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Author of *Half of a Yellow Sun*

THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK

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For Ivara

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CELL ONE

The first time our house was robbed, it was our neighbor Osita who climbed in through the dining room window and stole our TV, our VCR, and the *Purple Rain* and *Thriller* videotapes my father had brought back from America. The second time our house was robbed, it was my brother Nnamabia who faked a break-in and stole my mother's jewelry. It happened on a Sunday. My parents had traveled to our hometown, Mbaise, to visit our grandparents, so Nnamabia and I went to church alone. He drove my mother's green Peugeot 504. We sat together in church as we usually did, but we did not nudge each other and stifle giggles about somebody's ugly hat or threadbare caftan, because Nnamabia left without a word after about ten minutes. He came back just before the priest said, "The Mass is ended. Go in peace." I was a little piqued. I imagined he had gone off to smoke and to see some girl, since he had the car to himself for once, but he could at least have told me where he was going. We drove home in silence and, when he parked in our long driveway, I stopped to pluck some ixora flowers while Nnamabia unlocked the front door. I went inside to find him standing still in the middle of the parlor.

"We've been robbed!" he said in English.

It took me a moment to understand, to take in the scattered room. Even then, I felt that there was a theatrical quality to the way the drawers were flung open, as if it had been done by somebody who wanted to make an impression on the discoverers. Or perhaps it was simply that I knew my brother so well. Later, when my parents came home and neighbors began to troop in to say *ndo*, and to snap their fingers and heave their shoulders up and down, I sat alone in my room upstairs and realized what the queasiness in my gut was: Nnamabia had done it, I knew. My father knew, too. He pointed out that the window louvers had been slipped out from the inside, rather than outside (Nnamabia was really much smarter than that; perhaps

he had been in a hurry to get back to church before Mass ended), and that the robber knew exactly where my mother's jewelry was—the left corner of her metal trunk. Nnamabia stared at my father with dramatic, wounded eyes and said, "I know I have caused you both terrible pain in the past, but I would never violate your trust like this." He spoke English, using unnecessary words like "terrible pain" and "violate," as he always did when he was defending himself. Then he walked out through the back door and did not come home that night. Or the next night. Or the night after. He came home two weeks later, gaunt, smelling of beer, crying, saying he was sorry and he had pawned the jewelry to the Hausa traders in Enugu and all the money was gone.

"How much did they give you for my gold?" my mother asked him. And when he told her, she placed both hands on her head and cried, "Oh! Oh! *Chi m egbuo m!* My God has killed me!" It was as if she felt that the least he could have done was get a good price. I wanted to slap her. My father asked Nnamabia to write a report: how he had sold the jewelry, what he had spent the money on, with whom he had spent it. I didn't think Nnamabia would tell the truth, and I don't think my father thought he would, either, but he liked reports, my professor father, he liked things written down and nicely documented. Besides, Nnamabia was seventeen, with a carefully tended beard. He was in that space between secondary school and university and was too old for caning. What else could my father have done? After Nnamabia wrote the report, my father filed it in the steel drawer in his study where he kept our school papers.

"That he could hurt his mother like this" was the last thing my father said, in a mutter.

But Nnamabia really hadn't set out to hurt her. He did it because my mother's jewelry was the only thing of any value in the house: a lifetime's collection of solid gold pieces. He did it, too, because other sons of professors were doing it. This was the season of thefts on our serene Nsukka campus. Boys who had grown up watching *Sesame Street*, reading Enid Blyton, eating cornflakes for breakfast, attending the university staff primary school in smartly polished brown sandals, were now cutting through the mosquito netting of their neighbors' windows, sliding out glass louvers, and climbing in to steal TVs and VCRs. We knew the thieves. Nsukka campus was such a small place—the houses sitting side by side on tree-lined streets, separated only by low hedges—that we could not but

know who was stealing. Still, when their professor parents saw one another at the staff club or at church or at a faculty meeting, they continued to moan about riffraff from town coming onto their sacred campus to steal.

The thieving boys were the popular ones. They drove their parents' cars in the evening, their seats pushed back and their arms stretched out to reach the steering wheel. Osita, the neighbor who had stolen our TV only weeks before the Nnamabia incident, was lithe and handsome in a brooding sort of way and walked with the grace of a cat. His shirts were always sharply ironed; I used to look across the hedge and see him and close my eyes and imagine that he was walking toward me, coming to claim me as his. He never noticed me. When he stole from us, my parents did not go over to Professor Ebube's house to ask him to ask his son to bring back our things. They said publicly that it was riffraff from town. But they knew it was Osita. Osita was two years older than Nnamabia; most of the thieving boys were a little older than Nnamabia, and perhaps that was why Nnamabia did not steal from another person's house. Perhaps he did not feel old enough, qualified enough, for anything bigger than my mother's jewelry.

Nnamabia looked just like my mother, with that honey-fair complexion, large eyes, and a generous mouth that curved perfectly. When my mother took us to the market, traders would call out, "Hey! Madam, why did you waste your fair skin on a boy and leave the girl so dark? What is a boy doing with all this beauty?" And my mother would chuckle, as though she took a mischievous and joyful responsibility for Nnamabia's good looks. When, at eleven, Nnamabia broke the window of his classroom with a stone, my mother gave him the money to replace it and did not tell my father. When he lost some library books in class two, she told his form-mistress that our houseboy had stolen them. When, in class three, he left early every day to attend catechism and it turned out he never once went and so could not receive Holy Communion, she told the other parents that he had malaria on the examination day. When he took the key of my father's car and pressed it into a piece of soap that my father found before Nnamabia could take it to a locksmith, she made vague sounds about how he was just experimenting and it didn't mean a thing. When he stole the exam questions from the study and sold them to my father's students, she shouted at him but then told my father that Nnamabia was sixteen, after all, and really should be given more pocket money.

I don’t know whether Nnamabia felt remorse for stealing her jewelry. I could not always tell from my brother’s gracious, smiling face what it was he really felt. And we did not talk about it. Even though my mother’s sisters sent her their gold earrings, even though she bought an earring-and-pendant set from Mrs. Mozie, the glamorous woman who imported gold from Italy, and began to drive to Mrs. Mozie’s house once a month to pay for it in installments, we never talked, after that day, about Nnamabia’s stealing her jewelry. It was as if pretending that Nnamabia had not done the things he had done would give him the opportunity to start afresh. The robbery might never have been mentioned again if Nnamabia had not been arrested three years later, in his third year in the university, and locked up at the police station.

It was the season of cults on our serene Nsukka campus. It was the time when signboards all over the university read, in bold letters, SAY NO TO CULTS. The Black Axe, the Buccaneers, and the Pirates were the best known. They may once have been benign fraternities, but they had evolved and were now called “cults”; eighteen-year-olds who had mastered the swagger of American rap videos were undergoing secret and strange initiations that sometimes left one or two of them dead on Odim Hill. Guns and tortured loyalties and axes had become common. Cult wars had become common: a boy would leer at a girl who turned out to be the girlfriend of the Capone of the Black Axe, and that boy, as he walked to a kiosk to buy a cigarette later, would be stabbed in the thigh, and he would turn out to be a member of the Buccaneers, and so his fellow Buccaneers would go to a beer parlor and shoot the nearest Black Axe boy in the shoulder, and then the next day a Buccaneer member would be shot dead in the refectory, his body falling against aluminum bowls of soup, and that evening a Black Axe boy would be hacked to death in his room in a lecturer’s Boys’ Quarters, his CD player splattered with blood. It was senseless. It was so abnormal that it quickly became normal. Girls stayed inside their hostel rooms after lectures and lecturers quivered and when a fly buzzed too loudly, people were afraid. So the police were called in. They sped across campus in their rickety blue Peugeot 505, rusty guns poking out of the car windows, and glowered at the students. Nnamabia came home from his lectures laughing. He thought the police would have to do better; everyone knew the cult boys had more modern guns.

My parents watched Nnamabia's laughing face with silent concern and I knew that they, too, were wondering whether he was in a cult. Sometimes I thought he was. Cult boys were popular and Nnamabia was very popular. Boys yelled out his nickname—"The Funk!"—and shook his hand whenever he passed by, and girls, especially the popular Big Chicks, hugged him for too long when they said hello. He went to all the parties, the tame ones on campus and the wilder ones in town, and he was the kind of ladies' man who was also a guy's guy, the kind who smoked a pack of Rothmans a day and was reputed to be able to finish a carton of Star beer in a sitting. Other times I thought he was not in a cult, because he *was* so popular and it seemed more his style that he would befriend all the different cult boys and be the enemy of none. And I was not entirely sure, either, that my brother had whatever it took—guts or insecurity—to join a cult. The only time I asked him if he was in a cult, he looked at me with surprise, his eyelashes long and thick, as if I should have known better than to ask, before he said, "Of course not." I believed him. My father believed him, too. But our believing him made little difference, because he had already been arrested and accused of belonging to a cult. He told me this—"Of course not"—on our first visit to the police station where he was locked up.

This is how it happened. On a humid Monday, four cult members waited at the campus gate and waylaid a professor driving a red Mercedes. They pressed a gun to her head, shoved her out of the car, and drove it to the Faculty of Engineering, where they shot three boys walking out of their lecture halls. It was noon. I was in a class nearby, and when we heard the sharp bangs, our lecturer was the first to run out of the room. There was loud screaming and suddenly the staircases were packed with scrambling students unsure in which direction to run. Outside, three bodies lay on the lawn. The red Mercedes had screeched away. Many students packed hasty bags and *okada* drivers charged twice the usual fare to take them to the motor park. The vice chancellor announced that all evening classes were canceled and everyone had to be indoors after 9 p.m. This did not make much sense to me, since the shooting happened in sparkling daylight, and perhaps it did not make sense to Nnamabia, either, because on the first day of the curfew, he was not home at 9 p.m. and did not come home that night. I assumed he had stayed at a friend's; he did not always come home anyway. The next morning, a security man came to tell my parents that

Nnamabia had been arrested with some cult boys at a bar and had been taken away in a police van. My mother screamed, "*Ekwuzikwana!* Don't say that!" My father calmly thanked the security man. He drove us to the police station in town. There, a constable chewing on a dirty pen cover said, "You mean those cult boys arrested yesterday night? They have been taken to Enugu. Very serious case! We must stop this cult trouble once and for all!"

We got back into the car and a new fear gripped us all. Nsukka—our slow, insular campus and the slower, more insular town—was manageable; my father would know the police superintendent. But Enugu was anonymous, the state capital with the Mechanized Division of the Nigerian Army and the police headquarters and the traffic wardens at busy intersections. It was where the police could do what they were famed for when under pressure to produce results: kill people.

The Enugu police station was in a walled-around, sprawling compound full of buildings; dusty, damaged cars were piled by the gate, near the sign that said OFFICE OF THE COMMISSIONER OF POLICE. My father drove toward the rectangular bungalow at the other end of the compound. My mother bribed the two policemen at the desk with money and with *jollof* rice and meat, all tied up in a black waterproof bag, and they allowed Nnamabia to come out of his cell and sit on a bench with us under an umbrella tree. Nobody asked why he stayed out that night when he knew that a curfew had been imposed. Nobody said that the policemen were irrational to walk into a bar and arrest all the boys drinking there, as well as the barman. Instead we listened to Nnamabia talk. He sat straddling the wooden bench, a food flask of rice and chicken in front of him, his eyes brightly expectant: an entertainer about to perform.

"If we ran Nigeria like this cell," he said, "we would have no problems in this country. Things are so organized. Our cell has a chief called General Abacha and he has a second in command. Once you come in, you have to give them some money. If you don't, you're in trouble."

"And did you have any money?" my mother asked.

Nnamabia smiled, his face even more beautiful with a new pimple-like insect bite on his forehead, and said in Igbo that he had slipped his money into his anus shortly after the arrest at the bar. He knew the policemen would take it if he didn't hide it and he knew he would need it to buy his