# The Phoenix

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**p 4-15**

DAMASCUS. A graffiti artist has painted the words in green across the window beside the chair I choose to sit on. How appropriate, I think, as I let my buttocks down to meet the chair. *I am on my Damascus trip.* The line flashes across my mind. It is from a song I used to know. I cannot remember who sang it. I cannot even recollect the rest of the song. Not that I want to. There are other things on my mind.

I shut my eyes. Tight. Tighter than a miser's fist. I want to live in the darkness behind my eyelids. I want to shut my life to obliteration. Make my life a tabula rasa. I want to forget, my mind a state of pristine blankness where there is no past, no present. Especially no present. Most of all, I shut my eyes because I am afraid that if I keep them open, I will cry. I worry that if I do cry, I will shed something gritty. Like sand. Or *garri*.

I cover my face with my palms to make sure that my eyes do not open. But then a man's voice asks for my ticket. I open my eyes and rummage in my bag for my train ticket. While he is checking it, I look outside.

It is raining. It is not the kind of heavy rain to which I was accustomed back in Enugu, but rather, one that falls gently, as if it were afraid to offend. It reminds me of my mother, stealing into the church, tip-toeing on her high-heels, so that nobody notices that she is late for Mass. I have to press my nose to the window and squint to convince myself that it is indeed raining. I never had to do that in Enugu.

Everything here is different. I had expected it but the magnitude of the difference still unsettles me. And now, my life is changed. Completely. I feel like I am invisible. An unseen vapour floating odourlessly by. It is as if I do not exist. The feeling is so strong that I pinch my nose; I want to know if I still possess the sense of touch.

My nose hurts where I hold it between the nails of my thumb and my ring finger. I do not know whether to be relieved. Or sad. In the end, I am neither. I am simply grateful that the pain gives me something else to focus on. Something rather than the appointment I am travelling to Leuven to keep with Dr. Suikerbuik this morning.

There is a couple opposite me. They are youngish. I guess their ages to be twenty and twenty one; the boy being younger. That is still something of a phenomenon that I am grappling to come to

terms with:  that an older woman can parade a younger man without batting as much as an eyelid. It is amazing that I am still shocked as I have met quite a few of them by now. Carol who is thirty and her boyfriend Joe who is twenty-five. Karel, my neighbour and his girlfriend, Tina. There is a three year gap between them. Even Pa, Günter's father, once had a girlfriend who is a few years older than he is.

Back home, a man with an older woman is called a gold digger, a lazy man, a disgrace to the exclusive cult of malehood. The woman is called *old mama youngy*, *agadi ekwe nka*, mutton ill-dressed as lamb. But here, love is allowed to cut across boundaries. All boundaries. Age becomes nothing more than a number, a marker of how long one has been around and nothing more. It does not carry the weight of an importance attached to it back home where I am not allowed to call my older sibling and older cousins by name. They are *sista* and *broda*. Marks of respect for the years between us.

My father says a traveller is blessed because he sees and hears a world of tales. He always says that a traveller returns with a pouch full of stories. I have seen enough here to last me until I join my ancestors. In the land of the dead, I shall be the official story teller as I would have stored a bag overflowing with tales.

But I do not want to think of death.

The train stops in Herentals and the couple get off, swinging their jeans-covered hips, hands in each other's pockets, giggling at a joke one of them makes. I am no longer paranoid enough to think that every laughter is directed at me. Every joke at my expense; the unwilling clown playing to an unwanted audience. The couple leave behind a faint scent of something that seems to be a mixture of cologne and some flowery feminine perfume. There is a dent on the chair they have just vacated.

A woman enters and sits into the dent. I imagine it still warm under her buttocks. She adjusts her pepper-red skirt, crosses her legs and gives me a Flemish smile across the small table that sits between us. It is a smile like a child's paper-boat sailing on water. It remains on the surface, not daring to go deeper.

I smile back at her, baring my teeth. It is actually my version of the Flemish smile. A parting of the lips, a show of teeth mostly.

I have noticed that my teeth enchant them here. It is commented on all the time:

*How white! How can one's teeth be that white? Onmogelijk! The unstained white of a typing sheet.*

*Africans always have strong, white teeth. You don't need dentists, the plague of the west.*

*You keep your teeth clean with a stick, ja? Is that not painful? I could never do that!*

*You do not eat all the sweeties that we do here that spoil our teeth. Lucky you!*

*Africans have white teeth so they can be seen in the dark, ja?*

My smile encourages her. She speaks, *You are African, yes?*

I nod and smile again. It is a brief smile, over before I have even begun. I do not want to be drawn into a conversation. I am enjoying the company of myself. I have to come to realise that misery loves its own company. I want to be inside my head, alone, travelling down memory lane.

I play out favourite memories in my head: waking up on Saturday morning to a house bathed in the aroma of akara balls the colour of polished wood. My mother's voice humming a song as she plaited my hair. My father singing along to a Dean Martin tune. I hear the laughter of my sister, Ebele. It is a bubbly sort of sound, like gas escaping a bottle of cola.

*I have been to Africa*, the woman in the red skirt says. Her voice finds its way rudely into my head.

I nod. It is the only response I can give to that sudden proclamation. I look out the window and watch houses zoom past as the train moves on. I wonder what kind of lives the people inside the houses have. If you ride on a train that goes past Brussels North, it is easy to tell what kind of lives people in some of the houses lead. The train goes right past the red light district and gives the passengers a view of the prostitutes, stomachs as flat as ironing-boards, huge grins on some of the faces, waiting for customers to come in. But in Herentals, the houses look deserted, devoid of life. They are blank and there is nothing to suggest what kind of people live in them. They look like if they were food, they would taste of pounded yam, *nni ji*, with no soup. Bland. There is a house with a child's plastic swing in the back yard, but there is no child to be seen. I wonder how old the child is for whom the swing is meant.

The woman opposite me crosses and uncrosses her legs. She digs in her bag, her lips drawn tight in concentration. I expect her to bring out a magazine from the leather bag that sits beside her and bury her head in a copy of *Flair* or *Libelle*. Instead, she pulls out a roll of mentos. She offers me a mint and smiles again. The smile is deeper this time; the paper-boat goes lopsided and is sinking into the water. I feel obliged to smile back yet again.

*I went three years ago to Africa*, she says. She rolls the "r" when she says Africa. *I learnt some Swahili in Africa.*

She asks if I speak Swahili. I say *No, I do not speak Swahili.* She looks disappointed, like a child who has been promised a sweet but not been given one after all.

*You don't speak Swahili?* she asks again and I say *No*, shaking my head for emphasis. *But you are African, ja?* she asks, squeezing her eyes in confusion. *What do you speak then?* Her voice is challenging. Daring me to contradict her. Asking how can I be African and not know Swahili?

*I speak Igbo*, I answer.

*Is it like Swahili?* She asks and I say *No, it is not like Swahili.*

*But it is African? It is not a little bit like Swahili? Different dialects maybe?* She suggests.

*No. It is as different as Dutch is from Swedish.* I say, looking her in the eyes.

Her eyes look embarrassed. Her face clouds. But only for an instant. And then it clears and she beams me a smile.

*I speak a bit of Swahili,* she says. *Naomba unipe pesa.* She enunciates each word carefully, handling them like they were fine pieces of precious china. She repeats it, exhausting her vocabulary of Swahili.

*Naomba unipe pesa.* I think it sounds like a Zulu freedom chant. Like something one would hear Mandela shouting from a podium, fists clenched like a boxer's, pounding the air, standing majestic like an ageless mountain.

*Naombe unipe pesa.*

She looks happy with herself. *You recognise it?* she asks expectantly. I say *No. I do not.*

*But you are African,* she accuses, her eyes blaring with what might have been anger or hurt. *Surely your language is similar to Swahili.* Her voice rises a bit, seeking to intimidate me.

I refuse to be intimidated into accepting Swahili as kin to my language. I tell her my Igbo language is nothing like Swahili. They would not recognise each other were they to stand face to face, looking into each other's eyes. *They are complete strangers,* I say.

Her voice drops in disappointment as she translates for me. It means, *Friend give me money. I heard it all the time in Africa,* she says. *People coming up to me and opening their palms for money, dollars. I like Africa. People are poor but they are always singing and dancing. There is muziek in their lives.* She smiles again and closes her eyes. It looks as if she is in a gentle sleep.

I do not bother to tell her that Africa is not as small as she makes it seem. I do not tell her that Africa is a continent, like Europe is. I assume that she knows. She must know that she went to a country or some countries in Africa, not an amorphous Africa, with no beginning and no end. An Africa with no distinctions; nothing to distinguish one part from another.

*You like it here?* she asks, opening her eyes. For the first time, I notice their colour. They are the palest shade of blue, like water in a swimming-pool.

*Yes,* I say, wondering how eyes can be that colour. They look like a doll's eyes. I had a doll when I was ten; it was the first doll I owned. My Uncle Eze sent it from England. It had pink plastic skin and blue plastic eyes. I liked it until my best friend, Ijeoma, jealous of my gift from abroad told me my doll was not beautiful. She said it had *anya busu,* cat eyes. I have never seen a cat with blue eyes but I remember Ijeoma's comments and laughter stirs itself inside me.

*How can you like it here when it is so cold?* she asks, her voice rising incredulously, sounding almost furious. Then her voice softens and she says, *Africa is warm. Zomer everyday, ja?*

I say *Yes. It is summer everyday. Lots of sunshine.*

*I like zomer,* she says, her voice sounding like a prayer. I almost expect her to go on her knees and pay homage to summer and the image that floats to my head is so ridiculous the laughter inside me almost spills out.

*You must miss Africa, ja?* she asks , her head cocked to one side in what I can only assume is a show of sympathy. I say *Yes. I miss Africa.*

*Africa is beautiful but it is poor, ja?* she asks in a voice that sounds as if it is weighed down by the troubles of the world. *I like Africa,* she says her voice brightening like the morning sun, as she plays with the tiny wooden elephant on her left ear. I guess that the earring comes from the Wereld Winkel. She looks like she does her weekly shopping at Wereld Winkel with its collection of fair trade cocoa from Ghana and bottles of red wine from Chile and necklaces hand made in the back streets of Kenya and Tanzania. Shopping there is her contribution to easing the pain of Africa and the third world, I imagine. She is one of those with a conscience, who feel guilty about the wealth of the West and feel a personal responsibility to distribute that wealth fairly among the poorer nations. She carries the world on her shoulders and will not buy in a supermarket what she can get from the Oxfam shops. She means well, I tell myself, but I am her mission and she will keep talking until one of us disembarks.

Her voice drops in sadness again as she repeats that Africa is poor. *Beautiful but poor. Irony, ja?* she says. She pronounces it "eerony"

I nod. *Yes, it is an irony.*

She continues in what I regard as her weighed-down-with-the-sorrows-of -the-world-voice. *You like it here because this place is rich, ja? Houses are bigger, ja? Not huts, like I saw in Africa. I saw lots of them. We stayed in a big hotel, very modern but it was built especially for tourists. The hotel bus took us past the huts. Lots of them with straw roofs. Is it comfortable inside? Does the rain not come in? I could not ask the children who begged me for money because they did not understand me.*

I do not tell her that I have never seen a hut in my entire life. My father is a psychiatrist doctor who trained in Great Britain. He always adds that he trained in Great Britain to distinguish him from those of his colleagues who did not train in the country of the Queen, God save the Queen. My mother is a paediatric nurse and I am the second of five children. I grew up in a six bedroom house in the city with a swimming pool and a huge back yard, which my mother has turned into a vegetable garden, an oasis of tomatoes as red as palmoil and cocoyams as huge as a new-born baby's face and spinach of the healthiest shade of green. I do not tell her that the house I share with my husband here is only as big as my father's guest house.

Instead I tell her that no, the rain does not come in. I tell her it is very dry.

*And do people in the huts sleep on mattresses?* She wants to know. *Or do they sleep on hay?* A friend of hers told her that they sleep on hay.

I tell her they sleep on mattresses but the doll-blue eyes look doubtful. She narrows them to slits. I can see that she does not entirely believe me. Or perhaps, I think, she does not want to believe me. Her weekly trips to the Wereld Winkel will probably lose their significance if the Africans in huts sleep on beds rather than on hay. *Her passion for Africa will wane,* I think to myself. She will have to pick up a new cause.

*Africans,* she says shaking her head, *so poor yet so happy.* She looks at me and comments on how happy I seem. She says, "content." She says to look around the train, see how the young people in all their luxury look sad. Angry. Aggressive. She says this in a furious whisper, her eyes darting to a group of five young people, probably in their teens, sitting across the aisle from us. There are three

girls and two boys. The girls have charcoal-black lipstick on their lips. Lipstick that makes them look gruesome; like masks created to scare little children. Their hair is like coloured lengths of pink and yellow yarn. The boys have spiked hair and earrings on their chins. They are all carrying mobile phones on coloured slings around their necks. The two boys have thick-soled Nike sneakers with untied laces. The girls have thigh-length boots with heels as high as stilts for izaga masquerades in my village. They sprawl out on their chairs chatting in low tones, their features locked in what appears to be a permanent scowl.

*But you*, she continues, looking at me as if I were some trophy she has picked up, *you look like you do not have a care in the world.* Just like the people she saw in Africa, she says. The women were always singing, the children always playing even though they were all barefoot and wore torn shirts and some had no clothes on at all. Africa, she says again, no stress. Then, she adds in a giggle, *no dress, no stress.* Her pun seems to embarrass her because she covers her mouth with her palms to push down the giggle and to stop more words from coming out. I imagine her fighting with the words, refusing to open her mouth to let out a stream of words she does not want to utter. When she is composed, she tells me again how very happy with life I look, even though where I come from, people still die of hunger and many have to sieve through dust bins of big hotels like the one she stayed at in Mombassa to look for food.

My mother made us take our bath three times a day. Father said she was obsessed with cleanliness. We took our bath in the morning, took our bath in the afternoon as soon as we got in from school, and then at night before bed time we paid our tribute to the bath. It is a habit I am fighting to get rid of because water costs a lot more here than it does back home. Mother's obsession extended to our clothes. We had to be neat and tidy at all times. We were never to be seen with torn clothes. Mother inspected our clothes daily, like a boarding-house mistress, muttering under her breath that a stitch in time saves nine. I wonder if my co-traveller would have thought the African children she saw less happy if they had shoes on. And clean clothes. And were plump with life.

I look at the window. The rain is still there. Unobtrusive. I go inside myself and try to conjure up memories that will take me far away from my present. Memories to comfort me and swathe me in forgetfulness. Instead, another memory comes. One from a certain morning at the Gasthuisberg in Leuven. It takes central position and bullies all the other memories away.

I smell the disinfected waiting-room of Dr. Suikerbuik.

I see myself walk into his office.

I am sitting opposite him while he adjusts his silver rimmed glasses.

*I have got some bad news*, he says. He removes his glasses and wipes them. Then he says, *the lumps we found were cancerous. We shall have to start you on a treatment as soon as we possibly can.*

His words float in the air like fine dust and it is a while before they settle and make any sense to me. When they do, I want to scream. I want to tell him that he is lying. I want to say I am only twenty nine, I am too young to have cancer. I want to tell him I cannot have cancer because I still have dreams. I want to see my grandchildren I want to say. I want to raise Jordi. I want to say I am afraid to die and could he please help me not to die. I open my mouth but all that comes out is a tiny wail. Like the startled cry of a weak baby. Then the tears follow, ruining the Elizabeth Arden mascara which runs into the tears. They are fast; a furious cascade of warm, murky water. My cheeks burn where they touch. It is as if the tears scarificate my face. I imagine the marks etched

on my face, two thin lines, one on each cheek  like the *ichi* marks on an elder's face in Osumenyi, my village. Marks that signify their status in society. But mine are markers of pain. Signifiers of the huge boulder weighing on my chest.  I wipe the tears off my cheeks with the back of my palm. My hand is smeared with brown. I look at it in confusion for a moment before I realise that it must be my powder. *Imac* cream foundation and powder. I paid fifty euro for it at an African shop in Leuven. At that price, it is not one I wear everyday. I am miserly with it as I want it to last for years. I save it for outings and weddings.

And of course I wear it today for my appointment with Dr. Suikerbuik. I wonder now if it  will outlast me.

I worry that it might.

I put my hand out to my cheek to feel the powder. Its smoothness. Its *perfect finish* as it advertises on the cover. I notice that my hand is shaky. Shivering as if it had a fever from *iba*, malaria. The train stops to pick up more passengers in Lier. The woman opposite me is still talking. What do you like best about Belgium? I hear her ask. I do not answer her. I do not have the strength to.

I am remembering.

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