



**birdvillemagazine**  
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they came inside.

“Someone’s died,” said Carly.

“What? Who?” asked Andrew, stopping in the doorway.

“Oh, nobody. I mean, nobody we know... The owner.”

“Owner of what?”

“The owner of this place died. Two months ago, apparently. And...”

“Can I see?”

Andrew read the letter as Carly went in to the bedroom and sat on the edge of the bed. She took off her shoes and started to cry. Andrew came in and sat next to her and put his hand on her back, rubbing it gently. They didn’t speak at all.

shaving cream when he came out into the living room.

“Dropped the plants.”

The terrarium had shattered on the floor and the soil was spread out as far as the coffee table.

“Careful with the glass,” said Andrew. “Hold on. Just stay still for a minute. Hold on.”

By the time Andrew had washed his face off and returned to Carly she had gotten the dustpan and was sweeping up the dirt and glass shards. Andrew crouched down and carefully lifted the leaves of the fig and let them drop down again.

“Just put all of it in a bucket or something. I’ll go get another bowl for them. Get all the loose stuff tidied up and I’ll go now. Just the leave it all on the floor. I’ll go now.”

The little Chinese import store where they had originally bought the terrarium didn’t exist anymore. There was another shop the same a bit further down the road, but it didn’t have the right kind of bowl. After a while of standing there and looking at empty picture frames, Andrew picked a big clear vase with a wide bottom and brought it home.

“It doesn’t really look right.”

“It’s fine,” said Andrew.

“It doesn’t really look the same, though, does it?”

“Hey, it’s fine. Alright? It’s fine. The plants will be fine.”

“Yeah,” said Carly. “I guess.”

Carly stopped to get the mail as they returned from their morning walk. There was a letter from the real estate agent. She opened the envelope and began to read it as

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THE NOOSE  
stephen smith

“Hello there,” said the noose.

Like any sane man would, Harry Fielding ignored the rope around his neck. No great loss. It was beginning to chafe him anyway.

He stood on a platform two metres above the ground. Heavily varnished. He would have found it beautiful if it hadn't been built to kill him.

Below him, husbands sat feigning interest as their wives sipped wine and discussed fashion. The few children attending played a game, oblivious to the damage they were inflicting on their expensive clothing. Waiters swooped in as the couples finished their caviar, filling up their glasses and toting their empty plates away.

A moustached man in a bowler hat mounted a platform on the ground, to the left of Harry. “Testing,” he said, “Testing, One, Two.”

He seemed satisfied that the microphone was working. He smoothed his moustache, adjusted his bowtie and opened his mouth to begin.

“Hello,” the noose piped up again.

“Oh, damn,” said Carly. “Says you're supposed to put charcoal in the dirt, too. To filter the damp and keep it from getting smelly.”

“So?”

Carly held up the fishbowl terrarium and gently shook the soil. “I didn't put any in.”

“Just sprinkle some over the top. Crush up one of your old art sticks you never use.”

“That won't work.”

“Well. Don't worry about it. Can't matter that much.”

“Should I put the moss in then?”

“Hang on,” said Andrew. “Let me come see. You gotta get it real even. Here. Let me see.”

The moss grew well in the terrarium and after a while Andrew wanted to add another sort of plant to it. The first one they put in was a fern, which didn't survive. The second was a kind of creeping fig which grew up and over a craggy stone that they had placed next to it.

“The terrarium's looking nice,” said Carly. “Don't you think it's nice to have some green around?”

“Yeah.”

“Hey, do you think we should put little people in there?”

“People? Like, models?”

“I don't know. Little gnomes or something.”

“That's a bit creepy. Not to mention tacky. Really?”

“I guess not,” she said, placing the bowl back down on the shelf. “You're right. I just like having the green around.”

“Fuck!”

“What?” called Andrew. His face was half covered in

"I didn't mean today."

"Good. I'm glad. Because we don't have time for that."

Carly clicked on a link and the terrariums vanished. Andrew moved back to the couch, and watched an over of the cricket match.

"We can, though," he said, on the ad break.

"Can what?"

"If you want to. The terrarium thing."

"Place is looking good," said Mitch. "Hey, new telly?"

"Oh yeah," said Andrew. "Not that new though. Have you really not been here since..?"

"A while, yeah," said Mitch.

"The rent's kept going up. It could be worse, I suppose. For the area, I mean. But it keeps going up. Twice this year."

"Same here, mate. Same everywhere right now."

"Beer?"

"Love one."

Mitchell and Zoe finally got up and so did Andrew and Carly. They exchanged embraces and Andrew shook Mitch's hand and they all went together outside to the car. Andrew and Carly waited under the streetlight as Zoe pulled the car out and beeped the horn twice, before rounding the corner.

"Good thing we don't live out there," said Carly, squeezing Andrew's hand. "Where is it? Strath... Strathmore?"

"Not bloody wrong," said Andrew. "Want to go for a walk?"

\*

"Shut up," said Harry Fielding. "I'm trying to listen."

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the announcer. "We are gathered here today to witness the execution of Harry Fielding. His crime – murder; for which he will hang from the gallows."

He adjusted his bowler hat. "Society has been hit hard by criminals such as Mr. Fielding. It is our right, as peace-loving citizens, to strike back. Today we take vengeance. Today we stand as one and show these petty criminals we are not afraid. The hanging will take place in precisely twenty minutes, immediately following dessert. Thank you."

The audience clapped as he stepped off the platform.

Gusts of cool wind buffeted Harry, making him sway. The rope rubbed against his neck. Already the skin there was red and swollen. Harry cursed the rope; however, the noose remained silent.

The sun fell, drop by drop, down to the horizon. The blue day slowly yellowed into the colour of fading bruises on a lover's eye. Clouds made their way to heaven and the trees spoke in rasping whispers.

"What do you call an overweight alien?" said the noose.

"What?"

"An extra-cholesterol."

The noose chuckled at its joke. It was the sound of dry sun and sawdust. Harry Fielding groaned.

"Be quiet," he said.

He wanted to reach up and shake the voices from his head. Watch as they fell, one by one, to the grass. First,

his friends. Then the unforgiving stares of his parents, the hurried whispers of co-workers. Finally, his wife. Her daisy coloured dress flying up to obscure her face as she fell, revealing pink underwear.

The noose was not the only thing in his mind.

“Why don’t you want to talk to me?” said the noose.

“You are going to kill me.”

“I wouldn’t do that, I was made for helping people,” it said. “Helping people have fun is my one aim in life. People can use me for climbing, sailing and even swinging. And there is hardly any chance of me breaking. I am made from hardy nylon and created by Founders, a respected company. In fact this is my first use.”

Harry laughed. “We’ll see.”

A few of the children in the audience were staring at him. One pointed and said something to the rest and they laughed, their thin pre-pubescent bodies heaving beneath their Armani suits. One of the mothers pinched her son’s arm. “Behave,” she said.

The waiters moved in again. They picked up plates and glasses, carrying them so they barely touched their hands. The tables were clear when the announcer took the stage.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “This is what you have been waiting for.”

The crowd was silent, soaking in every word.

“It was barely three weeks ago when Harry Fielding brutally and sadistically murdered his wife of eight years.”

A few members of the crowd threw him disgusted looks. The T.V. lit image of his wife crept into his mind, hair stained rust, a dent in her head. He had looked so pathetic sobbing to the cops.

## THE TERRARIUM editorial

Andrew and Carly never spoke in the mornings. They roused themselves to separate alarms. Carly washed her face in the kitchen sink before slipping on her grey tracksuit, and Andrew did barefoot stretches on the hardwood floor. They crossed the street hand-in-hand and passed the barrista pulling chromed chairs from the café’s glassy entrance. They walked the harbour loop together as the commuters settled in at the ferry terminal with their broadsheet newspapers unfurling in their laps.

“A terrarium,” said Carly.

“Hmm?” asked Andrew.

“Look at this. We should set up a terrarium. Like this. God, I haven’t seen a terrarium since I was a kid. Did you make one when you were a kid? At school?”

Andrew squinted over Carly’s shoulder.

“And this one. You can make them out of wine bottles even. Or just jars.”

“Carly, we’ve got people coming over. You really think we’ve got time to set up a, um, terrarium?”

could see that would set her and her child free from their demographic destiny. She tiptoed through to the nursery and stared down at the little empty face. Above the child's whisper of hair were metal safety bars and above that, a colourful poster. There was a picture of an Antelope and then a big letter A. Then B was for Bear, C was for Cat, D...she could not see what D was for.

"Did you really kill your wife?" said the noose.

"Yes," he said, "I did."

"But why?"

"She slept with another man," he said. "I had to do something."

Silence. The announcer warbled on in the background, but Harry was no longer interested. He looked at the noose around his neck. Braided rope, almost as thick as his arm, it was a yellow bordering on a fantastic gold sheen. Frays of rope caught the dying sun and shone like wisps of rain on a clear day.

"Would you kill a murderer?"

The noose considered his question. Harry could almost feel it fidgeting against his neck as it thought.

"No. I wouldn't," it said. "I would never be able to live with myself."

"That's what I was afraid of."

The announcer was still talking, his face red and traced with veins beneath his bowler hat. "...This government is rooting out the devils from our society. It is making the streets safe, our schools safe, your homes safe." The audience was leaning slightly forward in their chairs, eyes glassy and receptive. "What you see here today is a step into a golden age – an age in which Mr. Fielding has no part. Thank you and enjoy the show."

He walked off the platform, taking off his bowler hat to bow. His thin hair whisked in the wind. Two hooded men appeared at either side of him. They made their way over to Harry.

The crowd was standing now, jittering, edging forward for a better view. The three men started on the stairs leading to the platform.

A drone flew in the sky above him. The black shape

twittered as each of its cameras moved to capture the moment. The citizens at home watched the live telecast.

Sky: cooling embers, wind. Harry's lips burned. The executioners were on the platform. One of the men breathed heavily. The announcer leant over Harry's shoulder. "Any last words for the murderer?" he said, gesturing to the audience.

Harry Fielding tried to think of something meaningful to say, but could not. He sighed. A hand moved to a lever. The audience gasped.

"No?" the announcer said.

Harry shook his head. Waited. The noose scratched his neck.

Emptiness.

"Don't worry, I've got you," the noose said proudly.

The nylon tightened around his throat, rubbing against his blistering neck. Harry jolted up, a snap coming from his neck.

The crowd cheered and clapped. His vision blurred.

The noose sobbed.

And as they had chosen, at the scan, not to be told if it was male or female, a unisex name would be ideal. They settled for Sam.

The financial pressures of impending parenthood forced Jason to retrain as a high school teacher and for them both to move to the fringes of the suburbs, so they could have a garden for their newly born daughter. But baby Sam was colicky and screamy and would not wean and Les and Jason began to fight as chronic sleep deprivation overtook their new home. Les was prescribed sleeping pills which made her even more drowsy and lethargic during the day and resentful in the evenings. Being in the suburbs she felt isolated and to calm herself she took to drinking secretly. Her depression was exacerbated by having to return to work, and by political developments which her company was involved in. It was around this time that statistics revealed the 'social ladder' concept had collapsed; that there was only 7% social mobility and that 93% of the population, in spite of all promises to the contrary, would never escape their demographic box.

At work, while doing a demographic study for a controversial proposed inner city regeneration project mini-mall in conjunction with the newly elected council planning department, Les oversaw research on the shopping patterns and values of the target market – D22. On screen she saw the stats map the lives of her parents exactly. During a phone survey of D22s, she then saw her own postcode come up as the most representative segment, then her own name and phone number.

Alone at night as her child and husband slept, an empty bottle of wine beside her, Les counted out her sleeping pills and in her hand held the only means she

the G41s – Brands include Lacoste, Burberry, Buckfast, Farmfoods, Embassy Regal, Nike, Nintendo – a growth market for credit services. Others, like the B9s, had used her in ways she should have been able to predict in advance. After a late termination, her sixth morning after pill and a case of Chlamydia, she was told that she may have damaged her ovaries and might not be able to conceive.

At this time it must be said she had amassed an encyclopedia of disappointments, traumas and personal tragedies, which included the death of her mother, having her stomach pumped, a mugging, and an HIV test. Safety, Security, Family: these became the words she would project forward and meet in her future. Luckily for her, each fell into place, like steps on the way. She got offered a full time post (which at that time was rare and to be coveted) and at 36 she became a market researcher proper, with her own team and glass walled office. Shortly after, as if prompted, Jason drifted into her life. Unlike Sal (F23) he had emotional and financial stability and unlike Hector (C16) he was without the burden of unattainable aspirations. Jason was a promising artist with a gentle disposition who did a bit of teaching and had come from a family of B's before drifting south to settle somewhere among the D's. They listened to Kooks by David Bowie, ate Doritos together in the bath, and joked about spawning a generation of soggy-tortilla-eating little misfits. To Les's Joy, her first pregnancy test revealed that her years of experimentation had not left her barren. She wanted to call the child a good, simple girl's name like Saffron or Jocasta, but Jason suggested a name less loaded class-wise; something simple and easy to say that might give the baby a head start in speech.

NANA YAA, KWAKA DUA  
AND THE GREEN-GOLD FIRE  
anna trembath

“Nana Yaa had wanted to bring down Kwaku Dua since they were both five years of age.” Mum’s story always begins exactly like that. She even has a name for her story, my mother. She calls it ‘Nana Yaa, Kwaku Dua and the Green-Gold Fire’. When I was little, I would beg Mum to tell me the story before I fell asleep at night. I can still hear her uncompromising refusal. “This is an extraordinary story, Afua. Not some little fairytale for bedtime.”

As I got a bit older, directed by teachers waxing lyrical over the idea of the Australian nation built upon the tales of elsewhere, I would ask my mother to write her story down. But my mother, stubborn as she is, would always say, “Oh no, who is going to read my silly scribblings? This is a story written on my soul, not destined for paper. And anyhow, Afua, I know what you are up to. I do not want our story read by those small brats and freckled teachers who think Vegemite is some kind of heritage of which to be proud.”

But today I have the better of my strong-willed

mother. Today is one of those rare occasions where I know the words will push themselves over her tongue. We — hundreds of us — have descended upon a school hall in Bankstown. No doubt when this square, pale brick box was built way back in the 1970s or 80s, nobody would have imagined it being filled with over 300 Ghanaians dressed in swathes of patterned material. The material is the red of life that streams through our veins, the white of mother's milk and vast skies, the inky blacks, greys and blues of the dark depths of the human soul. These are the colours of kinship and mourning, for Auntie Adwoa, a relative by some stretch of the family tree branch, has recently passed. My mother, now the matriarch of our Sydney clan, is in charge of organising us, the women, to prepare the funeral feast. I know that once Mum has created some order out of us, the story will begin. I am here to capture it in my heart. At twenty-one, I am old enough to use the quiet deep inside of me to concentrate with my full being, and to realise the meaning behind the words.

My grandmother, our great matriarch, says Mum, was Nana Yaa Sono Asare Ofori.

After slowly drawing out the name of my great-grandmother, Mum pauses and looks around, making eye contact with each of us listeners. At this point, we all feel it — the silvery spin of the spider's web that ties our souls together, the blood of the clan running through us, the union with the ancestors. I love this moment. She continues.

Nana Yaa came into this world on a Saturday, hence she was named 'Yaa'. Now, Yaa, as we know, means bravery. Early in her life, Nana Yaa acquired the additional name

source of money that gave her freedom to experiment with alternative ways of living in her spare time. She then went through an 'excited and dizzying' period, dating many people from different places, in the search for someone, like herself, who didn't fit any of the boxes. There was Taz (F35), Shena (A8), and Flack (G42). She slummed it with immigrants and had a brief 'amore' with a 'Symbols of Success / Global Connector' who, with his piede-a-terre penthouses in several countries, BMWs, and share portfolios was a complete caricature of the Type A1 slash 2 that he aspired to be. But he'd kept an old Play-Doh model of Kermit he'd made when he was four, and Les found that redemptive. For a while.

Her ability to empathise with and adapt to other people was unique. Her faces and moods, like her wardrobe, changed weekly, if not daily. Flared jeans for one date, an Armani suit jacket for the next; a D&G dress for one, then Nikes and slacks for another. And when she talked to people from different backgrounds, although she did not like to admit this to herself, her market research experience helped in discussing the things they liked. She knew, for example, that E34's used Ecover washing powder and supported Greenpeace, and that F41's liked Star Trek: the Next Generation and read Harry Potter even though they didn't have kids. It wasn't that she was two faced; if anything she was 82 faced, or 34 four faced, that being the number of lovers she had in her twenties, as was fairly normal for people of her type at this point in time.

Les had a small breakdown in her thirties as her freedom experiment ran out of energy, leaving a great many discarded lovers and friends in its wake. And some of those partners she was just plain scared of. Like

who didn't fit into any of the human categories that she was rapidly learning about.

She found The 82 Types at first disturbing, but ultimately laughable. Things like: L76's are Multi-Ethnic Crowded Non-residents. They live in Third World shanty towns, work illegally and live with high infant mortality and diseases such as AIDS and Cholera: they are the world's largest growth market for pay-as-you-go mobile telephones. This was so sad and cynical that you had to laugh or you'd go mad. Her favourite was B14's or Happy Families Living in Military Enclosures - a reliable market for self-help books, Disney toys, and Anne Summers Products. Such things were hard to believe, but they were the 'facts', and all written down on her worksheets. Some weeks she'd have to do nothing but phone B14 women and ask questions about bikini-wax or floor polish. Other days it was J51s, or Grey Perspective Sepia Memories. She liked asking them about brands of chocolates and pain killers and gifts for their grandchildren from Argos. They liked chatting to her because they were lonely, because 71% of J51s had lost a partner.

Work paid the rent, which was in an apartment in the edgy mixed student slash immigrant area (E28). Les was disturbed by the fact that her flatmates did listen to indie rock and did watch Will and Grace like their demographic profile determined. There were other things that disturbed her: like how a lot of research info was 'harvested' without any consent from credit, direct debit and loyalty cards, and even dating agency records. She didn't like any of this, but after many false starts at finding other kinds of work, she decided - in her mid to late twenties - that it was an easy regular

'Sono', meaning elephant, because even as a tiny child she had astonishing powers of memory, just like those magnificent creatures.

This story has been entrusted to me, I believe, by our ancestors. I was Nana Yaa's confidante and witness at the time of the events at hand. This is the story of one day, some forty years ago, when I was a child of only nine years. Nana Yaa and her sister Nana Abenaa had raised me from the time my poor mother died, before I could even say one word. Nana Abenaa was the sweeter one, but with Nana Yaa, it was like she and I had one mind, one soul. Our soul-in-union had a brittle shell that Nana Abenaa's did not. Nana Yaa would always know my secrets before one word had spilled from my lips, and she would tell me all of hers. Even when she would not tell me, I could always read her. She would say, "Child, stop fixing me with those eyes. You know your gaze pierces my insides and does terrible things to my bowels."

Nana Yaa had wanted to bring down Kwaku Dua since they were both five years of age. Our ancestors presented her with an opportunity when she had made ninety-one years of age. She was a patient woman, our grandmother. After all, she had waited eighty-six years for the perfect opportunity. Ninety-one years her broad brown feet had stubbornly gripped the dusty earth of our dear Ashanti land. Her small stubby toes spread wide and the flatness of her feet were evidence of her sheer determination. Through this body she anchored her soul in the world of humans until retribution against Kwaku Dua had been exacted.

If somebody had stared into Nana Yaa's eyes on the day that the ancestors proffered her their gift of

opportunity, they would have surely seen a strange green-gold glow emitting from them. The flash of a leopard's gaze at night. A fusion of the yellow cacao pod, the jade leaves of the shade trees and the sparkle of the night sky. But not one person, aside from me, of course, was the least bit concerned with the hunched old woman at that moment. Perhaps those whose ankles she rapped with her walking stick as she pushed her way to the front of the crowd scowled at her in passing. But mostly, the hundreds and thousands of people were happily and impatiently waiting for a sighting of the anticipated spectacle below.

The villagers from just outside Kumasi town had gathered in two lines on either side of the road that gently snaked up the hill. The two lines of people met at a throng on the hill's crest, where Chief Kwaku Dua's grand white colonial mansion stood. Oh, the sight of the waiting crowd alone was enough to stir such excitement that one would have been forgiven for not holding down one's breakfast. I remember watching the hornbills overhead in the cloudless azure sky. Their flight usually regal and relaxed, on this day their movement was oddly jagged, as if they could not keep straight bearings. Was it that they saw two pythons lying on the hill below, in a mating dance? Pythons of sizes large enough to raise their bodies high into the skies and pluck out the hornbills? Pythons with scales of iridescent hues?

For although this gathering was about death, it was such a change to typical death rituals that every kin gathered, young and old, was wearing not the subdued shades we wear today, but dazzling cloth, rich with the density of the primary colours and their cousins. Reds, blues, yellows, orange, greens, purples. This was cloth

started to replace the freedoms of the 60s both Kath and Tom sought to re-ignite the old fires with secret lovers. Les's dawning awareness of her parents' infidelities grew as their own mutual antipathy increased. The usual tirades featured blaming each other for missing the boat, tying each other down, selling-out etc, and smashing the hand-made crockery. Kath started to drink, secretly, but not secretly enough for her ten year old daughter, who found the many bottles her mother had stashed under the sink and in the closet.

Les went to a state school – which was typical of her demographic – and went on to study for a BA in liberal arts. Later, her parents became 'empty nesters' after having stayed together 'for the sake of the child' – which was typical of D22s – and divorced to re-connect with their own 'personal voyages', leaving Les with feelings of guilt and anguish and with a profound desire for escape. She vowed she would never 'become like those selfish bloody losers,' and so, after graduating and with very little money, she took a year out and explored Europe, experimented with recreational drugs and tried out many new tongues. She fell in love with Jose and Ivan, learned some guitar chords so she could sing along to Alanis Morissette and had an abortion. When the money was exhausted she returned to her original city and got a flexi-time job in Market research, as a stop-gap fall-back thing, and became one of the newly emerging group of people who worked in call centres and called total strangers to ask questions like 'how often in a week do you use a microwave' and 'do you have a cat, a dog, a pet rodent or none of the above.' Indeed, at this time Les wrote a story entitled None of the Above, about a girl

## THE 82 TYPES OF PERSON IN THE WORLD

ewan morrison

There is no such thing as ‘types of person’. Such an idea is contemptible to any free-thinking person; a pseudo-scientific lie cooked up by market research companies to put people into boxes, to hide the radical fact that each and every individual is unique and free to forge their own future. This was certainly what Les’s parents believed in the spring of 1970, when they celebrated the gift of her birth and named her in a non-gender specific way as an expression of their belief in social change and sexual equality.

In demographic terms Les’ parents would have been seen as fairly permissive middle class college educated couple with a single child – Edgy Bluecollar Suburbs (D22). But they would have scorned such a reductive caricature.

Les’s mother, Kath, was a complex mix of many things: a feminist and a wild-child, a would be poetess and a part-time office worker (PR). Les’ father, John, was a high school Modern Studies teacher who listened to Dylan and Johnny Cash and smoked a lot of pot. As the responsibilities of childrearing and the debts of the 80s

still saturated with fresh dye, not yet faded by sun, or wear, or scrubbing. Cloth like new, for special times. With its intricate line work and geometric patterns, the cloth was draped generously across the bodies of the villagers, each with their muscular right arms bare. A handsome contrast of firm, smooth, dark skin and colour it was. The women also wore the cloth piled atop their heads, in the style that we wear today. Clean-scrubbed children delighted in the rare opportunity to freely follow their natural instincts to play. Relaxed adults happily greeted distant kin and enjoyed the sensuous feel of being so magnificently attired. Every person smelled fresh, without dirt and sweat from toil touching them. All chattered about what awaited their hungry eyes, and excitement quivered and zinged in the sweet, heavy air.

It was the first time that any of us could remember Chief Kwaku Dua opening his gates to us villagers. For once we could stretch upright, backs tired and sore from working cacao plantations and food gardens, and languorously gaze upon our lands below. Or rather, the lands that we worked and Kwaku Dua had claimed as his own. The vista was stunning. It was the end of the rains, a radiant day, and a brilliant, almost lurid young green surrounded us, dotted with clusters of the villagers’ circular thatched houses. The canopy of rainforest, cacao and shade trees spread luxuriantly around the base of the hill.

Nana Yaa alone remained unmoved. Her attire was the same as on any other day — a simple cotton shift, its colours dulled to insipid shades over time, as shapeless as a cacao sack. I, too, under her command, was dressed as normal. God forgive me, a corner of my soul splintered

away from hers and was filled with a thunderous anger for this shame I felt had been inflicted upon me by Nana Yaa.

“A man only of Kwaku Dua’s level of vulgarity could invite such a spectacle. Why should we dress for it?” she said to me, reading my subversive piece of soul. A neat sphere of spit closely followed her words for emphasis and splayed on the dusty ground beside my feet. Osikani, rich man, she hissed under her breath.

You know that we Ghanaians invest great value in our funerals and will spare no expense. Look at today, even here in Sydney, far from our homeland! Kwaku Dua, reportedly deteriorating in strength, had taken this custom to dizzying new heights of show and cultural innovation. As always, driven by his ego, Kwaku Dua did not want the party to be held only after his death. Two months before the events I am recounting here, Kwaku Dua had called the two greatest living coffin artisans, Papa Tetteh and Samuel Mensah, both based in Accra, to his white mansion in the Kumasi region. At this meeting, Kwaku Dua informed Papa Tetteh and Samuel Mensah that they would need to vie for his coffin contract, worth many millions of cedis. Kwaku Dua wanted the greatest vessel that had ever been: his home, his transport to the ancestral spirit, an offering to his forefathers so as to entertain and flatter them into providing him welcome. Stronger, however, was his desire for every living person in the whole of Ghana and certainly in his region to be reminded of his superior status.

Word had travelled on the coastal winds blowing in from Accra that Papa Tetteh had constructed not one but a whole train of coffins in order to secure the reward. This burial train had been transported to Kumasi. It was now being carried by a troupe of men from the town to

subject. “Here,” he pointed to the Washington, D.C. area. She leaned across the aisle, studied the map. He tried not to look at her chest, tried to focus on the map. She smelled like bubble bath.

“You poor thing, you’ve been traveling a long way.” She stared, then handed the map back. “What a huge country we live in.”

“You can say that again.” He looked across the aisle. She was fluffing her hair and putting on lip stuff. He wondered about her age. “We’re supposed to stop next in San Angelo. Wanna get off the bus, have a smoke?”

She looked up, smiled. “Sure, Kurt.” Nodded. “That’d be nice.”

“They’re Camels.” He showed her the pack. “It’s all I’ve got.”

“That’s fine.” She smiled again. Her eyes and lips sparkled. “Your company is a real treat. Yer a nice kid.”

He blushed, readjusted the yo-yo in his pocket. The bus driver announced the San Angelo stop, arrival in ten minutes.

"That's nice." She paused, bit her dry lips. "My mother died."

"Oh, sorry." He moved toward the window, didn't mean to. He'd known a kid in fourth grade, Brad, who blurted similar things. Brad poisoned the cat, or his sister was in the hospital in a coma.

"It's okay," She said. "Mom wasn't, I mean... She didn't..."

Kurt was unsure what to say, so he watched the land zoom by, the empty, tawny landscape unraveling at seventy-five miles an hour. He wondered what happened to that Brad kid.

"She... killed herself."

"I'm sorry?" He'd lost track of what she'd been saying. He turned toward her.

She looked grim. "I'm headed to Los Angeles for her funeral."

There was something about Alice. She seemed like a bird he once found with a broken neck. It had flown into their trailer's kitchen window. He wanted to move toward Alice, maybe even sit beside her. Instead he stayed put.

"I don't like funerals," he added.

"No, me either." Alice dabbed at a tear, but she didn't make any crying noise.

"Hey, do you smoke?" he asked.

"Not supposed to," she said, trying to smile. "On and off."

"I think we have a stop coming up. I've been charting this trip on a map." He flushed it out from his jean jacket pocket. "I borrowed it from the library."

"Oh, that's what it is. I saw you studying it when I sat down. Where'd your trip start?"

He showed her the map, relieved to change the

Kwaku Dua's mansion.

This, the burial train, is what the villagers had turned out to see. Nana Yaa thought it to be nonsense. She could not believe that the ancestors would be stupid enough to be blinded to Kwaku Dua's lifetime of obscenities by fancy boxes. She imagined the spirits, including that of her brother Kumi, receiving Kwaku Dua as naked as the day he was born, his flaccid little appendage rendered even more shameful in comparison with his body's monstrous size. No box would spare him.

A cry was heard from below and carried rapidly up the hill, as if as a grassfire. "It has arrived!" a large, handsome woman beside Nana Yaa and I exclaimed.

After the first collective cry a momentary hush descended upon the crowd, eyes rounded, jaws swinging on their hinges. The silence lasted for a mere heartbeat before exuberant cheering, clapping, singing and dancing broke out, welcoming the burial train.

Nana Yaa was proud to have retained a complete set of teeth and the sharpest hearing in her village despite her considerable years. The latter power manifested itself in impressively large ears that seemed to hang two-thirds the length of her bony bare skull, and beyond, the lobes extended over the years by heavy, beaten gold jewellery. But her eyes' ability to reach distances had long since betrayed her. Nana Yaa squinted down the hill to where the burial train emerged. I knew she would not be able to make out anything but some formless objects in brilliant shades, and I could not find a gap in the crowd through which to peer.

"Tell me, child, what is the first coffin? My eyes are dull," Nana Yaa asked the woman standing beside us.

"Grandmother, excuse me, I cannot hear you," the

woman shouted, bending to match Nana Yaa's height.

"The first coffin, child! What is its form?" Nana Yaa rasped, as loudly as her aged lungs allowed.

"Grandmother, I am not sure. It is placed atop an elephant... Wait... Is it? Yes, it appears to be a person."

"A person, child?"

Now, you must understand Nana Yaa's surprise. This was unheard of. These expensive coffins would be carved and painted to replicate the shapes of inanimate objects dear to the deceased. Not people.

"Indeed! A woman! With large breasts and a rounded belly. Oh, she is so beautiful, Grandmother. On her head is a crown of feathers in all the colours of the wild birds of the rainforest. And the way she is sitting with one hand on her belly and the other outstretched with palm upwards, why she looks so serene and gentle. Grandmother, do you not see that her fine figure is all in gold? And her cloth, oh to wear such fine cloth. I do not know where Papa Tetteh found this pattern, it is not an Ashanti pattern. Oh, how the sunlight hits her, you would think she is glowing from the inside, like the Goddess is here with us right now, living and breathing. Samuel Mensah must be feeling bad. Very, very bad indeed."

So the leading carriage was Ulombu, our people's deity of fertility! I glanced at Nana Yaa and could see that this tickled her, fed the cold, green-gold flame inside. With the burial train snaking nearer to where we stood, I forgot my anger with Nana Yaa for shaming us with plain dress, and became her eyes. I described the other coffins that followed Ulombu. There was a giant cacao pod, symbolising the source of Kwaku Dua's wealth. It was as yellow as the blazing sun, formed like a misshapen egg, pointed at one end, with a rough,

ARRIVAL  
robert vaughan

The bus ride seemed never-ending. Just the Texas portion seemed longer than his entire summer vacation. He fidgeted with the yo-yo in his pocket. The woman across the aisle smiled. She'd gotten on in Dallas. She looked sort-of like a past babysitter, Gail. Gail taught him how to cheat at poker by reading other people's expressions.

"Cat got yer tongue?" she drawled. He shook his head, looked out the window.

Tumbleweeds. Prairie dogs. What a shitty trip. He was sure his breath stunk, his swollen feet ached. Would his mother even be at the bus station. Or would he have to walk the mile or more to her apartment. He didn't really want to see her.

"I'm Alice," the woman tried again.

"Kurt," he said self-consciously, a hand across his mouth.

She smiled. "Yer kinda young to be traveling alone, aren't you?"

He shrugged, noticed her daisy dukes, and her velvety, smooth thighs. "I guess." He picked at the shredding upholstery on the seat in front of him. "I'm meeting my mom in Tuscon."

whispers and laughter of our ancestors echoing in our soul. We knew, suddenly, that the Ashanti spirit world was not fooled by Kwaku Dua's apparent procreative abilities. The goddess of fertility was now nothing but ashes. The other world knew the truth, and everybody gathered there that day would soon proceed to the next world where they too would see the light of the truth. I stared at Nana Yaa, for her face seemed to be strangely contorted. Then I realised. She was smiling! It was the first and last time I saw her jaws set so. A tear, emerald in colour I swear, slithered across the crevices of her left cheek.

Later, as we trudged home with our kinsfolk, Nana Yaa paused for a moment, leaning on her stick. I looked back at her, rushing to her side. It was too late. Although she appeared serene, her wiry bowed legs weakened and caved under her, as if her bones were nothing but crumbling paper. Finally, her toes lost their firm grip on the earth.

Her story finished, my mother comes back from her reverie; her 'merging with the ancestors', as she calls it. She briskly claps her hands to signal that we are to return to work preparing the feast. My aunts, cousins and sisters resume everyday conversations, gossiping in pairs and small groups. But today I keep my gaze focused on my mother. She is wearing a strange, sad smile, and her pupils in their dark beds are ablaze with a green-tinged fire.

knobbly texture. So imperfect, like the real pods are, as to be a perfect replica. Next came a boxy, grandiose, white Mercedes-Benz sedan, so much like the one that belonged to Kwaku Dua, the only such vehicle in the area, that it looked as if it could glide away on its wooden wheels at any moment. Not only had Papa Tetteh elicited a deep metallic sheen from its white coat of paint, but it was replete with all the trimmings — a Mercedes-Benz badge on the hood, glass windows and side-view mirrors, windscreen wipers, even an antenna. Following the Mercedes-Benz was a yellow-and-white lottery card and a blue lead pencil with which to mark the boxes; a chocolate bar carrying a label of Ghanaian cocoa, with the effect of a smooth red paper outer and crunchy silver wrapping peeping through either end; a blackened silver fish with dull glassy eyes of death representing Kwaku Dua's favourite dish of fried fish; a cigarette with a glowing red tip as if one was spying it at night; and a bottle of rum with a beautiful multicoloured parrot on the label. How Papa Tetteh achieved the effect of the glass bottle's transparency, I do not know. All Kwaku Dua's great passions, comforts and vices were there, and I described them all to Nana Yaa.

But it was Ulombu the fertility goddess alone that captured Nana Yaa's attention. No doubt Papa Tetteh chose to showcase this unique vessel at the front as a way of flattering Kwaku Dua's Big Man ego. In so doing, he hoped that Kwaku Dua would choose this coffin in which to be buried in. Ashong was known as a greatly fertile patriarch, with seven wives, fifty-four children, one hundred and twenty-seven grandchildren, and a number of great-grandchildren so great that no-one could be bothered counting, lazily referring to them as

‘one thousand’.

But our Nana Yaa knew something about Kwaku Dua, a secret that he once, twice, thrice begged her never to tell another. In their mature years, she speculated that Kwaku Dua had long forgotten her, or believed that the morsel of secret knowledge that she possessed would have long gone stale and lost its deliciousness. Or that she was seen by their people as nothing more than an eccentric old grandmother with a motheaten memory. Yes, she did mutter and complain perpetually. Yes, she was too old at that time to care for any social niceties, voicing savage truths whenever she desired and indulging in exactly two loud emissions of gas after each meal. But she knew, although it had been a while, that she could command an audience when she wished to. After all, she was from royal lineage, just like Kwaku Dua.

We had followed the crowd that had closed in behind the advancing burial train to the giant set of marble steps leading to the entrance of Kwaku Dua’s mansion. Having once again successfully jostled her way to the front of the crowd, with I in her wake, Nana Yaa gazed up to where Kwaku Dua sat not far from her, on his grand marble verandah. Where Nana Yaa’s body has shrunk, brittle and lined with age, sunken and hung loosely on small muscles, Kwaku Dua’s had gained in corpulence, developing folds upon folds of soft, velvet-sheened flesh. No wonder they called him Kwaku Dua — Kwaku the Tree. Each year he acquired another ring of flesh. Kwaku Dua perched on a chair gaudily modelled after the Ashanti legend of the Golden Stool. This further disgusted Nana Yaa; that he could use the symbol of Ashanti unity like this. Kwaku Dua’s squat legs were spreadeagled to make room for his gross belly to rest

a sick, irregular beat, reluctant to be spurred on more quickly. Nana Yaa took a deep breath and closed her eyes, connecting her soul with that of her ancestors. This was surely why they had brought her to this earth— to ruin the stupid leader of the rival clan, Kwaku Dua, and help tilt the balance back in the favour of her people.

Just as we felt the ancestors’ fire warming our soul-in-union, mustering our courage, we heard the crescendo of a crazed man’s cry. His strangled war-call stopped the joyous clang of celebratory sounds. Nana Yaa’s eyes snapped open, met mine and then alighted upon a naked figure— Samuel Mensah! — screaming through the crowd wielding a log ablaze at one end. Before the shocked crowd could react beyond stepping out of his path, Samuel set alight the first carriage in the train of coffins. The goddess of fertility went up in a fierce fireball as Papa Tetteh wrestled the heartsore man to the ground. Later, when the villagers would tell the story, they would without fail describe the strangeness of the blaze. a bright green at its centre with tongues of gold, it elicited shivers of cold rather than a burning sensation in those nearby.

Kwaku Dua, meanwhile, clutching his chest, seemed to melt off his golden stool. He hit his marble verandah, sticky blood spreading rapidly from the crushed right side of his skull as if desperate to break out of its confines, delighting in escape.

Watching both Ulombu and Kwaku Dua disintegrate before her eyes, Nana Yaa’s internal fire was extinguished. I too could feel it smoulder and die inside. For a moment we were disappointed, feeling empty, cold and surprisingly ravenous. We had been jilted of the opportunity for revenge. But then we heard the

his cries from a considerable distance as she hurried back to her work, smiling, imagining the particularly painful burn in his groin. Nana Yaa never told anyone but me about this time with Kwaku Dua, for before her death she did not want it known that she had lain with him. But she knew he had not fathered those fifty-four children he claimed as his own.

It was not until many years later that the playful flame inside Nana Yaa was fanned by a sudden gust, erupting then into an insatiable, vengeful inferno. Nana Yaa's younger brother, Kumi, had attempted to lead an uprising against the now-chief, Kwaku Dua.

"Fools", Nana Yaa jeered under her breath as she looked around the happy crowd gathered to see the burial train, many of whom were our own people. "Do we no longer have a collective memory of the old times? If we did, these simpletons would remember another parade of death, led by Kwaku Dua, far more macabre than this one. They would remember him carrying Kumi's head on a stake through the villages."

It was on that very day of Kumi's death, when, at the age of thirty-six and with five small children, Nana Yaa vowed to bide her time for calculated revenge against Kwaku Dua.

At the foot of Kwaku Dua's mansion, Papa Tetteh stood in front of Ulombu, grinning madly, confident of his triumph over Samuel Mensah. Smiling, smug, Kwaku Dua struggled to his feet with the aid of his wives. Nana Yaa's old heart began to beat dreadfully as she readied herself to deliver her long-closeted information. I know this because mine did too. I was afraid, because while my young heart could beat fast and strong, Nana Yaa's had

atop his thighs and cascade over the space between his legs, where Nana Yaa and I imagined his little shrivelled peanut to lie hidden and smothered. His two eldest wives sat on either side of him, while the other wives stood flanking him. They were all heavily ordained with gold necklaces, bracelets and anklets and were carefully groomed, some of them quite beautiful. But Nana Yaa knew that none of them could command the hold on Kwaku Dua that she once could.

So everybody was there – all of Kwaku Dua's clan and all of his workers from our clan, all Ashanti people but rivals nonetheless. And it was to be Kwaku Dua's last public appearance before he succumbed to the call from the other world, a day that he expected would cap his grand status as revered Ashanti leader. How would Ashong react when Nana Yaa breathed her practiced words of fire into the crowd and humiliated him in the place from which no man can escape? Kwaku Dua had never been quick of wit, unlike her, unlike his father. Nana Yaa and I — one mind's eye, one soul — imagined his big flabby lips flapping open and closed, no words emerging. To leave the human world with the crowd's laughter ringing in his ears and that thought in every person's mind would mean that Kwaku Dua would be forever remembered as a Very Small Big Man.

Nana Yaa and I found our inner thoughts to be momentarily distracted by the movement of a figure in the crowd. It was Samuel Mensah! We did not expect the losing party in the contest of coffin artisans to appear, to be a witness to his own disgrace. What was he doing there? Nana Yaa was perplexed; I too. Samuel had a strange expression on his face, and there was a look in his eyes that echoed against the hollow walls of our

insides. That green-gold flash of iris and pupil was not hers and mine alone that day. Samuel Mensah stealthily retreated to the area where the women cooked. We could smell the freshly-slaughtered animals cooking; see the women busily preparing the feast over open fires. All the villagers were looking forward to tasting meat. Nana Yaa and I were not hungry though, and our focus returned to Kwaku Dua. The familiar fire in our bellies was feeding us. It had done so for Nana Yaa since she was just five years and sat on her grandfather's knee while he told her the old stories, of how Kwaku Dua's people had unjustly asserted their dominance over her own.

Our people, Nana Yaa's people, were the original inhabitants of the area, born from the earth upon which we stood that day. Kwaku Dua's people had migrated much later in search of water. Rightfully, Nana Yaa's people could rule Kwaku Dua's and it is likely that that natural social order would have continued had it not been for colonial interference in our land. The British and Kwaku Dua's people recognised something in each other; the common desire to bring down our kingdom. Together the British, the Fante and Kwaku Dua's people fought bitter wars against our people across the nineteenth century, and managed to establish control.

When Nana Yaa was young, the blaze inside her was less demanding, a flame that simply warmed the glinty steel in her heart and provided the heat to undertake minor mischievous deeds of sabotage against the rival clan. She had always targeted her age-mate Kwaku Dua, recognizing his innate lack of intelligence and knowing that he would ascend to the position of chief one day, if

he could secure the strategic marriage as planned for him. It was to Nana Yaa an enjoyable game. At that time she did not hate Kwaku Dua; rather, she pitied him and sometimes even rather liked his stupidity. And he was certainly handsome back then. All body and no brains, her clan sisters would giggle.

Nana Yaa worked on the cacao plantation belonging to Kwaku Dua's family, the same one where I was raised. In their late teens, before Kwaku Dua had taken his first wife, Nana Yaa was able to assert her dominance over him. While it was difficult for me to imagine as a young child, Nana Yaa had been known, in the freshness of her youth, to be very beautiful — radiant skin, feline eyes shining like starlight, the straightest back and most graceful gait imaginable. She was also very proud. People would whisper that beauty like hers could only come to no good, and indeed most men and boys were terrified of her intelligence and her disdain for them.

Kwaku Dua, however, was too stupid and inflated with self-importance to feel any intimidation. He slavered after Nana Yaa like a dog in heat. Nana Yaa, on her part, liked to lead him into the deep, dappled, private shade of the rainforest bordering the cacao fields, reveling in having Kwaku Dua's undoubtedly desirable body at her mercy. He would do whatever she told him to. But he could never get his little peanut to grow enough to find release. Nana Yaa enjoyed taunting him even as he begged her not to tell anyone, but he always felt impelled to try again.

Once, as he had fallen asleep in the forest after yet another unsuccessful attempt to relieve himself of his lust for her, she had even rubbed the fresh insides of chilli on the inside of his discarded clothes. She could hear