ricardo would never have thought possible with Mozart's music! When, during the interval, in the foyer, he expressed his doubts and concern to a British gentleman he knew, Mr. Michael Browning, another lover of classical music, this connoisseur agreed totally with him. The majority of the audience at the concerts were foreigners, mostly Europeans and some North and South Americans, but Ricardo noticed with joy that there were also some Nigerians attending those sessions quite regularly. The auditorium became full of mainly Nigerian spectators when, from time to time, there were only local performers, among whom there were some expatriates as well as many Nigerians. One of the best of the latter was Chief C. Mbanefo, who was a very good piano player and who became the chairman of the Music Society after the resignation of Mr. Akintola Williams. These two men had worked hard to foster Nigerian interest in classical music and it was really moving to see that now not only adults, but also some young people had started learning to play musical instruments totally foreign to the African tradition.

When Ricardo went to concerts Edima normally did not go with him, because she was not particularly interested in classical music – in spite of his desperate efforts to let her get acquainted with and like it. She preferred to do something else or stay at home watching TV. Once however Ricardo took her with him: it was mainly a concert of music for wind instruments performed by a British ensemble, playing especially pieces by Telemann and Händel that were easy to listen to and understand, and which he thought she might enjoy. She did indeed, but nevertheless this remained her only time at a concert with him.

At the concert, they met his friends Julio Jeanot, Enrique Bertoso and, during the interval, in the foyer, also Pablo Campos with his wife Margarita and Ricardo introduced all of them to Edima. It was the first time that Ricardo had appeared publicly with an African woman and they were therefore rather surprised to see him with such a nice, young indigenous girl. She wore a simple black dress – short and tight – with a high glossy belt of the same colour. She was really very elegant and a clever light make-up had made her face prettier than ever and very attractive. Ricardo knew very well that his friends were severe judges of his partner's charms and was therefore particularly proud to be accompanied by such a lovely girl.

By mid November 1993, General Abacha came to a decision that gave free vent to his ambition of being the leader of the country and declared that Chief Shonekan (who was a wise and honest, but weak man) and his Civilian Government had been deposed in favour of a Ruling Council. This was practically a new Military Government, and reserved the office of Head of State for the General. His tenure of this office was marked by a tough and constant concern about his own survival against any possible political opposition, which was therefore heavily hit and repressed, and also by a total lack of interest in the reality of the country or worry about its needs. All his actions appeared to be dictated by a greedy eagerness to maintain his power and become the absolute, undisputed ruler of Nigeria. Although during his tenure of power Nigeria earned an average of 10 billion US dollars per annum by the sale of oil, the country did not experience any visible benefit from such an amount of money, since the main part of it probably ended up in private pockets. There was huge importation of fuel to cope with the very frequent and extremely long fuel shortages – which lasted several *straight months* -

with enormous queuing lasting days at those filling stations likely to have fuel and motorists spending nights waiting at them to get refuelled.

Rumours had it that this was merely due to the fact that fuel importation was a very remunerative business directly controlled by some 'big guns' of the regime. This was therefore more interesting by far and preferable for those individual big guns than taking serious care to rehabilitate the four refineries existing in Nigeria. Abacha's hunger for power and effrontery towards his country became absolutely evident and attained its peak in 1998 when, in approving the formation of five political parties to contest elections for the so-called 'transition to democracy', he made all of them put his name as the first candidate in their list for the presidency.

At the end of the first year that Edima spent with Ricardo, she told him that she had found a convenient residence in Ikeja to move into, in order to be nearer to the centre of the town. It was a room on the first floor of a two-storey house, provided with electricity and running water. The price for three years' rent (in Lagos, rents were normally arranged for three years and payment of the agreed fee had to be made entirely in advance) was 53,000 Naira. She asked Ricardo to give her the necessary money, but he told her he did not have this amount. It was the truth, but she thought he said it because he did not want to spend that amount of money on her. She started weeping and shouting a bit and exclaimed with evident disappointment and also some rage:

"Darling, after all I am your girlfriend, you *must* help me!"

Ricardo answered:

"I would if I could, but I really cannot!"

She was not totally convinced, but she trusted him and her resentment against him quickly and totally vanished when he added:

"Let's do it like this: you ask your uncle, Mr. Ekpo, to lend you the money and I shall reimburse him by monthly instalments."

She agreed to do that. Ricardo wrote a letter to her uncle, explaining the situation and promising to reimburse him quickly, between December and May. Edima's uncle accepted and lent her the requested money. She could therefore sign the tenancy contract with the landlord and make all the arrangements necessary to move into her new house. She also wanted Ricardo to go and see it. Since it was in the middle of a district still unknown to him, he asked

Sunday to drive the car to the place.

Afterwards he drove alone to Edima's new house many times to take her there or to meet her brother and sister. It was situated in Atinuke Olabamiji Street, not far from the two main traffic arteries of the district, Allen Avenue and Awolowo Way. The house seemed to Ricardo to be slightly misshapen and the external access staircase to the first floor all crooked, narrow and a bit dangerous, but the room rented by Edima was larger than the one she had in her old place, neat, sufficiently in order and bright. Ricardo gave her some advice on how to fit it out and to equip it, also how to achieve a higher level of security against burglars.

When Ricardo went home for the second Christmas after meeting Edima, she gave him a long list of items she would like him to bring her from Spain on his return to Lagos. In particular, although warning him that these were only *a few* of all the items she needed, she mentioned: a camera, a Walkman radio, a wrist-watch, a necklace, bangles, perfume, running shorts and top, a soft and elastic sports bra, panties, T-shirts, blouses/shirts and a sports cap.

Ricardo bought some of the items, such as the necklace, the bangles and the perfume duty-free in the plane and the others at home, in Valladolid. He found a very nice latest fashion cotton blouse in a boutique on the Plaza Mayor in Madrid (where he subsequently bought a fashionable blouse for Edima every Christmas) and a couple of silk blouses at the Chinese stand in the market. He felt very embarrassed when he had to buy bras and panties at the general stores. Edima was delighted to receive all the items she had requested on his return to Lagos. As a matter of fact, she had not expected Ricardo to comply fully with her desires, and laughed a lot when he told her about his embarrassment at buying intimate feminine garments.

Edima's mother came to Lagos one day, because she wanted to go to the church that Edima frequented, where she hoped to be healed. She suffered acute pain in her legs, probably caused by arteriosclerosis or nephritis. The church frequented by Edima pertained to the Apostolic Church, a Christian Church with African beliefs and variations superimposed on it, and where the reverend pastor running it was renowned as a miraculous healer.

Ricardo was a dedicated, practising Catholic, and though living in sin because of Edima's presence in his life he never failed to go to church every Sunday. He would have liked to draw Edima into the

Roman Catholic Church in which he himself worshipped; however, the opportunity to do so unfortunately never occurred – to his great sorrow and regret, as he would have really loved to be able to pray to God together with her. This was partly because she was not with him most Sunday mornings when he used to go to Mass, as a result of the previous day's hash.

Edima's mother was staying at Edima's house, but, obviously, Ricardo invited her for lunch together with Edima's older sister, Comfort. He asked his steward to prepare a very special and appetising meal for the occasion, in order to please her as much as possible. Ricardo suspected that she might not be very happy that her daughter was living with him, since she knew that their relationship would not have a happy end, such as marriage; but she did not make any mention of this fact and was very kind and nice towards him. She only observed that Edima was not as fat as she would have liked her to be (in accordance with popular Nigerian tastes and preferences) and Ricardo objected to her statement declaring that he, on the contrary, personally found Edima simply marvellous and perfect as she was. Although Edima and her mother spent one and a half days and a full night at the church in prayer, Edima's mother – as Ricardo feared in his heart was most probable – unfortunately did not get the miraculous healing she sought.

On the following Sunday, Ricardo took Edima and her mother to Eleko Beach, because the latter was eager to see the ocean in the vicinity of Lagos. She had been born in a fishermen's village on the Cross River State coast and spent her youth there up to her marriage, which had taken place when she was still very young, about 16. On the way to the beach, when Edima got out of the car at the village near Jakande Estate to buy roasted maize-cobs and other foodstuff, Edima's mother expressed to Ricardo her desire to get a colour TV set, since she did not have one of her own. That evening, however, when Ricardo told Edima of her mother's wish, she told him not to worry about it.

One evening Ricardo and Edima were talking while sitting on the sofa in Ricardo's living room when they noticed a couple of big ants climbing up onto the sofa itself. They raised one of the cushions to catch them and made an incredible discovery: under the three large cushions of the sofa there was an entire formicary, full of big ants running scared everywhere, carrying white eggs and food for them! They immediately called the steward to come and help to take the

sofa out in the garden and clean it properly, after throwing all that stuff away.

When the cleaning of the sofa was finished and they were all about to go inside again, Ricardo noticed some movements at the entrance gate and one of the watchmen came to inform him that there was a young lady wishing to talk to him. He could see from far who the girl was: it was Beatrice Amenobi who had suddenly reappeared! But Ricardo instructed the watchman to tell her that he could not receive her – since another lady was now living with him – and to send her away. Beatrice never went to his house again.

One day Ricardo was requested by a girl he knew, Nike Adeyemi, to buy tickets for the theatre. They were playing Oscar Wilde's 'The Importance of Being Earnest' and the actors were all Nigerians. It was to be played in the Agip Hall at Muson Centre, normally reserved for concerts. He gladly seized the opportunity to take Edima to see it. The play had already been running for several days when they went to see it, so the theatre was rather empty when they arrived. Surprisingly, there were no whites at all. Ricardo and Edima sat in the second row (no one sat in the first row), so they had a perfect view of the whole stage.

They enjoyed the play very much and Edima was really happy to have at last accepted, after some hesitation, Ricardo's suggestion of going to the theatre. Ricardo, in particular, liked the actor playing the role of Ernest's friend, Algernon, because he not only played with consummate skill – he must have been a professional actor, certainly not a mere amateur – but also spoke very good and clear English. At the end, there was uproarious applause. Ricardo wanted to stand up while clapping his hands in order to pay the actors – more visibly and warmly – a standing ovation for their good performance, but when he saw that nobody was doing it, he gave up this idea. But every time he reflected about the show, he repented not having done so, and thereby given a good example to the other spectators.

Ricardo was invited to two special ceremonies: the first was on the occasion of the conferment on Ms. Sena Anthony, a lawyer and legal general manager of the Nigerian National Petroleum Corporation, by the Oba (King) of Lagos, H.R.H. Adeyinka Oyekan II, of the Chieftaincy title 'Yeye Olofin (mother of the law)'. The ceremony or, as they called it, the 'turbanement' took place in the Oba's Palace in

Upper King Street on Lagos Island. The Oba, who wore a crown-like cap, was sitting on his throne, a sculptured wooden armchair, at the far end of an ugly modern hall, with his own son – Oba in another village in his own right and a member of the Lagos Council of Chiefs – seated in a lower armchair on his right.

He was dressed in an ample and sumptuous, though relatively simple dark-red agbada, not in full regalia. He wore just one necklace made of glossy enamel-red lozenge-shape coral beads as an ornament, plus bracelets of the same stuff on both his wrists. A rolled-up variegated multicoloured umbrella with a thick turquoise handle leaning against his knees, completed his apparel. Six or seven Chiefs were seated on sofas along the wall on the left-hand side of the hall, at the right side of the Oba, while guests and invitees were seated on chairs among and behind a line of pillars on the right side of the hall.

The Oba revealed himself to be a kind and amiable person. Seeing that Ricardo did not dare go near the throne to take some pictures, lest he annoy him, and was therefore snapping photos from rather a long distance away, he beckoned to him with an ample and noble gesture of his hand to come forward and take some close-up shots of the very picturesque scene. A couple of rams who showed their firm intention to enter the hall by a secondary entrance had to be severely and harshly sent away.

Sena was deeply moved and happy to receive such high honour in recognition of her skill and her participation in important legal events. Her young daughter, who was 13, served as maid of honour together with other two young girls, all dressed in identical traditional attire. Although Sena was not a beautiful woman, her daughter, Mopé, was really delightful and Ricardo took several pictures of her, together with some of the ceremony as a whole. One of them, which he gave to Sena as a souvenir, was particularly fine.

Sena, dressed in a long white and yellow robe with a big lace shawl, had to kneel in front of the Oba. With the assistance of a godmother, who functioned as master of ceremonies and was herself a Chieftainess in the Lagos Council, she performed the 'yinrinka', the women's homage to the Oba, which consists in kneeling with elbows leaning on the floor and then rolling the body to the ground alternatively onto one side and then the other. She then had to eat cola-nuts with him – which were afterwards also distributed to the

other attendees and invitees – and finally receive the special hat that was the insignia of the conferred status, on which her newly granted title ‘YEYE OLOFIN’ was embroidered in large capital letters with gold thread. There was also a long welcoming speech in Yoruba (‘Too long and redundant’ thought Ricardo, though not understanding it) by a bishop dressed in red garments, whom Ricardo thought must be Anglican or Baptist, which called for a special blessing from Heaven on the new member of the Lagos Council of Chiefs, as well as (at least, according to Ricardo’s guess) on the Oba and the Council themselves.

Afterwards, refreshments were served in the courtyard of the Oba’s Palace, while a band of seven to eight drummers were, as always on the occasion of indigenous ceremonies, noisily and incessantly playing their ‘talking drums’ in search of ‘rewards’ from the attending guests. Sena Anthony was a Catholic and Ricardo often met her and her daughter – and they filled him with joy every time he saw them – on Sundays at the evening Mass in the Holy Assumption Church at Falomo, in Ikoyi (which he used to attend when he missed, for one reason or another, the morning Mass at the Apostolic Nunciature) where she was a member of the patronage group.

The other ceremony Ricardo attended was the marriage of John Aylwood, an Englishman, to a young Nigerian lady. John was the general manager of BPM Co., the international consortium set up by Technip of France, Kellogg of USA, Snamprogetti of Italy and JGC of Japan to engineer and construct, on behalf of Nigeria LNG Limited, the gas liquefaction plant on Bonny Island in Rivers State. He was already around 50, while the bride was only 28. They had lived for some time together, then they realised that their love merited to be formally cemented and was strong enough to enable them to form a family. They got married in the Roman Catholic Church of the Holy Assumption, in a simple but moving ceremony, amicably and merrily attended by a huge crowd formed of Africans, Europeans and some work colleagues of other nationalities. Ricardo had made John’s acquaintance at a reception, and had met the two of them together several times while shopping at the supermarket. As he was so fond of Edima – an African girl like the bride – Ricardo was strongly drawn to attending this wedding and felt himself particularly close to this mixed couple who had been able to

overcome all racial taboos and differences in education and social class to unite their lives definitively.

In the meantime, on 12th June 1994, the anniversary of the annulled elections, Chief Abiola had decided to proclaim himself the President of the Republic of Nigeria. But his action met strong opposition from Gen. Sani Abacha, the Head of State, and from the Ruling Council, and was received with disdain. The untimely and imprudent unilateral act was considered an open challenge to the power of the Government and made him decidedly hated by the 'big guns' of the totalitarian regime. It also lacked the support of a strong public determination in favour of implementing the election results.

For these reasons he was immediately arrested on the accusation of high treason and imprisoned. Although subsequently public opinion gathered that he had fallen sick, he was never released from prison after his arrest and, as narrated later on, would die in jail.

6.

Another sound, tender friendship

At the end of the second year of his life with Edima, Ricardo was invited to the 'End of the Year Party' of a Company where Nigel Green worked - an Englishman who was a very good friend of his. While there, having a chat with Nigel and his colleagues, he noticed at a certain moment a tall young lady, particularly attractive, who had something very strange in her beautiful face, apart from a rather marked black line of make-up around her eyes to outline them well. Because of the distance between them and because of the crowd, which was hiding her now and then from his view, he could not work out immediately what the strange feature was in her face that made her so intriguing. Ricardo felt he wanted to make the acquaintance of the charming lady, but feared that she was the wife or the girlfriend of one of the attendees. He therefore started giving furtive glances in her direction to detect whether any of the men present in the hall was showing particular care and attention to her, but was unable to pick out specially affectionate behaviour towards her by any of them.

Just before the managing director of the Company prepared himself to start the traditional speech, the young lady moved alone along the hall to come nearer to the point where this would take place. Ricardo, who at that moment was drinking alone, moved quickly across the hall towards her and stopped at her side, then said:

"And now you will see what a long and boring, pompous speech he is going to bestow on us!"

She laughed softly and, smiling at him, asked:

"Are you sure?"

"Oh yes, it is always like that!" he answered steadily.

Luckily, however, the speech, although a bit rhetorical and emphatic, was not too long. So, the unknown lady commented cheerfully:

“You see, you misjudged the person. He did not deliver a long speech.”

“We were very lucky indeed.”

Then Ricardo introduced himself and explained the reason for his stay in Nigeria and she said:

“My name is Lynda Chuba Ikpeazu. I am here because I was invited by my friend Ijeoma Okedi, who is an employee of the Company working in the Public Relations Department.”

Ricardo gave a sigh of relief and thought: ‘Well, I’m lucky! She is not here with a man, she is alone.’

Meanwhile Lynda unexpectedly, but to his obvious enjoyment, added:

“I would like to pay you a visit at your office, if you don’t mind.”

Ricardo fervently replied:

“Of course, not. On the contrary, I shall be pleased to receive your visit!”

And he handed her his business card. Now Ricardo had eventually detected what the strange feature in her face was: she had light-coloured eyes, of a very pale hazel brown, which lit up all her face! Up to that moment Ricardo had only once seen an African with light-coloured eyes, a watchman of NAOC Ltd. office – who incredibly had pale greyish-blue eyes – and whenever he entered that office could not prevent himself from staring at him, with a big smile of goodwill (which, to tell the truth, was reciprocal). Otherwise, he had only seen Africans with very dark eyes; he therefore felt particularly attracted to this lady.

Lynda went to his office two days later. She dealt with the sale of chemicals for drilling and as Ricardo was the mud specialist in Nigeria of the world-renowned Santa Fe she was therefore particularly eager to introduce the Company she sponsored and its products to him. Ricardo listened carefully to her introduction to these products and assured her that they would take her application into consideration. Once the official commercial purpose of her visit was finished they chatted amiably at length about their respective activities and hobbies. He learnt that she was interested in amateur theatre and had a rehearsal every Thursday evening in a special hall at the After-Hours Club in Eleke Crescent. She put forward a proposition to him:

“If you are interested and would like to spend some time relaxing completely, then come and watch my group’s rehearsal.”

Ricardo answered that he would obviously like to see her performance, but it was very difficult for him to be there at the time they were having their sessions. In fact, he never did manage subsequently to go to the After-Hours Club at the right time to attend Lynda and her colleagues’ theatre meetings.

Lynda was 30 and was single, because – she said – she had not yet met the right man to have a serious relationship with. Ten years before, when she was 20, Lynda had been elected Miss Nigeria and afterwards also Miss Africa and, as such, she had also participated in the contest for the selection of Miss Universe, which had taken place in the Far East. At 30, when Ricardo met her, she was still a very beautiful woman, tall and slim. Even a bit too slim for Nigerian standards and tastes: in that country, indeed, she was considered a skinny woman.

Usually Edima spent Sundays at her home in Ikeja after the Saturday hash. So near the beginning of the following year Ricardo invited Lynda to go with him to the beach and she accepted. She phoned him later on, however, asking him whether he could arrange to have another man with them, as she would take a girlfriend with her. Thus on Sunday morning she arrived at Ricardo’s residence with a girl nearly as tall as herself but plump and rather plain. Ricardo had not succeeded in finding any of his friends free, so he had to take care of the two young ladies alone. He decided to go to Eleko Beach. When they arrived there, the two girls wanted to buy biscuits and fruit; then they looked for a shelter. They found one in the central part of the beach, where the shelters were run by a fully-established organisation – not those belonging to individual owners, where he usually went with Edima in order to get a cheaper day-rent price – but Ricardo did not want to appear mean so accepted the choice willingly.

As usual, a lot of vendors were passing in front of them with the most varied and often unusual goods to sell, mainly carried on their heads. Ricardo had once bought a medium-size carved wooden chest at this beach which its maker, Alhaji Tinkin – a small, lean man – carried on his head with apparent ease, whilst Ricardo had difficulty lifting it at all because of its weight. The two girls looked particularly at sunglasses and goggles – wishing to wear models designed in accordance with the latest fashion – as well as at sports

caps and CDs. All sorts of CDs, especially American ones, were sold by the beach vendors at a very attractive and cheap price, sometimes only 400 Naira, whilst their cost in Lagos shops ranged from 1,000 to 2,000 Naira.

They laid out all their belongings, bags, sweaters, objects bought from vendors, as well as biscuits and fruit on the small table rented with the shelter and the deckchairs. They had already been there a couple of hours, and Ricardo had also bathed in the ocean, when suddenly a young girl wearing a baseball cap with a large visor slightly concealing her face sneaked into the shelter, stole the packet of biscuits and ran away. To Ricardo's astonishment, it was Edima! He ran quickly after her, trying to seize her, but stumbling against his own sandals which were not properly slipped onto his feet, fell flat on the sand. Edima laughed aloud till she cried, but stopped and returned the packet of biscuits she had seized; then she asked Ricardo:

"What are you doing here?"

"I am here with friends, as you can see. But you, on the contrary, what are *you* doing here? You were supposed to be in Ikeja!"

"I also came here with some of *my* friends."

Edima went away with a couple of girls and was out of sight for the rest of the time they remained at the beach. But Edima's apparition had been a shock that Ricardo did not like much, and it made him upset and rather nervous for the rest of the day: he had indeed been caught by her red-handed while sneaking off with other girls! When they went back home, the two girls wanted to leave immediately with Lynda's car to Apapa where they both lived. After a while Edima too arrived at Ricardo's flat; there was no clash or arguing between them – as Ricardo had been afraid of – but, on the contrary, they cordially laughed a lot about the totally unexpected and sudden meeting they had had, as well as about Edima's joke and Ricardo's fall on the beach.

Ricardo invited Lynda for lunch on another Sunday, about a month later. As usual, the steward was on leave for the festivity and Ricardo was therefore alone. Benoît had however prepared food the previous day, so Ricardo only had to warm it up to offer Lynda a dignified meal. They were about to eat an ice cream as dessert when Edima suddenly arrived. He saw her coming through the large windows of the living room, so by the time she rang the bell and he opened the

door to her it was no longer a surprise. It was much earlier than the time she usually came back to his house on Sunday evenings, but the reason for this was that she intended to change her dress to go to a party organised by a friend of hers in Ikeja.

Ricardo had to make the best of a bad situation and played the role of the perfect gentleman with nothing to hide: he quietly introduced Lynda to Edima, then asked the latter whether she wanted to join them and eat an ice cream as well. Edima accepted, but did not remain with them at the dining table and went to the small TV parlour with her ice cream. The mess however had been made: on one hand, Lynda, seeing another girl freely entering and circulating in his house as though she were its master, invented an excuse to go away immediately, although promising to come back later on; and Edima, on the other hand, who was simply furious and in tears.

Ricardo went to the parlour and tried to make a joke about his having lunch with another girl during Edima's absence, but was not funny enough and did not succeed in calming her at all. She was angry and really sorrowful. As a matter of fact, she felt frustrated and betrayed. She loved Ricardo, but he had shown that he did not deserve the trust and faith she had in him. Moreover, she did not like – for a reason known only to her – Lynda and bellowed at Ricardo:

“She is not the right girl *for you!* You'd be silly to have an affair *with her!*”

But she did not want to explain clearly the exact meaning of her words, so Ricardo thought that – despite her skill in understanding situations and ability in noticing the hidden sides of people – she was simply pushed to say it by jealousy.

Edima then asked Ricardo to take her to Ikeja and he agreed willingly, as he felt guilty and wanted to be forgiven. On the journey to Ikeja, Edima, after still quarrelling a bit, remained silent for the rest of the ride, pulling a long sulky face. When they arrived at the place where the party had been organised, she went out of the car without kissing him or thanking him for the transport or even simply bidding him good-bye and, not saying a single word, she slammed the door of the car violently and stepped quickly away, without a backward glance. He tried to ask:

“When will you come back home?”

But she departed sullenly, without answering. Ricardo drove away,

but all the way back along Ikorodu Road was thinking: "This time, I have really done it! She is so angry, that she does not want me any more. I surely have lost her. Oh my Lord, please, make her come back to me! I cannot live without her; she is too precious to my heart. I am terribly fond of her! Though I have to admit that Lynda, in absolute aesthetic terms, is more beautiful and I like her for sure, I certainly don't mind about her so much. Nobody is so important as Edima for me and I can't live without her!" He could have boxed his own ears and felt very guilty for the frivolity of his behaviour and for having thus destroyed the wonderful relationship existing between them. He was indeed very sad and dismayed for what had happened and, most of all, for having caused her grief.

He thought about all the nice moments he had experienced with her, like for instance that Saturday morning when after making love he had suddenly pretended to strangle her, making a truculent face, and saying with the most grating and hoarse voice he could find:

"You, damn Nigger, you bewitched me! You stole my heart! Now, give me back my heart or I'll kill you!"

And Edima had gaily laughed and laughed. She laughed with that enchanting laugh of hers that made even the gloomiest day become bright and sunny. Or about that other time when he had asked her:

"Edi, if I were a bachelor, would you marry me?"

And she had fervently answered, looking steadfastly at him with the sweetest and most amorous blink in her beautiful eyes:

"Yes, darling, I would enthusiastically, of course: I would be honoured and pleased, with all my heart! You know very well that I don't want to marry an African man. They are too rude. All many look and long for is to fuck their woman, caring only for their own pleasure, totally disregarding hers and what she feels intimately. I want to marry a white man. And, for me, you really are the ideal man, *my true hero!* Moreover, I would like so much to have children from you."

Ricardo had replied:

"I too would like to have children from you. I'm indeed very curious to see what can come out of us. Oh no, I'd rather say that I am pretty sure that we two together would make very beautiful, really magnificent children! And I must also say that, having only boys and no daughter, I would really like to get a baby girl from you." Then he had added, managing only partially, with a big effort, to remain serious: "But having a child from me may be a serious

problem for you. Because of the nose.”

Edima had been astounded and alarmed:

“Because of the nose? What do you mean, exactly?”

Ricardo had continued on the same hilarious tone:

“Yes, you see, Edi, you black people all have smashed noses and you in particular, my beloved, you have that little tilted-up potato-like nose. But if our child were to take its main features from me, then he or she might have a long, big nose and there would be no place for it in your womb. Moreover, it would be poking and hurting you from inside, while trying to make more space for itself in you or even to carry out an escape.”

His gag had hit the target. Edima had burst into a loud, happy laughter at the image, that he had so brightly depicted, of a small long nose piercing a hole in her belly in order to peep out and sniff the smell of the world outside. But Ricardo had not yet finished his joke – he was evidently enjoying one of his rare moments of real humour and great, delightful hilarity – and had gone on with fun, further jeering at her:

“Furthermore, we could also have half-black, half-white children. Which part of them would you like to have of black complexion: the upper or the lower?”

Again, Edima had burst into her contagious laughter, rolling on the bed until tearful, imagining two or three bi-coloured children, crawling about her, with a sharp, neat horizontal line of demarcation (or maybe vertical: and differently coloured left and right side?): half black, half white. Ricardo had invented all sorts of ridiculous (though, at the same time, tender) nonsense to keep her merry, and to declare to her how fully dedicated and sincere his love was for her! Although it was expressed through a joke, she had been made aware and certain that he was even happy and willing to envisage a common future as parents and was, in case she should conceive a child from him, heartily ready to appreciate and welcome the arrival of a baby in their life. It was only a joke, for sure, but Ricardo’s declaration of his willingness to have children with her, in spite of the impossibility of marrying her, was nice and fair and had clearly shown the strength of the attachment he had developed towards her. In her heart, Edima had appreciated it very much. Moreover, he had added one further jest:

“Besides, you too are already partly black, partly white.”

He was evidently referring to the four tiny, nearly imperceptible

white dots she had (two on her back, between her shoulders, one on her left gluteus and one on the front of her right thigh), where lack of melanin had left her skin uncoloured, that is without the chocolate colour characterising all her body. And she had explained to him how much a lot of girls in Nigeria want to look like the whites and in order to achieve this target they use all sorts of creams and they sharply rub their skin and even make use of bleach.

“They use bleach on themselves?” he had exclaimed “Don’t they know that they can completely spoil their skin and it can even be poisonous for their health?” Then, he had added: “Please, Edi, never do it. I very warmly urge you, remain as you are. Black-skinned women are so nice and *your* colour is absolutely wonderful! You are *my* chocolate, the very best and most delicious chocolate I could wish for – better by far than those which can be bought at the supermarket, and you know well enough what a glutton I am for chocolate! – and I like you so much like that! Do not change, please!”

As a matter of fact, Ricardo admired and liked African women’s complexion very much – in all its variegated nuances of brown and black; he was absolutely fond of Edima’s chocolate complexion and always considered that the contrast between the dark colour of her nude body and the ivory or cream of his bed-sheets on which she lay was extremely attractive and exciting. He liked this contrast extremely, as it enhanced her adamantine loveliness and made her body show up, magnificent and luxurious.

However, the thought of these lovely moments of joy did not console him at all, now that they were far away and lost to him. On the contrary, he felt only more sorrow wringing his heart. He therefore started planning how to behave and what to do in order to try to get her back. Unfortunately, that clearly appeared to be a very difficult, if not totally impossible, enterprise.

The following evening after dinner (a sad dinner, indeed, alone, without Edima’s presence to make it jolly) Ricardo was watching a videocassette, trying not to think about the tragedy of the sad conclusion of his romance with Edima, when the doorbell rang. It rang just as Edima used to ring it: one short ring, immediately followed by a longer one. Ricardo thought: “This stupid watchman has learnt to do it like Edima, damn him! What the hell is he behaving like that for?” and after putting the video-player on pause he went angrily to the door.

He opened it and looked outside and, immediately, his hatred vanished like a soap bubble. For to his sincere surprise – and, as under the effect of a spell, he could hardly believe his eyes – it was not the watchman; it was Edima! She stood there still, immobile like an apparition, half hidden behind the doorframe, shyly, with a sweet, inquisitive and slightly apprehensive countenance. She was finely dressed, wearing black close-fitting trousers and a short jacket in the same fabric and colour over a gaily-coloured sweater, and had a nicely-done light make-up on her face. She was extremely beautiful and charming. Ricardo's heart gave a leap and started beating hard and quick: he had rarely felt such an immense joy as at seeing her there that moment! *His* Edima was back - how great!

“Edi, Little You, my love!”

“Darling!”

He pulled her inside and she flung herself, utterly happy, into his protective arms. Ricardo locked the door and held her tight in his arms and kissed her passionately on her mouth and on her eyes and all over her face, without being able to stop. He felt he was literally crazy about this woman and was not ashamed to admit that he was all head over heels for his beloved Edima. Edima, who obviously longed with all her heart to be welcomed like that, but had feared very much it would not happen, felt completely overwhelmed by the warmth and enthusiasm of his cherished embrace and had the impression that she would willingly melt in it. She had found *her* Ricardo again and *her* Ricardo was giving her an open and indisputable demonstration of his love! In return, she had thrown her arms around his neck, keeping him as tightly as she could, and was full of love for him.

In fact she had come back because she loved him immensely and felt clearly in her heart that her life could only be with him. They both felt themselves sinking – and getting lost forever – in waves of affection and tenderness for one another. Their tiff of the previous day was totally forgotten. They did not even mention it, as though nothing had happened and it was simply non-existent. The normality of passionate love and deep, tender affection was re-established; then everything was all right! Now, they had found each other again and life, for both, could start flowing again in their veins, brought by blood to every cell of their bodies in love.

Edima felt – as always when she was twined, while standing, tight in his warm embrace and kissed by him in that tender and exciting

way – as though her legs were becoming extremely weak and no longer able to sustain her weight and she was about to swoon. She exclaimed, breathless:

“Darling, my legs, ... my legs!”

Ricardo quickly switched off all lights, stopped the video-player and turned off the TV, then led her to the bedroom and locked the door. They hurried to bed. That night, they made love with particular intensity and joy. They found an extraordinary pleasure in doing it and were extremely delighted to remark how great, sincere and gratifying their mutual devotion was.

As always when he could enjoy her splendid body, while he was in her, Ricardo felt special sensations and an immense happiness enveloping him and pervading every single cell of his own body. Though it may seem absurd and unbelievable, as a man already over fifty and therefore with great experience of making love to a woman, in his whole life he had never felt anything like it, anything so ravishing and celestial. It seemed nearly unreal, so enthralling was it. But it was, on the contrary, very real and physical. He was totally unable to explain why (was it due to her youth, or to the particular features of her body, which adapted and matched so well with his own?) nor could he exactly define their entity and nature; he only knew that such sensations were really extraordinary, never experienced before, unique. He felt urgently the need to utter to Edima these marvellous feelings and share with her his happiness and joy:

“Edi, my love, to be in you is so enjoyable and thrilling, absolutely unique. I never felt that before in my life: your enchanting and extremely desirable body is able to transmit to me such wonderful sensations and emotions that I would like to be allowed to remain inside you all my life and never get out of you. May God forgive me, but it really represents for me the Garden of Eden! As a matter of fact, when I am in you, I feel as though I were no more on earth, but in Paradise!”

Edima, on her side, had found in him the long-awaited and ever dreamt-of ideal man, capable of engendering in her the most tender thoughts and love sentiments; she therefore replied softly, as in a trance:

“Ricardo, darling, believe me, I tell you the truth: until I got *you* in me, I had never understood that to make love to a man and have that man inside me could be so exciting and give me such high

pleasure, as well as the desire to have this man deep in me forever! I want you to remain inside me as long as you like! You – and you alone – are in fact really the man I have been dreaming about and seeking for all my life.”

They then slept peacefully, tightly embraced in each other’s arms, fully aware of the evident, great harmony and sincere, serene love reigning between them.

Waking up in the morning, Ricardo saw that Edima’s eyes were open; surprisingly, she was already awake. He took her in his arms and, holding her tight to him, asked:

“Edi, are you mine?”

She assented feverishly, clinging to him as close as possible:

“Yes, darling, I am yours. Totally yours, forever!”

He then said to her:

“Edi, adorable Little You, I love you with all my heart and, believe me, I shall never – *never*, do you understand? – cease loving you, whatever might happen! It is in fact not for sex, but for love – a great, tender love – that I wanted you to be my girlfriend. And there is something else I want to tell you that you must not forget: I never – I repeat it, *never* – *fucked* you! I mean that I never had the idea of screwing, when having sex with you, trust me. On the contrary, I know for certain that I always *made true and sincere love* to you, but do not ask me whether I made love to you because I love you or I love you because I made genuine love to you, I am totally unable to distinguish that. I presume however that the first reason is the right one: I made love to you because I love you!”

She smiled captivated and said:

“Ricardo, darling, I feel the same as you.”

Two of Edima’s aunts were living in Lagos: one lived in Apapa, in Payne Crescent, and the other in Surulere, off Western Avenue, near Tejuosho Market. Ricardo accompanied Edima many times to their residences, but he always waited for her in the car and never entered in their houses. Sometimes, Edima, after more or less long chats with them, came out with some of her female cousins and in these cases she introduced Ricardo to them.

Ricardo knew those districts of Lagos well, because he had been there many times in the past. As mentioned before he had been doing his vegetable and fruit shopping for a while in the central market of Apapa and had been several times to Tejuosho Market, because some friends had told him that they had seen on sale there

the same sort of fine Chinese china dishes which he had bought from his predecessor when he took over from him in the Company position. He liked those dishes very much, as their edges were not flat, but sculpted in the form of birds' wings and the centre nicely painted with fine greyish-blue flowers; but the set was not complete, practically reduced to a half, probably because of breakages over the years. He was therefore hopeful of replacing the lost part of it with identical pieces. However, despite numerous ventures to Tejuosho Market, his desire remained vain, and he never found what he was looking for.

When Edima's brother, Ndubuisi, became unemployed following the closure of the Dutch company he was working for, Ricardo recommended him to a friend who was the managing director of a competing Company, which had won important contracts for laying gas pipelines. These works would take place both in the vicinity of Lagos and in Rivers State. Ndubuisi had actually worked as a welder's mate and could therefore be employed as such by Ricardo's friend's Company, as there was no opening at all for him in Ricardo's Company itself.

When the 'Ogoni crisis' erupted, Ricardo speculatively agreed with the Nigerian authorities' firm belief that the arrest and judgement of the nine members of the 'Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People' was an internal matter for Nigeria and that foreign countries did not have the right to interfere. These nine men were accused of having directly killed or induced their compatriots to assassinate four Ogoni Chiefs, guilty – in their eyes – of being too moderate against the Federal Government. The Ogoni are a small, but proud ethnic group, comprising around 500,000 individuals, located to the northwest of Port Harcourt. They had long been at loggerheads with the Federal Government on the issue of benefits and royalties resulting from the extraction of oil from reservoirs situated in their territory, which, in their opinion, ought to be paid to the Ogoni community. By acts of sabotage and threats of even worse gestures, they had also compelled Shell Petroleum Development Company of Nigeria – the regular holder of the leases for the extraction of oil in the area – to stop completely all production in their territory.

The Ogoni Movement had an extremist wing whose adepts – including the well renowned writer and playwright Ken Saro-Wiwa, also an activist for human rights – had launched the slogan that

moderate Ogoni deserved death and their houses should be burnt down. Four of their Chiefs who were openly in favour of a tight, but reasonably fair negotiation with Government were subsequently found murdered. Police investigations resulted in the arrest of Mr. Saro-Wiwa and the other eight members of the Movement, who were all submitted to a severe and tough trial and - having been found guilty, in one way or the other (either directly or as instigators), of the said assassination – condemned to death. Ricardo hoped however with all his might that after the capital sentence had been pronounced the Head of State would pardon them, in order not to incur world condemnation.

Ricardo felt personal concern for the good reputation of Nigeria, a country he loved and where he had been living happily for a long time, and he could not face everybody in Europe and in the rest of the so-called civilised nations talking very badly about it. But the dictatorial regime and its Head wanted to demonstrate their independence from external judgement and esteem and, possibly, consolidate their absolute power internally, by showing tough and intransigent behaviour; they therefore turned a totally deaf ear to all appeals for clemency. They were in fact too rigid and not far-sighted enough to understand that an act of clemency would have turned the opinion of other countries of the world in their favour.

So, unfortunately, there was no pardon and in spite of the unanimous chorus of vibrant protests from all over the world the nine men – including also Saro-Wiwa, despite his well-established renown abroad – had to suffer the sentence and were executed by hanging. Because of this action Nigeria was in fact heavily disqualified in the eyes of the whole world and its exclusion from the Commonwealth was even contemplated (and voted).

Legacy organised a visit to Ibadan, the second most-populous town of Nigeria and one which, unlike many European capitals, already counted about 1 million inhabitants by the end of 19th century. Although Ricardo had been to Ibadan – though only spending one night there and not seeing much of the town – he wanted to take part in the trip, expecting to be enchanted, as always, by John Godwin's fascinating explanations as guide. Ricardo proposed to Edima that she come on the visit with him and she accepted. She asked to be allowed to take Ndubuisi with them also, since he was jobless, so that he could spend a different and more interesting

Sunday rather than just sleep or wander in the streets of Ikeja or other districts of Lagos.

A medium-sized bus was at the disposal of the attendees for the journey, leaving early from John Godwin's studio in Boyle Street, Onikan (which was also the official seat of Legacy) while John was to drive his Land Rover with drinks and food for everybody. At the tollgate place on the Lagos Ibadan expressway, Edima bought three or four packages of thin slices of fried bananas. Ricardo had not yet eaten them and found them good and tasty.

In Ibadan they gathered with some members of the local branch of Legacy and had a picnic lunch at the house of a Nigerian architect, a friend of John Godwin. This astonishing modern construction presented so many surprising expedients, structural artifices and architectonic cunning that it fully demonstrated the high basic professional value, the sound and sophisticated technical skill, the great inventiveness and also the artistic vein of the architect who conceived and designed it. It even included a large open-air theatre. Ricardo was fascinated – as always when he had to admire some specific product of human genius and creativity – and liked to explore all around it to discover the various tricks used in the building. On his tour of the house, he was taken round by the daughter of its creator. She was a beautiful and charming girl, and this second very positive factor, added to his cleverness, meant that Ricardo could not sing high enough praises of the man.

The guided tour of the town included a visit to the Mapo Hall, the old Oba's Palace, which appeared to be more fashionable by far than the new one, a modern building having no particular charm or style. Then there was the visit to the Anglican Mission at Kudety Church, which was the first two-storeyed building built in Ibadan – and perhaps in all Nigeria – circa 1852 by Rev. Hinderer, the first CMS (Church Missionary Society) missionary in Ibadan. There was a ladder in it, to reach the first floor, which could be pulled up for security reasons and during the night.

Last came the visit to the Bower Tower, built as the highest viewing point on the top of a hill, and to the University, where the origins of the work of art were explained. There were also works there by Ricardo's most loved and admired contemporary Nigerian wood carver, L. Fakeye. It was already late when they finally got back to Lagos, and they were rather tired; but they had enjoyed the trip very much. Also Ndubuisi was glad to have had this opportunity

and thanked Ricardo warmly for having allowed him to make this excursion to a town he did not know.

In April, Edima had travelled to Calabar to spend two to three weeks there with her mother. Ricardo was invited to the farewell party of Antonio Mendoza who was about to leave Nigeria for good, having been posted elsewhere, and was very sorry that Edima was not around, as he did not want to go alone to that party. He wanted to have with him an indigenous girl, because Antonio was a regular lady-killer, a sort of Don Juan, always accompanied by very beautiful black women, and Ricardo wanted very much to show that not only Antonio, but he too was able to excite interest in nice African women.

The Maison de France had organised its usual, annual music festival for the evening before Antonio's party. Two bands, in particular, were invited to perform: the band of Femi Kuti, the son of the exceptional, popular and world-renowned Nigerian artiste Fela Anikulapo Kuti, and that of Lágbájá, the masked artiste who always played his instruments and sang wearing a mask on his face (the denomination 'Lágbájá' meaning 'anyone'). As admission was free, there were always a lot of people, mainly, obviously, Nigerian youths attending those festivals, not only those studying French. Ricardo decided to go because, in particular, he wanted to listen to Lágbájá's performance, since he had been told that the music of this artiste was very good.

When he arrived there, he met his friend Bode Thomas at the entrance, who told him she had to take something to a girlfriend's house – who lived in a small crossroad off Kingsway Road – and asked him to accompany her. He accepted and went with her. Bode was a beautiful, very tall girl (even taller than Ricardo), who worked as pharmacist at Falomo Shopping Centre. She was a good friend of Ricardo, but nothing more, because – although she certainly liked him much – she did not want to have an affair with a married man. Walking beside her on the sidewalk (one of the very few existing in Ikoyi and Victoria Island) and sometimes, when passing other people, remaining behind her, Ricardo noticed what a nice bottom Bode had and how nicely she moved it, swinging it softly from one side to the other when walking. She was wearing close-fitting, very light white trousers leaving the curves of her hips undisguised, and her shape was therefore fully evident. He could not restrain himself

from telling her. She laughed, though feeling flattered (no woman can resist a nice compliment concerning the appearance of a part of her body), and said:

“Oh Ricardo, you never fail to observe a lady very keenly!”

After they met Bode’s friend, they went back to the Maison de France. The music was already on and it was quite difficult to go near the two stages where the two bands were performing, because of the crowd pressing around them. They sat outside the pavilion, where shortly afterwards two young men, Bode’s friends, joined them. Bode introduced them to Ricardo. One of them was a doctor, working in a clinic in the vicinity of Obalende. After a while two girls came as well and, since there were no more free chairs, one of them sat on the young doctor’s knees. Ricardo felt a pang of jealousy towards this man, because the girl, nearly as tall as him, but very slim, was certainly attractive.

Ricardo asked Bode whether she would like to go with him to the party the following day, but she said she could not because she had already accepted another engagement. Ricardo was very annoyed to be compelled to go alone to Antonio’s party, but unluckily had to give up the hope of attending it with a female Nigerian partner. He finally succeeded in approaching the pavilion where Lágbájá was performing, but lost Bode in the crowd. The music was really excellent and fascinating and Ricardo listened to it enthralled for a good while. When he went back to the place where they had been sitting, to check whether Bode by chance was there, only the two other girls were sitting there, immersed in a deep, intimate chitchat.

He sat thoughtfully near them and after a short while had a sudden idea about how to solve his problem of taking a young woman with him to Antonio’s the following evening; so he asked casually:

“Any of you want to come with me to a party tomorrow night?”

The girl who had been sitting on her friend’s knees, the nicer of the two – the one Ricardo covertly hoped to be able to take with him – turned her head cheerfully towards him and answered:

“I adore parties. I would like to come, if you want me.”

Ricardo obviously said he was delighted to take her with him and made the appropriate arrangements to collect her. Her name was Catherine Izu and she lived in Gerald Road, at the Northeast end of Ikoyi Island. Ricardo stated that he would go to her house the following day and pick her up at 9.00 p.m. He was happy to have

been so lucky that – although Catherine unlike Bode was not so lovely as to outclass without doubt Antonio’s beautiful girlfriends – he could anyhow now attend the party with a sufficiently pretty Nigerian girl to make the desired impression on Antonio.

The following evening, as agreed, Ricardo fetched Catherine very punctually and took her to Antonio’s house. There were various people he knew and he exchanged news with them. There were also many good things to eat. Dancing started and Ricardo danced with Catherine at length. At a certain moment, something happened which pleasantly surprised them: Femi Kuti, the artiste they had seen performing the previous evening at the Maison de France, arrived to attend the party. He was actually one of Antonio’s Nigerian friends. Catherine was extremely excited:

“Ricardo, did you see, it is Femi!”

Since there were a couple of friends of his with a camera, Ricardo gently asked Femi whether he would condescend to pose together with Catherine for a photograph. He consented, so Ricardo’s friend snapped a picture of Catherine together with Femi. She was delighted to have had such luck. Unfortunately however Catherine never did get her nice picture with Femi Kuti because, afterwards, Ricardo was unable to get in touch again with these friends. When they went back to the dance and at a certain moment, while dancing, Ricardo was taken peremptorily by an impulse to kiss her on her lips, she returned his kiss with ardour and gratitude. Ricardo said:

“You are pretty.”

And she answered:

“Thank you. You too are handsome and, moreover, you are a kind man. I like you.”

Then Catherine told Ricardo that she was only 21 and was from the Edo ethnic group, whose place of origin is the old kingdom of Benin. Because she was an orphan, she was living with an aunt of hers, married to a Toyota car dealer. Ricardo, in return, frankly told her that he had a girlfriend, whose name was Grace, who at that moment was spending some days with her mother in Cross River State. She looked a bit upset that he was already living with a Nigerian girl, since she felt attracted to him – it was actually her first acquaintance with a white man – and she had secretly started hoping that he might take *her* as his girlfriend.

When the party was over, Ricardo took Catherine home. At the gate of the compound where she lived, before getting out of the car,

she asked him to give her his telephone number so she could ring him up. She was eager to keep in touch with him, in spite of Grace's presence in his life, and wanted him to promise that he would not drop her brutally, disappearing forever totally unmindful of her. Ricardo promised her that he would behave as a good friend and gave her his office and home telephone numbers. She kissed him with tender thoughtfulness and went away.

In June 1996, one of Chief Abiola's numerous wives, Kudirat, the most courageous and belligerent among them, who had long and publicly fought against General Abacha and the Ruling Council for the liberation of her husband, was shot dead by armed men in the streets of Lagos in broad daylight, not far from her house. The Press and much of the population were convinced that the killers were Government agents. The papers published that the news of her death was not reported to her husband, whose health – he suffered from serious heart disease – had perceptibly deteriorated in prison.

Catherine often called Ricardo at the office and they also regularly met from time to time in the evening, especially after he played golf or when he had to go out for some party, spending twenty to forty minutes together in amicable and pleasant conversation. She was delighted to be able to tell him everything about what she was doing, her thoughts, her doubts and her dreams, and cheerfully opened her heart to him, confiding all her feelings to him without reticence. She knew that she could freely do it and was extremely happy to find this attention and consideration in him. It had never been possible before, with other men. Ricardo always listened to her with interest and care and was happy to enjoy the open, total confidence of this young and lovely woman. He willingly gave her his advice and suggestions on the most diverse topics, also on intimate and personal matters, confident that she would then follow his good advice and put it into practice, without hesitation. Their mutual understanding and liking were therefore intense and perfect.

Catherine secretly regretted that Ricardo already had a girlfriend, since she would have liked very much to be in her place. However, thanks to the nice and cheerful mood established between them every time they met, their bond and their friendship grew closer and closer. As a consequence, they quickly became real bosom friends. They usually arranged by phone that Ricardo would drive to her

compound and once there ask the watchman or her brother Alfred to advise her that he had arrived. After a couple of times, the watchman started asking Ricardo a tip for the service, which Ricardo did not appreciate at all.

One evening, when he arrived at her compound, Catherine came out with a grim face nearly in tears and said that her uncle had prohibited her from going out and wanted absolutely to meet him. To her great joy and gratitude, Ricardo consented to see her uncle and was therefore introduced into the house. It was a nice-looking house, neat and well furnished. Catherine's uncle was affable and offered Ricardo a glass of wine – as he himself was drinking – but he gently refused and preferred to have a coke. Catherine's uncle wanted to know how they had made each others' acquaintance and Ricardo explained to him how they had met at the music festival organised by the Maison de France. Catherine's uncle said further that he had often to travel to Benin City, for his business, and wanted to know Catherine's friendships, because he felt responsible for her behaviour and education. Catherine had actually completed her secondary school, but had not gone on to University because they did not want to pay for further studies for her. He was happy to see that Ricardo was a trustworthy man and a real gentleman. He bade Ricardo farewell warmly when the latter left.

Catherine anyhow complained about the life she was living – she had very little freedom, although having nothing to do – at her aunt's house and sometime later decided to move to another aunt's, who lived in Waring Road. From there, later on, she moved to a cousin's in Ruxton Road, until she was taken into the house of a third aunt who however lived in a very distant district of Lagos, at the far end of Ipaja, where she was warmly welcomed. Her house was poorer than that of Catherine's first aunt in Gerald Road, but Catherine could happily carry on there a peaceful and joyous life.

Ricardo had the opportunity later to meet this other aunt, as well as her daughters, Catherine's cousins, when he went there looking for Catherine, and to have long talks with them. Catherine's aunt was a very lovely and interesting woman, a teacher, who also wrote books of stories and fables for children. Ricardo liked her and was very pleased to have had the chance to get to know her and had the impression, from the behaviour of the whole family towards him, that he had been well accepted and they were happy to consider this white man as a good and close friend. Ricardo gave Catherine the

money necessary to pay for a three months integrated course on the use of computers, as a diploma in this discipline would help her to find a higher grade job.

In November, for Catherine's birthday, before she moved from her aunt's house in Gerald Road, Ricardo arranged to take her to dine at 'Al Basha', a Lebanese restaurant in Awolowo Road in Ikoyi. But at the last moment he did not deem it correct and fair to go out with another girl, though doing nothing in particular, just eating, while leaving Edima alone at home. He felt that he was betraying her, so he proposed that Edima go with them. He explained to Edima that Catherine was a friend to whom he had promised this special reward for her birthday. Edima accepted, so they drove to Catherine's house to fetch her. When Catherine came out of her compound, Ricardo introduced the two girls to each other and said that 'Grace' (as he introduced Edima) would be with them. Catherine, seeing that another girl – what is more, just Grace, whom she considered the victorious rival in conquering Ricardo's heart – was going to be at the restaurant with them, was seized by a fit of jealousy and did not want to go out with him any more. She took Ricardo aside and, angry and upset, shouted in his face:

"You said you would take *me* to the restaurant, *not* your girlfriend!"

Ricardo just had the time to hand her the birthday-gift he had bought for her, before she sneaked quickly into her gate and disappeared, nearly without thanking him. Since they were already out and Ricardo – knowing that he would not stay home for dinner – had granted his steward a free evening, Ricardo and Edima decided to go to the restaurant as planned, although without the person to be feasted. Since they did not often go to a restaurant, being alone like that was nearly a feast for them and they enjoyed the pizzas that they ate quite a lot.

At home, when they were back in their so-friendly bedroom, they made love. But Ricardo was obsessed, as on other occasions, by the idea that Edima might consider him a poor lover, not sufficiently good in bed to satisfy her high sensuality. He kept saying:

"Little You, you are a splendid woman, full of glamour, but also full of sexual impulses. And I understand that, to my greatest sorrow, I am not the right lover for you. I am not performing adequately or sufficiently well to give you all the pleasure that you deserve. I am sorry that, choosing me as your man and coming to live with me, you fell on the wrong person. You merit a better lover

than me. But, if you meet him, the right man, I mean, the one you can say in block letters: 'HE is the *RIGHT MAN* for me', please, let me know it in time, so that I can silently and quietly slip out of your life."

At these words Edima always felt sad that he could think she was only seeking for sexual satisfaction, and she used to calm his dismay affirming:

"Darling, sex is of *no* importance to me. I prefer by far *true* love and, in my opinion, true love is not linked to sexual performance. The two things act on different levels and sometimes they are even antagonists. Believe me, if I have to choose between a tender love like yours and a superbly satisfying sex, I am totally in favour of love. Moreover, it is absolutely *not true* that I don't get physical pleasure in making love to you. *I more than amply get it*, I assure you, and receive *a lot* from you anyhow! I frankly *adore* making love *to you* and whenever *you* penetrate me and *are inside* me *you* give me an enormous and incomparable pleasure. I truly love you, also for this pleasure that you gave me throughout these years, and my love for you is really immeasurable." Then, softening and making her tone, if possible, even more tender, she added in a whisper: "After all, Ricardo, my dear, in my eyes you are an extraordinary man. A really fantastic and unique one. To find a man who can bear comparison with you, I would have to meet an *ultra-exceptional one*. For this, I would need to be particularly lucky, since I am convinced that there are not so many men of this sort in the world! Only by meeting an extra-terrestrial man, a man from another planet, I could perhaps find in him characteristics comparable to yours!"

But Ricardo – although he was obviously happy to hear what she was saying to him – was not totally calmed and said emphatically:

"Edi, my beloved Baby, your love is in absolute terms the nicest and most delightful gift I have ever received from life and I adore you. You are undoubtedly my most precious treasure, but in these years that we spent together I have received far more from you than I have been able to give to you!" And he was sincerely convinced of what he had stated.

Edima however, wishing to encourage him, declared quietly:

"Darling, believe me, I'm really very happy to be living with you and since we started staying together my life has substantially changed and undoubtedly improved by far, being filled up with sweet tenderness, incomparable joy and intense intimate pleasure!"

For Edima's birthdays, Ricardo gave her nice presents: in particular, he once gave her, for her house in Ikeja, a dual standard 14" combi TV set, which included the video-recorder, and another time a stereo set similar to his own. Besides, he ordered Benoît to prepare a special meal and, obviously, a good birthday cake (but Edima, as most Nigerians, was not really fond of sweet food and could hardly appreciate it).

For Christmas, on the contrary, he used to buy in the particular boutique he had found on Plaza Mayor in Madrid some nice, latest fashion cotton or silk blouses, which made her very excited by the fineness of their fabric and the beauty of their design. He usually also added perfumes to that, such as the much appreciated 'Dune' toilet water by Christian Dior. Edima was very happy to get such important gifts, which fully demonstrated – by the care put in searching for them – the depth of his love for her.

On two or three occasions Ricardo experienced personally how strong Africans' belief is that for the whites every enterprise is possible, even the most difficult one, since in their opinion white people always know how to manage to carry it through to a happy conclusion. The most significant episode happened one Sunday, at Eleko Beach. As always he had let Edima choose which sector to look for a shelter in and to negotiate the price to pay for it. She was indeed – being a Nigerian and also by virtue of her experience at the market – far more able than him to get a good bargain.

While Edima was resting under the shelter, Ricardo went to the shoreline and looked at the big ocean wave, wishing strongly to dive and swim beyond it. He had done it many times in the past, but this time he had the impression that the surf was too rough and strong and he was afraid that if it swept him away nobody was there to give him any sort of help. Edima was certainly not a sufficiently good swimmer to come to his rescue, in case of need, and was too far away, under the shelter. He stood looking very perplexed at the waves for some time, and after a long wishful glance he decided to give up the foolish idea and withdrew back to the line of shelters.

Three young Nigerian men who were sitting on the top of the dune had been observing him with interest, and they understood he wanted to dive into the rough ocean. They felt disappointed when they saw that he was abandoning his goal, and asked him:

"We thought you were about to go into the ocean, and you gave us

the impression of being very keen to do it. Why are you giving up now?”

“Because the surf is rough.”

They went on encouraging him:

“It is not possible that you are scared of the wave. We can’t believe it: *you* look *totally capable* of managing it!”

At this point, Ricardo felt challenged: he could not let down people so convinced of his ability. He therefore turned around and went back to the surf. He waited just a bit for the most favourable moment, until the big wave had crashed down, then he rushed quickly into it and dived hastily under the following wave moving towards the shore. When he emerged on the surface, he was on the other side of the surf, floating in the open ocean. He gave a glance around him and did not see anybody else doing what he had just done. On the whole beach, among hundreds – if not thousands – of people, Ricardo was the only person floating outside the breakers. It has to be said however that Ricardo was one of the best swimmers to be seen on the beaches around Lagos.

He swam all four styles and, despite his age, was certainly unbeatable in the butterfly-stroke, while very few other swimmers could compete with him in the freestyle. He swam for a while parallel to the shoreline; then he returned straight to the shore. He was careful to follow the up-and-down rhythmic movement of the wave, and let himself be transported forward by it, floating vertically on top of the wave, but just behind its breaking crest, until, as it rolled over, it deposited him, standing, near to the shore. Then, running rapidly away from the whirling, foaming billows in order to avoid being overrun and carried to the bottom by the next breaking wave, he safely reached the shore. The three young men literally burst into a real ovation for him, standing up and applauding frenetically, and they exploded, shouting loudly a “Hurrah!” towards him. One of them said to Ricardo:

“Master, you saw, it was not difficult *for you*. we were absolutely sure that *you* would succeed!”

Astonishingly, in Nigeria, many Africans still address white men as ‘Master’, especially when they want to manifest a sort of respect, but Ricardo – being not racist at all and feeling a bit ashamed for them – always thought that this inheritance of colonisation was exaggerated and ought to finish. But obviously he felt proud to have tried, and succeeded, and not to have betrayed those Africans’ expectation that

a white man can always attain the target he is aiming for. Edima had not seen anything, because from her position under the shelter she could not see the ocean, as the top of the dune concealed it; she was therefore quite surprised when she saw him coming back with such a triumphant look. She wanted to know the reason for his pride. He told her what had happened and she – although frightened by his adventurous character and the potential danger he had run into – sincerely expressed her admiration for his performance.

On another occasion, he happened to catch Sunday, his driver, in a very fervent discussion with Benoît and Ayo, one of the gardeners. He asked the reason for their heated argument and was told that they were trying to decide whether to take a sick friend of theirs to a hospital or to a native healer, as they used to call the sort of witch-doctors using traditional herbal medicine to cure illnesses. Their choice was rather in favour of the native healer, but the problem was the cost. Ricardo was astonished to hear that these witchmen could ask for even more money than a regular doctor acting in a modern and well-equipped clinic or hospital and expressed his surprise, but Sunday confided:

“You see, sir, the fact is that a traditional healer can also take out of the ill person’s mouth all the snakes, snails and lizards that may be there inside their stomach, and a hospital doctor can’t do that!”

Ricardo replied:

“Snakes, snails and lizards in the stomach, eh? What are you talking about? Probably, these native healers are capable of hypnotising a sick person’s visitors and making them believe that they see things which do not exist but which they want people to believe in!”

But the astonishing answer Ricardo got left him without words:

“Sir, you are a *European* and *with you* it cannot work, but here in Africa *black magic exists* and is heavily powerful!”

Suddenly, Ricardo’s video-player started malfunctioning: one of the capstans was probably revolving too fast – more or less at the same speed as when rewinding the tape – and so the tape was pulled forward too fast. As a consequence, although the vision was still sufficiently good and acceptable, the audio was very distorted – emitting a lot of screeching, especially during music – and was practically unintelligible. Edima offered to take it to a repair shop at Obalende. The player was repaired and for a while it functioned

regularly, but after a few months it started showing the same problems again. Ricardo then had a strange, but apparently clever idea and placed the video-player vertically on one side. It worked: in that position the faulty capstan revolved at the correct speed and the tape was therefore wound at its standard pace. Very occasionally, probably with defective tapes, it started repeating the error, Ricardo would then insert a very good cassette he had, which contained the film 'Johnny Mnemonic' starring Keanu Reeves, which had a tape in perfect condition. He let this cassette run for few minutes and afterwards there would be no more problems. It evidently had the power to stabilise it – not the film, obviously, although it deals with the technological aspects of an hypothetical ultra-modern life, but the perfect condition of the tape – and the player would work perfectly again. A mystery of technology!

Some months later, Ricardo was advised by his mother Company that they were planning to send someone else to replace him in the position he had in Nigeria and recall him to Spain. He told Edima that he was probably bound to leave Nigeria soon for good. She was broken-hearted: they had lived together nearly five years and – although she knew well enough that this day had to arrive sooner or later – she felt she would not be able to separate from him. She desired that their lives, being so delightfully united, should still continue like that for a long time to come. Now, her wonderful world was collapsing! She therefore said to Ricardo:

“Darling, if you leave Nigeria, I'll leave too. I cannot live in Nigeria any longer without you!”

She immediately started making a lot of plans, researching in thousands of different ways how to leave her country and where to go.

At last, some months later, the great opportunity arose: a worldwide organic agricultural fair was to take place in Frankfurt, Germany, the annual 'Bio Fach '97 Messe und Ausstellung'. Nigeria, in particular Cross River State, decided to participate in the exhibition with a stand showing their products. Edima's stepbrother, the one working as superintendent at the Obudu Cattle Ranch, managed to propose Edima as the hostess for the Cross River's section of the stand. She had never dreamt of anything better and wanted to take part in that event at all costs. Although she did not know German, her stepbrother succeeded in getting her selected, partly by virtue of her

very fluent English. She submitted her application for a visa to the German Embassy.

However, being young and single, she met great resistance from the Embassy itself over granting her a visa. All European Embassies were very reluctant to issue visas to young Nigerian girls, fearing they would remain in Europe to enter prostitution and therefore increase the already very large number of foreign women practicing this ill-famed 'job' all over Europe. Ricardo had to intervene in her favour, by submitting to the German Embassy a letter supporting her and by giving her the money necessary to buy traveller's cheques so that the Embassy could see that she was able to afford the cost of living there. She went innumerable times to the German Embassy to plead her case.

At the very last moment, when she had already given up hope of success, the visa was finally granted and she could therefore complete her preparations for leaving. She was very excited. She had never left Nigeria before and this was to be her very first travel outside her homeland. She was also very sorry to leave Ricardo, because she knew for certain she would not see him for a long while. But she was determined, as a matter of fact, to seize that opportunity not only to visit a totally unknown continent, but, beyond that, to try to settle in the fabled Europe, so often spoken and dreamt of. In her heart she had already decided not to come back to Nigeria after the show was over, and to remain in Europe: it was too rare and long-awaited an opportunity to be allowed to slip away! She was however so concerned about leaving Ricardo that they delightfully – but with a hint of nostalgic sadness – made rapturous love every day for the three consecutive days preceding her departure.

On Friday afternoon, Edima asked Ricardo to send a fax to the German organisers of the fair, informing them about her arrival on Sunday evening and asking them to meet her at the airport, given that she did not know Frankfurt at all and could not speak German. There were however difficulties in connecting to the requested number and the fax only went through rather late in the evening. Because of the one hour difference between European summer time and Nigerian time, Ricardo was very afraid that office hours in Frankfurt might already have been over by the time the fax was transmitted there and told Edima frankly of his concern that maybe nobody would have read it before her arrival.

On the morning of the departure – it was a Sunday and Ricardo did

not have to go to the office and could later on take her to the airport – they made love at length with particular intensity and tenderness. Both before and after penetration, Ricardo tenderly caressed her at length with great care for her pleasure, letting her – as well as himself – attain little by little the right climax: his hands lingered on the beloved, well known curves of her splendid body, smoothly skimming her magnificent, lively breasts, her firm belly, her delicate hips, her round buttocks and, insinuating themselves between her wonderfully shaped thighs, the core of her womanhood, her so delightful and desirable vulva, happily holding it smoothly in his cupped hand.

With enormous pain, he thought that he would now lose her, lose the unequalled wonders of this so beloved person; he was going to miss at the highest level the incomparable pleasure of the nearness and contact of her body to his own. He whispered romantically into her ears the sweetest words of love and of desire that, even in that gloomy moment, came to his spirit: desire for things he would have liked to do with her; things (mainly, erotic excesses of all kinds) that, for him, were possible only with her. Edima, on her side, yielded herself to his magic touch, relishing all his caresses, one by one, as well as enjoying the turgidity of his penis in her, keeping her eyes closed, as in a trance. She too expressed to Ricardo all her infinite love for him and the immense pain caused in her by the imminent parting. When at last he ejaculated with a vigorous quiver, she easily reached an exceedingly enrapturing orgasm – while all her body was suddenly trembling with an unconsciously provoked shiver of pleasure, as under the effect of an electrical shock.

Undoubtedly, they were deeply fond of one another, and passion and desire for each other constantly threw them into one another's arms, but their love was going to be confronted by a tragic parting and the separation between them might well cause the end of all their dreams, if not of their mutual feelings.

Though it was Sunday, and a day of rest for the driver, Ricardo had asked Sunday to drive them to the airport that morning, because he did not want to be bothered by parking the car once there and wanted to assist Edima at the check-in desk with the departure operations and procedures. Sunday was such an obliging young man that even on a holiday he could not refuse to perform a service for Ricardo, but in this specific case he did it with particular pleasure because he knew it was a favour for Edima. And he liked Edima

very much. He felt in fact that – being so kind and gentle and always showing a good temper – she was a marvellous person and the right girl for his master.

The flight was scheduled to take off at 12.00 noon, so they left by 10.20 a.m. in order to be at the airport in time. Loveliness was with them, sitting in the front passenger's seat, at Sunday's side, while Ricardo and Edima sat on the rear seat. All along the trip to the airport, Ricardo held Edima's hand in his own and now and then, hardly aware at all of Loveliness's and Sunday's presence, they kissed each other passionately. At the airport, they also met Ndubuisi who had come from Ikeja on his own. When checking-in operations were completed, Edima wanted to look for a moneychanger (at the international airport of Lagos, there are usually many 'Alhajis' who change all sorts of currency) to change some more Naira into German Marks or US Dollars, but none was around at that time. Luckily, Judith Ajisafe, a girl supposed to join her at the fair two days later, as the stand hostess for Ogun State, arrived at the airport to greet her and make arrangements for their meeting in Frankfurt, and was able to give her some change. Edima therefore had to leave the rest of the Naira with Ricardo, who would give them to her sister later on. Ricardo then accompanied Edima to the police control gate. Before going through it, she again kissed him tenderly, saying:

"Darling, I love you so much. I'm going to miss you a lot!"

Ricardo was numb and felt an enormous hole in his stomach. He did not yet know exactly what it would mean for him to remain alone, without her. As if he were a madman, he murmured incomprehensible words of love and sorrow. Then he exploded:

"Edi, my true great and unique Love, for my happiness, I shouldn't let you go, because I know that this parting will end by killing me. But, since you have taken this decision, live it entirely free from bonds and impediments and be happy!"

Edima looked straight into his eyes again and said:

"Darling, I do not want you to suffer. If it has to be so, then I won't go and will remain with you!"

But Ricardo replied:

"No, Edi, I know how important it is for you to see Europe and discover what it is like. You need and deserve to live this experience. Go, now, go or you will miss your flight!"

Edima was very excited, but still looked at him one last time with

great sadness and real pain showing in her eyes, while giving him a last kiss.

“Good-bye, darling. Be sure that I will never forget you. God bless you for all that you have done to let me have this opportunity!”

Then she disappeared into the departure hall. Luckily, on her very first journey outside her country, she did not experience the difficulties formerly suffered at the international airport by thousands of departing passengers when leaving Nigeria. After years and years of vexations imposed by all sorts of so-called airport officials, Nigerian authorities had at last decided to modernise departure operations and make them simpler and faster, in line with the rules and customs existing in any civilised country, which Nigeria certainly deserves to be. All the various lines of officials who had bothered passengers after passport control, with the specific tasks of controlling the just released departure stamp on passports, of verifying the amount of currency taken abroad, of inspecting for possible drug trafficking and so on had been suppressed.

The only further control, like anywhere else in the world, was that of the hand-luggage inspection. This, to be true, was rather ridiculous and frustrating: in spite of the installation of very modern and sophisticated X-ray screening, these devices in reality worked only for a very short time, then broke down so that visual inspection started again. But, although they were not functioning, passengers were formally requested to let their hand luggage pass through them.

Now arrivals had become far more difficult and tiresome than departures, since here nothing had changed. Incoming travellers – exhausted after the many hours spent on the plane – still had to form long queues at the passport control cabins where two to three officers, one after the other, inspected their documents; then had to wait a long time, tired and sweaty, for the delivery of their baggage in the overcrowded luggage-claim hall (flights had the strange prerogative of arriving all at the same time and luggage clerks were so terribly slow!) where no air-conditioning was installed. And then there was more vexation from the customs officials in charge of checking the contents of arriving passengers’ luggage. The departure hall was now much less crowded and obstructed, and the no-longer-overheated or overwhelmed travellers could breathe a breeze of freedom and ease (and, especially, enjoy air-conditioning) totally absent before.

Ricardo remained a long time at the gate, just to be sure that

Edima did not come back for any sudden unknown reason; then, deeming that take-off time had been passed, he collected Loveliness and Ndubuisi and went in search of Sunday. Once in the car, he gave instructions to Sunday to drive to Ikeja to drop Loveliness and Ndubuisi at Edima's house. Loveliness was sitting on the rear seat, at his side and along the way Ricardo, who felt very sad, did not stop talking for a moment with her about his beloved Edima, remembering anecdotes and moments of her life with him. Strangely for him, when mentioning her sister Loveliness always called her 'Miss Grace', with a sort of deep reverence and respect in her voice. She never dared simply say 'Grace' or even better, as Ricardo would have expected her to pronounce her sister's name, just 'Edi' or 'Edima'.

7.

New lovely experiences, but missing true love

Ricardo's house was not the same after Edima's departure: no more sweet calls of 'Darling!', no more sudden bursts of happy and jolly laughter, no more sitting with a lady on his knees in the living room or in front of the TV set, no more that lovely, funny face of a splendid young woman placed in front of him at lunch or dinner, usually caught in the act of pouring an unbelievable quantity of pepper on all foodstuffs! The joyful gaiety he had become so used to had alas died. Sadness and emptiness were everywhere, and nearly palpable.

Ricardo felt very sad and understood better, after her departure, how much he loved her, as well as how much she had counted for him and, as a consequence, how much he was now missing her. His joy was indescribable when, three days later, he received a call from her. She told him that everything was going well and, although nobody was waiting for her on her arrival in Frankfurt, she managed to find her way to the 'Messegelände', the Fair area – as he had been absolutely sure she would – and everything was very attractive and exciting.

She called him again a week later from Paris – from Paris, that luxurious town, imagine! – and said that she was enjoying her stay in Europe very much, and visiting a lot of places; she had met nice friends at the fair, among them a young Spanish lawyer – another Spaniard in Edima's life! – working for the Spanish Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture. His name was Diego Quintero and he had a car to take her around. Everything was nice and enjoyable, but she was missing him a lot and loved him so much! Afterwards, she would go to Belgium and Luxembourg and then back to Germany. Edima had such a marvellous, joyous temper that

everybody at the Fair liked her and this Diego felt irresistibly attracted to her and started courting her very insistently. From Paris, Edima sent Ricardo an illustrated card on which together with the photograph of the face of a handsome man there was a big inscription 'SWEETMAN, I want you' and she had nicely added, in handwriting: '... I think of you now and always. Take care of my heart. Hasta luego (she wrote in Spanish, meaning: good-bye)!'

She also wrote a very nice letter to him (evidently written just before her telephone call but which he, however, unfortunately received only two months later after he had already met her) saying: "...Oh darling, the things I used to see on TV are here right outside the door! This evening, no matter what, I told Diego I must call you. I miss you so much, he tries to give me a good time but he can't succeed, because no one, no one can reach that place in my heart. ... Believe me, I'm having fun, but it's just not the same as being with you. ... I love you more than I ever thought possible in my whole life. You are my world, you made me what I am today and my mouth opens and I tell all my friends about you, how much I love [you] and how difficult it would be to ever look away from the times we spent together. Stay blessed dearest love. ... I'll call you soon, the love of my life! Hasta luego!"

Unluckily, Edima, in that exciting and festive mood and despite her love for Ricardo, was unable to resist Diego's advances and close courting. But where was Ricardo in those moments of ravishing pleasure for her? For the very first time in her life she was touring the fabulous Europe, a land up to then known only through books, people's accounts, movies and TV! Moreover, she was touring it and savouring its particular, romantic atmosphere with another man, not alas with Ricardo! Just one night after having written those nice expressions to Ricardo and having phoned him, she went to bed with Diego. She candidly confessed it to Ricardo one month later when he, on his holiday trip to Spain, paid her a short visit in Germany.

They were mad with joy and real happiness when they met and they made love immediately, as soon as she joined him in his hotel room at around noon. Edima was so happy to have Ricardo inside her again and enjoyed his tenderness so much that she did not have the usual difficulty at all and got a very fast orgasm.

As always when it happened so easily and quickly, she therefore happily shouted in melodious tone, glancing up at him with a

dazzling and triumphant smile:

“Darling, you got it!”

Sexual pleasure and satisfaction as well as sound romantic happiness were clearly depicted on her pretty face, while her eyes were filled with evident tender, confident affection. Ricardo was extremely happy to have demonstrated to her how much he loved her and to have succeeded so quickly where he had failed on so many other occasions.

She told him all the experiences and adventures she had had since her arrival in Europe - too many indeed for a young African girl who was in a totally new, unknown continent for the first time. The dreamed-of continent of the fables of her childhood! She had even met unfaithful Nigerian ‘friends’ who had stolen her money and were ready to exploit her. To Ricardo’s great dismay and sincere concern, she had even been compelled to work as ‘entraîneuse’ in a coffee shop in Munich – to get the money necessary to live.

“As entraîneuse? Oh, Little You, what a shame!” he exclaimed.

“So you know what this word means! I had to induce customers to buy more and more, strong and costly alcoholic drinks.”

He knew well that entraîneuses also perform other services for the customers of the establishments where they work and that their profession, in Europe (at least, it is certainly like that in Spain), is considered the vestibule of prostitution, but let the topic fall, fearing to hurt her. When Ricardo met her, she was making packets of crisps in a potato-cooking enterprise. Now, she had finally taken a drastic decision: she would not go back to Nigeria, but remain in Europe and try to get European citizenship.

Later on, when he passed naked in front of her to go to the bathroom and have a shower, she stared at him and exclaimed with a hint of admiration that clearly transpired in her voice:

“How big!”

He understood immediately what she meant with this expression, so he did not ask for any explanation, but thought: ‘She must have seen more than just Diego’s, to be able to make such a firm statement on the size of my male anatomical attributes (which, by the way, she seems to appreciate) and that implies a wide comparison.’

However, he did not want to inquire, he did not question her. It was true that she had given herself to another man (or to more men?) just ten days after she had left him, but this might very well be

due to her blossoming sensuality and, moreover, for many Africans having sex with another person is simply a pure physical exercise without sentimental consequences: a mere need to appease the physiological sexual impulses of the body, which does not necessarily imply the involvement of heart, mind and intimate feelings. Most girls in Africa lose their virginity at an age between 15 and 17 out of simple curiosity about its physical implications, not because of being in love with the schoolmate to whom they offer themselves. Although Ricardo knew that Edima was a sentimental person, who normally put all her heart into her actions, she might anyhow have given in again to lust. He loved her too much, and whatever she could have done during that month far away from him did not matter at all and could not in the least erase his profound sentiment for her.

Edima felt the power of his love and felt happiness, tenderness and pleasure penetrating under her skin, reaching her bones and filling her entire body. She was grateful to Ricardo for this wonderful, voluptuous sensation he was able to give her and, if it was possible, felt even more attached to him. Full of tenderness and love, she said to him enthusiastically and solemnly:

“Darling, *only you* can make me feel like that!”

Ricardo was so happy that he felt unable to speak and express in words the height of his feelings and the truth of his sentiments for her. After four days of intense love he left her. She rang him at home, in Spain, four days later to inform him that the following day she would go to the German Police and ask for the right of sanctuary.

About three weeks after Ricardo's return to Nigeria, he received a call from Catherine. His friend Nigel Green had invited him to dinner late on the following Saturday evening – because before that they both had to play golf. So Ricardo proposed to Catherine that she join him for the dinner at Nigel's. Catherine asked whether she could come with a cousin of hers. After asking Nigel whether he minded if he came with two African girls (Ricardo knew that Nigel was always surrounded by women, but only white ones, since he did not feel any attraction for black girls), Ricardo agreed.

When the two girls arrived at Ricardo's house by town transport, he took them in his car to Nigel's house. The meal, as always at Nigel's dinners, was fine and delicious because Flamand, his

Beninese steward, was a very good cook. (Once, however, Nigel had wanted to be able to offer to his guests a dessert which was Benoît's speciality, a sort of sorbet made from different liquidised fruit and using as its basis the tasty and slightly acidic pulp of the tropical and very exotic 'custard apple' or 'soursop' – also known to fruit vendors in Nigeria by the local name of 'soursweet pear' – blended with rum and served in a pineapple rind. When he asked Ricardo whether Benoît could teach his own steward how to prepare it, Benoît had categorically refused, saying that he would make it himself for Nigel, but not pass over to another cook his own recipes, which he guarded jealously). The two African girls in particular appreciated the final ice cream, which was really Flamand's speciality. They were however shy because of the presence of so many intellectual young white ladies who were in fact all graduates of European Universities, most of them being teachers in the American School. This was embarrassing for them, taking into account their simple culture, and they didn't talk much.

Their embarrassment was evident and did not disappear in spite of Ricardo's strenuous attempt to take them out of it by advising them warmly that they should not care about those ladies' culture - which was undoubtedly laudable but was only one praiseworthy quality. They, the Africans, on the other hand possessed not only their indisputable beauty but also many other very valid attributes, such as their delightful, unaffected genuineness, opulent generosity and unselfishness – which are amply and clearly demonstrated in the kind help systematically granted within the so-called 'extended family' – and candid originality, as well as innocent naïvety, which the whites had long since completely lost.

Luckily, after dinner, Nigel proposed to his guests going to a nightclub for fun and dancing. They all agreed and decided to go to City Tavern in Awolowo Road. Ricardo, with Catherine and her cousin in his car, was the first to arrive at the club. The others, who were rather numerous, six or seven, were not yet in view, so they decided to go inside. There was a huge crowd, drinking and dancing. Ricardo and Catherine stayed together, while her cousin went around looking for friends and then disappeared. Ricardo and Catherine drank a coke and danced a lot. Catherine was a keen dancer, she moved fast and gracefully with the rhythm of the disco-music and it was a real treat for his eyes to look at her stepping forward or backward, bending down or rising up in accordance with

the tune. Nigel and the others – unless confusingly dispersed in the crowd – must have changed their plan and gone to another club, perhaps City Tower in Idowu Taylor Street or After-hours in Eleke Crescent, or even to their most favourite Mexican bar/restaurant Pancho Villa, because they never appeared.

By the time that Ricardo and Catherine got tired of dancing and were totally wet with sweat – because the heat inside the club was nearly intolerable – it was about 3.00 a.m., so Ricardo asked her whether she would remain with him and spend the night in his house. Catherine reflected:

“I would willingly come to your house, provided we do not make love. I don’t like to make love to a man the very first time I go out with him, even if I spend the night in his house.”

Ricardo assented:

“As a matter of fact, I don’t like it either.”

Having thus agreed on such an important issue, they went home. They both slept in Ricardo’s big bed, because it was very late and Ricardo was too tired to prepare the second room for Catherine. They slept anyhow like angels.

However, the following morning, when she awoke and, after a while, stood up on the bed, he said impulsively:

“Take your panties off. I want to see you naked.”

Although formulated in a soft, amiable and extremely courteous tone, his request sounded to Catherine’s ears as a compulsory obligation. Nearly an order she felt she could not disobey. An order she *did not even want* to ignore, because he was, for her, a handsome and kind man and she had started liking him a lot. As though she had been mesmerized by his voice, she obeyed promptly, appearing to his eyes in all her attractive nudity. Being good-natured and, also because of her young age, rather naïve and jocose, she did not even know the great power of seduction pressingly emanating from her nice body. She was amused and took it as a coquettish feminine play.

Ricardo admired her silently for a long while. Catherine was indeed a really splendid young woman. She had a fine head on a nice long thin neck, with a lean very lovely face, normally shaded by a veil of sweet sadness and nostalgic melancholy, but capable of bursting with joy and delight in the most happy and hilarious moments. She had large, beautiful, very expressive, glowing black fawn eyes, slightly almond shaped, a small pointed nose – the special

characteristic of which was to have its tip always icy cold – and a lovely patterned, desirable mouth with rather dark lips, usually left, to Ricardo's grateful approval and highest pleasure, without lipstick and therefore likely to attract his most passionate and voracious kisses.

A small group of pimples and moles at the centre of her left cheek, if on the one hand perhaps somehow reducing a bit the perfection and beauty of her features, on the other contributed by adding sprightliness and realism to her pretty face. Her hair was stretched long and combed back, apart from a scanty fringe on her forehead, and tied up into a small chignon on her nape. She was very slim, or better even skinny, and had small breasts (this indeed was her greatest sorrow and worry and – as she confessed openly to Ricardo – she would have paid any amount to get bigger, plump 'boobs') but with attractive and exciting long, thin nipples constantly raised and pointing out. Her belly was flat and firm and her thighs, though without an ounce of fat and very slender, were round and well shaped, absolutely lovely and capable of engendering urgent desire in a man. The glistening skin of her body was like satin, perfect and astonishingly attractive to look at, seductive and precious for touching and caressing.

On the whole, she was an exceedingly delightful and admirable young woman, whose great, evident charms easily seduced Ricardo, exciting him to such a level that he started desiring her crazily. Despite her thinness, her shining, beautiful body was altogether smooth and soft, so pleasant to touch as to attract the most delicate and tender caresses. To stroke her smooth, even skin gave Ricardo enormous enjoyment and indescribable excitement, drowning him in a sweet vertigo. Unable to hide his admiration and his too-evident ardour, he joyfully said to her:

"You are very beautiful. A desirable woman. I must sincerely confess that I like you a lot."

Ricardo kissed Catherine passionately. She liked his way of kissing greatly. His kisses were libidinous and enticing, highly voluptuous, though also tender and sweet and showing well enough great care and fondness for his partner. She therefore clasped Ricardo tightly with her arms around his neck, pressing his face down to hers by pushing his head with her hands under his nape and keeping her fingers deeply interlocked within his hair. Catherine felt totally enraptured in wonderful sensations of libido and desire and

surprised Ricardo by opening her own mouth completely wide to capture and hold his mouth inside it, while he sucked her tongue avidly, stretched like an arrow in his mouth in search of pleasure.

At first he felt a bit disconcerted by her strange and uncommon gesture, since he adored feeling the lips of the woman he kissed inside his own, but then he appreciated Catherine's excitement – and her evident pleasure in behaving like that – very much.

Catherine felt growing in herself a deep sentiment and desire – a sort of unexpected and unsuspected youthful passion – for this man who was now holding her in a warm embrace in which she enveloped herself happily, feeling as much at home as if he had been holding her since her youngest years. Questions and sweet thoughts came to her mind: 'Was then this nice and seducing 'oyinbo' the Prince Charming she had been dreaming of since her most tender age, the man - whom she had been seeking for such a long time - to give herself to? Was he the *right* man to abandon herself to? She liked his features and good manners very much (he was indeed so kind, gentle and pleasant) and she undoubtedly felt a great, irresistible attraction for him; but was he worthy of having her?' In spite of her huge and urging desire to receive love from a man, and an already long-endured hunger for sex, as well as of the readiness of her heart to get fond of Ricardo, Catherine had pressing doubts, because of the poor knowledge she had as yet of him, and so was still rather hesitant to open herself totally and wondered if it was right and wise to yield herself.

After softly caressing her face, neck and shoulders with tender skill and fondling her hair gently and intertwining his fingers deeply in it, Ricardo sucked avidly her wholly erect nipples and also took her breasts, alternately, entirely in his mouth – gently and tenderly chewing them as if he were about to eat them – provoking in her an enjoyable sensation; especially when he said:

"Cathy, you are a really delightful cake; I would like to eat you!"

Then Ricardo started kissing and licking the inner side of her thighs up to her vulva and this sent her into ecstasy. She could not resist any longer, as she enjoyed his play very much and was aroused to very strong sexual excitement. With his sweet and persuasive technique he banished all her residual hesitation: abandoning her idealistic resistance and, nearly melting in his warm and sensual embrace, she resolutely offered him, as in an incantation, her lovely body and let him penetrate into her. But in that same instant, having

a clean and sentimental nature that usually guided all her actions, she realised that what she was mainly eager for were true sentiments and that sex, although she enjoyed it absolutely, could give real joy and delight only if in close connection with sound feelings.

Though she was a sensual woman and enjoyed very much making love to a man she liked, in that moment her sexual impulses were overcome by other, more profound thoughts and Catherine abandoned herself to romantic fantasies and indulged in reveries. Tumultuous and contradictory feelings swirled and overlapped like furious billows in Catherine's young but already determined, fine spirit. She had been searching for two or three years for a man with whom to establish a sound relationship; she dreamed of having a true and passionate love affair with such a man, but had been unable to find any one able to realise this dream. As a fundamentally honest and sincere person she had to admit (even to herself) that having been without sexual interludes for some time, she now desired very much to experience again the peerless pleasure deriving from making love to a man, and this physical need might be enough to push her into the arms of a man. But this man, Ricardo, appeared to be the *right* one, the only knight in shining armour; to her eyes, made blind now by her growing feeling for him, he really was *the only one fully worthy* of receiving her sweetest and most passionate affection. Had he not amply shown his lovely nature, as well as his unselfish attachment to her, generously giving her the money for the computer school and, later, a very nice and expensive gift for her birthday, just for friendship and liking, without insisting on something in return? Had he not been kindly and attentively listening to her and gently exchanging ideas and viewpoints with her during their friendly meetings?

No other man had behaved like that with her before. His freely-given kind gestures, which evidently disclosed a friendly and generous nature, had impressed her very positively. She was therefore literally fascinated by his gentle manners – which appeared absolutely singular in her eyes – and seductive personality. Moreover, he was a *white man*, exactly the sort of man that occupied the foremost position in her secret dreams! Dropping instantly her doubts, she instinctively felt that Ricardo was really the *man of her life*, the only man she would willingly share – whenever possible, given that he was a foreigner bound to leave Nigeria sooner or later – her whole life with.

He anyhow certainly deserved her most tender affection and she could therefore entirely dedicate herself to him. 'Had Ricardo already reached too advanced an age – as he was over thirty years older than she, who had just attained the age of 22?' But it was not a problem; she did not care at all, she had always despised those youths and men younger than him only looking for selfishly satisfying their ego and their personal, intimate lascivious instincts. Too often, making love to them, apart from the obvious, undeniable physical pleasure attained by her body, she had felt psychologically like being raped – so poor and totally careless was their concern about her personal involvement in the act, and her consequent mental enjoyment and pleasure.

With this white man, though, she had for the first time in her life not felt treated as an object, especially not as a simple and insignificant sexual target. Unlike the other few men she had known intimately up to that moment, he had always treated her as a real woman, as a human being of the same nature, level and importance as himself! Only with him therefore had she felt completely fulfilled in her womanhood, for he had acknowledged her as an existing individual identity, as a person. A person, it goes without saying, worthy of maximum respect, as he had fully and openly manifested to her on every occasion they met; with a lithe, exquisite body to be possessed and loved, of course, but not only – simply and uniquely – as this; also with a lovely soul and a brilliant brain likely to produce an independent will, as well as its own ideas and achievements. Ricardo was the first man she had met who was capable of understanding and appreciating this first priority feeling of hers. With him she therefore felt that she was welcomed and desired for her complete and essential being, not simply for her sex.

He was indeed not only pleasantly handsome and good-looking (the African partners she had had in the past were physically attractive too) but – unlike them – also extremely gentle and full of care and tenderness for her; consequently, she had clearly understood that for him too sentiments were more important than pure sex without involvement of reciprocal feelings.

His age, for her, could therefore only add the charm of wisdom and maturity, as well as that of a paternal and benevolent behaviour, to the attraction engendered by his nice manner. She was then confident that Ricardo would feel something deep and sound for her. It was true that now she was about to give herself to him, but

she was not an easy girl at all: she had a sound dignity and cared much for her respectability. And she was totally unwilling to throw herself too precipitately into an affair, which might turn out to be wrong and senseless. Her decision to make the personal gift of herself to him was then deliberate and free, since she knew very well that, if instead she refused herself to Ricardo, he would not react badly, by getting rough with her or wildly dropping her: he would certainly continue anyhow to honour her and keep her in the same high regard.

The only matter of conflict, therefore, still resided in the questions: 'Was it possible for her to penetrate profoundly into his heart, still so full of Grace, and – displacing from it the memory of that girl, her unloved rival – make him get fond of *her*? Could he sincerely and deeply love her, as she so intensely desired?' This notwithstanding, she felt that she was already very fond of him and ready to give him her heart forever. This was the point, the unquestionable reality of facts, all the rest did not matter much. And this, for the moment, was sufficient for her to fully justify her surrender. She thus indulged joyfully in his tender and exciting hug.

They made love, with transport and voluptuousness. When she was about to come, Catherine started yelling aloud:

“Aaaah! ...” “Aaaah! ...” “Aaaah! ...”

Her cries of pleasure were intense and resonant (Ricardo even feared and worried that they could also be heard by the other inhabitants of the building and outside as well, by the watchmen and stewards) separate and distinct, paced in harmonious accord with the rhythmic, vigorous inward thrusts that he gave inside her to attain his own orgasm and ejaculation. They were indeed totally different and had nothing in common with the long, uninterrupted wailing, similar to a hacksaw noise, often emitted in movies by actresses simulating copulation. Catherine's cries really and clearly indicated her personal, full and enthusiastic involvement and participation in the sexual act, as well as the attainment of great and intense enjoyment.

And when she reached the orgasm, she gave out an even louder and longer, nearly violent and wild:

“Aaaaaaaah! ...”

Although Ricardo had many times heard others talking about the loud moanings and exclamations emitted by women when getting an orgasm, it was the very first time that something like that had

happened to him. He liked it, since it sounded like an open declaration that he had performed well as her love-partner and given her, as due, high pleasure. Nevertheless, full of attention for her enjoyment, he asked her kindly:

“Did you come?”

“Uh-huh, ... Yes, of course, it was really so pleasant!” she assented giggling softly.

He exclaimed, emphatically:

“Cathy, you are a magnificent young woman, a really peerless creature! To be in you is extremely sweet and exciting.”

“It is you who are wonderful, really superb, Ricardo: you gave me an unspeakable pleasure!”

“Did you enjoy it?” he asked gallantly.

“Oh yes, a lot!” she cried eagerly, with a sweet golden blink of her lovely dark eyes.

Because of her thinness, Ricardo nicknamed her ‘My Sylph’. She took that as a sign of consideration by him and openly told Ricardo her full appreciation for it. In the afternoon, after giving her some food (the remnants of the previous day, as his steward was on Sunday leave) Ricardo took Catherine back to her aunt’s house in Ipaja. It was a very long trip: it took three quarters of an hour’s driving to get there! But he learnt how to find her house and memorised the road well. It took longer however, slightly more than one hour, to drive back to Victoria Island, because the first shadows of the evening had started falling (and in less than half an hour, before 7 o’ clock, as the twilight in the equatorial zone of the globe was very short, it would be pitch dark). Luckily, he passed through the usual Oshodi traffic jam with sufficient rapidity and nothing bad happened.

A week later, without warning her, since there was no telephone in her aunt’s house, Ricardo drove to Ipaja again to fetch her. He remembered the road very well, so he had no difficulty at all up to the last small cross street where the house was situated. At first, he missed it and drove on past it. But then, not recognising the places any more, he made a U-turn and drove back the same way until he found the right place to turn in. When he stopped and parked in front of the house people at the windows were astounded to see a white man coming out of the car; Catherine was advised that it was probably her friend who had come to see her, and she could hardly

believe her eyes. Caught by a paroxysm of happiness, when Ricardo tenderly embraced her, she nearly fainted:

“How could you come up here? You found the way to this far-away place all alone, it is unbelievable!”

“Well, I have a good photographic memory and I am keen on orienting myself. And, imagine, this time it took me only thirty-five minutes to get here!”

Catherine had been just about to go for a stroll with her cousins, so they all went together, in friendly conversation, Ricardo with them too, through the streets and lanes of the district at length. Then they went back to the house, where Catherine changed her dress and went happily away with Ricardo, to his house. Catherine’s aunt was out and Ricardo could not meet her this time.

At home, Catherine told Ricardo that she had been deflowered when she was only 16. She had had her very first sexual experience with a schoolmate, as in most cases happens among young people, because she firmly wanted to find out what it would feel like not to be a virgin any more. It was then a matter of pure curiosity, and the wish to appear as ‘grown-up’ in the eyes of her friends for having done it, that had pushed her into the arms of the young man, who was evidently very pleased to deflower her and did so without much persuading. She felt happy after the act for being in this new condition, more than for having derived particular pleasure from copulation, and only wanted to yell aloud everywhere and to everybody: “I’ve done it! ... I’ve done it!” Ricardo was amused to hear her telling this story and laughed with relish. Catherine was a splendid and exciting lover and performed sex with great profusion of passion, intensity and dedication.

She also confessed to Ricardo that she found great pleasure in making love to a man of her choice and of whom she was fond. She really liked that. For her, nothing could be more wonderfully exciting and sensationally satisfactory than feeling the cavity at the very bottom of her abdomen, willed empty and void by nature, being so pleasantly occupied and filled up by the lovely, hardened warm protuberance of *his* body that she so ardently sought. Of all the loveliest moments in making love, the very instant of penetration of her man’s penis into her body was her preferred one, the fatidic moment in which she got the maximum pleasure. It was for her such an enticing, gratifying and, at the same time, very pleasantly disturbing sensation. Ricardo could verify and experience this

himself. Once, indeed, at the moment he was penetrating her, she – being nearly in trance from the intense pleasure, with her head all thrown back and her eyes turned up and half-closed in ecstasy – shouted loudly:

“Oh, *how I love it!* ... *I love it!*”

Catherine considered Ricardo’s penis as a sort of personal toy or pet nearly expressly made for her to play with and loved to hold it with both her hands and softly caress and kiss it. At first she was intrigued and a bit disconcerted by the prepuce that she was seeing for the very first time in her life: ‘What is that sort of sheath hiding the most vital part of it? Where is his glans? Is it possible that a white man’s penis is so different from an African man’s one and lacks that lovely and essential part of it? That is the most important and attractive part of the whole penis, that sublime glossy swelling – up-right and pointed like a gleaming fleshy rocket ready to probe into the sidereal spaces of the vast sky – which really gives the sense of purpose and powerfulness! Ricardo had entered her so pleasantly and made her come, enabling her to attain a very agreeable and fully satisfying orgasm: how had this been possible if his penis was not equipped with an adequate pricking tip? If it is covered like this and almost closed by that strange double-folded skin, how can she find it to stroke and kiss it?’ However she learnt quickly how easy it was to squeeze it backwards along the shaft, to discover its dazzling tip.

She liked oral sex very much. When she sucked his penis, she did it at length with intense dedication and pleasure, but also with great gentleness and concern. After she had done it several times, although he was thoroughly enraptured by Catherine’s delightful sucking action on him, Ricardo was seized by the sudden fancy to experience a new and stronger sensation. He therefore addressed to her a surprising and vibrant invocation:

“Bite it, Cathy, *bite it!*”

‘What a foolish request!’ she thought for an instant, ‘Is he not afraid that I might hurt him with my teeth and even wound the delicate skin of his penis? Or is he, by chance, a masochist? Though, to be true, I never had the impression that he was that sort of man.’ On the other hand, Catherine, like every African woman, was not accustomed to arguing with her man’s desires. In this case, moreover, it was a desire expressed by Ricardo, a man she loved and wanted with all her heart to make happy and fully satisfied. He seemed in fact to be perfectly aware of what he had requested her to

do and of its implications and consequences. And she knew very well that he was entirely worthy of receiving her most ample and intimate trust.

She therefore started biting all over its glans and body, at first – surprised, as she was, for the strange and totally unexpected request – rather clumsily and with great caution, lest she do him harm; then, seeing that she was not wounding him with her teeth, more vigorously, but still with extremely careful delicacy and tenderness. It was the first time she had done that, as none of the few partners, all African young men, she had had before Ricardo had ever requested her to behave in this way. But she discovered that she liked it very much. She kept it as a play, a new sexual game just taught to her, and she performed it therefore expertly, with consummate skill as though she were absolutely used to it, and this sent Ricardo onto cloud nine.

The greater pleasure she perceived that was flowing into him, the more exciting and fulfilling it became for her too; the pace of her bites on his penis grew accordingly, until it eventually became almost frenetic. Practising oral sex in the most conventional and usual way was in fact for her exceedingly exciting and pleasant, but she got the agreeable feeling that, by biting him as he requested, her role in this act of love had become even more active, significant and directly oriented to a faster attainment of pleasure; thus, her personal involvement in giving him physical and mental delight was more complete and satisfying. He was absolutely enraptured and found her vigorous but, at the same time, sweet action incredibly enjoyable and highly sensual and she, in turn, was happy and proud to give him such pleasant sensations.

Catherine decidedly liked feeling that piece of flesh of the man she loved so much getting swollen – and therefore coming to full life with pulse and throbs – while being kept gripped between her teeth and, perhaps more intensely than when simply sucking it, she had the impression it was becoming part of her own flesh. Oh, if it were possible without damaging him, she would have willingly cut it off from Ricardo's body to keep it with her all the time, and even eaten it to make it really become an integral part of herself in the same way as when food is ingested and then absorbed by one's organism! Liking utterly to feel the sweet but firm hold of her teeth on his stiffened organ (it was indeed so exciting and arousing!) Ricardo could not refrain from joyfully opening his heart to her:

“Dearest Cathy, my Sweet Sylph, you are really sensational! A very lovely woman and a fantastic lover, indeed.”

“You too, Ricardo. That’s one of the reasons why I like you so much!”

“*One* of the reasons, eh? ... What about the others?”

“Oh, the others, ... the others are ... No, it is better I don’t tell you, otherwise you will get too proud and bold and you will lose your very kind attitude. And I don’t want you to change at all, you are so nice and lovely like that!”

“All right, I do not mind not knowing the other reasons, provided it is really true that you like me.”

“It is true. Absolutely true: there isn’t anybody or anything in this world that I like as much as I like you. I like you utterly and unconditionally, believe me!”

Since that first occasion onwards, she always bit him passionately in that happy and enjoyable way when they further met, as though it had become their own love rite.

But Catherine’s attributes were not uniquely or primarily physical. She was indeed a delightful and enchanting person and what made her so splendid and irresistible were a marvellous character and many good qualities: she was essentially very good-hearted, genuine, sincere, honest, profoundly pure and romantically passionate in loving a man. Perhaps less clever and less enterprising than Edima, she showed however a resolute temper, though mitigated by her basic goodness and kindly disposition. She easily perceived Edima’s constant and cumbersome presence in Ricardo’s heart and she obviously felt weary of it, but she never complained and never accused Ricardo of misbehaving towards her. She accepted and took willingly what he could give her and was happy and contented with it. Certainly, should Ricardo not be so bound to the sweet memory of his perfect mental and physical harmony and mutual understanding with Edima, as well as of their wonderful life, he would have been totally captivated and subdued by Catherine’s most appealing spiritual charms and magnificent personality. She certainly deserved it entirely.

Ricardo enjoyed making love to Catherine, as he liked that girl very much and felt for her a sound, tender affection, but was tormented by the thought of Edima. He felt that only with Edima could he attain peaks of physical and mental pleasure that no other woman could give him. Catherine indeed always gave herself to his

lovemaking with great ardour, joy and enthusiasm and apparently seemed fully pleased and satisfied by him; this undoubtedly was extremely exciting and gratifying for Ricardo who, in making love to a woman, mainly sought after his partner's pleasure.

But to make love to Edima was for him a totally different thing. Only her body matched so perfectly with his own as though they were two halves of a single unit. Edima indeed represented, in his mind and heart, the maximum, the top in giving pleasure, the absolute number one in making love and only she was his really incomparable and most precious love! This was due to the fact that Ricardo really and deeply loved Edima with all his heart and his whole being, whilst he only felt, though intensely, sentimentally and especially physically bound to the other women he had an intimate relationship with.

Therefore, in spite of his great and sincere affection for Catherine, he never said to her 'I love you' or similar love expressions and never called her 'darling', because it would have sounded false to his own ears. This was simply and purely reserved to Edima, even now that she was far away. Only once, when Catherine – eager to hear something nice and affectionate from him – asked him:

"Ricardo, tell me, do you love me?"

he dryly (and rather coldly) replied:

"Of course, I do."

Then, catching in her sad eyes her disillusion and discontentment, just to be somehow nicer to her he hastily added:

"With you, as long as you are mine, I am the richest man on the entire planet; without you, if and when you will stop loving me, I'll undoubtedly become the poorest of all human beings."

Although he understood that it was not at all kind of him in respect of her, this was indeed the sweetest and most tender expression he used towards Catherine, despite the fact that she had at last become fond of him and did not deserve at all such cold and unfair behaviour from him. Also because she, on the contrary, openly manifested her love for him every time they met. She used to say with a quiver of passion in her voice:

"Ricardo, I love you very, very much. I know you cannot, because you are already married, but I really wish with all my heart that you could marry me. Only by being your wife could I be totally complete as a woman: your wife is a lucky woman, I would be wonderfully happy to have *you* as my husband!"

Or she might say:

“Ricardo, I think I can no longer live without you! I need you to make love to me for the rest of my life!”

But he – although obviously flattered by these open declarations of love, which raised in him a great tenderness towards her – manifested his interest and his sincere affection only physically, by caressing and kissing her gently and tenderly making love to her.

As most educated girls in Lagos, Catherine too liked very much to adorn herself with attractive objects: not with the old traditional African ornaments made of hard stones, glass, ivory and coral beads or of small ostrich eggs disks and of brass and bronze cast, but with small pieces of modern western jewellery or trinkets. She therefore asked Ricardo to bring her some of these ornaments from Europe, and he very willingly brought back for her from his travels in Spain not only shoes – European ones, made in Spain, or maybe even more renowned original Italian shoes, what a pleasure! – but also a gold-plated necklace, earrings, bangles and a nice lady’s wristwatch with a sculpted annular border. A chain with a series of discs formed the necklace that Catherine particularly appreciated.

Catherine was very happy to receive these gifts and was therefore grateful to Ricardo for his kind thoughtfulness and the care employed in selecting the nicest and most appropriate objects, so that she could bedeck herself in the cherished, sophisticated European fashion.

General Olusegun Obasanjo and General Shehu Musa Yar’Adua were arrested on the charge of having plotted for the overthrow of Abacha’s regime. There was serious concern and deep consternation among the population, as the two were very popular and highly esteemed. Everybody was astonished and bewildered. They enjoyed in fact great prestige and very ample renown since they had been, respectively, highly commendable and far-sighted Head of State and Minister for Defence (practically, his deputy in the then military regime) during the years 1976 to 1979, before Obasanjo voluntarily handed over power into the hands of the elected President Alhaji Shehu Shagari.

A number of journalists, among them Mrs. Chris Anwanyu, editor of ‘The Sunday Magazine’, and other prominent persons were arrested together with them. When, hardly one year later, Musa Yar’Adua died as a result of the maltreatment received and the

difficulties experienced in prison (or maybe – as was suspected and murmured in a whisper, especially by his friends, as well as by his supporters and estimators – he was murdered with poison, since the autopsy on his body discovered cirrhosis of the liver and he was not a drinker) a great anger exploded - especially in Katsina, the town he originated from. The Government was afraid that an organised revolt might start, but after some days of tough tension and small disturbances, the situation was taken under control.

Ricardo went to Ipaja several other times. He met Catherine's aunt and had very pleasant talks with her. One day in particular, when he arrived at Ipaja unexpectedly, he did not find Catherine who had gone out with her cousins, and while waiting for Catherine's return he had a very long conversation with this lady. They openly exchanged ideas and feelings about Nigeria, Africa and Europe and they found themselves in perfect syntony. She was a very interesting and clever person, indeed, educated and wise (as said before, she was a schoolteacher and a writer) and Ricardo liked her a lot. However, on that specific occasion, Catherine did not come back before he judged that, being already late enough, the time had come for him to drive back to Victoria Island, so he had been compelled, to his great disappointment and sorrow, to leave without her.

The way to Ipaja was however not an easy trip and turned out in fact to be a trap for Ricardo's cars. On one occasion when he was on his way home with Catherine on board, the clutch of his Seat broke down at a crossroad in the most crowded point of the district. He managed to push the car to the side of the street, with the help of a young man who had immediately come to rescue him as soon as he saw him in difficulty, then revealed himself to be a mechanic and said:

"Let me have a glance at your car, master. Please, open the bonnet."

"I fear it is useless, you know. It must be the clutch that has failed."

The young man still replied:

"Let me see it, anyhow. If it is the upper clutch, then we may succeed in repairing it."

A little crowd of young men had gathered around them in the meantime. The young mechanic sent one of the other young men to a near filling station to seek for a lubricant, but, despite his goodwill,

it did not work. There was no way to repair the damage. The young people around were all concerned about Ricardo's problem and willing to help, in one way or another.

When they saw all efforts useless, they said to Ricardo:

"You will have to leave your car here, sir. But you cannot leave it on the road, as it is now, for it would certainly be vandalised during the night. Luckily, a Spanish lady lives not far from here. Maybe you know her, she works at the Embassy. We can help you to push your car to her compound, inside which it could be parked safely until you have it towed to a workshop."

But Ricardo tried calling the chief mechanic of his Company through the mobile radio and, despite the distance, he succeeded in getting through and talking to him. This man's suggestion was to look for a towing-car and take his car down to his house on Victoria Island, where they would come to collect it the following day. When he learnt what Ricardo wanted, the young mechanic jumped on an 'Okada' motorbike and after a while came back with a jeep provided with a towing device, driven by two big men. Ricardo gave the very patient and helpful young man 300 Naira as compensation for all the time he had spent trying to solve his problem. Then he contracted the price for the towing service, agreed on the basis of 2,500 Naira – which seemed high to him, but the chief mechanic deemed it equitable – and finally he and Catherine were taken aboard the jeep, which, while towing his car, took them home. They could happily spend the weekend together and Ricardo then got a replacement car, a Honda Civic, which he enjoyed while the Seat was under repair.

Unfortunately, when the clutch of this car was repaired and the car returned to him, it was the turn of the air conditioning system to start failing and Ricardo was therefore compelled to ask for a permanent replacement for this car. He preferred by far to have the perfectly working Honda, which was practically new, rather than go on with a Seat that was ranked higher but full of potential failures because of its age.

The second misadventure he met on the way to Ipaja took place, as it happened, while driving the Honda. He was taking Catherine back to Ipaja, after they had been together for a weekend and had spent the Sunday at Eleko Beach. He was driving on the expressway, when, arriving at the junction with the stretch of road leading to the international airport, his left front wheel hit a wheel-rim which had

been placed in the middle of the road by a motorist, while changing his tyre. His own tyre got a deep cut and went flat immediately. Despite the heavy traffic, Ricardo managed to stop at the extreme left side of the road, obviously cursing the stupidity of that driver who, instead of placing the rim behind his faulty car, had placed it at its side, well in the middle of the next lane – in which Ricardo was driving. He could not avoid colliding with the rim, because of the presence of another car overtaking him on his right side. As soon as he opened the boot to get the tools to change the tyre, a young man appeared immediately, risen as from nowhere, who said:

“Leave it, master, I shall do it for you.”

In a very few minutes he had changed the tyre and Ricardo and Catherine, after giving him a 200 Naira tip for the useful service he gave them, could continue their trip to Ipaja.

On these two occasions, Ricardo could fully experience the kindness, skill and availability of Africans towards white people. On both of them he had found himself in distress, but had been rescued at once by good-hearted people who intervened voluntarily, making it unnecessary for him to seek for help. And there were no other whites around; he was the only European among a crowd of blacks, who turned out to be extremely kind and willing to give him their help.

He was therefore very happy and proud that he could totally discredit the myth circulating in the whites' community about the danger of being alone in an African district of the town. In fact, the only real danger that Ricardo met in those districts, where in general confusion and, sometimes, complete pandemonium reigned as undisputed sovereigns, was for his ears, as the noise there was absolutely deafening, at the highest possible level. It seemed indeed as if all the owners – private individuals or shops – of a stereo set, a TV set or a simple radio had to let all the neighbours know that they were proudly in possession of such apparatuses and desirous of letting them fully enjoy the music and words coming out of the relevant devices. Ricardo wondered constantly whenever he had to pass through an African district of the town, ‘Was this habit the heritage of ancestral customs – native music, mainly based on beating drums, is indeed rather noisy and their songs are normally sung shouted at the top of their voices; moreover their discussions are nearly always agitated and loud – or did it derive from a sort of love for challenge, for competition in all fields?’

One Monday Jill Elebeche phoned Ricardo and he invited her for lunch in his house the following day. So, on Tuesday at 1.00 p.m., she went to Ricardo's house. She was smart and radiant. After lunch, while having coffee, Ricardo asked her:

"Well, Jill, did you get a man at last?"

"No, so far I have not found a man worthy of consideration."

"You know, at present I too actually don't enjoy a close romance. My girlfriend chose to settle down abroad. She left me alone."

Then he approached and sat close to Jill on the arm of the armchair in which she was comfortably sitting. He bent towards her and said softly:

"Jill, let me kiss you."

Jill, who had been missing the kisses of a man for a long time, longed for a proposition of this sort. She therefore abandoned herself willingly to the sweetness of a strongly emotional sensation and silently offered her parted lips to him. Ricardo leaned over her wilful and desirous mouth and kissed her at length; then, since the frontal opening of her blouse was deep and gave a glimpse of her delicate, pretty bosom, he eagerly pulled one of her breasts out of the bra and gently sucked her nipple. Jill was extremely sensitive on this particular part of herself, which represented one of the most erogenous zones of her whole body. She nearly fainted from the intense pleasure. Moved by a sudden, imperious desire to make love, but however still capable of thinking about what she was doing, she was able to extract herself from his sweet embrace and, while carefully resetting her breast inside the bra, said:

"No, Ricardo, not now. I have an appointment and must go immediately."

Ricardo reflected:

"OK, Jill, as you want. Why don't you come here for dinner, Saturday evening?"

Jill, preparing herself to leave, replied:

"I'll phone you to let you know whether I can come."

Then she took her elegant handbag and went out, looking for a taxi.

On Thursday, Ricardo had been invited to the big party given at the Lagos Yacht Club by Esteban Roja y Cárdenas for his 50th birthday. There were a great mass of people, both Europeans and Africans. A group of African singers, who had gathered in a choir

named 'The Golden Voices', sang various songs. A barbecue and other good foods were served. A young Italian man, whom Ricardo knew, Riccardo Rocca, a member of the choir – its only white chorister in fact – was sitting at a table adjacent to Ricardo's, chatting with two African girls. When Ricardo passed by to go to the barbecue and get some food, one of these girls said to him:

"I know you. I saw you at the Mass in the chapel, at the Apostolic Nunciature: you were singing the hymns nicely with the nuns and other worshippers." Then she added gently, clearly blinking at him: "Frankly speaking, your voice was the best in tune; I heard it well and liked it."

Ricardo did not remember her and, whilst thanking her for her nice compliments, said this to her frankly. She replied:

"You could not see me, because I was hidden amongst the worshippers, but I noticed you."

Strangely, this girl looked vaguely like Edima, although smaller and fatter than her. She had the same type of face, chubby with a large, captivating smile. It was different however from Edima's appearance in merry moments, as two very evident dimples became etched in her cheeks when she smiled. Riccardo Rocca introduced Ricardo formally to her. Her name was Grace. Although Grace is a favourite and very common name for women in Nigeria, Ricardo thought 'What a strange coincidence'. Keeping his hand tight in hers, she said:

"I would like to meet you at the church on Sunday."

Ricardo answered:

"I shall not go to church on Sunday, because I have an early swimming-pool party that day; I'll go to church on Saturday evening."

"Well, then I also will go on Saturday. So, we can meet there."

When Ricardo went to church on Saturday, there were not many persons therein. The Saturday evening Mass at the Nunciature was traditionally the French Mass, often celebrated by a French priest, but that evening it was celebrated by a British priest who spoke French sufficiently well, but with a very strong English accent. Ricardo entered a pew and looked around to check whether Grace had come, but could not spot her. Just in front of him there was a person whom he – judging from the back presented to him and mindless of the fact that men and boys do not wear hats on their head inside a church – thought to be a young boy wearing a hunting

jacket, jeans and a baseball cap. Only when the priest invited the congregation to give each other a sign of peace, and this young person turned to shake hands with him, did he discover that it was not a boy, as he had thought, but Grace herself. Then she had come, as promised! When they went out, after the Mass was over, Ricardo told her he had not recognised her at all up to that moment. She said:

“I did not see you entering the church, either. I too thought you had not come.”

They talked a little about the nice environment and garden of the Nunciature; then Ricardo invited her to join him for dinner. She accepted, but wanted to go home to change her clothes. Ricardo went with her, driving behind her car. She lived not far from his own place, in one of the towers of Bishop Oluwole Street. He waited downstairs in his car rather a long time. When she came out, she apologised for the delay and explained that she had to climb on foot up to the 12th floor where her flat was, because there was no electricity to power the lifts. She was wearing a nice white dress, with flounces all made of lace. When they arrived at Ricardo’s gate, the watchman informed Ricardo that a young woman had come and was waiting for him in his flat. Ricardo exclaimed:

“It must be Jill!”

Grace promptly said:

“Ricardo, if you have other visitors, do not worry, I will go. We can meet another time.”

But Ricardo answered:

“No, I want you stay. It doesn’t matter; we can very well eat all three together.”

They went in and found that it actually was Jill.

When Jill saw Ricardo coming home with another girl, she was obviously not happy and felt very uneasy. She said:

“I am sorry I came without previously warning you that I would come.”

Ricardo answered:

“Don’t worry. I am happy you are here. All three of us can enjoy having dinner together.”

He introduced the two girls to one another and then advised Benoît to lay the table for three persons. It was absolutely evident that Jill had come with the intention of fascinating Ricardo and possibly starting a romance with him. She had worn her best dress

and was particularly elegant – more than usually – and also had a fine perfume on. During the meal, Ricardo talked in a rather generalised way and addressed the two girls alternately and equally. It was however probably evident – though not deliberate – that his preference was for Grace, since Jill felt more and more uneasy and, as soon as the dinner was finished, she manifested her intention to leave. The disappointment for the unlucky evolution of the evening – that she had hoped would elapse in a very different way – was evident on her face. She took Ricardo apart and repeated to him:

“I hope I did not disturb you and your plans. I am sorry I did not inform you previously about my intention to come and see you.”

She was unable to dissimulate her anger for the bad turn taken by events. Ricardo said again:

“Jill, do not worry about that. I was on the contrary very happy to see you.” He gave her 400 Naira to recompense her for her taxi expenditures. Then, together with Grace who also said she wanted to leave, he took Jill to Obalende, from where she could get town transport to her house. Poor Jill, who had gone to Ricardo’s house full of hope to spend a wonderful night of tenderness and to start a new love story, was on the contrary compelled to go back home full of sorrow and nearly with hatred, without having attained any of the desired aims! Ricardo never saw her again and regretted having treated her so miserably. He only got a phone call from her just a fortnight before leaving Nigeria for good. When she heard that he was about to leave, she said that she would come to see him and say goodbye, but she did not. At Obalende, Grace said again, but without real conviction:

“I want to go home too.”

Ricardo however easily succeeded in dissuading her from this aim and drove back home, where they had some further chats. Her full name was Grace Letima Tekse and she was from the Bassa-Nge ethnic group. She was 28 and a lawyer, not practising at the Bar, but employed in the legal department of an insurance company. That night they slept together. Ricardo however had to admit – although she certainly proved to be expert – that making love to Grace was far less pleasant and also less attractive and joyful than making love to Edima. Even less exciting and sweet than making love to Catherine. Ricardo and Grace met only two other times, then no more. But this was obviously because their relationship, despite mutual attraction, had been totally physical; there was indeed no real

sentimental involvement between them.

Soon after, Grace met a young Danish man at the Yacht Club and fell in love with him. After some months, Ricardo learnt from Riccardo Rocca that she had got married to this man. When they met by mere chance at the church and Ricardo questioned Grace why she had not invited him to her wedding, she replied that she thought he had already left Nigeria for good. Ricardo felt very happy for her, as she had crowned the dream to get married to a European, and he hoped sincerely with all his heart that a similar chance would also befall Edima, to whom all his constant, strong and affectionate concern was always addressed.

In the morning of that same Saturday he met Grace at the evening Mass, and then had both her and Jill together for dinner, another strange – in some ways, even hilarious and comic – episode had happened to Ricardo. When he had just entered the car and was, as usual, about to take it to go shopping, Ayo, the gardener, introduced himself furtively into the door before he could shut it (in order to keep hidden from anybody else's sight) and said:

“Master, I need your help!”

And with a rapid and wary gesture he opened wide the towel wrapped round his waist to show to him shamelessly his circumcised organ: it stood half-way up, pointing out in horizontal position, all covered with long viscid white filaments going from the urethral opening at the tip of the glans to its shaft. A really awful and horrid vision! Ricardo, disgusted, turned his eyes away quickly from that obscene sight and asked:

“What did you do?”

“I don't know,” replied Ayo “I found myself like that yesterday.”

“This is the right punishment for you, since you fuck too much, and instead of being content to make love to your nice young wife, are always looking to screw wherever and with whomsoever the opportunity arises, mindless of consequences.” Then he added: “What sort of help are you looking for from me? I am not a doctor.” Moreover, not having ever contracted in his whole life any sort of venereal disease, he had absolutely no idea about what could have been affecting Ayo and about its gravity. Nor could he remember having read in books anything concerning a disease presenting the loathsome symptoms as those evidenced on Ayo's penis.

“No, sir, I know you are not a doctor”, said Ayo “I'm not eager to

have medical assistance from you. But I need money to go to the doctor and get appropriate medicaments.”

Although Ayo was certainly not a champion at gardening – Ricardo had always considered him a real destroyer (he was also guilty of having let Ricardo’s beloved citronella grass die on three consecutive occasions!) – and as a man was also lazy and rather a rascal whom Ricardo had often had to scold for bad actions, he felt great pity for the miserable condition in which the poor man found himself at that moment. He therefore decided to grant him what he had requested and handed him 350 Naira, saying:

“Make good use of this money in order to be healed very soon. And, in the future, be more cautious about which women’s holes you put your tool into!”

Unless it was a trick put in place by Ayo in order to move him to pity and thus scrounge money off him (as more or less all the watchmen often did, inventing all sorts of extravagant and pitiful stories in turn), Ricardo supposed that Ayo must have recovered quickly because he was not asked for similar help again. When, however, the following day, at the swimming-pool party, Ricardo told the friends he used to meet – Julio, Carlos, Enrique and Esteban – what had happened, they all laughed at him and at once started some insinuating, heavily mocking jokes at his expense. They pulled his leg by asking him whether he had liked the size of Ayo’s member and saying that Ayo’s secret aim, in showing him his penis, was probably to tempt him and see whether he was ready to jump the fence between hetero- and homosexuals and pass into the latter’s camp. Ricardo, being rather touchy and easily irritated whenever he was the butt of such humour, did not like their jokes at all and shouted angrily towards them:

“I would have liked to see what the hell you would have done in my shoes, being unexpectedly confronted with that shocking and revolting spectacle!”

Eunice Fowlkes was a very tall, beautiful unmarried woman of about 35, always rather elegantly dressed. Though provided with an ebony-black complexion, she did not have typical African features, but a rather European appearance. She did however have very protuberant round buttocks which spoilt her otherwise slender silhouette, hanging like a big globe at the lower end of her back. She had graduated in law, but had never practised the profession of lawyer;

she took care of a school for girls owned and run by her family. The worst that can be said of her is that she was not a simple and sincere woman such as those for whom Ricardo had a liking: she was a real man-enslaver. Eunice was in fact fully aware of her seductive, feminine power over men and made ample use of it. Being convinced that all men should fall at her feet, she behaved as a prima donna and was always trying to fascinate men who had an important position so that she could use them to her own advantage. For this reason, Ricardo did not like her and always studiously avoided her attempts to seduce him: he obviously treated her with the usual politeness he was accustomed to reserve for all ladies, but he did nothing more and kept a rather cold countenance with her whenever he met her.

This simple tactic produced the desired fruits and, despite her advances and cunningly disguised attempts, Ricardo did not give her any chance to catch him in her net.

Eunice succeeded however in seducing the Counsellor to the Spanish Embassy, who eventually became her cavalier and took her with him to all the important events and receptions which took place in Lagos. Although it was rumoured in the whites' community that she had got him over a barrel, and he had become a simple puppet in her hands, and people covertly made a fool of him, he was very proud to appear in public accompanied by such an impressive woman and looked at all other men contemptuously.

He surpassed himself however when he tried, surreptitiously, to impose her as a lawyer who would be the desirable focal point in Lagos for a delegation of Enagas who had come to visit their supplier. Enagas is the Spanish gas company that was committed with Nigeria LNG Limited as one of the buyers of the liquefied natural gas to be produced by it, the others being the French Gas de France, the Italian electricity board Enel and the Turkish gas distributor Botas. When he found that out, Ricardo had to intervene, secretly advising his friends in Nigeria LNG Limited to inform this Company's representatives that Eunice had no experience as a lawyer.

Ricardo was invited by one of his friends, who was the managing director of a construction company, to a dinner that the latter was giving in honour of a close Nigerian friend of his who had just been named ambassador to Greece. During the party Ricardo had the

opportunity to have a chat and exchange viewpoints with this Nigerian gentleman. He told him that he had been very lucky to be posted to Athens, since Greece, among European countries, is really the land of sun, light and warmth: besides which, obviously, was the beauty of a town which still has so many vestiges of an ancient, glorious and significant past. The newly-named ambassador replied, to Ricardo's obvious astonishment, that Athens, Paris, London, and Rome were all nice towns, but that Lagos was provided with a particular charm – “a certain ‘I don't know what’ which makes it a unique town” – that none of the others could boast. Then he added, with an air of complicity:

“Well, take, for instance, the Parthenon: if we think of when it was constructed, it is a big thing, but today a construction company such as that of our host would put it up in half a day!”

Though it could well be a flash of wit to flatter their host, Ricardo was literally stupefied and lost for words to reply. That gentleman had probably forgotten or not taken into account the incredible and fascinating structural ingenuity employed in its construction by that ancient architect, Iktinos, such as placing the columns of the magnificent and impressive temple at different distances apart in order to obtain the effect of perspective – when looked at from distant viewpoints – of equal size columns with equal distances between them, as well as other optical corrections to alleviate the heavy Doric building.

Later, Ricardo, being seated behind them, heard a conversation between this gentleman and the ambassador from Saudi Arabia. The Nigerian gentleman was explaining to the Arabian that it was his intention to take a second wife (it has to be noted that his first wife, also present at the party, was really an exceedingly beautiful and charming young lady) and the Arabian was trying to dissuade him from this aim, saying insistently:

“Please, if I may give you my opinion, don't do it! You don't know what sort of hell you would put yourself in! You have no idea of what it means to deal with more than one wife!”

This answer, given by an Arabian, that is a man who is allowed by his religion and his laws to have four wives plus a large number of concubines, obviously provoked great hilarity in Ricardo who silently split his sides with laughter.

On two occasions, Nigel Green organised an expedition to

Motherland on Allen Avenue in Ikeja, the place where Lágbájá, the masked artiste, performed throughout the year on the last Saturday and Sunday of each month. The first time, Nigel and Ricardo took Tokumboh Manuwa there with them, a Nigerian girl with whom Nigel had at last a love relationship, and her sister. Ricardo wanted simply to attend this artiste's concert and had no interest in either of the two girls. He would have loved to have Edima with him in order to enjoy Lágbájá's performance even more. Nigel had started his relationship with Tokumboh partly under Ricardo's persuasion – since the latter had discovered that Tokumboh liked Nigel very much – but then quickly got tired of her, especially because of her continuous requests for money, in spite of the good salary she received from her Company. He then finally dropped her when she suddenly decided to cut her hair so short that her head looked like that of a boy.

Lágbájá however was not in his usual mood that day and his performance, to Nigel's and Ricardo's great dismay, was rather shoddy and boring; they were so annoyed that they left even earlier than planned. The second time they went, there were also other men with them, some good friends of Nigel, who were all teachers at the American School. When they arrived at Motherland, it was still early enough to find seats in a well-placed row with a good view of the stage. After a while a group of nice young Nigerian girls came into the row behind them. Among them was a girl who appeared around 17 to 19, who was absolutely the most beautiful, glamorous and enticing girl that Ricardo had ever seen in Nigeria: tall, slender, but plump in the right places, with striking features and vivid intelligent eyes.

When Lágbájá started his performance, the girls stood up and started dancing. Then Ricardo, who as usual felt no stupid complex and was the most enterprising in initiating a talk with Nigerians, especially with nice women, said something funny and she laughed, smiling warmly at him. He introduced himself. Once the ice was thus broken, all the other men wanted to introduce themselves and stake their claims to be selected as the preferred one, and pushed the girl to go towards the stage and dance in front of it. Initially she tried to decline their proposal, but under everybody's incitement she agreed willingly and danced magnificently in front of the whole audience under Lágbájá's amused eyes.

Lágbájá's performance this time was really superb and extremely

exciting. When the girl went back to her place, she thanked all those white men for their support, but reserved her best smile for Ricardo, who grasped her gently around her waist tight to himself and kissed her on her cheek. She looked pleased and amused that an 'oyinbo' should behave like that with her. When Ricardo's group decided to leave, the girls behind them – who on the contrary had every intention of going on enjoying the performance till its end, early the following morning – acclaimed them loudly and said goodbye to them very warmly. Ricardo – although he always kept in his heart the sweet memory of his beloved Edima – was sad not to have any chance to meet such a fabulous beauty again in his life.

On the other hand, Ricardo met Lynda again on several occasions. Since she was an educated young lady, a lover of theatre and the arts, he took her on two or three occasions to the concert at the Muson Centre. Every time he went there with her he felt very proud to be together with such a beauty – and he would have liked Antonio Mendoza to still be around so he could stir up his jealousy. All men's eyes were on her! And also on him, of course, as the guy who apparently (only apparently, alas!) was enjoying her favours. Lynda indeed was every time extremely attractive and altogether seductive: wearing fashionable dresses or nearly transparent trousers, with nice make-up and lovely hairstyles. Since he had chosen to go to the concert on Fridays – in order to be free to play golf on Saturdays – and the concert started at 7.30 p.m., he normally went straight from the office to fetch Lynda at her house in Apapa, so the car was driven by his driver, Sunday.

One of these times, after the concert, taking her back home, while being seated near Lynda on the rear seat of the car, Ricardo felt totally seduced by the nearness of her splendid body to his own and madly fascinated by her indisputable charms: he could not hold back and started kissing her dreamily, the more and more passionately as she responded to him, although half sleepy and not really conscious of what she was doing. However, he never went beyond the kisses of that particular night, because, although feeling undoubtedly attracted to him, she said in a friendly but frank way:

“Ricardo, I am looking for a *husband*, not for a lover. And you, *being already married*, cannot be a potential husband!”

However they became very good friends and Ricardo went to her house in Apapa several times, either on Saturdays or on Sundays,

just to have a pleasant chat and tea or a cold drink. She had indeed told him:

“Please, come and see me whenever you like!”

On one occasion, he met her mother who had come to pay her daughter a visit from Benin City, where Lynda’s parents lived. Chatting with this lady was not simple, because of her limited fluency in English and her relative reluctance to open herself in conversation with a foreigner, but Ricardo succeeded in talking with her a bit and could exchange some views and ideas. Lynda also invited him for lunch one Sunday. She had prepared a rather Nigerian meal (mainly rice with fish) that Ricardo only partially appreciated, as he hated fish skin, but for politeness did not reveal it.

A sad event happened that left all Nigeria dismayed at the news: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the great Nigerian artiste, a music composer and singer of rare strength and talent, died of AIDS. His life had been spent in a very disorderly way – he had an incredible number of wives, 27 of them married in one day, all together, and innumerable concubines – and making heavy use of drugs. Everybody knew it, but he was appreciated all over the world and Nigerians, of course, loved him. Ricardo felt very sorry not to ever have found the occasion to go to the place where he performed, pompously called ‘The Shrine’. It was however a rather dangerous place, full of smoke and hashish fumes (and with performances not starting until 2.00 a.m.) because the youths who frequented it were mainly drug addicts themselves and therefore did not usually like to see white people around. It was necessary, for this reason, to be well organised and in sufficiently large groups to prevent attacks.

Shortly after Fela, his niece Fram Kuboye died too. Ricardo felt extremely sorry and grieved for this death because he knew Fram and her husband Tunde rather well. He had gone many times to the ‘Club 38’ in Awolowo Road, Ikoyi, where they performed with their band, called ‘The Extended Family’. Fram was a dentist by profession and had been a very beautiful woman in her younger years, when Ricardo had first made her acquaintance - though now she had become big and matron-like, as well as rather solemn, wrapped as she was in a long loose robe. She sang very finely and attractively while Tunde played the bass.

Their music was a sort of Africanised jazz, with the strong presence of a typical African percussion section. One of their

favourite tunes – which always raised a lot of applause whenever Fram sang it with great intensity and glamour – was ‘Wahala’, which is a widely used slang word, meaning chaos or troubles. They were both very friendly and kind and used to embrace Ricardo warmly every time he attended their performances. But Ricardo had not gone to listen to them since they had moved, some months ago, from Ikoyi to the Victoria Island extension after Maroko, into a new purpose-designed building.

At last, Ricardo received a phone call from Edima. She was calling from the parish-house of a priest, the Reverend Benjamin Ajayi, who ran a church of the same denomination as the one she used to frequent in Lagos and who was kind enough to let her make external calls. She therefore gave Ricardo the telephone number of this priest so he could call her there on Fridays when she was having Bible lectures. Ricardo called her regularly to get news and her tales about her life and what she was doing. She told him that she was enjoying the regular religious meetings she had with the priest very much and was extremely attracted by the mystic life, so she had decided to devote her life to glorifying the Lord. When they met again, at Christmas, she did not want to make love to Ricardo, as she considered it a sin, but had to fight strenuously against her own wish in order not to do it. Lying on the bed in his hotel room, she asked him to “Come and lie on me, please!” and stayed under him a long time, enjoying the lovely and desired contact of his body on hers. Furthermore, the following day she wanted him to take her in his arms and stayed still, tightly embracing him, for a long while. She also said to him:

“Darling, I am convinced that *no* man will ever love me as much as *you* do.”

Ricardo, whose main concern was her happiness, not his own, said words that he had already said to her many times in Lagos:

“Edi, Little You, I owe you so much and *you are everything* for me. You are not only the woman I love, but also my virtual spouse, my sister, my mother ...”

She interrupted him gently:

“Your mother? ... How can I, when I am so much younger than you, be your mother?”

“Yes, my beloved, also my mother, because you made me be born again, you gave me a second birth, a new life that I started when I

first met you. As a matter of fact, you have rejuvenated me, you lifted almost twenty years from off my shoulders – if not more! Moreover, I learnt a lot from you. You quenched my thirst for knowledge! But, believe me, although I simply adore you, I wish with all my heart, on the contrary, that you will meet a man able to love you *more* than I do.”

But she replied, firmly and serenely, knowing perfectly that this was absolutely undeniable:

“That’s impossible.”

He obviously felt extremely flattered and touched by her statement, as he knew very well that his love for her was unmistakably immense.

When he was back in Nigeria, after the Christmas holidays were over, a very distinguished and glamorous young lady, elegantly dressed in modern western fashion, came to his office one afternoon to make a presentation for a company eager to be inserted in Ricardo’s Company vendors’ list. Ricardo felt deeply stirred by the loveliness and attractiveness of this girl: a real startling beauty, in the full sense of this word.

Although not black, but brown, more or less like the colour of a burnt cocoa bean, she was noticeably darker than those Nigerian young ladies for whom he had felt a deep love sentiment or particular tender attraction and were still full masters of his heart, Edima and Catherine. Also darker than Beatrice, Janet and Grace, but not as dark as Maude or Amina, Bunmi and Jill (the latter three were in fact rather ebony black). She had a very beautiful and interesting, finely regular face that was accurately and attractively made-up. Her eyes were large, dark-brown in colour and expressive, amply showing, besides bright intelligence and gusto for life and its offers, also shyness and genuineness, together with adroitness and independence. Her black hair was stretched shiny and left smooth and loose in a modern cut that was not long, but with a small knot at the back of her nape.

She was tall, slender and had a pair of long, slim and very nicely-shaped legs to make a man become crazy and cry about her. Their length and perfect shape, well-harmonised with her entire figure, were indeed really breathtaking. Ricardo had rarely seen such great perfection; rather often, in fact, slender African women have calves too thin – especially on the inner side of the leg – and because of

this their ankles and legs give the impression of being bandy, sometimes even when they are absolutely straight.

Once the official formalities were completed, Ricardo said to her:

“You have such beautiful, expressive eyes that I would like to see you again, out of office duties. Would you like to come and have dinner with me at home?”

She was obviously used to men’s admiration and desire. Sometimes, these feelings had also been verbally manifested with lovely sentences and kind expressions of real adulation. But, in her whole life, she had never received such a nice compliment by a man wishing to date her. Taken by surprise, she therefore asked, rather naïvely:

“When, ... this evening?”

Ricardo had not intended to invite her for that same evening; he had spoken in a general sense, having rather in mind one of the following days. But since she seemed to be available and free for that same day, he thought that it was better to make hay while the sun was shining and said to her enthusiastically:

“Well, ... yes, this evening, ... is that OK for you?”

She said: “It is OK for me, but let me just go home and change my dress. I do not want to come to your place and have dinner with you dressed like this. I consider this dress suitable only for office hours, not for going out in the evening and having dinner in a friend’s house. Allow me therefore to be dressed more formally and adequately.”

Ricardo tried to say that he could not see any problem with her dress and he deemed it perfectly suitable for a tête-à-tête dinner in his house, but he found her very determined to change it. So, he obviously had to agree (also because it was still too early to go home immediately) and arranged that she should come back to his office later on, so that he could take her home. She went away and Ricardo promptly phoned home to inform Benoît that he was going to have a guest for dinner. Luckily, Benoît was still working in the house, so he could speak to him and advise him about it with no delay.

Though he was very excited at the thought of seeing her shortly after, he succeeded in going on with his work. A couple of hours later, as promised, she returned to his office wearing an elegant ensemble furthermore enhancing her beauty, as well as the splendid shape and the preciousness of her silhouette: a smart sweater and a miniskirt, which gave – to Ricardo’s sincere, profound admiration

and exultation – even higher prominence to the rare and graceful perfection of her legs. A real triumph for Ricardo’s astonished gaze to admire! He wondered whether her need to change her dress was somehow or other dictated by the desire to let him notice what a fashionable woman she was and to make a good impression on him (having as well, as a consequence, perhaps also a secret aim to fascinate him). They left together for his house.

During the trip, the young lady told Ricardo that her full name was Vivian Isakyio Odali. She was a 28-year-old Ijaw woman and had a singular peculiarity that connected her with Ricardo: she was from Nembe and during her youth she had lived in Brass. Ricardo had been to both Nembe and Brass in the past and felt particularly happy to be able to tell her that he knew both places. As a matter of fact, he had travelled on the river from Brass to Nembe, together with the NAOC Ltd.’s managing director and the ambassadors of Spain and Italy, by a service boat belonging to a divers’ Company working for NAOC. The Mingi of Nembe, the local King, received them there. Ricardo interrogated Vivian:

“Maybe, you were among the young people and children who were dancing in front of the Oba’s Palace to welcome us?”

But she replied that she was not in Nembe at that time. Her father, formerly a Mobil employee, had already died and now her mother was living in Warri with her younger sister, Stella. Ricardo asked her:

“Do you know that Stella in Italian means star? In Spanish, my language, it is slightly different: in fact, we say *estrella*.”

She replied that she knew it, because she had studied and learnt some Italian as autodidact. Vivian also had another sister, the eldest, who was married to an Army officer and lived in Lagos. There wasn’t however a very good mutual understanding and harmony between her and her elder sister.

To Ricardo’s sincere astonishment, since she was so beautiful, Vivian was single and – at the age of 28! – did not even have a boyfriend. He openly wondered how it was possible that, in Nigeria, beauties like her (and Lynda, as well) were blamefully ignored and left alone by the male populace, who did not appear eager, as he would expect, to fall in love with them and conquer their heart for an everlasting bond, leading to a possible marriage. Such great negligence towards the charms of a splendid woman was in Ricardo’s opinion a real crime and a culpable waste of precious

resources (he certainly could not behave like that!); unless it was a matter of women's refusal to concede themselves to men they considered unworthy of them, or of the bridal dowry that men would have to pay to have them being too high. This however would be strange because, in Africa, beauty in a woman is not really considered as an essential quality more important or more to seek for and reward than health, strength, easy subjugation, docility and mild temper to make her more valuable in the eyes of her parents and more requested by potential bridegrooms.

Whatever the reason, and although she looked rather inaccessible, Ricardo quickly reached the decision to launch his attack and try his hand at seducing her. Should this lovely creature indeed accept and appreciate his courting, he would be delighted to be allowed to pick such an enchanting flower blooming, and so luckily offered, in the wonderful and rich garden of Nigeria.

When they arrived at Ricardo's house he gave the driver, as usual, the newspaper of the day. Then, after entering the house, he dropped his briefcase and some other papers in his room; eventually, he went back to the living room where he had installed Vivian and continued the conversation he had started with her.

Vivian was living in Aja, after Victoria Gardens Estate on Lekky Peninsula (the extension of the Lagos district of Victoria Island towards Epe) which was very far from Ricardo's house. So, after dinner, Ricardo – worrying about the possibility for her of getting rapid transport back home – suggested she spend the night at his house. Realising that he was right about the difficulty of finding a bus at that time of the evening and about the risk of arriving at her house really very late at night, she agreed and accepted his proposition. Ricardo prepared the second bedroom of his flat for her.

The following morning she asked him whether he could lend her a pair of trousers because she wanted to go to her office wearing different clothes. He gave her his white jeans with white elastic belt, which fitted her nicely and made her look sufficiently smart – though in spite of her assurances these white jeans and matching belt were never returned to him. On the way to work, he dropped her off near her own office.

Vivian was back at his house that same evening and so Ricardo understood he had aroused a strong interest in her towards him, as well as that a bridge was in this way being built. He therefore warmly

welcomed her and kissed her passionately. She responded fully to his kiss. At night, they slept together and made love. Vivian had a marvellous, straight figure: tall and slender, very well shaped, she did not have the sort of big posterior common among Nigerian women, but a round, well-proportioned and nicely formed – firm and high, not flabby at all – buttocks with long, nice and smooth behind, lovely upright dome-shaped breasts with right-sized mushroom-like nipples always pointing out, and an attractively flat belly.

Although she was already 28, Vivian's heaving high breasts – really magnificent, of a rare perfection: right-sized, plump and fleshy, but stiff like big soft peaches – were so steady and hard, like those of a teenager, that very often she did not wear a bra at all: in fact, such a garment was totally useless on her. She also had long, full, well-shaped thighs and, generally speaking, her perfect body was nicely muscled and strong. It turned out that in her youth she had practised – although at amateur level – competitive athletics at length and this had largely contributed to building up and giving her a marvellous and superbly shaped body, which was really splendid and exceedingly attractive and desirable, because of its opulent beauty.

Unlike Edima and Catherine, she did not make an exaggerated use of creams but, on the contrary, she had ample recourse to talc, with which she sprinkled all her body in great abundance especially after a shower. So her skin was rather mat, but with a natural glow that rendered it similar to velvet and very pleasant to look at and touch.

Vivian showed herself as having a very particular sexual habit that rather surprised Ricardo: she needed to masturbate herself in order to attain orgasm. And she did not allow her partner to perform it for her: Ricardo was certainly willing to manipulate or lick her in order to let her enjoy the interlude and come, but she constantly refused his intervention – as though she considered it as an undue interference – and wanted to do it herself, all alone. She used to do it even while being entered, because her maximum excitation and consequent pleasure were totally at the level of her clitoris – which she rubbed by an incredibly fast movement of her finger – and not inside her vagina.

This of course embarrassed and disturbed Ricardo quite noticeably during copulation, because her hand inserted between their bodies tended to keep them apart from one another and so partially hinder deep penetration, as well as diminishing the pleasure of the mutual

contact and friction between their lower abdomens.

Moreover, her preference of sexual act was, by far, in favour of fellatio, partly because she could masturbate herself while practising it. She used to do it very frequently; often in the evening, as soon as Ricardo arrived home from the office, or when she was back from her own or her sister's house or from the market or hair-dresser or, later, while watching TV: she would quickly approach Ricardo to undo the zip of his trousers and, taking his penis with both her hands, pull it out. Her preferred moment to do it was however first thing in the morning. She was fond of sucking it nearly every day, with intense application and real pleasure, as soon as they awoke. Since she liked it so much, Ricardo asked her to bite it too – as he had done so successfully and pleasantly with Catherine. But Vivian, being less adventurous than Catherine in acquiring new experiences and too fearful of doing him harm, always refused to do it and never even wanted to try.

Vivian also liked very much to kiss him on his chest and to suck his rather prominent nipples. Although men's nipples are not so well supplied with blood and have many fewer nerve endings, and therefore cannot give the same erogenous sensations as women's, he greatly enjoyed this gesture of hers which clearly indicated fondness for his body.

Vivian started going to Ricardo's house every week and spending four or five straight days there. Although they immediately found a perfect mutual understanding – they certainly liked each other a lot – and a very good physical accord, it is difficult to say if their relationship implied a real sound romance. Ricardo never said "I love you" to Vivian as long as they stayed together (that is up to the eve of his departure from Nigeria for good) or addressed her with the sweet adjective 'darling', as the thought of Edima (his only 'darling') and desire for her were too strong and always present in his mind.

Vivian however accepted this situation. Edima's portraits were in fact in full view on the table in his bedroom and she never requested that Ricardo remove them – or reveal the real nature and consistency of his feelings for her. She just kept tacitly and gently to his own behaviour, and also herself never said to Ricardo, "I love you," or similar tender expressions.

In Ricardo's house, Vivian got into the habit of ironing her garments

in the small TV parlour. She used to do it totally naked. Nude, she was absolutely splendid and her charms shone at the highest level. On those occasions, Ricardo couldn't but silently admire her impressive, statuesque beauty: she appeared in fact so perfect, really superb, that he enjoyed a lot staring at her terribly attractive and tempting nakedness. Sometimes however he felt totally overwhelmed by her attractiveness and could not refrain from expressing to her in very warm and enthusiastic terms the unlimited admiration he had for the prettiness of her face and the sumptuous splendour of her magnificent body. Vivian accepted his compliments willingly, reacting with a gracious move and a satisfied smile, full of gratitude for the kind and passionate words he had been using to her.

A couple of months after the start of their relationship, Vivian was dismissed by her Company on no official grounds. In reality, Vivian had become disliked by the wife of her chairman – who was herself also working as PR in the firm – because of her vivid intelligence and her perfect and glamorous elegance in dressing (she used to change her dress every day and her clothes were always perfectly ironed and fitted beautifully) which constantly outdid her, thus putting her in the shade vis-à-vis the other employees. Moreover, she had discovered an affair existing between her general manager and a lady customer, inadvertently entering his office and catching them making love, and this had raised his resentment against her. Ricardo decided to allocate Vivian the sum of 5,000 Naira a week to meet her needs and personal expenditure (whilst the salary she got from her Company had only been 5,000 Naira a month).

After a while, Vivian, although she was not a Catholic, started going with Ricardo to the Mass celebrated on Sundays at the Apostolic Nunciature and on a couple of occasions she also urged her sister Stella, when she was in Lagos, to go with them. She believed that God could be worshipped and praised in any church and she was eager to do it whenever possible. She also had a strange way of praying: in the morning, after having made love to Ricardo, she went into the other room or into the TV parlour and prayed at length, for about 20 to 30 minutes, in a sort of sung declamation that she vividly addressed to the Almighty in a very loud voice.

One Saturday afternoon she asked Ricardo insistently to take her to Eko Hotel to have a drink with her at the bar beside the swimming pool. Her real aim however was different: she knew very

well that a photographer was permanently there waiting to snap pictures of customers, and she absolutely wanted to have some nice photographs of herself with Ricardo. Though Ricardo claimed that he was not particularly photogenic, they let that photographer snap four or five photographs of them. When they got them, Ricardo had to admit that they were very nice: as a matter of fact, he came out not too bad and fully acceptable, while Vivian appeared in all her glamorous beauty. Vivian was delighted to have these pictures for herself as a tangible souvenir of her relationship – which she lived with joy and intense pleasure – with a man that she certainly liked very much.

One evening they were both invited to dinner by a common friend, Alfredo Lopez, who lived in Elsie Femi Pearse Street, not far from Ricardo's residence. In his house, among a dozen people, they unexpectedly found Eunice Fowlkes, who they had not realised knew Alfredo too. She was there alone, without the usual presence of her escort, the Counsellor of Spain, chaperoning her. Eunice was very happy to meet Ricardo on this occasion, as she did not know anybody else and was unable or unwilling to get to know the other guests. As always, Eunice immediately tried to seduce him; then, noticing the particular care Ricardo had for Vivian, asked him whether she was his girlfriend. At his positive answer, she doubled at first her efforts to conquer his attention, but then – being probably discouraged by his unresponsive attitude – eventually had to admit that Vivian was very glamorous. At the end of the party, before leaving, Eunice even congratulated him on being in love with such a beauty.

In spite of the existence of other women marking his life, Ricardo never ceased bearing only Edima at the very centre of his heart and was constantly thinking of her. He missed her enormously. Whether Vivian was in his house or not, he often called Edima on the phone to get news of her and open his heart to her very passionately, expressing to her frankly and tenderly all the love he felt for her.

One day Ricardo's friend Julio asked him:

“That girl you introduced to me once, at the concert hall, is she your girlfriend?”

“Yes, she is. She is a wonderful Efik girl, but alas she has left Nigeria. She is in Europe, now, and – in spite of her wish to be with me – she does not intend to come back here. And, I confess it

frankly: I miss her tremendously. But, though she is absolutely unique and irreplaceable and is my only real sweetheart, I had the luck however not to remain alone for long. There is indeed a splendid Edo girl who loves me and pines for me and, as it happens, I recently met and started a relationship with an Ijaw girl, another very beautiful young Nigerian woman.”

“Well, I just want to inform you that I, too, now have an African girlfriend. She is from Sierra Leone and is really marvellous!”

Ricardo said: “I am happy for you. These young African ladies undoubtedly are splendid and fabulous women and are sumptuously passionate lovers, indeed; moreover, they adore being in love with a white man. And, from my experience at least, I must also say that when they are fond of a man, they deeply and sincerely love him.”

Julio came back:

“You know, I have already known this girl for a long time, as she came to work in my house as my wife’s hairdresser, but I never imagined I could have a relationship with her. Then, suddenly, one evening when my wife had travelled to Spain, with the help of my nanny, Monique – who organised the whole affair – I went out for dinner with her and the whole story started. And now I can’t help it, I’m in love and cannot get rid of this sentiment for her. And she, who would like to go back to her country, Sierra Leone, says that she is only staying here for me.”

Because Ricardo had been so happy with Edima, he felt very glad that his friend could have a similar love experience and therefore begin loving Africa as much as he loved it himself. Now, they had one more – and more interesting by far – item to add to the usual topics touched in their conversations: their respective admiration for this wonderful continent likely to offer them such precious gifts. After some time, however, Ricardo received a very alarmed call from Monique (whose own love affair with Carlos was in the meantime happily on again). She asked him:

“Do you know that my master has a relationship with a Sierra Leonean girl?”

Ricardo said: “Yes, he told me about it.”

“What you don’t know, because Julio is unaware of it as well, is that she is only staying with him for his money. She confessed it to me in a moment of open frankness and sincerity. In fact, he is spending a lot of money on her. She has slept however with many of your friends. Hugo Garcia has even made love to her on Julio’s bed.

I feel very concerned and I worry about my master's behaviour and fate."

Ricardo could not believe that this was true. Although Hugo was a very close friend of Julio, in order to use Julio's bed to make love to a woman he would have to be let into the house by Monique herself, and this was quite unrealistic as she was too serious and faithful to Julio and his wife. Even under pressure by Hugo, she would not have allowed him to use Julio's bedroom. Only if Julio himself had granted Hugo access to his house, or left the keys with him during his absences from Lagos, would Hugo have had full and free use of Julio's bed. Monique anyhow added hastily:

"There is also a young Sierra Leonean man who declares that he is her boyfriend and who is making a lot of noise and causing troubles, threatening to go and tell everything to Julio's managing director! Since you are a good and sincere friend of Julio, can you please intervene and try to dissuade him from going on with this relationship?"

Ricardo felt terribly sorry and worried for this sad event in Julio's love affair, but he knew very well that he could hardly succeed in performing such a hideous task. Anyhow, he promised:

"I have very little hope of being successful, but I'll try my best."

However, when he had the chance to talk to Julio and broached the subject of their respective girlfriends, he found Julio very determined to pursue his relationship. He therefore did not have the heart to discourage and frustrate him, by telling him what he had happened to learn about Julio's affair. Perhaps there may have been something true in Monique's tale because when Ricardo met the usual group of friends they all complained about Julio's misfortune in having a romance with that girl. In their opinion, only he could see it as marvellous and gratifying. From what they told Ricardo, it was evident that they were perfectly aware of what they were saying, and knew the girl in question very well. But perhaps they might have been wrong or too severe in their judgement: the girl, in fact, despite her previous experiences and adventures, could very well have become fond of Julio once she got to know him.

Owing to his good nature, Ricardo was ready to accord her at least the benefit of doubt. Anyhow, this story doubled his firm belief that he had been particularly lucky in having been in love with Edima, who was certainly not the kind of girl about whom this sort of gossip could be built up. Nevertheless, Julio continued his love

story, travelled several times to Freetown in Sierra Leone with his girlfriend and even met her brother there. Ricardo had no way of judging the girl and her behaviour, or the truth of Monique's and his friends' reports, because he did not know her and never met her. He once offered Julio to go out together with their respective girlfriends: should Julio have been willing to implement the proposal, and given that Edima was now abroad, he would have taken Vivian – or Catherine – with him. But Julio replied that the girl he was staying with was very shy and reserved and was extremely careful that nobody should see them together. He always had to select small, unknown restaurants and to drive the car himself when taking her out, as she did not even want the driver to see her together with him, as, she used to say:

“Drivers always gossip about their masters and what they do, when they meet.”

Julio was really very fond of her and told Ricardo that he wanted to take her to Europe and even had the vague thought of getting a divorce and marrying her. When Ricardo left Nigeria for good, Julio's affair with that Sierra Leonean girl was still on.

A friend of Edima, Patience Müller, a young Nigerian woman originating from Bayelsa State (one of the most recently born Nigerian States, formed by a partition of Rivers State) and married to a German, came from Germany to Lagos on holiday. She was given a lot of letters by Edima, that Ricardo had to take care to distribute to her mother, brother and sisters, as well as to the church she used to frequent and relevant nuns and, of course, to keep for himself (three of them, written at different dates, were addressed to him). Ricardo therefore invited Patience for lunch in order to receive Edima's parcel. When she went to his flat, he did not like her. He found her trivial. She talked about her life as a married woman in Europe and of how she hoped to get German citizenship soon and relevant papers. She then told Ricardo that she wanted to find a boyfriend to make love to and at Ricardo's astonished exclamation:

“But you are *married!*”

She explained: “Yes, but my husband is in Europe, so I need someone to make love to while I am here. And, obviously, not to an African man; I want a white man, because African men do not like to lick a woman's vulva, and I wish that the man I make love to

does perform this sort of sensual sexual action on me. It is so exciting and pleasant and I avow that I like voluptuous kisses on my intimate parts very much.” Patience also added: “You know, I am teaching my little brother – who is very eager to make love to a white woman – that this is an important issue which he has to understand, but he is still very reluctant to accept that he has to perform it.”

This was a new lesson for Ricardo about African customs and behaviour, which he did not know at all. As a matter of fact, he was, on the contrary, absolutely convinced that African men were very fond of practising lascivious intimate kissing on their women, at least as a prelude to penetration. Patience then asked Ricardo to find a man for her among his friends, but she gave him the impression, by some well-calculated words that she let drop, that she was thinking about himself. Ricardo, who did not like her, did not offer her the slightest hope in that sense. However, some ten days later, it was a Friday, Patience called him:

“Tomorrow I’ll come to your place in order to have dinner with you.”

He could not refuse, as he had to give her a parcel to take to Edima when she travelled back to Germany. But he thought: ‘If she finds me alone here, I’m lost; she will certainly attack me and it will be very difficult to let her come to reason!’ He therefore not only asked Vivian to join the party, but also worked hard, that same day and the following one, to find a male friend willing to come to his house that Saturday evening and have dinner with him and two Nigerian ladies. Unfortunately, all the bachelors he spoke to were already engaged and could not accept his invitation or, in one way or another, refused with an excuse. He was therefore compelled to welcome her, on her arrival in the evening, saying:

“I tried to have a man attending our dinner, but was unable to find anyone.”

She had come in her brother’s car, but he had simply dropped her at Ricardo’s gate and driven away. It was therefore very evidently her intention to spend the night at Ricardo’s, and her face showed all her displeasure at finding another woman present in his house. During the meal, Ricardo openly showed a lot of interest in Vivian, in order to discourage Patience and make her understand that there was no chance for her. Learning the lesson, Patience asked Ricardo at the end of the dinner whether his driver could take her back to Ikeja,

even though it was late to pass the various security gates. Ricardo called for Sunday, then, at the moment of saying goodbye to her – and feigning to have misunderstood what she wanted exactly – said to her:

“I’m sorry I was unable to get a man for you.”

But this time she was no longer determined to hide her precise wish and replied, dryly, even sharply and leaving no room for any possible doubt:

“It is *you* I wanted!”

Out it came. Bingo: he had guessed rightly! So, this was her hidden aim! He was therefore confirmed in his belief and was happy to have avoided her advances. In fact, he was convinced that Patience found him interesting just because she knew that he was Edima's lover that Edima, though now living in Europe, loved so much and still kept close in her heart. Since she was a malignant woman, she had therefore probably decided to seduce him for two reasons. The first was to have the possibility to test for herself Edima's lover's performance in bed and to tell her maliciously, after her return to Germany, that her boyfriend was not that faithful to her; the second was to boast with her that she, Patience, was so terribly attractive and seductive that she had induced Edima's man to make love to her. Apart from personally disliking this lady, Ricardo absolutely did not want to give her any victory of pride over Edima. Edima was the superb being, the only really seductive one; in comparison with her, all other women hardly existed.

In a long letter to Edima (6 full pages!) that he handed to Patience to take to Germany on her return there, Ricardo had reserved a great and totally unexpected surprise for his beloved. An Ibibio secretary in his office, coming from Akwa Ibom State, the Nigerian territorial district adjacent to Cross River State, had told him that ‘I love you’, in her native language, translates as ‘Muma fien’ and that Efik people normally used the same expression. Ricardo then had framed every second page of his letter, all round the four edges of each of them, with the words ‘Muma fien – Muma fien – Muma fien,’ and so on and, alternately, round the remaining three pages, with the sentence ‘I love you’, written consecutively in eight different European languages: Spanish, Portuguese, French, Italian, English, German, Dutch and Swedish. He could have written it in Turkish too, since he knew it (the only sentence he knew in this eastern language) but he did not, since it would have been too hard for

Edima – who did not know it – to catch whether it was a sentence in a language that really existed, albeit unknown, or in a fake, totally invented one.

Two weeks after Patience's departure to Germany, one Monday morning very early, at 6.00 a.m., the telephone-bell in his room started ringing. He was still deeply asleep and at first did not realise that it was the telephone, its ring matching perfectly with his dream. But the ring continued at length and he realised at last that it was something different from the dream he was having, it was reality. He jumped from the bed, hoping with all his heart that it was not bad news coming from home – since it was too early for a normal call – or the usual impolite disturbing person, as many other times had happened. Nigerians in fact have the habit of calling at any time of day or night, very frequently making errors while dialling the desired number and most of the time they do not apologise when they are told that the number they have called is wrong. He managed to clear his voice, to a normal tone, and said:

“Hello!”

Then he heard Edima's cherished voice at the other end of the line. Ricardo however did not have time to rejoice at hearing her. She was extremely upset and was screaming aloud, with evident anger and, maybe, even hatred:

“Ricardo (she had to be really furious not to use the usual, so tender and familiar ‘darling’) you are a traitor, a rascal. You betrayed me! You always asserted I was the only woman you loved and now you have another girlfriend! I do not want to hear from you *any more*, I *do not want you* any more!”

But in truth, beside the anger, there was in her voice also the sounds of weeping and disappointment at his ‘betrayal’, with real sorrow and despair for a love maybe lost. Although he was mortified and, as a consequence, had difficulty in finding suitable words, she did not even give him the time to reply and try to justify himself; she hung up.

Ricardo felt as if the whole world had collapsed on him. He was literally destroyed. His brain was worm-eaten by an awful thought ‘*His* Edima did not want *him* any more!’ This was evidently Patience's vengeance against Ricardo for having refused her: she had certainly told Edima that he had a relationship with another girl! And, although it had been for Ricardo a calculated risk that he had to run – as it was always better than letting Patience boast in front of

Edima of a personal success with him – her retaliation had hit the target firmly and successfully.

For the entire week he could only brood and brood again in his mind about the terrible verdict Edima had delivered: to him, it sounded worse than a capital sentence! He was in anguish and extremely sad. Luckily, the Saturday of that same week was Saint Valentine's day. On the eve, he hoped with all his strength that something nice would happen. The following morning, punctually at 6.00 a.m., he was woken again by the ringing of the telephone-bell. He jumped hurriedly out of the bed with his heart leaping and beating hard and fast in his chest, went to the other end of the room barefoot – as he had not had the time to put his slippers on – and, stretching out his hand to grasp the telephone receiver and hold it once more to his ear, said in frantic haste:

'Hello!'

Again, to his enormous joy and relief, Edima's voice softly shrilled, nearly singing, at the other end of the line:

"Happy Saint Valentine's, darling!"

Ricardo felt immediately pervaded with great and sincere joy and happiness: she was back to *him*, she was *his* Edima again! He replied joyfully:

"Edi, my love, happy Saint Valentine's to you, as well!"

Then, not wanting her to waste too much money on a long conversation, added hurriedly:

"Little You, I'm going to call you this evening. I have a lot of things to explain to you. But believe me, I love you!"

She answered:

"I love you too, darling. Call me soonest!"

After hanging up, he was in a totally different mood than when he had gone to bed the previous evening. How wonderful, he still had *her* love! That day seemed brighter and everything appeared in a different light and more acceptable; even the most heavy and disagreeable office task. In the evening he called her and told her about his meetings with Patience, her behaviour and the tricks he had to put in place to defend himself from her desire for him.

Edima was surprised, but only to a certain extent, to learn how devilish Patience's behaviour had been, with her open attempt to seduce Ricardo, and approved the latter's manoeuvre to ward off her blow. She said to Ricardo that she should have expected something

like that on Patience's part and warned him about this possibility of treachery, since Patience was a sly and rather selfish woman. Ricardo obviously passed over the role played by Vivian and did not tell Edima that they were already practically living together and regularly making love.

Edima probably suspected they were doing it, but preferred not to go back to this topic again. She was happy to know that Ricardo's love for her had not changed at all and she was contented by the fact that, according to his own declaration, she was still his Queen, the 'only one' in his heart and thoughts. After all, sentiments counted for her much more than physical experiences, and if Ricardo slept with another girl it was not so terribly important provided that his heart was still hers. To maintain her pre-eminent position in his heart was enough for her. Besides, she knew well enough that she was somehow guilty herself, as she had refused to make love to him the last time they had met.

Ricardo swore that he had only her in his heart and in his mind and, by saying this, he was absolutely sincere, because he – despite Vivian's constant presence near him now – missed Edima extremely. Certainly, if she had still been in Nigeria he would not have started any intimate relationship with another woman, even in spite of Vivian's beauty, attractive character and nice behaviour towards him.

8.

Bound to leave, alas!

Spaniards and South Americans like parties very much and never missed an excuse to gather in somebody's house for joyous and convivial dancing and singing, besides obviously eating and drinking. Ricardo was often invited to such gatherings and participated with pleasure in them. Once he took Vivian with him too and her friend Roselyn. They were splendidly made-up and dressed and had a great success with their charms and their skill in dancing, though after some initial hesitation and embarrassment, as men did not want to appear vis-à-vis the other ladies (their wives, all white) to be launching themselves immediately on these two *black* beauties. Vivian, who had a magnificent hairdo with broad braids wound in helicoids which suited her tremendously well and was extremely attractive, was particularly courted by most men attending the party.

The most exciting parties to which Ricardo was invited were however two masked feasts organised by Italian friends that Ricardo went to alone. One was held in the house of the managing director of NAOC Ltd. and the other in the house of his deputy. On the first occasion, Ricardo disguised himself very simply as a Mexican 'campesino' (peasant) by drawing long side-whiskers and a thick drooping moustache on his face with a burnt cork. His disguise was completed by an enormous straw hat, borrowed from some friends and worn as if it were a real 'sombrero' (although, in reality, it was African) a folded-up variegated blanket (not Mexican, but Paraguayan) brought over one shoulder as a 'poncho', a discoloured brown shirt, brown trousers with rolled up lower edges and a pair of sandals.

But there were people with very nice and fanciful costumes: one professor of the Italian school had disguised himself as a Japanese

geisha; a geologist of the Company as an American Indian with a nice dress and a fantastic feather diadem. Unfortunately, however, he had not wanted to shave off his silver-greyish beard, thus making an improbable redskin, since, in truth, wearing a pointed beard was not a typical facial feature of Red Indians; he would have certainly been more credible as a Buffalo Bill in his old age, when he used to tour America and Europe with his western circus to show to astonished and enthusiastic spectators cowboys' and Indians' dexterity in dealing with wild horses and bulls. Three or four guests, dressed like Alhajis, were distributing packets of fake dollars made with a photocopier, on which they had portrayed themselves in the place of Lincoln, Hamilton, Jackson, Grant, Franklin, and so on. The ladies were mainly dressed as Arabic odalisques. Certainly, the wives of the various guests had worked a lot to cut and sew all those fancy dresses.

At the second party, Ricardo went dressed in a colourful original Igbo agbada, which was a gift he had received from a Nigerian friend. He tried to persuade Vivian to attend it with him, but she refused lest she was the only black lady present there and, being too shy, she preferred to stay at home, waiting for his return in the heart of the night. There were some 'Sinbad the sailor' characters, several Alhajis, while a certain number of people, men and women, including the hosts, had disguised themselves as primary school pupils, with uniforms, smocks and big fancifully knotted coloured ribbons.

The most original of all was however Mr. Umberto Montezemolo, an Italian mining engineer, a little older than Ricardo. They had met sometimes at the parties organised at the Italian Embassy and also, on Sundays, at the seaside, at Tarkwa Bay or Eleko Beach; and later on they would become good friends. This gentleman arrived at the very climax of the feast disguised as an African public prosecutor, with black hue on his face and hands, wearing a genuine white wig, jabot and black robe borrowed from a colleague in the legal department of his Company and small glasses put half-way down his nose, looking like a lorgnette or pince-nez. He had under his armpit a lot of files and rang a hand-bell to call for attention; then he opened the various files and started reading funny fictional personalized accusations for each of the guests, invariably terminating with a sentence, which in most cases was a capital one:

"Death! ... Death!"

He was really very humorous – especially in pronouncing the final sentence – and everybody was ecstatically amused. Someone filmed the scene with a video-camera and they all laughed a lot.

Ricardo made the acquaintance of a mixed Nigerian family, half Yoruba, half Igbo, made up of a middle-aged widow of a superintendent of police, Mrs. Floss Kanu, and her three children. Being fervent Catholics, they were parishioners of the Church of the Assumption at Falomo, Ikoyi. Like Ricardo, they used also to attend regularly the Mass at the Apostolic Nunciature. She was a Yoruba woman from the already-mentioned town of Epe, in Lagos State, while her late husband was an Igbo man originating from a village in the vicinity of Umuahia, capital town of Abia State (a State created in the mid 1980s, formed by partition from Imo State, with its capital located east of Owerri, on the road between Aba and Enugu).

Ricardo became a good friend of this charming and amicable lady and, in particular, of her eldest daughter, a very nice girl of 19 named Dakky. He had indeed been noticing for a long time this beautiful, tall and slender girl with a nicely-shaped plump bosom, dressed most of the time in national attire and more rarely in sweater and jeans, who followed the celebration of the Mass very attentively and seriously, regularly taking Holy Communion every Sunday. Because of her always serious and rather grave face and composed attitude, which made her appear much older than she was, he had been totally unable to guess her age. Ricardo did not have an opportunity to exchange a word or a gesture with her until they found themselves close to one another on the occasion of a very crowded and extremely long celebration in the Church of the Assumption. Recognising each other, they exchanged a wink and a nod, but even then Ricardo could not talk to her because she left before the end of the celebration.

The following Sunday, however, he approached her shamelessly at the end of the Mass at the Nunciature while she was collecting all the hymn-books left on the chairs by the worshippers who had attended it, to put them in order in a special cabinet. He said in a cheerful tone:

“You always look so terribly grave. Why are you so serious, don’t you ever smile?”

She did not expect him – a white man, really unbelievable: for her,

one of those haughty, reserved and inaccessible ‘oyinbos’! – to talk to her and was totally unprepared to receive such a question. She therefore joyfully gave him her most open and charming smile. Outside, he was walking towards his car after having talked to friends and acquaintances and having undergone the usual assault of the beggars seeking for alms, without noticing that she was still around, when she approached him and asked him audaciously (though, as he had so kindly spoken to her first, showing openly his nice nature, he would then certainly not ‘eat’ her; and so there was no harm in trying):

“Excuse me, sir, would you mind giving my mother a lift home? She has an aching ankle and would be happy not to have to walk.”

Ricardo was not in a hurry and therefore willingly agreed to take all the family home. They lived not far from Anifowoshe Street, where the Apostolic Nunciature was, in a flat of a large complex belonging to the Army in front of Bonny Camp on Ahmadu Bello Way. When they arrived there, Floss invited Ricardo to go up to their flat and have a drink.

The flat was small – a parlour, a very small kitchen and a bedroom where the whole family slept, and a bathroom – simple and clearly showing lack of wealth, as both the sofa and the armchairs were old and their upholstery evidently needed a good restoration. But it was dignified: clean and provided with luxury items, such as a colour TV and a big stereo set. There were many long-playing records ranged on the shelf. A big rectangular electric clock and a framed picture of the Holy Virgin hung on the walls of the parlour, as well as three calendars with colourful pictures and different Companies’ logos.

Ricardo was not particularly surprised to find three different calendars (all of that same year) in their parlour, because calendars have the same function for Nigerians as paintings, pieces of tapestry and other wall decorations, as well as knick-knacks, for Europeans, and are used generally to adorn and beautify their homes. They are therefore eager to receive as many calendars as possible and they don’t mind filling their living rooms, bedrooms and kitchens with them. Ricardo tried to refuse, but was obliged to accept a soft drink. They wanted very much to return the courtesy he showed by transporting them home. He had a long, amicable chat with Floss and Dakky. They appeared literally enchanted to make the close acquaintance of such a friendly and open ‘oyinbo’, who demonstrated so clearly his freedom from stupid racial taboos.

Floss, after the death in service of her husband, had been given a job in the Ministry of Defence, but her salary was very low, about 1,300 Naira per month, a real absurdity taking into account the current cost of living in Lagos. Despite the very small amount of money at her disposal, she had managed to bring up her children very well and Dakky and her brother were about to pass the exams for admission to the University. Dakky had been working for a couple of months as the liquor vendor at Sunaina Plaza, a Lebanese store on Adeola Odeku Street, near the beginning of Anifowoshe Street, and later on was moved to clerk in the CD-Rom department. Her brother had just started a new job at 'Pay-Less 2'. When Ricardo was about to leave, Floss invited him to pay them a visit at any time when it was convenient for him. He promised he would and – after giving Dakky his address and home and office telephone numbers – drove home.

Later on, that same day, Dakky went to Ricardo's residence and, explaining that she was totally broke, asked him whether he could help her financially. He gave her 1,500 Naira. They became real bosom friends. Both Floss and Dakky very often had recourse to him to get his advice on things they had to do, since they really considered him their best and closest friend and appreciated very much his 'wisdom' – he always protested that he was simply using common sense – and also for some stringent financial necessities they were unable to afford.

One Sunday, strolling alone on the beach at Tarkwa Bay, Ricardo had a totally unexpected meeting, chancing on Beatrice Amenobi, who saw him first and rushed towards him. He had not thought about her for a very long time and was therefore very surprised to see her there. She had gone to the beach with a very young girl and she introduced her to Ricardo as her little sister. This little girl, who appeared about 10, was astonishingly beautiful and looked – by the features of her face and her overall appearance – more like a dark Tuareg than a black African. She had indeed a light complexion – much lighter even than Beatrice herself – and even had a very light coloured, nearly blond, lock of hair at the top of her head.

Ricardo greeted Beatrice very warmly and she was really happy to see him; they tenderly hugged one another and told each other what had happened since the last time they had met and Beatrice, in particular, said that when she had come to Ricardo's house and saw from the gate that there was a young woman with him, she

understood he had a girlfriend and did not want to come again for fear of disturbing him.

They spent around one hour together, since there was nobody else with Beatrice, apart from her sister. They also played a little while bathing in the sea and Ricardo showed her every consideration by treating her with affection, very warmly and ceremoniously. And intimately, as well. When it was time for Ricardo to go, Beatrice's sister, who had remained on the shore, followed after him, asking him insistently to give her some money, but Ricardo – rather annoyed at such an inopportune and vexing request – replied:

“Are you not ashamed, at your tender age, to ask a man you never saw before to give you money? Shame on you, you are not a beggar in dire need!”

And went away, leaving the little girl dumbfounded for not receiving anything from him. After that sudden short occasion, he never met Beatrice again.

Another nice surprise that Ricardo got was the sudden courtesy visit paid to him by Laurence, the young man who had worked as driver for him for some months many years ago. Laurence, as a matter of fact, called unexpectedly at his house one Saturday afternoon, just when Ricardo was about to depart for the Golf Club to play golf with his friends. Ricardo was really happy to see him and hear that he was well, though not very happy with his current job. Laurence was a very nice and kind young man and rejoiced a lot at seeing him and having a long chat with him. He liked that ‘oyinbo’, who was always ready to talk nicely with everybody and to give his good advice for solving some African people's problems, and his sincere sadness clearly showed on his face when he heard that Ricardo was already near to completing his stay in Nigeria.

Laurence considered that Ricardo was one among not many white men really worthy of remaining and living in his country forever. Ricardo willingly delayed going out, and stopped to console him for his dissatisfaction with his present job and talk pleasantly at length with him; then said goodbye to him very warmly when he left.

Vivian adored dancing and was really a very good and skilful dancer. For this reason, Ricardo took her to a nightclub many times, especially on Saturday night. They only once went to City Tavern in Ikoyi; their preferred and usual club was the After-Hours at Zabadne's in Eleke Crescent (later on renamed Louis Farrakhan and

now Walter Carrington Crescent) in Victoria Island, where they usually also met some of their friends.

Since the entrance fee there for the two of them (no drink included) was 1,000 Naira, they also tried once to go to a newly opened, less expensive club in Sanusi Fafunwa Street, the 'Mainze Plaza'. However, when they went in they found that although it was not so terribly crowded, and therefore far more accessible, it was almost sad and not particularly friendly and cosy, so they soon left.

At After-Hours, on the contrary, there were always so many people there that dancing would mean immediately sweating like in a sauna, with shirts and trousers for men and dresses for women all soaked through with perspiration and tightly glued to the body – not to mention the pitiful condition of their underwear and bra and panties. Ricardo and Vivian used to dance like mad things till very late in the night, and even when they stopped to go home, Vivian would have continued willingly in unrestrained dancing. No doubt, she loved that immensely! But it goes really without saying that she danced superlatively well. Ricardo, although he disliked being all wet in that disagreeable way, enjoyed dancing to the disco music a lot and performed admirably, to Vivian's pleasure. However, to tell the truth, when she danced, she was so concentrated on herself and cared so much about interpreting the music and perfecting her dance-steps and moves that she did not pay much attention to her partner: she could have been totally alone and she would have enjoyed her unbridled dancing in exactly the same way.

So whilst Ricardo tried to fit his own movements to those of his companion in order to form a real dancing ensemble, a couple with singleness of purpose, Vivian did not; she danced, as in a trance, only for herself. But certainly, she controlled all the variations of rhythm and cadence perfectly, her admirable movements being continuous and smooth, without sudden pause or unconscious stop. She expressed herself with great enthusiasm and skill in a fascinating way; one could almost say that she was *not* dancing: in those moments, she practically transformed herself into a modern, black Terpsichore or Polymnia, the Muses of the dance in the old Greek and Roman mythology, and, as an inimitable goddess, she became and *was* the dance itself.

Once, when Stella was around in Lagos, they arranged to go together with her and her boyfriend to the After-Hours Club and agreed to meet at the small club behind the Napex Building at the

very far end of Eleke Crescent. When Ricardo and Vivian got there they sat outside having a drink while waiting for them, as the heat and noise inside were absolutely unbearable. However they had to wait a long time, and Stella and her boyfriend never finally appeared. They thought that the couple had perhaps gone straight to After-Hours; so they went there, but curiously there was no sign of them in that club either. Ricardo and Vivian however had their fun dancing together till late and forgot them.

In March, from 21st to 23rd, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, made his second pastoral visit to Nigeria - his first one having taken place in February 1982, some 9 months after he had been shot in St. Peter's Square, Rome, by the Turk Ali Agca. He did not go to Lagos this time, and landed in Abuja – welcomed there by the Head of State and the Nation's highest authorities – and from there went straight to Onitsha, where a great and impressive ceremony was held at Oba Airfield for the beatification of the venerable Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, priest and monk.

It was the first beatification celebration in Nigeria and in the whole of West Africa. On the 23rd a high Mass, with the participation of all Nigerian bishops, was celebrated in Kubwa, in the outskirts of Abuja, attended by several hundred thousand people, perhaps a million. All through the Mass, choruses chanted heavenly-inspiring hymns and melodious songs in English and in various selected Nigerian languages, Hausa, Igbo, Efik, Yoruba, Edo and Tiv. Even Ricardo attended it, because he had been invited by the Apostolic Nuncio, H. E. Carlo Maria Viganò to meet the Pope in the afternoon, after the end of the Mass, in the newly-built Abuja Nunciature – together with other frequent worshippers at the Chapel of the Lagos Apostolic Nunciature, totalling around forty people. Ricardo's closest Spanish friends, not being regular worshippers, were not there, but the Ambassador of Spain, a very fervent practising Catholic, was present with all his family.

It was really thrilling and highly emotional to have the opportunity to shake hands with the Holy Father and kiss the blessed ring on his finger! Great charisma and a mystical impression and feelings radiated from his person. The holy man, in spite of his evident tiredness and fatigue, and who had absolutely needed the help of a walking stick when he entered into the hall where the guests were waiting to greet him, stood courageously all the time and greeted

each person individually and gave to each of them a special rosary, as a sign of his benevolence and a tangible souvenir of the meeting.

An official photographer snapped a series of photos for individual guests while they were presenting their homage to the Pope. On top of getting these official photos, Mrs. Graciela Forte, an Argentinian lady married to an Italian, Mr. Luigi Forte, head of NAOC Ltd.'s workshop, asked Ricardo to take a couple of pictures of her with the Holy Father. She shamelessly and happily seized the hand of the Pope to be immortalised like that, in a posture that no other visitor could boast about having. Later, Ricardo said laughing to everybody, to their great amusement, that she practically jumped into the Pope's arms to have an even more exclusive photo of the event.

Miss Flavia Amoretti, who worked as secretary to the Nunciature, told the attendees that Pope John Paul II, in spite of the Parkinson's disease that affected him gravely and caused him difficulty in moving and in speaking, was extremely brilliant and had made very interesting conversation during the meals that he had shared with the Nunciature personnel. Miss Flavia was one of the 'Memores Domini' serving as helpers to the Lagos diocese. This was a community of lay men and women springing out of the Catholic movement 'Communion and Liberation', who, having decided to dedicate their lives to the service of the Lord, have made vows of obedience, poverty and chastity.

The visit of His Holiness to Nigeria and the beatification of a Nigerian man of such a holy personality made an enormous impression on all the country, even among non-Catholics and non-Christians, and was therefore highly welcomed and long praised and remembered.

Ricardo knew well how profound and sincere Floss Kanu's faith was in Jesus and in His mother, the Holy Virgin Mary, and how great was her desire to have something coming from the Pope whom she admired and loved so much. He therefore decided later on, taking into account the fact that he had already been granted such a gift at the preceding visit of the Pope, to give her the rosary he had received from the Holy Father. She accepted this gift with true, intense joy and was immensely grateful to Ricardo for such a very friendly gesture.

Ricardo and Edima met again briefly for a weekend after he had been sent on a short mission to Europe for a meeting. She was still

living her mystic experience and, though she spent the two nights with him sleeping in the same bed, again she did not want to make love to him. She had to exert great effort however, because she desired him very much and would have liked to enjoy his tenderness and love.

On Saturday morning, indeed, after getting up and having had a quick breakfast, she suddenly stretched out her arm while he was passing by in front of her and slipped her hand under the lower edge of the shorts of his pyjamas, reached for his penis and pulled it out. Then, holding it tenderly on the palm of one hand, she softly and nicely stroked it at length with the other hand. Ricardo was surprised by her totally unexpected sensual and sweet gesture, which openly demonstrated at the same time all her love and her desire for him and the stormy conflict harboured in her heart between the spiritual love for Jesus taught to her by Reverend Ajayi during his Bible lectures and the sexual impulse and attraction she felt for Ricardo. The clear, difficult effort she was exercising on herself was abundantly evident in this act. He was literally enthralled by the intense physical pleasure he was getting from her at that moment and the great sentimental affection he felt for her. He fondled her head, caressing it gently and, holding her face delicately in his hands, kissed her lovely, warm mouth with maximum tenderness. She quaked and shook with the effort of resisting her own desire. On Sunday, by 12 noon, he left her and flew back to Nigeria.

Nearly one and a half months later they met again and stayed five days together, spending all the nights in the same bed. Ricardo made love to her on the first night, although he had to push her a bit. Just a bit, as a matter of fact, since she did not put up any great resistance, because, after all, she desired him very much. The following two nights, however – although they had taken two single rooms in an hotel in Bremen as there were no double rooms available – she wanted to share his bed and sleep very close to him because of the narrowness of the bed, but, again, she did not want to make love to him.

The second night they had even argued, because he had suddenly kissed her in the darkness of the street, while walking after they had had dinner in a restaurant, and Edima had disliked it, as she did not want any open demonstration of intimacy between them in public. She was still angry with him when they went back to the hotel. They entered into her room quarrelling, but then she lay irritated and

provocatively silent on the bed. He was staring at her with an inquisitive glance. With a bruising look, she said angrily:

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Her expression remained gloomy; afterwards, she closed her eyes as if ready to sleep. He preferred to remain silent and went sadly to his room and prepared his luggage, as they had decided to move the following morning to Hamburg where they had booked a double room in a hotel. He had just closed his suitcase and was about to go to the bathroom to clean his teeth after having put on his pyjamas and prepared himself for bed when there was a knocking at the door. He thought it was the hotel owner or one of the staff, but when he opened the door, Edima, dressed in her nightgown, was shyly standing there, in the corridor outside his room. She entered it and, without saying a word, got into his bed. Then, when he too got into bed, she enlaced him in a tender embrace and whispered, before falling asleep:

“Darling, I love you. ... Keep me tight in your arms.”

In spite of her decision not to make love to him, Edima needed the contact and the warmth of his body. In the narrowness of that bed, she felt protected by the close nearness of him and she adored to sleep like that, entwined in his arms and all wrapped up in his love and tenderness. Such closeness was indeed like a powerful juju for her, since it gave her the agreeable certitude that the strength of his love would avert any evil from her.

During the journey to Hamburg, Edima told Ricardo that Diego Quintero had called her and announced that he would come to Germany two weeks later to pay her a fortnight-long visit. Ricardo was not happy at all at this announcement, because he feared that this young man was coming to meet her with the mere intention of having fun and sex with her and not because of any real love or serious, deep sentiments towards her. Should he have clearly serious intentions towards her, such as an affection likely to induce him to ask Edima to marry him, then Ricardo would have accepted his presence near Edima – whether easily or not, it does not matter, he would anyhow.

His greatest and constant concern was Edima's happiness and he prayed to God every day to give Edima the chance to meet a man who could understand, like and fully appreciate her high value and innumerable qualities and therefore decide to marry her. A European, obviously, not an African, since this was her desire and

he considered Edima absolutely worthy of becoming the wife of a European. Ricardo was so fond of Edima – he certainly loved her more than his own life – that it was absolutely inconceivable for him that a young bachelor could desire only to take this precious treasure to bed and not to make her the companion of his whole life. But he strongly feared in his heart that Diego Quintero was not that sort of man and he felt sorry for her and himself wounded that another man could enjoy her graces physically, without the evidence of a sound sentiment for her.

There was certainly in this feeling of Ricardo's a good dose of narcissism and vanity. He considered himself much more deserving of her love and affectionate attention than any other man. This was because he knew that he was not pushed to make love to her simply by sexual impulse or physical desire for her, but by the sound love he felt for her and the high consideration in which he held her. Ricardo therefore warned her seriously about being too quick in accepting Diego's advances and showing herself ready to fall into his arms:

“Edi, I beg you, do not make love to him immediately, *please!* Try to resist at least some days before sleeping with him, in order to give yourself the time to sound out his feelings towards you and ascertain the sort of relationship he is willing to establish between you two. Before you give yourself to him, let him demonstrate to you that he really loves and seriously wants you as the sole woman in his life and not just do as he may wish and have any other woman!

Remember, my Little You, this is an important issue: most men in Spain, when they see that they can have a woman easily, unfortunately give up the idea of having a serious bond with her and start considering her as a whore or something like that whom they have the right to make an easy object of vulgar gossip with friends. Therefore, this is the most vivid and strong recommendation I make to you as a sincere and affectionate friend, not as a jealous lover (though I frankly admit that I am utterly jealous): don't be easy! Let him pine for you!”

When they arrived in Hamburg, one of the wheels of Ricardo's suitcase broke down during the transfer on foot from the tram-stop to the hotel, while crossing tram rails. He tried to put the wheel back in place, but he noticed that the metallic gasket and the screw blocking the wheel had been lost. So, after they had deposited all their belongings in the hotel room, they went out looking for an

ironmonger's shop where he could buy the missing parts to repair his suitcase.

They also did other shopping for Edima. They looked for a shop she had been told about where nice shoes were sold at a very reasonable price. They had lunch in a Chinese restaurant and dinner in a Spanish one, where there was a man playing the guitar and singing gypsy songs; but Ricardo feigned not to be a Spaniard, since he did not want to have the waiter immediately treating him confidentially because of their shared citizenship.

Later, when they went to bed, Edima was nude and got into his arms like that, all tender and sweet. The fondling and hugs that she lavished on him were not a mere act to draw his attention away from the frightening and wounding thought that perhaps another man would soon enjoy her physically and, possibly, sentimentally. They were dictated by her sincere and deep passion for him and meant to indicate all her great, unaltered love for him. She fully and coherently desired to melt within him. Edima and Ricardo felt entirely all the sound affection that attracted them to one another softly pervading them and, after caressing and kissing each other with great transports and desire, they made love, easily attaining the usual, intense and dizzy pleasure. Despite some misunderstandings that sometimes appeared on the surface, they were so crazy about one another that they utterly enjoyed being together! And in bed, in particular, all moments of bitterness were easily and quickly forgotten.

They made love again when they woke up the following morning. Then they went out for further brief shopping. Ricardo availed himself of the opportunity to snap her in the last photographs remaining in his roll of film. Most of these portraits were taken inside a drugstore, where one of the female assistants approached him and asked him to stop, saying that taking photographs inside the shop was not allowed. They were very surprised at this strange request and thought that, because of the shelves full of goods and products of various types photographed behind Edima's face, perhaps that lady was motivated by a suspicion of some industrial espionage. Then they got the train to the airport – but Edima left him outside the terminal – and Ricardo flew back to Nigeria.

When Ricardo phoned Edima, he found her all excited at the prospect of Diego's arrival, but she still renewed her assurance of

her love for him. Ricardo called her again just after Diego's arrival at her place. He asked Edima:

"Are you happy?"

And she replied:

"Yes, I am happy."

Ricardo hung up and at once felt an enormous jealousy growing in him. He could not stand the thought that another man was now entering her and taking possession of the place that he considered the most valuable in the entire world, her body: and probably also of her heart, which he wished with all his strength to be reserved uniquely for him.

A horrible week started for him. He was literally gnawed at his heart by an uncontrollable jealousy. He was himself surprised that he could be so terribly jealous concerning her. As far as he could remember, he had never felt a nasty sentiment of such strength. But he really could not bear the thought that Edima was conceding herself to another man who was able to give her intense physical pleasure and satisfaction, together perhaps with sentimental delight and joy. He tried with all his strength to convince himself that this was for Edima's happiness – which he himself wanted completely – but he had to recognise and confess to himself that his pain was enormous, his grief incurable.

He felt a terrible dismay and, at the office, work became tedious and hard, while, at home, even Vivian's presence was totally unable to console him. In those awful moments he did not even want Vivian around him! He was continually thinking, day and night: '*They* are making love, *now!* ... Now, *they* are *making love!*' and this was a true nightmare for him. The horrid vision of Edima exchanging kisses and caresses with Diego while her delightful body was being conceded to his penetration was clearly depicted before the eye of his mind; it hit him strongly and wrung his heart powerfully. The thought was unbearable. How he hated that man! He was in anguish, eager to hear her voice, but unwilling to call her because he was afraid of catching her while making love to Diego - and he loathed the idea of hearing pleasure and satisfaction in her voice. Many times he was on the verge of lifting the telephone receiver and ringing her up! He had to struggle severely against himself not to do it.

But there were no calls from her either: this obviously increased Ricardo's sorrow, because for him it meant that she was living so

happily and intensely her communion with Diego that she did not feel the need and desire and did not even have the time to talk to him. No call arrived even on the day he underwent a small surgical operation. It was not a very serious one, though delicate: a piece of skin with swollen moles had to be removed from his chest in order to submit it to a histological examination; the operation was magnificently performed in a Victoria Island clinic by a very skilful African surgeon who left no trace of a scar on Ricardo's chest. Yet Edima was well aware of it and he was expecting her to ring up to inquire about its progress and results!

He took that very badly and felt forsaken and betrayed. He fell into a state of deep depression and sadness. After an entire week of this situation, on Saturday afternoon, when he was about to go out to play golf, as he usually did on Saturdays, her call arrived at last:

"Hello!, darling ..."

She had addressed him with the cherished 'darling', but Ricardo did not even notice it. He was too embittered and angry and furiously fired at her:

"*You*, ... you and that man have been *fucking* like rabbits all the time, so that *you* were totally unable or unwilling to find even a little moment to call *me!* Time to ring Ricardo up? Oh no, just fucking, fucking, fucking night and day! OK, you may well be in love with a man, but to behave like *pigs*, screwing non-stop, is a totally different matter!" He did not give her the time to say a word and went on, full of rage: "Don't I deserve at least a short call from you? Did you really think I was happy to imagine that you were spending your time in somebody else's arms, fucking? ... *You, screwing pig!*"

He had never spoken so violently and rudely to anybody in his whole life, but he had become really mad and was in a state of towering rage, which he was totally unable to control. When, at last, she managed to interrupt the flood of insults coming out of his mouth, she was crying:

"No, Ricardo, darling, it is not as you think! What you imagine about me is wrong! Please, call me and I shall explain everything to you!"

He hung up and went to the Golf Club with the great relief of having heard her voice at last. But in his heart he had contrasting feelings, which were a mixture of the ever-present tenderness for her, disbelief and great curiosity to know what had happened between her and Diego so that she could say: "It is not what you

think!” “What did she mean by this? Obviously, they had made love, it was not possible they had not, but then?”

His anger and resentment against her had anyhow evaporated like fog in the warmth of the sun, by the simple fact of having received her call and having heard those unexpected words of hers. He felt totally different, perhaps happy – he did not really know, he only realised that he was not the same man as half an hour earlier – and that evening, to the astonishment of his partners, played particularly vigorously and rather well, with only 32 shots above par in covering the entire 18-hole course. For a medium-low-calibre player, this was a very good performance.

When he returned home, after he had finished playing, he called Edima. She was in tears and told Ricardo that her expectations were totally frustrated, because she realised she did not like Diego any more and very much disliked everything he did. Lots of things he did were bad and hideous in her eyes, and she had seriously argued with him about his thinking and behaviour. Ricardo was always trying to find a way to make Edima happy, even against his own wish and good, and he asked her:

“But you did make love to him?”

“Yes, I did.”

“And then? What’s wrong? I suppose he made you come and you enjoyed it!”

“No, I didn’t.”

Edima was still weeping and Ricardo could not understand whether or not she had reached an orgasm when making love to Diego. She added:

“Diego is still here, since he planned to stay two weeks, but I am not interested in seeing him. He is obviously very angry with me, but I do not care!”

Again, Ricardo tried to understand how and why events had turned out that way, although, apparently, it was not a matter of his disliking her, but more likely of her refusing him:

“Did you make love to him immediately or did you stick to my recommendation?”

“No, darling, I behaved like you wanted me to do. He had booked a double room in a hotel, thinking that I would spend the nights in his bed, but I refused to sleep with him. He was annoyed, of course, and angry with me. I consented to make love only after some days. But this is not the point. I simply realised I did not like him and his

manners. Everything he did was wrong in my eyes.”

They talked for more than one hour. She also told him that she had tried two or three times to call him, but never succeeded in getting through and he had to admit that – although in those days his telephone was functioning properly – getting a line between Europe and Nigeria was always a gamble. When at the end of their conversation Ricardo said:

“Edi, my beloved, I adore you!” she answered:

“Darling, I love *you* so much! *You are my only man!*”

Ricardo was about to lose his sense of reality and felt he was floating in a soft heap of white and vaporous clouds, with his feet not touching the ground, but waving in the air; then he was transformed into a gaily-coloured butterfly flying in an immense meadow full of beautiful multicoloured flowers. Thus, their tender romance was not terminated; and there were absolutely no limits to his love for her! He felt extremely happy and full of gratitude to life, which had granted him such an immense gift as Edima’s love for him.

Kenneth, Edima’s cousin, went to Ricardo’s house twice to see him and have a chat with him about Edima and her family. He was a rather tall man, elegantly dressed and with fine facial features. Ricardo liked him and, after his first visit, on the second occasion when Kenneth called to pay him a visit, he invited him for lunch. It was very pleasant and easy to talk with him about Edima, her life and the development of her future in Europe: she was always Ricardo’s favourite topic in a conversation.

Kenneth felt very concerned about Edima’s doings and was eager to know all the slightest facts that Ricardo could tell him about her, as he loved his cousin very much, and had also been her business partner. He told Ricardo anyhow that he had decided to stop that business and attend the University in Ibadan. He worried as well about Edima’s brother, Ndubuisi, who was jobless, and about the latter’s behaviour while he would be far from Lagos on his studies. Ricardo thought that this man was really smart and sensible.

Ndubuisi and his sisters also went to see Ricardo several times. Pearl came to Lagos unexpectedly only once, because she could not interrupt her studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife and Ricardo was very glad to see her again, after the first time she had stayed at his house when Edima was still with him in Nigeria.

Loveliness on the contrary had nothing to do in Calabar, and travelled to Lagos two or three times and went to see Ricardo every time and frequently during her stays. Although she was coming up to 18 years old, Loveliness – in contrast to Pearl, who was already a nicely shaped, attractive woman – was small, much smaller than Edima, and rather childlike in her overall features, both in her face and in her unripe body. In spite of her young age however she chatted willingly, with a good dose of wisdom, and Ricardo was delighted to talk with this very young woman who combined a child's appearance with so much skill and cleverness. Edima in fact loved this sister of hers, who was her favourite, and wished she could join her in Germany to carry on her studies, since she considered her very brilliant and capable of doing well.

On one of these occasions, Ricardo broached with Loveliness the subject of a possible marriage in Europe for Edima, which he always hoped she would have the chance for, and was surprised to learn that the dowry to be paid to her mother would be a very important issue. He knew well enough that this is an absolute 'must' in Africa, which is a very great worry for young men wishing to acquire a bride: and among Igbos, for example, there is a belief that unless a substantial dowry is paid on the right terms to the parents of the bride, with a considerable amount of money or head of cattle, she is bound to die on the delivery of her first child.

He had heard many tales about this subject all over the entire continent, but was convinced that it was limited to African territory, and did not have implications for people living abroad, especially in other continents. But Loveliness told him that it would be tremendously dangerous for their mother if Edima got married without a large and adequate dowry being paid to her. The danger, according to Loveliness' account, would come from her parents' relatives and could even involve Edima's mother's murder, as a final punishment, if they thought that she was hiding a dowry received from the bridegroom to avoid sharing it with them. Ricardo was really astonished, he had always thought that the dowry was simply owed to the bride's parents, and never realised that it had on the contrary to be shared among their relatives. And, of course, he had not even imagined that its absence could imply such drastic and cruel measures.

He therefore rushed to inform Edima, on the first occasion he spoke with her, about what he had learnt and warned her to comply

with such traditional obligations if she did receive a marriage proposal.

A sad, but alas frequent and inevitable event happened: the death of Edith Banjo's father. Edith was one of Ricardo's closest and best colleagues and he felt very sad for her. He decided to attend Edith's father's funeral, although it was taking place in a village near Ijebu-Ode, around one and a half hours fast driving from Lagos. When Ricardo entered the Baptist church where the ceremony was being held he looked around and saw to his surprise and pleasure that there was another white man in the church: Mr. Umberto Montezemolo, the Italian engineer he was getting to know. He therefore walked to the bench where that gentleman had found his place, greeted him and – as the space next to him was free – sat beside him.

The church was full of people, but they were the only white men attending Mr. Banjo's funeral. Ricardo asked Umberto why he was there and he learnt that Edith's father's second wife, Fadesola, was Mr. Montezemolo's secretary at Nigeria LNG Limited. Booklets were distributed among the attendees with the liturgy of the entire ceremony and texts – all in the Yoruba language – of prayers and songs. When the first song commenced, after the audience sang the initial verses, Umberto, to Ricardo's great surprise, started singing in his nice, baritone voice perfectly in tune. At the end of the song, he asked him under his breath:

“Do you know Yoruba?”

“No.”

“How can you sing their songs, then?”

“Oh, it is simple. You see, I read the words that are printed in the booklet, pronouncing vowels in the Italian way and consonants in the English way. Actually, I don't know whether this pronunciation is correct, but it seems to work. At least, this is the impression I got by listening to the way that the other mourners are singing. And I presume that if they were really horrified, they would in some way or other try to stop me. This however has not happened, they seem to appreciate it!”

“Could you by chance catch the meaning of these songs?” whispered Ricardo still *sotto voce*.

“Oh no, I did not, I don't even know whether they are English songs translated into Yoruba or original autochthonous songs. And I

don't pretend to understand what I read, I absolutely cannot. But, to be sincere, I don't mind so much about it. So, I just sing, without knowing at all what I'm saying. Try, if you want: you will see, it will be easy, the harmony in fact is not difficult at all. Just pronounce the vowels in the Spanish way, which is the same as Italian."

Ricardo followed Umberto's instruction during the next song and, to his surprise, found it was not too difficult. In the same way, he sang also the subsequent two songs. He felt a powerful emotion: he was singing in a totally unknown language, not understanding a single word of what was coming out of his mouth, but sang it anyway! This was absolutely great! He felt happy for Edith that he had done it in her father's honour and grateful to Umberto for having given him the good example and induced him to try.

All the African people around them were exceedingly surprised to hear them singing their own songs full of concern and quite well, in good tune, although with some hesitation and slight imperfection in the pronunciation of the words. Certainly, they must have been thinking: "Those *white devils* are, as usual, capable of doing everything! Really, no enterprise is impossible for *them!* And in any case – and here resides the difference in their character – *they try!*" After the ceremony in the church, there was the procession to the family grave in the cemetery. Ricardo and Umberto went there together. It was a small cemetery, rather bare, with a few rows of simple tombstones.

Afterwards, a big lunch was served for the huge hungry crowd at the Banjos' house, where the three widows of the dead man bustled about a lot to make everybody happy and contented. Ricardo however, like Umberto, just had a drink, not to offend Mr. Banjo's relatives, who were so kind and desirous of making everybody at ease and satisfied. Then, giving an excuse, such as having an appointment or being waited for at home, they left separately for Lagos in their respective cars, after bidding each other goodbye.

To the great surprise of the whole Nation, on 8th June 1998, the Head of State, General Sani Abacha, died suddenly, it was said, of a heart attack or of cirrhosis of the liver. It was indeed common knowledge that he was a heavy drinker, but rumours ran that he could have died for other reasons and someone even raised the suspicion that he could have been poisoned. Gen. Abacha's death was anyhow welcomed with openly declared satisfaction and even

joy by the majority of Nigerians, not simply by his established enemies, as his regime was considered tough, even brutal, tyrannical towards those he considered potential political adversaries and, in any case, generally anti-democratic.

His successor, General Abdulsalam Abubakar, appeared immediately to be willing to establish a softer handling of politics, freed General Olusegun Obasanjo and other political prisoners and promised to call a general election in May of the following year, in order to hand over power to a civilian government. However, against all expectations and the open requests coming from part of the population, General Abubakar did not free Abacha's most controversial political opponent, Chief Abiola, who therefore remained in jail, even though apparently suffering from serious heart disease.

Nearly a month later, anyhow, on 7th July, Chief Moshood K.O. Abiola also died unexpectedly and rather mysteriously, producing a great impact on the country, especially on the Yoruba ethnic group. The Government feared that riots and violence would burst out and prepared troops and police forces to quieten them, but nothing serious happened. The newspapers, of course, wrote about this event at length and a generally widespread concern arose for the fact that the man had died in prison without a formal charge having been made against him. But his real supporters and followers were relatively few, in relation to the huge Nigerian population, and his appeal too limited to a restricted portion of the country, to provoke an uprising of Nigerians in his favour and remembrance.

The time had come for Ricardo to start preparing himself to leave Nigeria for good. He therefore asked a carpenter to make some strong wooden boxes of different sizes, internally lined with synthetic rubber foam, to hold all his belongings for shipping to Spain and started sorting items he wanted to take home from those he had decided to leave in Nigeria.

There were lots of things he had to take care of. He prepared a poster announcing the sale of his TV set and video-player to be hung on the special noticeboard at the Golf Club. But when Vivian saw it on his table, ready to be taken to the Club, she burst into tears and started weeping, saying:

“Ricardo, you are about to leave me all alone and are behaving like an awful, selfish man: you intend to sell your TV set and video,

instead of thinking of me! I thought you would be leaving these items to me, actually!”

Ricardo said to her:

“But my intention is exactly that, to sell them in order to get the money I want to give you before leaving!”

But she replied:

“I don’t care about money. What I want is a special souvenir, something which can remind me of you, when you are not here any more!”

“Well, if that is what you want and it is OK for you, then I give you the TV set and the video-player, instead of money. It is even better for me, as then I do not have to meet potential buyers and start bargaining over the sale price. Don’t forget that the video is slightly faulty and has to be put in a vertical position for watching cassettes.”

Scarcely one month before Ricardo’s departure from Nigeria, Ronke Giwa, as always very kind and ceremonious, wanted to give a farewell party in his and Riccardo Rocca’s honour, since she considered them both very good friends of African people. Riccardo Rocca, as it happened, was also going to leave Nigeria for good, a couple of weeks before Ricardo. Ronke’s party was organised at the Polo Club in Ikoyi and was extremely enjoyable. She had invited a lot of people, both Africans and Europeans.

Various attractions were organised to entertain the two guests of honour, as well as all the attendees. The choir of ‘The Golden Voices’ was present and sang some of their favourite, very pleasant songs. Then a young African wearing a mask with the features of Michael Jackson sang and danced, mimicking in an extremely authentic way the voice and movements of that artiste, which amused everybody and attracted loud applause and cheers. At the end, Ricardo and Riccardo Rocca had dedicated to them a special song from ‘The Golden Voices’ who then terminated, as would be expected, with the tune known all over the world ‘For he’s a jolly good fellow’.

After that they were each given a present, which consisted of a painting on canvas of a local scene by a Nigerian painter. The one given to Ricardo vividly represented a group of African female dancers dashing along in a whirling dance. The buffet was also very good, with some specialities that Ricardo did not know, but liked very much. Ricardo attended the party with Vivian and she also

enjoyed it a lot. They danced together at length, but Ricardo also danced with other young women who were there. He particularly liked dancing with one of the female members of the choir, who was very beautiful and danced in a delicious, very attractive way.

Ricardo felt very grateful to Ronke for this lovely party she had so kindly organised for him and, when the time came to leave, thanked her with particular warmth and expressed all his liking and friendship for her. Ricardo and Vivian left the party at a very late hour, though it was still going on.

In order not to get into trouble with Nigerian Customs it was necessary to get authorisation for the exportation, or 'clearance permit', by the Lagos Head of Station of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, for most of the bronze-cast, wooden and ivory objects, as well as for the paintings that he had bought from traders and artists. He had therefore to bring all those objects, apart from ivory ones, which he had already taken home in his suitcase or travel-bag while going on holiday, to the National Museum in Onikan for the official inspection and to show them to the officers in charge.

They made a careful examination and measurement of each item and described them in detail, in the clearance document, giving their respective sizes. There were fifteen different headings mentioned in it, grouping various items of the same nature or size. The Museum officers only made an issue about the wooden window-post, which however was not Nigerian, but Malian, from the Dogon people. Ricardo told them it was not made in Nigeria, but they said that they had the task of preserving African artistic handicraft, in general, from being removed to other continents.

In the end, however, they gave him the requested clearance for this object too. The service charge he had to pay for getting the clearance permit amounted to 4,000 Naira. He had thought it would be more than that and because of this had brought 5,000 Naira with him. He therefore saved 1,000 Naira on his anticipated expenses. After returning home, he then packed up all his belongings and filled the boxes.

Some ten days before his departure, Mrs. Dorothy Yemi Okoja, Ricardo's secretary, organised a surprise leaving party for him among the Company's employees. Many of them stopped their work for a while and attended the short party in the Personnel Department and all of them wanted to manifest to Ricardo their

good and friendly feelings for him and their sorrow at his leaving Nigeria. There were very kind speeches made by the manager of Personnel, who said some extremely kind words about Ricardo, and by his own secretary, Mrs. Okoja, who – despite some unavoidable misunderstandings between them and his consequent scolding of her – had appreciated a lot his usual, warm courtesy and therefore literally sang his praises. They also delivered to him a beautiful gift, bought with the participation of most of the employees, which was a big round carpet and quilts made of many pieces of antelope skin of diverse colour shades sewn together like a chessboard. Ricardo felt deeply touched by this sign of evident gratitude and liking for him in recognition of the kindness and friendship he had always shown towards everybody.

The Management of the Company also gave a lunch in his honour, presenting him with a plaque of appreciation, but this ceremony, despite the speech of the managing director to thank him for the services rendered to the Company – which was anyhow formal and customary, not intimately felt – was much less touching than the former one. Ricardo, who was a frank man and, moreover, enjoyed telling people what he felt they deserved to be told and, possibly, also to scandalise them a bit, said this openly and sardonically in his own speech of thanks.

Another incredible sign of real friendship and liking, as well as of sorrow for his departure was demonstrated to him by Mr. Frederick Ngu of Afasta Pharmaceuticals Ltd., who came to his office bringing him, as gifts, a very large round leather fan with the embroidered silhouette of Nigeria and its main rivers, the Niger River and the Benue River, tinted with the colours of the national flag, green, white and green, as well as a lady's bag in lizard skin and two small quilts. Not satisfied with the delivery of these absolutely unexpected gifts, for which Ricardo obviously felt very touched, Mr. Ngu said that he was very sorry not to have had enough time to organise a ceremony in his own homeland, because he sincerely believed that Ricardo deserved to be awarded a Nigerian chieftaincy title. Ricardo felt really gratified and very proud to have engendered in Africans this sentiment of open friendship toward him and to leave behind this good impression of his stay and his deeds.

His stay in Nigeria had been long – though not as long as he would have liked in order to leave a real imprint of himself – but certainly did not pass in vain. His colleagues in Santa Fe gave him, as

a farewell gift, a Casio 64KB digital diary that was much appreciated by Ricardo who did not possess this sort of useful modern tool.

He gave Loveliness, Edima's sister, a certain quantity of US dollars and an Iberia return ticket to Spain with the hope she could succeed in getting a visa and gave her brother Ndubuisi enough money to pay the fee for the renewal of the rent – which was about to expire – of Edima's one-room flat, where he was living. He also gave Catherine, when he went to Ipaja for the last time just one week before his departure, enough money to enable her to start an export-import business she wanted to establish between Nigeria and the Republic of Benin. Catherine was very grateful to Ricardo for this gift, but was desperate at his departure, having now become so fond of him and knowing that it was a drastic and definitive parting which would prevent her from seeing him any more.

When she saw he had come to her place, as if to fetch her, she hoped at least to make love to him for the last time. But Ricardo unfortunately had to disappoint her, saying that he could not take her to his house, because of the presence there of a colleague from Port Harcourt. Poor Catherine, who was also a very romantic and sentimental girl, so tenderly in love with Ricardo and totally dedicated to him and yet, despite the sincere tenderness he felt for her, so unfairly treated by him! She literally adored making love to him, and had indeed found in him the ideal partner she had always dreamt of. Although her experience in this field was limited, she had noticed the difference between Ricardo's behaviour in making love – so sweet and gentle and full of attention for her own enjoyment and pleasure – and that of the African young men with whom she had had sexual interludes.

For Catherine, Ricardo was simply special: he had a way of evoking affection which was really unique and, in making love, his tenderness was totally different and more attractive and agreeable by far than the wild aggression to which many African men used to subject their female partners! Moreover, with his sweet and restless kissing, caressing and, mainly, licking of her, he was able to stimulate great and extremely pleasant excitement in her and enable all her enchanting, desirous body – not only the cavity of her most intimate parts – to join in the love act. As a consequence, by making love to him she got delightful sensations and a pleasure she had never felt before.

One of the last times they had made love, he made her attain three consecutive orgasms, with indescribable ecstatic pleasure. He had

come only once, taking care to withdraw from her in time before ejaculation, to avoid any risk of making her pregnant, and had sprayed his sperm on her belly and chest. After cleaning her lovely, slender and lithe body well, he had re-penetrated her and made her come again. It had been so exciting and delightful that she could not hold herself back from saying:

“Ricardo, you are really wonderful! I love you *so much* ... and I love your marvellous penis as well.” It was indeed a much greater pleasure for her to discover its fine cyclamen-pink amicably-menacing glans coming to full sight by pushing back his prepuce while its body swelled, than to have the immediate vision of the black protruding glanses of circumcised Africans! “Please, Ricardo, when you do leave Nigeria for good, *leave your penis with me*, you must absolutely *give it to me*. I want to keep it with me and hold it all the time, I *need* to have it for myself!”

Ricardo had laughed and said:

“I would willingly leave my penis with you, since you are so eager to have it, if only it were possible to detach or screw it off and replace it!”

Catherine had liked his joke, which awoke the gaiety that was so natural to her; her protest had then come back in the same humorous and jolly tone:

“No, ... possible to be unscrewed to enable you to give it to me is all right, but *not* possible to be replaced, because in this way you could give it away a hundred times, that is to other women! And I must say that I don’t accept this, since I want to be the *only* permanent owner of *your* penis!”

Ricardo had laughed again. But, although their talk had been carried out purely in terms of a jest, the hidden meaning she had attached to it was extremely serious, as she had felt she was going to miss him a lot. Although Catherine knew perfectly well that Ricardo was married, and he had never concealed his family’s situation, she secretly hoped in her heart that in one way or another, especially after Edima’s departure, he could marry her. Eventually she had realised fully that she was so fond of him that she would have very much loved to become his wife: this was indeed her greatest dream and she desired that with all her strength, since she was absolutely convinced that if she had married him an endless happiness would have been assured to her for the rest of her life.

At the time they had had this jocular talk his departure from

Nigeria, though already planned, was still distant, thus leaving a little room for her to hope that his Company could go back on its former decision and his removal from the post in Lagos still be avoided. Now, alas, and drastically, it had become certainty and soon he would be going! His leaving for good was a terrible shock and an extremely painful blow for her. She wept disconsolately.

Ricardo paid his steward, Benoît, the liquidation indemnity due to him, which together with some additional money to round the amount was in the order of 35,000 Naira, and gave Sunday, the driver, 10,000 Naira in recognition of the good service performed, then shared between them all the suits, shirts and shoes he had decided to leave in Nigeria. He also gave 2,500 Naira to each of the gardeners and the watchmen of the compound to help them generously and leave a good memory of him.

He arranged with Iberia Airline the shipping of his boxes as cargo and got from the Spanish Embassy a declaration of return to his country after having settled in Nigeria for 8 years, so that on his arrival in Spain he could collect his belongings from the customs without payment of import taxes.

At the end of the final Sunday Mass at the Nunciature, Ricardo took his leave of everybody, bade farewell to all the worshippers he had a certain confidence with, embracing many of his friends and shaking hands with the others; he then kissed warmly on both cheeks sister Marie-Céleste, a beautiful young Vietnamese nun with whom he used to sing the church hymns. Sister Marie-Céleste liked him and therefore willingly returned the kisses on his own cheeks, but was shyly scared of being seen by her 'boss', sister Anna, while doing this. But Ricardo removed her embarrassment by gently kissing the 'old' sister Anna on her much less attractive cheeks too. He then took Mrs. Floss Kanu home, together with Dakky, and left a reasonable sum with her, saying:

"I know you have a lot of difficulty, with the little salary you get, to support your family (which, honestly, in my opinion, you have done so well up to now). Please, take this money I'm able to give you; I know it is not enough to solve *all* your problems, but I hope it can at least be of *some help* for the needs of your family, also as a reminder of me. Please, try not to forget me immediately!"

Floss felt extremely grateful to him for his kind thought and, thanking him very warmly, assured him that they would certainly

continue to remember him for a long time. That same evening, which was the eve of his departure, Dakky went to his flat to bid him farewell. Ricardo thought that she was not only very beautiful, but also kind and gentle; she had indeed only one – although rather important and tangible – physical fault: in spite of a handkerchief that she always bore in her hands to dry them, her palms were constantly wet with cold sweat. Dakky stayed there for a long while, curled up in a corner of the sofa in his living room, all silent and sad. She knew indeed that a very good and unselfish friend was about to leave them forever and they would probably never get the chance to see him again. But she may have had something else in her heart too that she would have liked to reveal to him, but did not find the courage to.

The following day an unknown man came to his gate bringing a message from sister Marie-Céleste. It was a few hours before Ricardo's departure, and he was waiting for Ambrose, the 'airport man', who would get his luggage and passport and make the checking-in operations at the airport in advance, so that Ricardo could arrive later at the airport and proceed straight to the departure police control. As the man was waiting for a reply, Ricardo quickly read the message and stood open-mouthed: besides bidding him farewell and sending him an image of the Holy Virgin Mary, sister Marie-Céleste was secretly asking his help in buying a nightgown! After so many years spent in Nigeria, he had become used to getting a lot of different, sometimes shocking surprises, and though understanding that nuns too need nightgowns, Ricardo had to admit he would expect a nun to request a man's help for any sort of thing *except* for buying a nightgown!

Following all his recent distribution of money, Ricardo had at that moment only 5,000 Naira left, which he intended to give Ambrose for paying the fee that the airline clerks would certainly request for the excess load of his luggage above the 30kg. allowance - plus, perhaps, 5kg more accorded by the airline to him as a member of the air qualified passengers programme. (His luggage in fact turned out to weigh, in total, 55kg.) Hoping that it was enough for the acquisition of the desired item, he then sent 1,300 Naira to sister Marie-Céleste, in a sealed envelope handed to her messenger, along with a message explaining why he could not send her more money.

When Ambrose arrived he gave him only 3,500 Naira, keeping with himself the remaining 200 Naira for the unavoidable last-

minute emergencies at the airport. Later on, when Ricardo arrived at the airport, Ambrose told him that it had been tremendously difficult for him to persuade the clerks at the check-in counter to accept that sum as a sufficient payment for the excess baggage charge applicable to his luggage.

Having witnessed many historical events and changes, Ricardo then flew away from Nigeria and Africa. He would miss Nigeria's return to a civilian government after more than 15 years of military rule – apart from the short intermission of Chief Shonekan's regime, which lasted only four months – with the election to the highest office in the country, President of the Federation, of Chief Olusegun Obasanjo who, as mentioned before, had already been Head of State as General from 1976 to 1979, during the former period of military rule. Ricardo left Nigeria with a very heavy heart: after eight years of continuous sojourn there he had started to consider this country his second homeland. He had been an eyewitness to a lengthy series of memorable political and social events and deeds, highly marking Nigeria's life, had seen places and environments of diverse character and attractiveness, met people – either individually or as groups of different identity and ethnicity – and sounded out their soul and heart, got acquainted with interesting and intriguing customs and beliefs, experienced men's cordiality and friendship and received women's affection and love.

He was now therefore obliged to leave behind him a lot of nice, vivid and nostalgic memories: 'Good-bye great Nigeria, strange, somehow mysterious and primordial – despite the strong trend for progress visibly permeating all recesses in the soul of the people living in your territory – but absolutely wonderful country! Here love is still the real undisputed sovereign, the absolute but generous monarch – as a real king of hearts – the hidden engine moving humans' lives and an exhaustive and marvellous certitude: Blessed Land, why have you been called 'the white man's grave'? Is it really because of the dreadful malaria, which infests this lovely land and was in the past so often lethal mainly with the weak and unaccustomed, practically defenceless 'oyinbos', especially before the discovery that quinine could be an efficient antidote to prevent and cure the disease? Or isn't it, rather, because a white man is bound to lose his head and heart here – and consequently to succumb and lose his life – for those magnificent, so splendidly feminine creatures, real

queens and muses of love, that are your daughters? ... Beloved Land that so nicely and powerfully captured my heart, shall I ever see your cherished shores again?

He felt guilty however towards this country where he had spent eight wonderful years, which had filled him with unspeakable enjoyment and happiness. Guilty and also profoundly ashamed: for though this generous land totally merited this due homage by him, he had not in fact learnt any of the local indigenous languages.

Yes, it deserved it, but which language should he have learnt? Yoruba, the most widespread language in Lagos, given that this town is in Yorubaland? He could have asked Bunmi to teach him some Yoruba, and Ricardo had always been firmly convinced of the rightness of the Spanish saying that the best way to learn a foreign language lies in a woman's bed. But his relationship with her had lasted too few months to learn it adequately. Or Efik, the native language of Edima, the woman with whom he had been living for most of the years spent in Nigeria? Certainly, there had been enough time to do it. Or Edo, Catherine's own language? Or Ijaw, the language pertaining to Vivian, who had spent with him the last period of his stay in Nigeria? But how many people could he use these regional languages with afterwards? Their range of influence and diffusion is limited to the territorial area occupied by the relevant ethnic group, or possibly to within the ambit enclosing where displaced families using them live.

It was indeed a difficult choice, especially taking into account that the three girls named above, who had shared their life with him, as well as his other friends, Lynda, Floss, Dakky, Jill, Grace and Bunmi herself, all spoke a good and almost literate English. Even Janet – despite her young age and her relatively low level school education – and Maude, whose scholarship was also limited, were able to express themselves sufficiently well in this 'lingua franca' of Nigeria.

Nevertheless, the gnawing of ingratitude towards this land, which had so generously benefited him, tormented him constantly. As a matter of fact, besides Spanish, Ricardo knew and spoke correctly English, French, Portuguese, Italian, some German, and even words in Norwegian, Swedish, Danish, Finnish and Dutch, among European languages. In Africa, when he had lived in the Sahara desert, he had learnt a few sentences in Tamarshak, the language of Tuareg, and could make these people happy by greeting them with their own expressions whenever he met them; moreover, he had also

partly studied the difficult Ci-Nyanja grammar – which pertains to one of the three main languages spoken in Zambia, complex and articulated, with declensions and conjugations like Latin – which caused him to be welcomed with cheerful howls when he used it with the local population.

He had always regarded it as a matter of pride, and his strategy, to be able to speak to people in their native language: why then had he now been caught by such awful laziness not to duly praise Nigeria, where he had spent more time than in any other foreign country of the world, by learning one of its languages as a due tribute to its generosity and loveliness? Leaving this country for good, he now regretted that enormously and felt his behaviour very negligent, unfair and ungrateful – as accomplishing, in fact, a thorough treachery in respect of Nigeria.

There was a further inextinguishable regret that Ricardo took with him when he left Nigeria for good: he had not attended two of the most impressive folkloristic events normally taking place every year in that country. The first was the Fishing Festival of Argungu, in Kebbi State (the State created by partition from Sokoto State). That event is held in February or March in the large pools produced around the town of Argungu by the drying up of the Sokoto river in the dry season. On this occasion, a couple of thousand fishermen, each provided with a butterfly-net and calabash, would all dive together very scenographically into the pools and compete for the best catch, which usually consisted of very big fish. The second was the Durbar or Sallah held in Katsina and in Kano on the occasion of the Muslim feasts of Eid-el-Fitri and Eid-el-Kebir, with the spectacular, colourful procession and cavalcade of magnificently-dressed horsemen mounted on beautifully and richly ornamented horses or camels and the final bridle-less riders' charge to present their homage and renew their loyalty to the traditional authorities represented by the Emirs. By the way, the mounted policemen in the Emirates, when dressed in full regimentals, wear busbies – though in fancy colours – and coats similar to those of H.M. the Queen of Britain's horse-guards or caps similar to those of the Spanish Guardia Civil or of the Italian Military Police force, the so-called Carabinieri.

A friend of his who had attended the Durbar in Katsina had given him a copy of the videocassette he had produced filming the ceremony with a video-camera, but the whole film had been taken

from a single viewpoint, high on the stand. In spite of the beautiful colours, the result was therefore flat and boring.

Ricardo was convinced that to get the best impression of people and animals it was necessary to stay at ground level, amidst the excited and cheering crowd, with sharp cuts in perspective and frequent and rapid changes of the filming angles and viewpoints, as well as of the length of the lens – that is not to use the zoom too much but also to have straight passages from a wide-angled position, going to that of telephoto and back again, with ample use of close-up foreground scenes. That was what he would have done himself, if he had had the chance to attend the event. However in some years during his stay in Nigeria these fabulous events had been suppressed, mainly for economic reasons, while in the others he had been unable to organize a trip to those northern localities, or compelled to give it up, because of important office engagements.

Ricardo paid Edima a visit of four-and-a-half days. They were days of intense and passionate love. He had brought many things she was expecting from Nigeria: skin creams and lotions, dieting tea, medicated Tura soap, lots of packets containing long hair to make braids with, and when he arrived at the hotel she had booked for them in Hanover, he displayed all the goods on the bed, waiting for her arrival. When she arrived and, after kissing him tenderly, saw the show, she saluted all that with great enthusiasm and joy. But she blamed her brother, who had bought the hair, for not having bought the correct original brand, but those of a fake trademark. She said he should have allowed himself to be helped by their elder sister who certainly knew exactly what she wanted. But Edima's position towards her brother was always severely critical, so Ricardo did not attach much importance to her words. Moreover, to Ricardo's non-expert eyes, the hair that Ndubuisi had bought appeared to be perfect, so he could not really understand what she was complaining of. They went round the town and also spent one full day visiting Dortmund and a smaller typical tourist town on the way to that location.

They were in very close communion and joyful harmony and this time there was no arguing between them. They felt really happy to be so intimately together and, once more, they felt in their hearts and minds that they were made for one another. They expressed all their innermost feelings, emotions and happiness to each other with

tender words of love. Certainly, there could not exist a greater love than theirs on the entire planet! They joyfully made love with the greatest and most intense dedication. On the last evening they spent together, Ricardo, enjoying a tremendous, superb erection (as could only happen with her), penetrated her in depth quite vigorously – although employing all his usual tenderness – and, after attaining the peak of physical and mental pleasure for being inside her, ejaculated in the very bottom of her vagina. Edima enjoyed his action enormously and exclaimed wildly:

“Darling, I felt you so wonderfully deep in me that I had the impression that you had penetrated into my stomach and were hitting and pushing to get even further up in me, into my lungs!”

He was absolutely delighted to hear her saying this, as he understood that he had given her a full sign of his love and the clear evidence of his desire for her and she had received from his total dedication to her a particularly intense pleasure. She had in fact attained a full, very agreeable and enthralling orgasm and felt happy and grateful to Ricardo for the unique, lovely emotional sensations he was able to arouse in her. How exalting and absolutely unequalled was their romance! In the most intimate part of her, she felt that he was the only man she could be fond of and unconditionally accept to receive inside herself. Their love did not show any sign at all of diminishing; it still had the same intensity and the same strength as the day they met, many years ago. Lying on her magnificent body, still delightfully in her, he therefore replied to her emphatically:

“Edi dear, when I met you, I didn’t simply find a marvellous woman; I really found a rare and priceless treasure. I have been particularly lucky – and I am very grateful to you and also thank Heaven for this – that you decided to devote yourself to me: for certain, no other woman like you exists on the entire planet. I tell you, my beloved Baby, you are more precious than gold, ... more precious than the biggest and purest gem ever found on earth!”

Edima was happy to notice that his love for her remained as intense as in the early times of their relationship and his sweet expressions about her inebriated her. She closed her legs round him, crossing her feet on his back and hugging him tight to herself – how amusing and sweet was it to make him a prisoner like this in her warm embrace! – then uttered softly, but in the same exalted tone:

“Darling, I love you so much! You are the only man who can make me feel like that. I’m mad about you!”

When Ricardo left, the following morning, Edima went with him to the airport and remained with him while he carried out the usual formalities at the check-in counter. Then he went back with her to the train station and snapped her with the last photo remaining on the film which he then gave to her for processing. When her train arrived, he embraced her with a tender and passionate:

“Edi, you are my sun and the light of my eyes. I love you more than anything else in the world, even more than my own life. You are so exceedingly adorable!” Then, happily remembering the only Nigerian sentence he had learnt and knew well, which was, moreover, in Efik, *her* own language, surprised her by exclaiming cheerfully: “Muma fien (I love you), sweetheart, *muma fien!*”

Knowing her dislike of any open demonstration of love between them in public, he wanted to kiss her in a simple and friendly manner on her cheeks, even though she was warmly smiling at his use of a Nigerian native expression for declaring his love to her. But she suddenly surprised him by tenderly kissing him on his mouth. He flew home with the warm, sweet flavour of her kiss on his lips.

9.

End of an unequalled dream

A month later Ricardo rang Edima once more to get news of her, as he often did, and have a little chat: he would have loved to stay on the telephone with her for long time, but he had of course to take care also of the rather conspicuous cost of the telephone bills. As they exchanged the usual information, he heard her voice faltering rather. After a while, she said:

“The other day I went to the hospital.”

He asked alarmed, with apprehensive chagrin in his voice, immediately worrying for her:

“Why, are you sick?”

“No, no, ...” she said and did not want to go on, clearly hesitant. Then, under pressure by him, she said:

“Never mind, darling, it is nothing important enough for you to worry about.”

But he insisted:

“What are you saying, my Little You, everything which concerns you is important for me! And I would be worrying anyhow. Tell me then, Edi dear, what is the matter?”

At this point, she was unable to conceal any more what she had in her heart and exclaimed softly, evidently embarrassed:

“Darling, ... I, ... I ... am pregnant!”

He was obviously surprised at this announcement, which sounded however natural and exciting, and asked:

“What? ... Pregnant! ... Are you sure, my sweetest love? And by whom did you get pregnant, if I may know, ... by me, by chance?”

“Foolish you, whom else do you want me to be pregnant by? Ricardo, my darling, I made love *only to you!*”

He felt proud and happy: *his* beloved Edima had got pregnant *by*

him! This was indeed absolutely the most fantastic and wonderful news he could get from her! He felt a lot of tenderness flowing through his veins for this lovely young woman, as she could possibly become the mother of a child of his. He thought she deserved even more love and care from him, if that was possible: she had indeed conceived a baby – *his and her* baby! – from the semen he had deposited in her. But she was already going on, quickly:

“Darling, do not worry about me, I have already arranged with the doctor to go to the hospital next week and have the operation.”

Ricardo felt lost, he hated abortion and could not approve it at all, whatever the situation might be; on the contrary, he was resolutely and openly against it. Now he was confronted with a tense situation where he was for the first time in his life personally involved. He therefore said:

“Edi, my beloved, please, don’t do it. I can face my responsibility and, of course, I am ready to recognise the child and take care of you!”

“No, Ricardo, my dearest, do not try to dissuade me. I have already taken my decision. I cannot have a child now!”

“But, Edi, I am really *happy* to have a child *with you!* I can even say frankly that I firmly want it: do you remember, we discussed this possibility in Lagos, a long time ago? Remember, I said I wanted a baby girl from you!”

“Yes, darling, I too would like to have *your* child. If I were still in Africa, I would not hesitate, believe me, I would keep it and raise it with great joy, but not here and at this moment! Bear in mind in fact that I submitted a request for political asylum, here in Germany. There would therefore be a lot of inquiry about how and where and by whom I got pregnant and I do not want to go through such a process, which might even be detrimental to my request to get German citizenship as soon as possible.”

He insisted anyhow:

“Edi, please, take my words into serious consideration and think deeply about them, before submitting yourself to such an awful and criminal operation! Do not kill the baby you have in your womb!”

But Edima had taken her decision at the very first moment she suspected that she was pregnant, well before revealing her condition to him, and once she had made her mind up it was quite impossible to make her withdraw from an already firm position:

“Please, darling, don’t say that! Don’t make me feel that guilty! I

simply *cannot* bear a child, not at present.”

Ricardo called her again the following day and on the eve of the day established for the operation, imploring her to turn back from her decision, but all his prayers were in vain and his begging useless. Her own will was tremendously strong and determined – she could in fact be very obstinate when she had some clear objective to pursue – and she maintained her position, staying absolutely immovable. Ricardo, to his greatest dismay and sorrow, did not get a child from her.

Although Ricardo very frequently phoned Edima to get news, they could not meet again for five and a half months. They had never spent such a long period apart from one another. At last, the day came when - being on mission on his Company's behalf - he was able to fly to Hamburg, where she had booked a double room in a small hotel near the Sankt Pauli district. The departure of his flight from Madrid was however delayed for (as usual) unknown reasons and take-off took place one hour after the scheduled time. She had agreed with him that they would meet at the hotel, but when he came out of the arrival zone of Hamburg airport and was wondering whether to call her immediately to tell her about the late arrival of his flight or to go first to the Hauptbahnhof (the Central Station) he heard her calling him: she had indeed come to fetch him at the airport and was there, waiting for him.

Forgetting her dislike for displays of love, he embraced her tenderly and kissed her on her mouth. This time, she did not protest. She was so beautiful and extremely attractive; Ricardo thought she had changed a lot from the simple girl he had once met in Lagos. Now there was in front of him a modern and splendid woman, full of incomparable charms. Elegantly and sophisticatedly dressed, she wore a pair of close-fitting black trousers terminating in elephant-leg bottoms, a white silk shirt, a nice brownish-green cardigan with an ample soft collar and cuffs and a long well-cut dark cloak. Only her shoes were rather extravagant and, for his taste, not exactly suitable. But they were probably all right for youngsters. Her hair was plaited in a very fashionable way, with a myriad of tiny black and blond braids gathered and tied up in a fancy knot with a nice colourful ribbon on the upper part of her nape.

She had even changed her nail polish: instead of the pink one which suited her so well and he liked so much she now had a more

up-to-date brilliant yellowish-green varnish on them. She had also increased the length of the nails themselves a bit – to Ricardo's tacit disapproval (although he anyhow dared not say anything to her in this respect). A really magnificent woman altogether: proud and self-confident.

She had now got to know and learnt to live with the sudden variability and occasional harshness of weather in Europe, with the alternation of four different seasons, and was forgetting the two seasons – the dry and the wet – existing in Nigeria. She had seen, in particular, the intense blue skies in the daytime, and star-spangled darkness of the night. In Nigeria, because of the high level of humidity, the sky is greyish most of the time and only sporadically, on too-rare lucky days, coloured a pale blue, while at night only few stars, the most brilliant ones, can be seen.

She had also experienced the drawing out of days in summer and their shortening in winter; as a matter of fact, it had been a real and considerable surprise for her the first time, on her arrival in Europe, to notice that there was still daylight at 10.00 p.m., when it was supposed to be already dead of night and in Lagos it would long since have been pitch dark. In Lagos, situated about 7 degrees north of the equator, days have more or less the same length, 12 hours, throughout the year; the difference is nearly imperceptible, around half an hour at maximum.

She had also discovered the glorious and joyful triumph of blossoming and budding in springtime and the grey, leaden skies of autumn – covered with clouds full of rain chasing each other – with its interminable and dull rainy days, as well as experienced the hard lashing of icy winter winds. She had witnessed the trees lose all their leaves after they had become all red and yellow, as if they were transformed into dangling slabs of copper and gold, and remain bare and like lifeless, benumbed spectral skeletons in the thick fog. Furthermore, these trees themselves were so different from the ones she was used to: none of the big and impressive African species were in fact in sight here – baobab or obeche, iroko and mahogany trees, to cite a few amongst the most common and renowned. None of the trees growing here in Europe had those typical high and powerful rampart-like roots between which a man could hide and protect himself from heavy and chilly blasts of wind, or the intricate system of aerial roots and hanging lianas, as can be seen in Africa. Here, tree trunks, almost cylindrical or very near to this geometric shape, rose

up straight from the ground and their roots were hidden deeply underneath.

For the very first time in her life, she had experienced and adapted herself to the soft, silent fall of snow covering earth, streets, trees and roofs of houses with a cold, cotton-white blanket, which was however strangely able to keep seeds in the earth warm and to protect them from winter's icy temperatures. (Before the first winter she spent in Europe she had only seen snow on a big photograph that Ricardo had hung in his living room in Lagos, which portrayed him skiing downhill during a giant slalom competition. But she had obviously not understood what it was exactly, and how it presented itself or what consistency it had.)

She had even learnt German and seemed familiar with it, capable of understanding and expressing herself in this difficult language which just one and a half years ago was totally alien and unknown to her. And now she was going to college to get a diploma in graphic arts and, at the same time, was already working as design assistant in an advertising agency. Ricardo was full of admiration for this lovely, beautiful and clever creature and romantically thought that his love for her was still as fresh, intense and perfect as at the start of their relationship. He liked her utterly and would certainly continue to love her endlessly! Only, her eyes had reddened considerably: little worm-like criss-cross veins had developed badly in the whites of her eyes and this worried him a good deal. With the usual consideration he always had for her, he therefore asked her immediately:

"Did you see an ophthalmologist to have a thorough examination of your eyes and check whether everything is all right or some healing treatment is necessary?"

A lot of anxiety clearly resounded in his smooth yet urging voice; Edima felt moved by his tender preoccupation and therefore answered quickly:

"Not yet, but I am planning to do it."

But Ricardo was not reassured by her reply and warmly invited her:

"I am too worried about the condition of your eyes; please, go and see an oculist as soon as you can."

"OK, I promise I'll do it soon, after your departure."

When they arrived at the hotel she wanted to inspect the room before paying for it. She found it was OK, but she complained about the shower, which was hanging high from the centre of the ceiling of

the bathroom and made her anxious about her nice and elegant hair arrangement. She therefore asked for a bucket with which to wash herself instead of standing under such a high shower. Despite the hotel attendants' assurance that they would comply with her wish, the requested bucket was never delivered to them. But she later solved the problem by putting her hair into a plastic bag bound tightly around her head. The room was on the top floor and there was a narrow and very steep spiral staircase leading up to it: it was nice and comfortable, with a large double bed, a sufficiently ample wardrobe and with both central and independent heating. When they entered the room they felt cold and did not notice the central heating, so they put the independent heater on before leaving to go round the town. But they realised later on that they had made a big mistake, as when they came back to the room they found it overheated. They switched off the independent heating, but there was no way of changing the air in the room, as Ricardo would have liked to do, because both the windows were blocked and it was impossible to open them.

Ricardo and Edima spent those four days going out shopping (this time she forgot her usual reserve and they walked along hand-in-hand, at times with both tucked deep into one pocket of his overcoat, with their fingers tightly intertwined) and making love. Their love was indeed still so strong and impetuous that they were feeling the highest pleasure in being together and giving one another tenderness, in sweet words and in acts of physical love. Ricardo could not remember having ever attained a similar level of pleasure with any other woman in his life: when he was with her, it was as if the entire world disappeared and they two were the only living beings on the whole planet. He for her, she for him. Edima, as well, felt that the simple presence of Ricardo near her created happiness and joy in her and made her forget all the difficulties of her life in a foreign country, so different from her native one. They therefore made love with the greatest enthusiasm and joy because they truly and intensely loved each other and they felt that, when they were together, their closeness was helping them to become one another. Sincere and romantic love was the engine that moved their actions, and physical love-making was therefore a pure consequence and the most evident expression of their mutual profound sentiments.

Ricardo initially had a little shocking, disappointing surprise when he saw her nude: she had in fact shaved off her pubic hair, and the

magnificent tiny silk triangle that had always attracted Ricardo's admiration for the perfection of its shape and dimensions was no longer there. Her pubis was totally bald, like that of a little girl. He asked why she had done it, but Edima was rather evasive on this issue. Ricardo then said to her that it was not good, because – apart from his own profound love for this small black hairy triangle, which will obviously thereafter change its nice pattern – after shaving, hairs re-grow thicker and coarser and the delicate skin of this part of the body can therefore become irritated and easily get a rash. He wondered who could have been so stupid and 'perverted' as to convince her to wreak such havoc on her body, since she had never acted like that before: 'Maybe was it a request coming from Markus, that middle-aged industrialist, ex-football player, whom Edima had confessed she had made love to?' Ricardo however liked and loved Edima too much to reproach her for long over this and quickly forgot his censure. And, full of the most tender affection for her, he gently and softly caressed and kissed her belly at length, exclaiming:

"I love this adorable belly in which a baby of mine was conceived, though alas you did not want to carry it till the time was ripe to give life to it. Edi, adored Little You, my great true love, why did you kill our baby?"

"Don't say that, darling. Please, do not make me feel more guilty for that than I do already. You are fully aware of the unfavourable circumstances. I really could not have a baby. It would have been too risky vis-à-vis the authorities of this country. But, believe me, I am happy and proud to have at least *conceived* a baby *from you*."

Realising that his words had been too harsh and upsetting and had revived a forgotten pain, and being totally unwilling to humiliate her further, Ricardo let this topic fall and never raised it again.

They went shopping in the town, because Edima was looking, in particular, for three items: shoes – as always – a 'salopette' (dungarees) and a sports jacket or padded windcheater. They found a pair of shoes with big raft-like soles that attracted Edima's attention – she always cared very much about the latest up-to-date fashion – and bought them. Then at the open-air market they bought the desired salopette, which fitted Edima quite well, but were unable to find a suitable sports jacket. The ones they saw either did not really fit her well or, if particularly beautiful, were very expensive, in spite of the discount the shop-owners were ready to

allow. They found one which was really nice and smart – all blue, with velvet shoulder-reinforcements – and fitted Edima exceedingly elegantly for both size and cut and was also sold at a very affordable price. But Edima considered it was a bit too smart for the use she wanted to make of it (wearing it while cycling to her college) so they did not buy it.

At the end of the day, having walked so much, Edima's feet were painful and she sat tired on the bed, stretching her legs and taking her shoes and stockings off. Ricardo took her feet in his hands, gently stroked and massaged them at length and then, wishing to show her how much he loved her, also kissed them tenderly. With this gesture he wanted to apologise for and wipe out what he had always told her - that her feet were the only part of her he did not like - and clearly demonstrate that no adverse feeling could exist in his affection for her. Later, when they went to bed, Edima moved close to Ricardo and lay in his arms pressing her body against his, then took his leg and folded it around her own hip: she wanted to recreate that lovely mood they had so often vividly engendered in Lagos and, renewing their old habit, feel herself trapped again in his 'cage', physically wrapping herself completely in his love.

In the night, Ricardo got one of his usual powerful nocturnal erections. She was sleeping on her side, with her back turned to him, but in her drowsiness she felt immediately the hard protuberant pressure of his swollen penis on her body. She promptly stretched out her hand behind her back and seized it and, without turning around, put it first between her thighs and then pushed it inside herself. He grasped her hips from behind and, in spite of the hindering roundness of her buttocks against his belly, pushed it forward deeply inside her, while she moved her abdomen slowly in an undulating manner. They both sank passionately in a sensational vertigo of pleasure and happiness. It was so unbelievably exciting and fulfilling; more than on other occasions when he was in her, he felt like being in heaven, she mumbled and moaned at length with delight for the very intense pleasure she was getting from him. They did not say a single word; they were relishing in depth the great joy of their communion and intense pleasure and true happiness hindered them from speaking. But later on, when they woke up, before dressing to go down to the hotel cafeteria and get breakfast, they exchanged passionate declarations of love with each other. Ricardo said:

“Edi, my beloved, *you* have marked my life for ever! I shall never forget what *you have been giving to me* in these years of uninterrupted happiness. To say the truth, I would like to be a musician or a poet, capable of composing a song able to celebrate your charms and beauty and to sing all your innumerable immense praises. Unfortunately, I’m not that sort of artist, I’m terribly sorry: I can’t express adequately all I feel for you. But, trust me, my love for you will be endless!”

Edima replied:

“Darling, *I owe you* so much! *You alone* can make me feel such great pleasure and, moreover, *you* have been capable of making me *the woman I am now*. I love you, too, immensely, and my heart is all yours!”

And, reassured – if it were ever necessary – of their mutual genuine sentiments, they made love again.

They also planned to go and see a film, but then they did not stick to this programme and did not carry out this wish. One evening, however, they went to a discotheque to dance. When they were inside the nightclub and Ricardo was drinking at the counter, she suddenly disappeared. Ricardo thought she had gone to the washroom, so he remained quiet at the counter with his glass of draught beer, waiting for her. After a good while, when she did not come back, he started looking around for her, thinking she had perhaps met people she knew.

At last he saw her on the dance floor. She was dancing with a young black man and Ricardo could not take his eyes away from her. She danced astonishingly well, with the right rhythm and extremely graceful and soft movements. She was wearing nice thin shoes with mid-height heels, just right for dancing, which made her nice figure even taller and more slender, and she did not miss a single step. She was a real queen of the floor. He openly admired her, and her refined elegance in moving, especially her elegance. Ricardo knew that she had attended dancing classes, but did not expect to see such an expert, a real professional dancer! He thought that perhaps more elegant dances, such as the waltz and the tango, would enhance her attractiveness and be even more appropriate to her graceful movements. He watched her with great, contemplative admiration. It was a real joy for the eyes to gaze on her grace and Ricardo, feeling madly fascinated, wanted to welcome her with applause when she finished dancing.

He would have liked to be able to dance so well with her himself. But he did not know the steps of the salsa – this was in fact a totally new dance for him, he had never had the chance to learn it – and he did not have suitable shoes for dancing, as the ones he was wearing had a rubber sole that did not slide well on the floor, so his performance was alas rather poor. He tried his best, but his moves were too rigid, hesitating and somehow clumsy. She laughed at him and said that other young people who were there were laughing at him too. Unfortunately, the music was almost all Mexican, salsas and merengues, and he could not perform as he would have liked. In Lagos – where ‘disco’ and ‘shake’ music was still played – he had always danced so well, giving full satisfaction to his partners; but now, with the only woman he loved unconditionally, he was feeling like a young teenager unable to move his steps on the dancing arena. What a shame!

Ricardo wondered whether she had also learnt some older dances that had filled Europe with enthusiasm in the past. He tried to imagine himself, wearing a dinner-jacket and patent leather shoes, and Edima, richly dressed in a sort of ‘belle époque’ dress, all laces and ostrich feathers, or swathed in a long gaily-coloured gown, tenderly enlaced in each other’s arms and launched in the gay pirouettes of a swirling waltz or engaged, their bodies voluptuously interlaced, in a languorous, sensual and sinful tango. Or even in more modern, joyful and vigorous be-bop, mambo, cha-cha-cha and rock-and-roll. Obviously, not on the narrow and crowded dance stage of a smoky and dark nightclub, but in the luminous, large, frescoed and stucco-worked eighteenth-century dance hall of an old and rich palace. ‘Then, yes, he could really show her all his skill and talent and make her fully enjoy dancing with him! And all the people present in the hall would be compelled to stare at them and admire their lovely dancing.’

Another young man of evident African origin invited Edima to dance, but after a while she started screaming and addressing the man wildly, then stopped dancing and came away from the stage. Ricardo did not grasp the reason for her being angry, he only caught a short piece of a bellowed sentence:

“... and I am Nigerian, I am able to fight you, what do you think?”

When he asked Edima about what had happened, she was still emotional and was not very clear. Ricardo therefore assumed that

she had received some obscene proposition from that young man.

The day Ricardo left, Edima decided to accompany him to the airport. In the morning, after waking up, they had made love at length, at first in bed and again, afterwards, under the shower (they liked making love under the shower a lot: and had done this frequently in Lagos!). He was very excited – and she happily excited him even further with her mouth – and, with his penis made so wonderfully stiff and rigid, had entered her deeply several times, so she had attained an intense and extremely delightful orgasm and was very happy and cheerful. They went out for a last shopping trip and when they went back to collect their bags, before leaving the hotel, she gladly and gently trimmed his eyebrows in the washroom of the common sitting-room. Neither of them knew, at that moment, that it would be the very last time that she performed this.

Later, on the tram to the station, they even spoke heartily about their joyous morning love interlude and her easy attainment of a pleasant and fulfilling orgasm. But afterwards, on the train to the airport, a stupid small misunderstanding happened between them, she erroneously took offence and her mood changed drastically. At the airport stop, she stepped out of the train very angrily and took a sudden decision not to go up to the departure hall of the airport with him, but to take the next train some ten minutes later to Lübeck, where she lived. Ricardo begged her to reconsider her hard and disagreeable position and forgive him, and come back to her former nice and joyful mood, but there was nothing he could do. Her very wild temper was playing its malevolent role and maintaining her bad behaviour. When the train arrived, she jumped into it without saying a single word to Ricardo and then stood there on the carriage floor, turned towards the other wall of the wagon with her back to Ricardo. Ricardo begged her, as long as the train-door was open:

“Edi, please, give me a good-bye kiss, or just say good-bye, ... tell me something, at least! I am travelling away from this country, I do not know whether and when we can meet again! ... Please, be kind: do not leave me like this! Bid me farewell as it should be between two people who love each other!”

But she remained silent, facing the opposite side of the train. Only when the train-doors were shut and the train started moving did she turn around towards Ricardo and wave her hand slowly, very slowly, in a short and minimal goodbye gesture. A great sadness fell on

Ricardo, who had certainly not had the slightest intention of offending her – how could he, since he loved her so much? – and did not expect such a tragic conclusion to what was meant to be a joyous visit to her. His return home without her cherished goodbye-kiss was a real catastrophe and terribly tragic for him: he was therefore full of melancholy and had a very heavy heart. And he could not yet know it, but this – although for different reasons – would be the very last time they slept together and made love to one another.

The following morning, however, Edima called Ricardo and asked him to give her a ring. Although glad to hear her voice, he was really too angry with her for her inexplicably nasty behaviour and wanted to punish her somehow or other. He therefore let a full day elapse and rang her up only the following day. She apologised for having behaved in that awful way and told him that she had wept all along the street between the station and her house, feeling terribly sorry and guilty for her action, since he was the only man she loved with all her heart. She was unable to explain what had happened in her mind. Ricardo was too happy to hear her to keep any resentment towards her and expressed all the tenderness of his love for her.

All through the following month they were in continuous contact by telephone, giving each other ample information about their respective lives and deeds and expressing to each other the abiding nature of their love. Constantly, their conversation would end with Ricardo saying:

“Edi, I love you!” and Edima answering in turn,:

“Darling, I love you more!”

The first time she answered like that, Ricardo asked her:

“How can you love me more than I love you, since the entire world is hardly sufficient to contain all my love for you?”

And she replied:

“Well, in that case, my love for you is as big as the whole universe!”

He was extremely delighted with this declaration of love without measurable boundaries and felt that his most tender feelings for this young woman would overcome any challenge. It became a sort of rite between them and every time Ricardo said:

“I love you!” regularly, to Ricardo’s maximum ecstatic pleasure, Edima’s answer was:

“I love you more!”

One month later, however, during one of their usual telephone conversations, he found Edima exceedingly excited. She told Ricardo that just the day before she had met a handsome young German at the college she attended, who had talked nicely to her, holding her hands in his own:

“Darling, exactly as you told me in Lagos one day that a man really interested in a woman would do, do you remember?”

And, at the end of their conversation this man had gently given her a little kiss on her lips. Ricardo asked her:

“Do you like him?”

“Well, yes, he is a nice man. But I do not yet know whether he really likes me.”

Ricardo, as always, was only worried about her happiness and did not want her to suffer any disappointment. He therefore strenuously hoped that this man would be correct towards her. During their next conversation, Edima told him that her new friend had said he wanted to marry her, but he still had to formalise his separation from a former girlfriend, because, according to him, their love story had come to an end after several years of living together. Ricardo, alarmed by what he considered a hurried proposal – and perhaps superficial or even insincere – warned her very carefully about starting a relationship with a man who still had a close attachment. Moreover, he very severely recommended her not to go to bed with him, whatever her interest in him might be and also in spite of any possible irresistible physical attraction. Not satisfied by having simply warned her in spoken words, he also wrote her a long letter telling her that in Europe it was a common trick among men to express their intention to marry a girl in order to sleep with her, but then, having attained this target, forget about marriage. He therefore reminded her to be very cautious and not to give away anything to that man before he had completely ended his former relationship and, by that, concretely manifested serious intentions to her. A week later, she said to Ricardo:

“He broke my heart!”

Ricardo felt great dismay and sorrow for her and also personally offended and therefore full of resentment against that man. He could not believe, indeed, that a man could behave in a rough or incorrect way towards such a lovely and perfect creature as Edima, in his eyes, undoubtedly was. He wrote a second letter to her, still

recommending her to be strong and consistent with her principles, proposing that she come to Spain and be his guest for a while, to give her time to reflect better about the whole matter, make her own ideas clearer and remove herself temporarily from an environment that could induce her to some desperate measures. She decided to follow his suggestion and planned a trip to Spain.

In the meantime, Ricardo suddenly received an unexpected, very nice letter from Catherine in which she openly protested all her love for him. 'Ricardo, remember that *I love you* and will love you *as long as I live!*' and 'I am still *your* Sylph.' were sentences repeated many times. She implored him to find a way to go back to Nigeria because she was missing him abominably. Ricardo was surprised that Catherine's romantic attachment and deep feeling for him were still alive such a long time after he had left Nigeria, but thought that might be because she had not met any other man worthy of receiving her love. She certainly deserved to be loved sincerely and intensely in return for her strong cherished sentiment, but he frankly did not know how to behave with her because of his exclusive and pining love for Edima.

He also got a letter from Dakky, narrating to him that she had just given birth to a baby girl, whose father was an Islamic Bulgarian she had met at the department store where she worked and had fallen in love with, but who was now treating her very brutally, insulting and even beating her. Ricardo felt very sad for her fate and full of hatred against a man who dared to behave in such horrible and wild way with such a lovely, candid – and, evidently, frail – young woman as Dakky certainly was. He thought angrily: 'Oh you awful white men, when will you stop creating havoc and grievances among these marvellous black beauties who are so eager to give you their heart and disclose to you the hidden, precious intimacy of their splendid body?'

He wrote to Dakky expressing his advice that either her boyfriend should change his attitude towards her drastically and marry her (but assuring her due respect and freedom) or it was much better for her to sever any relationship with him completely. Moreover, since she also informed him that she had passed her exams for admission to University, he strongly advised her not to give up, because of the recent preoccupying events which had happened in her life, but to leave her child with her mother as soon as breastfeeding could be interrupted and go to University to complete her studies and

become a lawyer as she desired. Obviously, Ricardo also rebuked her for not having told him about the existence of her intimate relationship before he left Nigeria, so that he could have given her good advice and a friendly warning then.

When Ricardo went to the airport to fetch Edima another month had elapsed; he thought however that their mutual feelings had not changed at all, so when she came out of the arrival zone, he welcomed her by enlacing her in his arms and kissing her warmly and tenderly on her lovely mouth. She appeared to accept willingly, and responded to his kisses.

However, what Ricardo did not know was that she had already made love to that man and had finally fallen in love with him. She had therefore decided to travel to Spain not specifically to meet Ricardo – although three months had already elapsed since their last meeting – but rather to spend a short holiday, just a fortnight, abroad, in a country she did not yet know and which was different from the ones she had become acquainted with. She felt strong enough in her new love to afford to meet Ricardo and thought herself capable of not feeling a particular attraction for him any more.

But when Edima saw Ricardo, she realised that she was not that strong: she still really liked his long, bony medieval face, furrowed with deep grooves between the sides of the nostrils and corners of the mouth, the high forehead, the greenish-brown eyes, his big, so typically Spanish aquiline nose and his elegance in dressing! Also now, coming to the airport to fetch her, he was so smartly dressed that she could not restrain herself from manifesting her approval:

“Ricardo, how elegant you are!”

She felt herself in great danger; she knew very well that if Ricardo had been a free man, without family engagements, willing to live his life with her, she would not have any doubt or hesitation, she would have chosen him – and him alone – despite his age, among thousands of men, and she would fling herself *only* into *his* arms. She realised that no other man could *fully* replace him in her heart. This notwithstanding, since Ricardo could not assure her a future together, she had now decided to change her life and to devote herself to another man.

She therefore understood that if she wanted to continue her newborn romance with Günter Lebensdorf (this was the name of her new boyfriend) and strengthen her link with him, she had to

force herself to avoid any further act of tenderness with Ricardo.

Naïvely, she had thought that Ricardo – having understood that the situation was no longer the same as when they were happily a couple in love and consequently also their mutual feelings were bound to evolve differently – had changed his attitude towards her, modifying his sentiment into pure and simple friendship. In her opinion, they could in fact remain real bosom friends, of course, but nothing more than that.

Now however she was made aware by his behaviour that he was still fond of her, he still desired her. Edima had on many occasions given proof of her strong will and determination when she wanted something – and Ricardo himself had unfortunately already experienced that on his own skin. But this time she realised immediately how difficult it would be to break abruptly and sharply a bond that had been so exclusively close and marvellous, for her too. She knew she had to defend herself against her own contradictory feelings and decided to follow the age-old rule that the best defence is attack. It was only a matter of picking the right tactic and the most propitious moment to put it in place.

Ricardo took her to the South of Spain where his family resided, to make the acquaintance of his brothers and sister. Along the road, they visited the famous and beautiful town of Toledo, where he proudly showed her – besides the various monuments and the glorious Alcazar, unforgettable symbol of the Spanish civil war – the world-renowned paintings of El Greco (especially the wonderful 'Burial of the Count of Orgaz' in the church of St. Thomas, but also those in the dedicated museum). After this visit, while driving to Jerez, he suddenly asked her:

"When we are there, can we sleep together?"

In spite of his constant, very strong desire for her, his request absolutely did not mean that he wanted to make love to her. He had indeed got the clear impression that she did not want to and was therefore avoiding ambiguous behaviour between them. He just wished to have the possibility of holding her tenderly in his arms once again and feeling the superb and unique contact of her marvellous body close to his own. But Edima very harshly and nearly nastily replied:

"No."

Her reply was so cold and dry that it did not leave room for any objection; therefore Ricardo drove totally dumbfounded for a long

while and a heavy, threatening and awkward silence, foreboding even more severe sadness and discontent with each other, fell bitterly between them along a considerable stretch of their journey southwards. Fully sensing the meaning of the drastic verdict concealed in that irritating “No”, Ricardo grasped that he was no longer desired and that all his residual hopes of tender intimacy with her were vain and fading. He therefore felt tremendously alone and forsaken.

When they arrived, Edima was impressed by the beauty of the surroundings and by the warm welcome given to her by Ricardo’s relatives. She spent ten really very pleasant and carefree days there. Ricardo and his brothers took her to visit the splendid Andalusian towns of Cordoba, Granada – where they listened to ‘flamenco’ music sung pleasingly by real gypsy performers who played their guitars in a fascinating and masterly way – and Malaga, and Ricardo’s sister took Edima shopping in the jewel-town of Seville. They loaded her with nice gifts. Edima particularly appreciated a long brownish-green two-piece dress in flower-printed tulle and fashionable silk two-piece nightwear of top and shorts.

The region where they lived was a special vineyard territory and Ricardo’s brothers were renowned wine and brandy producers. All around their country house there were luxuriant vineyards as far as the eye could see and they used to let their guests taste very good wine in their cellar. Edima was more used to drinking beer – there are very good beers produced in Nigeria and Nigerians have become great consumers of it and, moreover, Germany, where she now lived, is the real homeland of European beer. However she very much liked being served wine straight from barrels; it tasted in fact quite different from the cheap bottled wine (mostly German brands of poor quality!) she could buy at the supermarket in Germany. Ricardo’s brothers were handsome and humorous men and their sister was a beautiful and elegant woman; Edima fully enjoyed being in their company and loved them all.

The season also helped to make everything look bright and attractive: the trees were full of flowers, every single bush was blooming, the weather mild and pleasant, a nicely warming sun shone in a clean and clear, intensely blue sky. A fine, agreeable breeze rustled amongst the leaves and the air was permeated with a great variety of intense, sweet and inebriating perfumes, much

stronger and much sweeter than those she had become used to smelling in Germany. Though the heat was not yet stifling, the first cicadas of the season purred on trees in a deafening din, having already started their unbridled summer sawing-like noisy churring, mindless of the shortness of their life; stopping and staying still and silent for a while at any sudden rustling of leafy fronds, to start again with doubled vigour and endeavour as soon as calm and stillness were re-established.

At night, in the dim and joyous light of hundreds of fireflies, tireless crickets gladdened meadows and lawns launching into the quiet air their pleasant and peaceful long gay trills that sounded so different from the noisy and bothering jigsaw-like rasping of their African equivalents. The nearby wood resounded with the turtle-doves' garrulous, but monotonous call and the mournful and plaintive curlew's cry, as well as, later in the evening, with the owls' lugubrious and sinister hoots, but nobody in the house, being so used to them, cared much about that or seemed to be scared by such sounds – as, on the contrary, was Edima – which they even considered friendly and familiar. Regularly, in the early morning, at about 4 to 4.30 o' clock, the nightingales' song filled the garden. But Edima, at that time, was still deeply asleep and could hardly hear it and rejoice at the loquacious cascade of glowing and merry notes cheerfully emitted by those melodious singing birds – responding to one another or one slightly after the other, as in a polyphonic counterpoint. During the day, intensely busy butterflies and bees were gaily flying everywhere and the sky was continually intersected by the shrill chirping of the swallows, which nested under the roofs of neighbouring farms.

In a moment when Ricardo and Edima were alone, she wanted to pull his leg, as she had cheerfully done many other times in the past, and also to challenge him. So she said, but this time with a hint of animosity, which transpired so clearly in her voice that it violently hit and visibly saddened him:

“Ricardo, in your family, they are all very beautiful, except you!”

He frowned, knowing that this was not what she really believed in her heart, but, by saying it, she wanted to attach a particular meaning to her words, and exploded:

“Edi, you used to say exactly the contrary, *when you loved me*, in Lagos!”

Ah, the horrid and awful concept ‘when you *loved me*’ had been

expressed! He himself had so rashly pronounced it! How could he? This dreadful and terrible past tense! It sounded horribly like an open admission that their fabulous relationship was no more, that her love for him had come to an end! And he shivered and was terribly sad, as he understood that with this statement she wanted to defy him openly and make him know clearly that the wonderful mood existing between them in the past had, unfortunately, finally changed for the worse.

On the morning of their departure to go back to Madrid for Edima to catch her flight to Hamburg, Ricardo went to her room to speed up the preparation of her luggage, but she was still in the bathroom, taking a shower. He called to her through the closed door, hurrying her up, then waited for her in her room. When she came out, wrapped up in the bath-towel, Ricardo thought: 'How beautiful and seductive she is, as always!' But she was surprised to see that he had been waiting for her there and exclaimed:

"Ah, you are here!" then added: "OK. Now, keep your eyes closed or ... no, better, ... turn your back and don't look at me while I am dressing, otherwise I'll shout out loud!"

Ricardo gazed at her with ill-concealed astonishment: 'Has she forgotten who am I? Am I not the man she had been living with, the man she had loved so passionately for years? Do I now deserve all this?'

He would have given away the whole world to see her nude in her splendid beauty once again, to take a glance at the magnificent bosom he had had the chance to caress and kiss innumerable times and have a glimpse of that lovely black triangle of her pubic hair – had it grown back again, attractive and sexy as formerly, since the last time when he had missed seeing it because it had alas been shaved off? But he turned around, as requested. He behaved gently as the real gentleman he was in order to comply with a lady's desire, although thinking with repressed rage: 'I have seen her nude more than a thousand times, nearly three hundred days a year for more than four years, plus many other times in this last one and a half years, does she now really need to treat me like a stranger?' He felt heavily offended in his self-respect and severely wounded. *His* entire world was ruinously tumbling down!

The final stroke, however, was not yet delivered on Ricardo and only came later, on the road; all this was only the foreshadowing of a

much worse and totally unexpected attack against him. They were driving fast enough to arrive at Madrid in good time, and had briefly stopped at a 'posada' (inn) to eat a 'paella valenciana' (typical Spanish dish of rice with meat and pulses). Then, at a certain moment when they were just riding on the large and not difficult bends of the Desfiladero de Despeñaperros (literally, Pass of Throw-dogs-from-the-cliff) down from the Sierra, Ricardo naïvely asked:

"Edi, what about us?"

Good Heavens, he should never have put this question forward! Their trip became a real record of disasters that Ricardo would never forget! A mere nightmare under a terrifying storm of accusations. Edima started a train of sad complaints against him, shouting and screaming in an awful manner, accusing him of the worst deeds. She poured out in fact a full torrent of pure and totally undeserved calumnies in his face. Captured by an uncontrollable fury, she was literally shrieking, dreadfully, at the highest possible pitch, which horribly distorted her voice (usually so melodious and cherished) and made it hardly recognisable to Ricardo, who had never argued so badly with her. Ricardo was in complete astonishment at her rabidity and spite towards him. He was sunk under a real flood of nasty words. She charged him brutally and blamed him for being still fond of her and desirous of making love to her even when she had decided to devote herself to another man:

"Whenever you look at me, there is lust and *wish to have me* in your look, I can read it easily in your eyes! And you are *jealous!* Jealous, yes, because now I have dedicated myself to another man!"

Ricardo wondered: 'Lust? Wish to have her? Jealous? Perhaps. ... Probably. ... OK, yes, decidedly jealous: and so what? After all, is there any reason why I should not be jealous?' How could he remain imperturbable and not be jealous of a man who had taken his most precious treasure and was now enjoying, in his place, the lovely dedication of her heart which was so enchanting and the exciting smoothness of her splendid body? Ricardo was not insensitive and could hardly stand such a heavy blow. Of course, he needed time to collect himself: he was so terribly fond of her! But jealousy in him was not fundamental and the natural disposition of his soul to good sentiments would certainly prevail over it. In fact, jealousy could be easily swept away and beaten by his fond preoccupation for her and the tender care for *her* happiness that he constantly cherished in his

heart above everything. Edima's arguing however was not yet finished:

"Ricardo, *you cannot have me any more*, our love is finished. *It was already over* after the very first time we met in Germany! You remember the horrible crash of thunder and the lightning falling nearby? *It was a sign!*"

Ricardo could hardly follow all the flood of her hard words: 'A sign of what? What kind of sign? An ill omen? Coming from whom or from where?' He only remembered well that, in the middle of that night, the lightning fell – probably on a nearby tree – just outside the window of their hotel room, which had been left open to alleviate the heat. There was a horrible and dreadful shattering and a roar similar to an unexpected awesome, lonely rifle shot or to the sudden crack of a gigantic whip wielded by a ghostly postillion driving his coach on the pathways of the sky. In that hotel there were only twin bedrooms (no double beds, which they would have preferred) so, after having made love on Edima's bed, they had to part and each of them lay down to sleep in their own bed.

But when the penetrating and deafening rumble broke high and ruggedly against the peace of the night, and the blinding glare flashed into their room through the shutterless window, she had jumped up promptly and hurriedly from her bed. She had thrown herself into his arms, making herself small, small, like a baby, and buried her face in his neck, seeking *his* protection while her arms were stretched tightly about him to hold him close in search of a warm, reassuring hug. But she had made him quiver with joy and pleasure at the unexpected, incomparably exciting touch of her lovely nude body.

What sort of sign could that be? What had that to do with a claimed end of their love? Given that lightning was a discharge of electricity between two points at different levels of energy, in particular between clouds and earth, it clearly had to fall somewhere on the surface of the globe, didn't it? Therefore, even if it fell so close to them, and with all the good will to respect and accept African beliefs and viewpoints, as well as their sensitivity towards natural phenomena – totally unfamiliar to European positivism and rationalism – he could not see any particular sign in it, actually. Perhaps because he was more used than her to the violence of thunderstorms in temperate climates, especially in summertime (and from his most tender childhood, he had seen so many frightening

ones!) he could not see in it anything other than the obvious, natural evolution of a normal summer storm, as it happens all the time and everywhere under stormy circumstances.

He was unable to stop her long, rambling speech, but thought, mentally reviewing all the nice moments spent together: 'How could our love be finished by that time? This is a falsehood, absolutely, by no means true. We met many other times afterwards, making passionate love, and the time before last she even got pregnant by me! Wasn't that still *true* love? Wasn't the conception of a baby the *fruit of our love*? Wasn't that the issue of *my own* semen deposited in her womb, my own blood mingled with *hers*? What else, then? And what about the very last time we met, just a few months ago? How can she have forgotten all that! What is she talking about? Unless she's become totally bewitched by her new love into forgetting the reality of facts, this is pure nonsense, a real madness!

Voiceless, diverting briefly his eyes which he kept wisely on the road in front of them, Ricardo could only glance sideways at her in despair. He had no way to express his thoughts to her, Edima was shrieking in a rush of pure hysteria, still shouting too loud to be interrupted:

"I do not want you *any more*, Ricardo! I shall *never* make love *to you* again in my life!" Then, to soften a little her last statement which sounded like a capital sentence - that grieved and quite painfully wounded him, making him shiver in anguish - she added:

"You see, in my people's belief, should I make love to you now, after I have been received and welcomed in such a warm and friendly way in your house, it would cause some dreadful effect on your family: some member of your family, your wife or one of your sons, could die! And I assure you, I do *not* want, *in any way*, anything bad to happen to *you* or to *any of your* relatives!"

A firm belief of this sort, in order to justify her denying herself his love, was totally acceptable to Ricardo, even though bound to African superstition. He knew perfectly well that traditional taboos were so strongly and intimately interconnected with their mentality, and respect for native beliefs and customary persuasions so tightly held in their mind and heart, that no Nigerian would dare contravene them. Not even an educated and modern-thinking young woman like Edima, even if now in the process of becoming a European.

But then what was the purpose, the meaning of all that bellowed

rigmarole - a really awful, painful tirade - of all those accusations?

In Ricardo's opinion, she could have talked calmly and more tactfully to him, saying: 'Ricardo, I loved you completely with all my heart and my senses, but you must understand you represent only a marvellous past for me, however wonderful and pleasant and full of true and sincere love. You cannot give me a future, since you have a family to care about, and at my age I need to have a present and a future. This man, Günter, is now my present and, if he wants it, may also be my future. Let me therefore live my life with him, while you must try to forget me, as well as the entire mood of sweet intimacy and the tenderness which existed between us!' It sounded reasonable and simple, but it would have required a good dose of reflection and self-control, and an act like this was too far from Edima's way of thinking and could not be expected from her. She was too pragmatic, resolute and impulsive and was unable to behave so easily and peacefully.

Ricardo, of course, would have replied: 'I can't forget and I do not even want to: those years of love have been so wonderful and too important to me!', but was neither silly nor egocentric. He could obviously be jealous of any man getting into an intimate relationship with her, but he would have fully understood and accepted a speech like this and would have been ready to pull back and leave Edima totally free to live a new romance, especially if this could happily culminate in her marriage. He had always told her, indeed, since the very beginning of their own love affair, that when she met the man she deemed the right one for her life, she needed only to tell him frankly and he would step out of her life! OK, maybe it would have been more difficult now, after so many years spent together, but what still counted more than everything for him was Edima's happiness, not his own! Above all, what he wanted was that which would be best for her.

He would have been exceedingly happy to marry her, he would have even considered it a real honour for him to be desired and chosen as a husband by such a lovely African woman, if only he could do it, of course; but, this not being possible, he was prepared to leave the way free to any man of her choice with such laudable intentions. He was absolutely convinced that she fully merited it and could be a marvellous wife for any European man. Even more, he sincerely thought that it was strictly necessary for Edima *to marry* the white man she was in love with in order to live in Europe as a fully

accepted black European lady of African origin – which she was very rightly proud of – and not as the probably gossiped-about ‘*little African mistress*’ of a European man. As a matter of fact, he strongly hated the thought that this lovely woman (as she still was and would be for ever in his eyes) could be the target of people’s slander and receive hostility and blame from tattling and malevolent landladies.

He had indeed largely contributed himself to her formation for just this purpose, and had wanted with all his strength - and strenuously pushed her to become - the marvellous woman she now was. (He noticed though that she had changed her nail polish again to a colour he did not like at all and, despite being the latest fashion among youngsters, did not in his opinion suit her well, partly because of the colour of her skin. Now a very dark cyan, awfully near to black, was spread on them. ‘Was her present man, this Günter, then so lacking in taste and unable to perceive what was the best for her, as well as unable to give her good advice?’)

At this point, thinking she had found the right argument, by putting it on a moralistic ground, Edima yelled angrily:

“I also confessed all my sins and do not want to continue an erroneous and sinful life!”

Ricardo acknowledged openly that his love affair with Edima, since it was an evident adultery, was wrong and sinful from a moralistic viewpoint – and he too had confessed to a priest his sin – but was convinced of enjoying God’s benevolence and mercy, since he had always considered Edima a real gift from Heaven for which he had thanked Him a thousand times in his prayers. In his opinion, their love was far too pure and beautiful to be the fruit of evil.

Moreover, since God’s ways are infinite and His designs mysterious and inscrutable to humans, there might well have been a design of God for Edima to develop the limited horizons she had before meeting Ricardo. In this case, since it is up to Him to convert also negative actions, like sins, into positive ones, just as nothing can happen without His permission and will, Ricardo could have been the instrument in the Lord’s hands to realise it. So, this perhaps might well have been the task that God Himself had planned and entrusted to him: that he should hold her by her hand and take her on the path of life. And she had in fact properly spotted that he was the right man to give her what she needed to complete her formation.

He also thought that if fornication is a sin in God’s eyes, then it is

a sin whatever the marital position of her partner: a potential free bachelor like Günter (by virtue of the separation on course from his previous girlfriend) just as a married man like he himself. He wanted, therefore, to tell Edima that, since Günter was not her husband, she was still living in sin, exactly in the same way as she was when being with him. But if she did believe that she was avoiding sin, then telling her his own opinion would hit her harshly - harder than he really wanted to. And even at that moment, when she was so brutally destroying all his dreams - practically, his whole life - and severely wounding him, he was unable to hate her. He felt awfully full of bitterness and sorrow, of course, but not of hatred.

Such a sentiment could not find a place in his heart. Ricardo deeply and sincerely loved Edima and - although disliking utterly the violent manner used by her - was nearly ready to justify her and to reckon she was right to act as she did. He was in fact nearly prepared for this sorrowful end of their splendid romance. Since her departure from Nigeria, when she left the cage trapping her strong personality represented by her country to fly away as a free bird, he had feared that he would lose her. For by living in Europe - moreover, far apart from him - she would have the chance of meeting many young white men and most probably of falling in love with a selected one of them. Ricardo knew well that far from him, in the land of the so much desired white men, it was inevitable. He could even say that he should have bet, and been sure to win, that sooner or later this was likely to happen, alas! Edima was in fact a too beautiful and lovely young woman for a European man not to notice her and easily get fond of her. Now, this had actually happened - though too soon, alas, as he was not yet ready to be so abruptly separated from her and to let her go! - and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

Edima's new relationship with a young European had unfortunately decreed the death of their magnificent story. She seemed to have totally forgotten all the lovely moments they had spent together, their perfect communion, their intimacy. He, on the contrary, happened to remember pretty well everything, every single moment since their first meeting, every word exchanged, every act of love, all the happiness and joy they had been giving to one another. How could she have forgotten all that? How could she have made 'tabula rasa' of their wonderful togetherness as if it were a simple adventure of no account, and be ready to start a new affair?

Apparently, she had cancelled everything. Ricardo had been driven out of her heart and was no more in her sweetest thoughts.

Notwithstanding his vague expectation and fear of such a grievous event, he felt wounded and betrayed and his pain was enormous and uncontrollable. His naturally generous nature got the upper hand of him however, and, thinking that it was useless and unfair to wound her in retaliation, he kept silent, though a piercing thought hammered incessantly inside his head: 'How sorrowful and devastating the end of a nice romance is! A really shocking and tragic event! Especially because she is undoubtedly, in all aspects, a splendid woman and over these years had become my life. She *was* my life. Alas, now our wonderful hearts' communion is finished: she doesn't want any more of me and life is forsaking me and flying away from me, going with her forever! And this time it is really final; any idea about her turning back from this awful decision appears in fact totally unlikely. Our love story is really terminated, is over forever. Why did it have to happen? Is it part of women's nature to be so drastically forgetful? Yet, it had always been considered, in literature as well as in psychological treatises, as being a specifically male prerogative! Or is it due to the African soul and habit that such a great and beautiful love as ours could also be so fragile and – apparently, at least – so ephemeral?'

But Ricardo was too clever and wise a man not to perceive that there was something else hidden behind Edima's tough decision to put an end so roughly and even ferociously to their fabulous love bond: there was in fact also her firm determination to free herself from his protection, which, after so many years, had perhaps become too cumbersome in her eyes and, as a consequence, maybe even tedious. Her deep passion and her great, boundless admiration for him had in fact brought her to depend entirely upon him in a sort of unconscious moral subjugation that had totally guided her life in the last years, making her live in his shadow, fully protected by his careful wing. Thanks to Ricardo's wise guidance and to his constant presence beside her to back her she had brilliantly attained adulthood, but now she needed freedom and independence to get out of the shell and come to full maturity. It was in her reach, but she had to conquer it on her own, without any other person's help.

That is why her action had been so violent: any struggle for independence – be it individualistic, as in this case (likewise the rebellion of a grown-up girl against her father's imposing and harsh

paternal authority), or for an entire population, such as independence wars against colonialism – is tough and painful, in certain cases even heavily bloody. Otherwise, why did she have to abuse him so wildly and unjustifiably? Wasn't he the man she had loved so intensely for years? She needed to acquire independence from Ricardo's benevolent and precious, but somehow excessively protective presence and, consequently, the freedom from his paternalistic judgement of her actions, which was always softly expressed, as it was in Ricardo's nature, but now had become, in her eyes, too severe and critical. In so doing, she would then be able to stand alone, as well as to step forward and progress in life without help from anybody else.

She had in fact promised herself that she would not go through a similar experience again. For the rest of her life she would no longer depend so closely on a man. Not even on Günter, who could very well represent a means, but not her ultimate target. She acknowledged readily that her life with Ricardo had been full of successes, besides physical pleasure, joy and happiness, but only one Ricardo existed in the world and men like him – so generous and altruistic, so ready to tenderly care for and put his partner's happiness before his own – are really of great rarity. Ricardo knew well that it was absolutely her right to wish this – whilst he had no right to interfere and frustrate her initiative – and in his heart, silently, justified her behaviour completely.

Therefore, despite the profound wound and genuine sorrow that her action had provoked in him, in his heart he was even ready to praise it. It fully demonstrated in fact that a certain childlike aspect and African ancestral customs in Edima's character and behaviour were totally abandoned forever and a capable, emancipated and autonomous woman – and what a magnificent modern woman, indeed! – had finally developed in all its glorious and happy potency. And this, for him, was what counted more than anything. Much more than his own pleasure and contentment.

At last he succeeded in cutting Edima's angry soliloquy short and silenced her, by shouting even louder than her:

“Edi, enough is enough! Now, shut up or I'll drop you in the middle of the road, regardless of your need to catch your flight!” and he raised his foot abruptly from the accelerator, thus slackening suddenly the speed of the car, as though being seriously on the

verge of implementing his threat.

Edima, frightened that he might really do it, obviously stopped immediately her odious violent arguing and finally remained silent.

He pressed his foot down again on the accelerator, then explained to her that she could not demand that his love for her should immediately finish simply because she wanted this and because she had decided to give herself to another man:

“I give my love to anybody I want and nobody, not even you, can hinder me from doing that! It is surely tragic for a man so fond of a woman as I am of you to love her without receiving love back and thus will it certainly be for me; in no way will I be able to avoid a long period of sorrowful days and desperate nights. This notwithstanding, it does not really matter whether my love for the person I want – you, of course – attracts, in its turn, love towards me: it rests entirely in my discretion and is therefore totally in my own power to decide if I am content like that. You can stop loving me if you want to, as you have already indeed! Believe me, there is no blackmailing action on my side against you to compel you to revise your plans or your position towards me: if you have decided to leave me, I can’t oppose your decision and have to accept it, even against my own will. Certainly, you do not need to love me, just because I love you!”

“But I do not want someone I can’t give my love to, or I have ceased to love, keeping on loving me anyhow!”

“What I do concerns only me and nobody else. So, if I want to love you, that’s totally my matter and you cannot censure me for doing so. This parting that you now want between us – for which, mark it well, despite the grief that you give me, I don’t blame you – can obviously break my heart and my soul and kill my life, but is totally unlikely to kill or even weaken ipso facto the deep and sincere sentiment I nourish for you in my heart. My love for you is in fact too sound and true to finish in this way, as if by the touch of a magic wand.” Fearing that she might misjudge his feelings, Ricardo then further added thoughtfully: “And you are completely wrong, if you think that I am pushed to act like that because of my sexual desire for you: for me, indeed, love comes first, a totally and uniquely sentimental love, then physical desire. I can very well go on, living with my love for you, also without satisfying my desire to make love to you!”

Luckily enough – and Ricardo, acknowledging it, felt very grateful

to Edima for that, as the contrary would have been really too hard to bear, it would have killed him – she had had, at least, the good taste not to slap him in the face, by saying brutally, as many women unfortunately do when their affair with a man finishes: ‘I love Günter more than I loved you!’ or, throwing in his teeth a poor performance on his part as a lover: ‘Günter is a much better and more pleasant lover than you. Making love to him is more sexually exciting, enjoyable and satisfying than it has ever been with you!’ This indeed would have been a really upsetting and totally cruel insult! But it has to be said that Edima was not that sort of woman: although determined to break off their love relationship, she did not want to do him any real and severe harm. As a matter of fact, it was unavoidable for her: at the very bottom of her heart she still loved him a bit. She was too sentimental and knew very well that the true and sincere love she had received from Ricardo, as well as the one she had felt for him, had been too beautiful, enjoyable and exalting for her to express something like that.

After having cooled down, Edima – although without repenting or apologising for having treated him so badly and outrageously (but it was not normal in Edima’s strong and proud character to acknowledge her faults and to apologise) – felt that she did not mean and did not want to lose Ricardo: he was too important a piece of her own life, he was the man who had so successfully and brilliantly let her come out to adulthood, like a superb butterfly from a mean chrysalis; he had shaped and moulded her and made her bloom and become the splendid woman she was now. The potential and the intelligence necessary for such evolution were obviously intrinsic values and prerogatives of her magnificent complex personality, but he was the one who had polished her and developed her to let her come out to a complete, fabulous adulthood. In the inmost part of herself, she understood that by losing him, she would have lost her own roots – or a piece of herself – in the same way as when parents die. He represented the family for her, especially now that she lived so far away from it. She therefore expressed to Ricardo her wish to remain in strict contact, as real bosom friends, saying eagerly:

“Ricardo, please, call me anyhow, despite the end of our love story, and do it often: I *need* to hear *your* voice, *you* are my family!”

But Ricardo groaned:

“How do you want me to ring you up frequently? I would be

frightened to call at an inopportune moment, for instance right at the moment you are making love to your man!”

Her request, indeed, had sounded maybe somehow anachronistic and incongruous after all the evil things she had said against Ricardo, but it fully demonstrated how good-hearted and romantic Edima was and how great her affection was for him and also how bound to him she felt, in spite of everything. And she then replied, firmly:

“Ricardo, are you joking? You can’t speak like that; *you are my hero* and heroes are *never afraid* of anything!”

Of course, Ricardo felt flattered to be considered by her still as *her* hero, but nevertheless thought that heroes are human beings too and may be scared stiff of finding indifference and coldness at the other end of the line or of catching, in the voice of the woman they love, pleasure for an orgasm just attained with another man! In love matters, in fact, when deep and sincere sentiments are involved – as in a true love like that which Ricardo felt for Edima – even the greatest heroes in the world may lose their strength and aplomb and become fearful and uneasy like shy youths at their first emotional experience.

When they arrived at the airport and, after having completed the check-in operations, Ricardo had to leave her so that she could go into the departure hall, they gently said good-bye by hugging tightly and giving each other a series of small sweet kisses on their lips that both enjoyed rapturously. But Edima still wanted to make her point clear, and when Ricardo gently asked:

“Why did you continue to say ‘I love you!’ on the telephone, till the last day before your arrival?”

She hurriedly said, before going: “I was misunderstood.”

The absurdity of this unexpected answer struck him violently and left him unable to find the words to express his astonishment. Ricardo became totally bewildered. It was very difficult, if not impossible, for him to catch the exact meaning of this unbelievable and somehow sibylline sentence. Though Edima loved to promulgate concise sentences, if this was intended to be a message hastily launched at him, it was in fact certainly too cryptic and unintelligible for him to go through and clearly understand its content and allusions. There was however no time for a clear and plausible explanation, she had to board her plane (the airport control had already called passengers to Hamburg for the second

time) and he was compelled to let her go.

Although a heavy and gloomy sadness had suddenly filled and overshadowed his heart, a last sweet thought for her well-being came to his mind: 'God had once entrusted her to me, but now He is keeping her away from me, having designated her to another man, a much younger one, more suitable than me to be her companion through the hurdles of life: the task I had of holding her by the hand and leading her is then finally terminated. I shall no longer be beside her to protect and help her on the path of life, as well as to guard her against evil and warn her about unworthy and treacherous or dishonourable persons. From now on, she definitely has to stand on her own feet. Let's just hope that she will meet only nice people in her future, whether this is Günter, with whom she is now in love, or any other person she will run across.' In spite of his constant desire to be of some help to her, there wasn't much more he could do for Edima: he just had to keep his fingers crossed and pray that everything would turn out in the best way for her or, at least, according to her expectations.

Addressing himself inwardly to God, he silently, but ardently prayed: 'My Lord, I beg You, hear my prayer, though I'm an undeserving sinner: don't leave her alone and do not take Your benevolence – in which she is fully confident and of which she is totally worthy – away from her. Please, keep Your own Holy hand on her and avert all dangers, difficulties and evil from her!' Ricardo then tenderly whispered to Edima while she was already setting out for the hand luggage X-ray screening:

"Good luck, Edi, Little You. Take care and watch yourself!" and, adopting a wish very popular in Nigeria when bidding someone farewell, he added softly: "God bless you!"

Then, with a faint, grave smile crossing his face, which flickered and was quickly gone, he pressed his hand wide-open on the glass of the hall window against hers on the other side of it, as if to maintain for a while longer the contact between them in a tender greeting gesture. Afterwards, he watched her stepping away along the long, wide corridor amid a crowd of passengers until she went out of sight. But even before she vanished behind the distant corner which hid her definitively from view, when she turned around for a last wave and he waved back to her, he was unable to focus and distinguish clearly her beloved face and her enchanting figure: they had started fluctuating and fading and becoming vague and

contorted because tears had filled his eyes.

Some droplets had also welled up in the corners of Edima's eyes and wet her fine black eyelashes (because the end of a good and fulfilling romance is a sad event for both the protagonists, even for the one who decides to part, not only for the one who is forsaken) but she was able to force them back. The thought of Günter, her new man, due to come to meet her on her arrival at Hamburg airport, was indeed a sufficiently strong antidote to the sadness engendered by this gloomy and painful farewell.

As she was eclipsed, Ricardo desperately understood that it was also the final eclipse of their love. In the twinkling of an eye, as by a bad spell, the bright and vital sunshine that she had brought into his life and which had enlightened those years of boundless happiness spent with this marvellous woman was abruptly turned off. Even the lovely intimate mood, the perfect understanding and accord, the mutual deep knowledge of one another that had characterized their lives, faded out. Darkness and sorrow had taken their place in Ricardo's thoughts and rooted themselves deeply into his wrung-out stomach, pervading dreadfully his whole being. It became clear in his mind that he would not see her any more, at least for several years. Consequently he felt that his soul was broken, and all his body ached terribly.

His dismay was so great that he wanted to yell his inconsolable despair out loud, even in front of all these unknown passengers. His blood chilled, and the horrifying sensation of a shadow of death fell heavily and inexorably on him. There was agony in his heart and in his brain. With tears in his eyes and streaming down his cheeks, feeling shivery and shaking sadly with the consciousness that a wonderful dream was miserably over for ever, he thought: 'Alas, all lovable and desirable things – and beautiful dreams are among these – don't last long; unfortunately, they are bound to have an end, sooner or later. But what misunderstanding could there be? Whenever I said: "I love you!" she invariably answered: "I love you more!" What could be more clear than that!'

The mystery of a woman! A magnificent, lovely African woman he had loved with all his heart, his mind and his strength, who was now – to his greatest and most painful grief, alas! – going out of his life. Out of his life, undoubtedly and unfortunately, but not of his heart: he would have continued to love her as long as his brain would be able to remember. To remember, as realistically and vividly as they

can only be in a fairy-tale, the marvellous, magic moments of an extraordinary love story – absolutely unrepeatable and unforgettable.

But Nigeria, the land of love, had not exhausted its role as friendly and generous dispenser of joys and pleasure and was still offering its precious and peerless fruits. For there, in Lagos, another young woman, now 26 years old, full of the hope of having him just for herself at last, and ready to give him her most tender love and passion, was still longing for Ricardo's return to Nigeria. Catherine was indeed wishing with all her heart to dedicate herself to him and was confident of getting the highest pleasure and endless happiness from a close and exclusive, intimate relationship with him.

Having heard from Ricardo of the sad conclusion of his romance with Edima, she wrote to him: "I am sorry for how Grace (Catherine knew Edima only as Grace) treated you. But *I shall not do* like her: I, *your Sylph, want you* and you alone and *will love you as long as I live!* Come back soon to Nigeria to make me live again, please, dearest Ricardo, because *I miss you* tremendously!" Ricardo was quite thrilled and extremely delighted and happy at this announcement: another beautiful and fascinating woman, at least, had not forgotten the lovely hours spent together and was still desiring and loving him, how great! And how exquisite was this pretty and delightful creature: a real rare treasure; with no doubt, a very charming and enjoyable young woman, the right girl for him, just the one he would have been so happy to have the possibility of marrying!

Her words were indeed the most convincing and clear answer to his unexpressed – merely thought – question: no, an African woman's love for a man – and, in this case, he, Ricardo, was the fortunate receiver of such highly praised and welcomed sentiment – could also *not be* fragile and ephemeral! On the contrary, it could evidently be as solid as a rock and last for a long lapse of time. There was love-promising life in the warmth and tenderness of Catherine's words. So he was still enjoying a favourable fate and that wonderful land still wanted to show how generous it was with him and life therefore still had a meaning and could start again!

The nice and sweet words used by Catherine in her letter had indeed triggered a mechanism in Ricardo's mind and, opening his eyes, let him understand that she deserved much more than the few hours of tenderness he had been able to give her. She was in fact worth a true, great, unbounded and enrapturing love, not a simple

season of love, but an entire life full of love. It called to him with such strength of purpose that he felt an urgent and frantic need to rush to her. For sure, she would have been a fabulous wife, likely to gladden her man's heart! Not only for him, obviously, but also for any other man having the prerogatives needed to engender real interest and passion in her.

Not satisfied with the lovely expressions she had addressed to Ricardo, Catherine further wrote when he sent her a nice gift for her birthday: 'You are the kindest man I've ever known, the only man who always remembers my birthday without being reminded. I will never forget you, Ricardo, *never*. Even if by chance I get married, I will still continue to love you anyway, all through my life.' Ricardo had never in his whole life received such an open and exclusive avowal of perpetual love from a woman - apart from his wife, who had pronounced it while reciting the sacred matrimonial oath in front of the main altar of the Monasterio de San Juan de la Peña, the monastic church near the town of Jaca in Aragon where their wedding had taken place. He was therefore highly moved by Catherine's gentle and absolute declaration, which even Edima, despite the profound love she formerly felt for him, had never made in such terse terms.

In her next letter she delicately and tenderly wrote to him: 'Dearest Love, I miss you very, very much and I long to make hot, sweet and passionate love to you again. Come, darling, please, come back soon to Nigeria and give me the cherished joy of hugging you. Perhaps, if you come, we can make some babies from the passionate love we will make. I am ready to get pregnant by you and carry your baby inside me. I want you inside me and want my children to resemble you, so that they can always remind me of you, my true love. If you want me to be happy forever, I have to carry a baby of yours. I pray that you come to Nigeria very soon to give me this incomparable and invaluable gift.'

Ricardo was perfectly aware and conscious that a gentleman such as himself - with his impeccable and courteous manners and his infinite, exquisite tenderness, as well as his sweet, amorous care for his partner's pleasure and enjoyment in making love - could engender strong sympathy and deep affection and also real passion in an African woman. However he could not have imagined that Catherine's love for him would be so profound, solid and lasting. 'She wants a baby from me and seems very determined to get it,

what a nice and tender thought! What moving and incredibly sweet feelings she must harbour in her heart for me!

Profoundly touched and exalted by such open and delightful declarations of sincere love and full dedication to him, Ricardo hastened to write to Catherine, assuring her of his gratitude and boundless affection: 'I am amazed, though also extremely happy and pleased, that after almost three years since the last time we met you still feel that you are mine, adorable Sweet Sylph. I am also extremely honoured that you want *me* as your sole lover and the potential father of your children, as the only man you want to make babies with. I am really profoundly touched! I apologise for not having perceived, when I was in Nigeria, that your feelings for me were so strong and true and for having treated you so badly and unfairly. I feel terribly guilty and ashamed towards you: I reckon you fully deserve to be loved passionately and I truly do, with all my heart and now I wish and am ready to dedicate myself entirely to you, unconditionally! I frankly admit that you are a really fabulous young woman, the nicest and sweetest woman existing on earth, the woman to fill a man's dreams. You simply are superbly magnificent and splendid, in one word: you are unique and I have nothing else to do but adore you ardently. Do therefore accept my humble apologies, dearest Cathy, lovely and charming Lady, and be patient with this untrustworthy and unfaithful man; forgive me and keep on loving me as long as you can, please! I need your love as much as I need air to breathe: it gives me life, indeed.'

Being a serious and sensitive man, he wondered anyhow: 'Is my behaviour too cynical, since – with the nice memory of my beloved Edima still so vivid in my mind – I'm ready to give away my heart to another girl?' But no, for sure; there was no cynicism in his action. It was in fact indisputably true that his feelings for Edima had remained the same, endlessly unalterable, and he still loved her, but she had brutally, even cruelly dropped him and this had hit him immeasurably and provoked a real cataclysm in his sentimental life. Besides, her hard and drastic decision – which had caused him a dramatic wound, tragically tearing his heart to pieces – now clearly appeared, alas, to be absolutely definitive and irrevocable.

They had been living together for years as in a fantastic dream, but, as any dream, once it is finished – and the will of one of the two protagonists is sufficient to bring it to an end – it is over for ever and never comes back again. Edima and the lovely time spent with

her undeniably represented a unique, wonderful and ravishing period and splendid salient points in his life and were absolutely unforgettable, but they pertained to a chapter of it finally closed. And it did not matter that he still loved her desperately – he would certainly continue to love her all his life long – and it had been Edima, not he, who decreed its closure. It was the past, gone forever. Now, it would therefore have been really very silly and totally irrational, if not even criminal, in all respects (especially in relation to Catherine) not to accept and seize the delightful and affectionate offer that the sweet Catherine was so delicately and nicely making of herself to him. Especially because the declaration of her love for him was certainly not only enrapturing, but also tremendously consoling and cheering!

Moreover, Ricardo could not forget those magnificent and charming creatures he had met in Africa, who had so tenderly and happily beautified his life and made it enjoyable, making him go literally crazy about them, and felt that he had to give them all his affection in return. He therefore needed urgently to feel that he was still loved and desired by them. He strenuously and longingly wanted it. And Catherine was the right woman to give him true, immense and passionate love and all that he might have been seeking for. After all, she was sincerely fond of him and cared a lot for him and these were the very first words of love that she had received from Ricardo. In the past, before being so wildly dumped by Edima, he had never thought of addressing such tender words to Catherine, despite her unquestionable merits and his deep affection for her. She truly and wholly deserved them and got, from reading them, an immense joy and an unprecedented happiness, as well as the expectation for a brilliant future life of real and intense love that she hoped with all her strength to be able to spend with this man who had so powerfully and exclusively conquered her heart.

In the meantime, Dakky wrote to Ricardo to inform him that she now had two more baby girls by her Bulgarian man and ask for Ricardo's support to relieve and console her against her man's vexations, as well as for his financial help. Obviously, Ricardo sent her a considerable amount of money. He scolded her very severely however for having got three children, although enchantingly beautiful, in only three years with a man who, in his opinion (totally shared by her mother, Floss) did not deserve her.

Later on, Ricardo had the opportunity to meet the Kanu family again, when he went to Nigeria for a short mission, surprising them by arriving at their house totally unexpectedly. They were all so incredibly happy at seeing him and cheerfully regaled him, emitting high shrieks and giggles of unbounded joy. Floss was in her seventh heaven. Dakky was too, but she kept a rather coy and somewhat cold countenance because, as she explained in a brief handwritten note covertly handed to Ricardo by Floss, her man had placed his spies everywhere with the aim of spying on her behaviour towards other men and reporting to him. She therefore apologized for her 'distant' behaviour towards him and vigorously asked him to give her his support and bear with her.

In spite of her three pregnancies, Dakky was still a very attractive woman with the appearance of a young girl: as a matter of fact, she had totally regained her lovely slim silhouette. Only her breasts – which even in the past, as already narrated, were well shaped and plump – had grown bigger because of pregnancy and breastfeeding. Ricardo, still cross with her for what he defined as 'her silliness', warned her seriously against having more babies and made her promise him that she would go to University and complete her studies, in order to get a good place in Nigerian society, saying, with a serious and solemn face:

"I count on you and you know perfectly well how much I love you; please, do not let me down!"

Then he took Floss apart and, holding her hands in his own, said to her:

"Floss, I know well enough that you might be tired of going on bringing up your children even after they have come of age (by the way, as I already had the occasion to affirm in the past, you did it marvellously up to now) but your task in respect of your family is unfortunately not yet terminated. You must absolutely help Dakky to come out of her not-easy situation and this can only be attained if she does not remain a simple housewife: she must absolutely find an adequate job and a right place in the society of this country! For this, it is essential that she complete her studies, by going to University and graduating in some discipline. It is therefore necessary that you look after her children, who are so exceedingly beautiful and delightful and whom you love so much. Up to now you have never been egocentric, dear Floss; do not start being it now, leaving Dakky in difficulties. You know very well how precious she is to me: I wish

I was still posted here, in order to have the opportunity to help her – so far as I can, maybe simply by constantly spurring her on to study. But I live far away and there is nothing I can really do; so this task falls again entirely on your shoulders, Floss. Think seriously of her future, she deserves to have a better one. The same kind of life, let's say, as her brother Miles who, studying biochemistry at the University now, might have a brilliant future in front of him. Dakky must know that she can still fully rely on you, as always!"

Floss agreed with Ricardo that her involvement in her daughter's life was still important and significant and, to Ricardo's maximum joy, promised Ricardo that she, mindless of the effort still required of her, would do her best to help Dakky attain that goal.

Ricardo felt highly rewarded by the warm and joyful welcome he received from the Kanu family: evidently, he had left with them a good memory and a great sound affection that only Africans – and Nigerians in particular – are capable of keeping in their hearts for so long a time and of manifesting so openly and cheerfully.

After a while, when the lovely memories and reminiscences of what had happened during his stay in Nigeria started becoming spun out and had grown weak because of the time elapsed – and therefore the nice, sharply-focused images of their beloved pretty faces and the splendid slender silhouettes of their much desired attractive bodies started to fade away and vanish in the gloomiest recesses of his mind – Ricardo sometimes thought: 'Were Edima and the marvellous time spent with her, as well as my exciting encounters with Catherine, Vivian and the other enchanting creatures I had known true episodes of life that I had really lived intensely and happily? Or, rather, was it all pure and passionate fantasy, that is a product of my fertile imagination, the effect and visions of a long cherished dream engendered by my secret wish to live an exotic adventure there and by the strong desire to feel somehow or other more tightly bound to that wonderful and generous land?'

Ricardo was deeply shaken: how could it be possible that Edima, Catherine, Vivian, Grace, Beatrice, Monique, Bunmi, Janet, Amina, Jill, as well as Maude and all the lovely (or, in the latter's case, also unpleasant) experiences concerning them had not been true – either sweet or bitter, it doesn't matter – episodes that he had really lived in the bountiful and unforgettable Nigeria, but just simple reveries and suggestions? For they had given him such a wonderful sensation that

they were concrete and alive, as fleshy, solid bodies under his voluptuous caresses, and desirous warm and tender lips under his passionate kisses.

And what about the other praiseworthy ladies and girls he had been in touch with, each one with her own particular charms and positive or negative characteristics – Lynda Chuba Ikpeazu, Dakky, Bode, Floss, Pearl, Loveliness, Eunice, Rhonda, Patience – with whom he had established a relation of pure friendship or simple acquaintance, without any emotional or sexual involvement? ‘Were they all only splendid fancies? Magnificent oneiric images roaming about a world of fantasy; haughty and gorgeous, but only images, ghostly appearances? Pure invention and imagery produced by my eager brain, mirror-like mental speculation, is that so? Spirits? How is it possible?’

In the newly acquired solitude of his soul, he was assailed and captured by a vague sense of confusion, which left him completely dumbfounded and bewildered: was it really believable that he had totally invented a world where love reigned as a potent and invincible sovereign, a world of unequalled happiness, a world of faerie? Doubt therefore assailed his soul and pervaded him totally, wringing his mind with troubling thoughts and his heart with controversial and tormented feelings. Oh doubt, doubt, why are you so congenial to human beings? He started doubting his own mental sanity: ‘Was that wonderful and pleasing life, which was so full of incomparable, unprecedented and unrepeatable love, all just a dream? Simple hysterical hallucination? Though the impression I still have of it is of a consistent and palpable reality, was nothing real?’

In any man there is a bit of madness and Ricardo, surely, was a man like any other, sharing with the rest of mankind the same qualities and the same faults, with no exemption. Although he cared a lot about always appearing rational and logical in his actions, from time to time even Ricardo found himself behaving in strange and, for his usual habit, abnormal ways. He could therefore have invented it for his personal pleasure, to feel dreamingly welcomed and loved by these charming creatures living in a fairly exotic country, since a fertile fantasy produces easily, at no cost, the most beautiful and captivating images of phantoms and ghosts, as well as fanciful and attractive fairytales. And a sound and agreeable love story like the romance between an elderly white man and a young

black woman (and thus involving two persons pertaining to different races and having a substantial difference in their respective ages) is among the nicest.

Ricardo was however also perplexed and highly puzzled by another question: 'Is then the Edo woman really the most romantic and faithful among Nigerian women? And has an Edo young lady deeper and longer lasting sentiments of love for a man than that wonderful Efik woman he was so sure he had undoubtedly loved with all his heart?' This question he would soon explore. Through their hearty and warm epistolary preambles, Ricardo and Catherine discovered they enjoyed a close affinity and an extraordinary identity of feelings and aims, besides an indisputable, sincere affection for one another. They therefore gave birth to and cultivated a passionate and genuine romance. This love story would later on attain full concretisation, happily marking their lives and lasting many years. For after almost five years of separation, they had the chance, thanks to Ricardo's further mission to Nigeria, to meet again and feverishly live for a while together in wholly expressed, passionate love – to their greatest joy and unbridled happiness.

But this is another story.

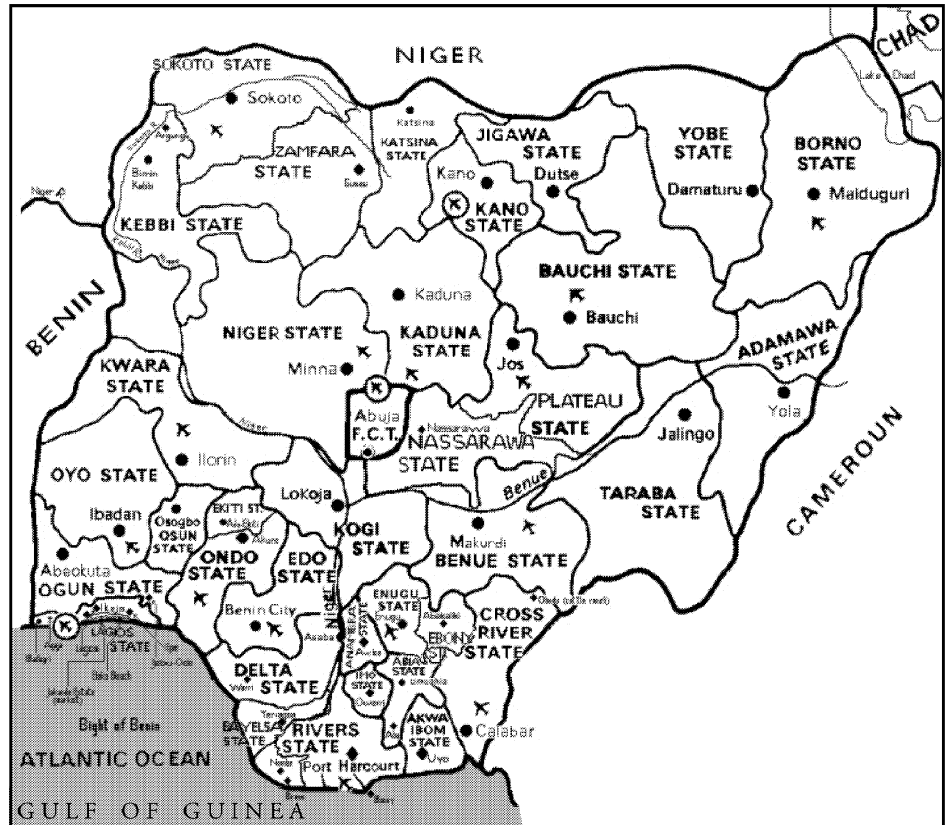
APPENDIX: THE LAND OF NIGERIA

Nigeria and its African Neighbours



APPENDIX: THE LAND OF NIGERIA

The Federal Republic of Nigeria



N.B.: All the Nigerian locations mentioned in the text are shown on this map. Tarkwa Bay, Bar Beach and Alpha Beach, which are the three sole not indicated sites, are located as follows: the first two, respectively, just at the entrance, on the western side, and on Victoria Island's oceanfront on the eastern side of the channel leading to the port of Lagos and the third on Lekki Peninsula, at short distance eastwards of Jakande Estate.

APPENDIX: THE LAND OF NIGERIA

Nigeria: Natural Resources, Crops and Animal Breeding

