

THE FACT OF SUFFERING

(novel excerpt)

2009 Blodgett Waxwing Literary Prize in Fiction – Second Prize

Andrew Rooney

The King's English, Spring 2009

This is the Friday before the Saturday of the presidential elections and as expected things are in chaos. Ballots that were printed in South Africa will not be distributed until morning. Many will have mistakes on them and a final list of approved voters is not available. Poll watchers from the European Union and the Carter Center are in every state but not every polling place. The PDP is assured their candidate, Musa Yar `adua, will win. And there will be thousands of reports of voting fraud. But not at the Academy and not with Edith Asaman.

The federal government has advised people not to travel and not to move around until after three p.m. on Saturday. On Friday afternoon, thinking it will be the perfect time to move around, Sellig packs many of the girls into two buses and drives them over to Jos, for the big market the next morning. He is ignoring the warnings and the predictions of violence because he wants to get out and he thinks they're overstated. He has arranged with a friend of the Academy, who has a hotel, to put them all up. The hotel owner has organized a dinner and invited men that he feels might be future contributors to the school.

In order to be paid their salaries, Sellig has told the teachers, they will have to go along on the trip as chaperones. And so most of the way they sit with arms folded, sulking, or whispering to each other. The girls listen to headsets or braid each other's hair and are glad to be away. The buses are stopped on the way by federal and state police, by the military, and by the quasi-military, but there are no incidents, and Sellig only has to hand out a little dash. All the varieties of soldiers are keen on the girls, though, and some of the girls are keen on them, but when

the soldiers call out to them Sellig prevents any from leaving, which some are inclined to do.

The buses arrive at six at the Fine Hotel and the building is a typical Nigerian mixture of well done and needs help. In the lobby the sofas are covered in beautiful Italian leather but the stuffing has begun to come out of all of them at the seams. There is an elevator with rococo metal leaf work around the frame and inside, but it hasn't been operable for years.

Mr. Mumeen greets Sellig and Lowell first, shakes their hands warmly, asks about their work and their families, and nods in the direction of the women teachers. He wants to know how many girls have come on the trip and they say thirty-six. Mr. Mumeen surveys the girls, tells Sellig they'll have to sleep four to a room, and that the dinner will begin at seven. The girls are like sparrows in the lobby, looking at everything, touching everything, touching each other, asking questions at the desk.

"Is that Nigerian seven," Sellig says, "or generally-accepted seven?"

"I am thinking maybe we will start at seven fifteen, no later, that is certain."

Before Sellig divides the girls up into groups of four and gives them keys, he gives them strict instructions to be in the lobby by seven-thirty. The teachers are paired up and Sellig winks and pats the petite one he has been courting and gives her a room by herself.

Within a few minutes the electricity is off in the hotel and because Mr. Mumeen has not purchased any fuel for the generator, the building is nearly dark. And soon there is no water for bathing, which is followed by a trio of girls clad only in towels at the front desk, dripping, demanding they deliver hot water.

Sellig and Lowell share the biggest room, with twin beds and an ante room and Sellig comments that dinner is going to be a circus.

"Why is that?" Lowell says. "You mean no food, or the time?"

"Neither," Sellig says. "I think we're going to see the good men of the Quran at work."

Sellig attempts to turn on the TV and it does nothing, and in the few minutes it takes Lowell to rinse his face and walk out to ask a question, Sellig has slumped in a big chair, asleep. The typhoid had been in remission for a few days but tonight, because he has pushed it, it has made him tired and he looks much older than his age. Lowell has lit a candle and the dim light illuminates Sellig's sagging body, and the scene resembles the opening of a dramatic play.

By seven-thirty most of the girls have gathered in the lobby and half the men are there. Mr. Mumeen asks after Sellig, and Lowell explains he is having a recurrence of typhoid, but that he will likely be recovered by morning. Mr. Mumeen wonders if Lowell could make a brief welcoming speech in Sellig's place, and he says he'll try to pull something together.

In the dining room the women teachers carve out their own space at one end of the long table and Mr. Mumeen staggers men-girls at the remaining settings. Initially the men would rather talk to each other and they talk across the girls and ignore them. As different courses are brought out, and they're brought out with humorous irregularity, they eventually begin speaking with the girls around small things: Which state are you from? Ah, yes, I have a brother, cousin, business partner there. What are you studying? Ah, yes, I myself studied accounting at the university many years ago. And when you are finished what will you do? Ah, yes, that will be a worthy thing and maybe there will be room in my house for a girl such as yourself, when you are finished, do you think?

Some of the more aggressive men begin touching the girls on the shoulder, patting their hands, smiling with their irregular, caried teeth to emphasize points. Lowell sits in the middle and can see up and down what is happening. He sees when one of the men asks the teachers if it would be acceptable if he took the girl next to him out for a walk. The teachers aren't sure what to do and look for Sellig. When they find only Lowell, they debate letting the girl go until the man drops two one-thousand naira notes on the table. They're sure, they say collectively, that Mr. Sellig would find it acceptable.

The evening spectacle is enhanced by the intermittent lighting, and at times it's as if a strobe is in operation: men and girls are frozen in position with their mouths open, gasping, baring teeth, smiling, or with hands and fingers gesturing like thespians.

Other men ask the teachers if they, too, can show their young friends around town in their car, or to the park, or to the new American coffee shop, and they also drop one-thousand naira notes on the table. Lowell is not comfortable with the girls leaving but is not sure what to do in Sellig's absence. He's not entirely certain Sellig would have disapproved. He stops one or two of them but is not sure what to do or what to say. The men tell Mr. Mumeen before leaving that he can expect a sizeable donation for the Academy and he says, yes, yes, he will pass them directly on.

When the dinner is over half the girls are gone and the other half wander everywhere in the hotel and flirt with the bellboys and the desk clerk. They have to be told not to go into the basement, not to go into the kitchen, not to go into the laundry,

and eventually they return to their rooms to watch the occasional TV. There is electricity for a time and when it goes out they're given religious candles. Lowell sees them in the hallways and stairs carrying the votive lights and their faces are illuminated like night angels. Lowell sits in the lobby as though he were a chaperone and smiles when they approach and sit on either side of him.

Lowell feels a duty to wait for the girls, and by midnight all but three have returned. And though it is dark he is sure the hair and clothing of the revenants is in disarray. He falls asleep on one of the leaking sofas and midway through the night returns to his room. Before he does, one of the three missing girls knocks on the locked doors of the hotel and has to be let in. She is holding the front of her shirt, the buttons have been torn off, and she is whimpering.

In the morning Sellig is sitting with Mr. Mumeen in the dining room when Lowell enters. He asks Sellig about the two missing girls and is told they have not returned. Because of the election, the hotel is virtually empty and this is the real reason Mr. Mumeen offered it to the Academy. He is telling Sellig he would like to collect a small amount of revenue, if that would be possible, for the girls staying and the dinner.

"Your friends didn't pay for dinner last night?"

"Yes, but they are paying just enough, Mr. Sellig, sah," Mr. Mumeen says, "and then there are the rooms, sah, and the girls are using everything and the electricity."

"I was asleep, sick with the typhoid; *akwai* NEPA last night?" Sellig says.

"There was last night some of the time NEPA, Mr. Sellig, sah."

"Let me just check with my friend about NEPA last night, then maybe I will pay many naira and have our girls clean your hotel from top to bottom. Was there much electricity in the hotel last night, Lowell?"

"Not much," Lowell says.

"Mr. Sellig, please, sah."

"And the dinner, Mr. Mumeen, was there an excellent dinner last night for my lovely girls and your hungry men? I have heard that some of my girls were taken away by these men of Jos and brought back very late, that their clothes and hair appeared to be tampered with, and that one of our young women returned crying and almost naked. What kind of men did you invite to dinner, Mr. Mumeen?"

"Sah, I am thinking these girls are wanting to go with the men, Mr. Sellig, that they are knowing, sah."

"And the contributions, Mr. Mumeen, it takes a lot of naira to run a high-quality institution like the Academy. We talked about your friends making contributions to our school."

"Yes, Mr. Sellig, sah, I am sending the money. They all are promising."

"Oh, and I'm damn sure because they promised we'll need a Brinks truck to transport it over to Ajimola."

"I am not understanding, sah."

"Can we walk to the market from here, Mr. Mumeen, or should we take the buses?"

"Oh, sah, the government has said not to be out because of the danger."

"Any food back in that kitchen for my girls, Mr. Mumeen, before we go to the market?"

"I am thinking there is oat porridge, sah. If that will be acceptable."

"My girls are used to full Nigerian breakfasts, Mr. Mumeen, and to serve them oat porridge would be a step down. I'll have to do a lot of explaining but if you'll serve tea and juice and some toast with it I think I can get them to understand."

On the walk to the market, Sellig explains that this is probably the safest time to be out in the city because all the brands of military and police are either on the highway or stealing ballot boxes and the criminals are lying low.

"John," Lowell says, "last night many of the girls left the dinner with the men who were sitting next to them and your teachers accepted money to allow them to do it."

"Yep, and the problem?"

"And the problem is these girls have enrolled in Ajimola Academy to get an education to be house stewards, or something like that, not goddamn after-dinner toys for rich Muslims."

"I have to tell you, Lowell, for most of these girls, the best thing that could happen to them would be to get hooked up with a rich Nigerian or Senegalese or Indian businessman or even just a little Muslim guy from Jos. No matter what takes place, their lives will be a lot happier putting out once in a while for fat cats than living in their villages with bad water, bad health care, baby after baby, and no chance in hell to advance themselves."

The Saturday market in Jos is subdued but still busy and Sellig pairs the girls and gives the group a time and place to meet later. The teachers have rebelled and none have come down for breakfast or joined them. Fatima Bauchi has given Sellig a list of things to pick up in the market and they include everything from bushels of fruit and vegetables to copying paper, office supplies, and toilet paper.

By eleven the sky has clouded but it appears to have circumvented the city. Even though the rainy season has officially started, Sellig bets Lowell a thousand naira there won't be a downpour.

Sellig enjoys haggling with the shopkeepers and they laugh at his bad Hausa. He says "*Aa'aa ban gaanee ba*" when they call out to him, and when he asks a price, "*Na wa ne,*" without fail after they've said it he says "*Kai, ya yi tsada.*" To handle all the produce and flour and things he's buying he has hired boys in the market with wheelbarrows to follow him around. They are strong ten and eleven-year-olds and muscle the hundred pound sacks or baskets pretty well, with only occasional tip-overs.

By twelve, just before they are to meet up with the group again, there are nine boys weaving behind Sellig and people in the market come out to laugh and point and say "*Hey, bature.*"

The wind has come up and no one except Sellig is surprised when it begins to rain. At first it seems as if it will stop or continue the light spritzing and people go on walking and shopping. In just a few minutes, though, the rain comes down in pummeling drops and all stand under. Sellig unceremoniously hands Lowell a thousand naira.

Quickly, Sellig and Lowell shelter next to ladies hawking spinach-like greens, okra, red peppers, Italian tomatoes, and garlic. The ladies tell Sellig he needs to buy a wheelbarrow-full of everything they have and he tells them he is not a rich *bature*, he is one of the poor ones, with a school for girls to run. The wheelbarrow boys huddle under the metal awnings that form the clumsy shops opposite them and they are glad for the rest. For a few moments there is a general sense of peace and camaraderie between the shopkeepers and customers in the market.

A woman seller of cassava and potatoes calls out something from her space directly across from Sellig; it's a comment about the big *bature* marrying them and taking them to America, and if he does this he can have his way with all of them. Sellig and the women on his side laugh and he responds that he will take them back with him and that they should prepare their bags. The woman steps out into the rain and makes a sexual gesture as she points to Sellig and the women he is standing next to. She is thickly built and everyone laughs again when she waves her arms. But before she can retreat another gust of wind lifts a piece of the zinc roofing off the top of a shop and sends it groundward. The thin corrugated metal strikes the woman in the back of the neck and decapitates her.

For a moment all are frozen in the kind of unreal fear that accompanies a horrific event and they watch as the woman folds first to her knees, then flat on her chest, and finally her head. She

does this with a surprised smile still on her lips, topples and spews blood from the arteries.

"Let's go," Sellig says to Lowell, and he motions to the boys.

"John," Lowell says, "we can't just leave. A woman has been killed right in front of us. We have to do something."

"The story will become that the *bature* caused it in some way and there will have to be compensation – for the family, for the police, for the ladies."

"I'm going to stay," Lowell says. "I'll catch up with you."

The retinue moves quickly and each of the boys looks at the grisly sight as he passes the dead woman. They thread their way through the back streets to the hotel and the girls tease and poke the wheelbarrow boys when they meet and walk.

In the market, Lowell finds a sheet of used clear plastic to cover the dead woman and the rain immediately beads on the tarped mound, then pools in the flat spots. He stands with hands on hips in the downpour, watching, struggling, and with a confused look on his face. Then he turns and hurries to catch up with the group.

When the girls begin arriving at the hotel they chatter about a woman whose head was cut off in the market, and how it continued to speak. They say the last word from her mouth was the name of the former Nigerian president, Babangida. Though none of them saw it they relate the details of the event as though they had. Neither Sellig nor Lowell embellish the story or even acknowledge they were present.

The police hadn't arrived before Lowell left but the ladies insisted he give them dash because they were sure the family was going to need it. No one touched the body for a long time or moved it until one of her young sons came looking for his mother.

Mr. Mumeen makes himself conspicuous at the hotel as the girls and the teachers load the buses and Sellig packs the enormous amount of groceries he has purchased in the rear seats of one of them. Mr. Mumeen gestures occasionally to Sellig with his hands or his head in a pleading way and Sellig ignores him. Though all the girls eventually returned from the previous night, two girls did not return from the market. He tells the drivers they will wait a few minutes and then leave.

While they are waiting, Sellig takes time to kid and patch up his relationship with the teacher, Sadiqa, who he'd been pursuing. He apologizes, says, "That's what happens when you have typhoid," meaning that's why he didn't come to visit her the previous night, and by the time they are ready to leave, she is leaning on his shoulder.

When the missing duo does not return, Sellig asks Mr. Mumeen, who is pouting in his office, if he will direct the girls,

when they do show, to an intercity van so they can find their way back to Ajimola. He gives the desk clerk a hundred naira dash for helping the girls, knowing Mr. Mumeen will ignore them.

On the bus Sadiqa tunes her radio to the BBC and it gives live reports of the Nigerian election. First the anchor speaks to a correspondent in Lagos, who reports people being robbed while standing in line to vote, and then the correspondent says this is a regular occurrence as people are often robbed while waiting in any kind of line or traffic go-slows. And there is another report from Jos, and everyone on the bus listens intently. The correspondent mentions men on motorcycles driving up to polling places, threatening people with machetes, and carrying off the ballot boxes, traditional electioneering. He also reports that in a random act of election-day violence a woman's head was cut off in the marketplace and the police have no suspects.

"Will there be trouble after the election with the results?" Lowell asks Sellig.

"Some," Sellig says, "probably by Buhari and Atiku but the election will stand. They will challenge it in court and there will be proof that there was widespread fraud but not enough to overturn the whole thing. These two guys will make speeches and be quoted in the papers but that's the end of it. The PDP has won. They won yesterday, even before the ballots were distributed."

"Why hold an election? Why waste the time and why waste money that could be used somewhere else."

"Maybe they have to go through it to make themselves feel good, a democracy -- sort of. And don't kid yourself. The money wouldn't be spent any better anywhere else. Could be they just needed the practice."

Despite the fact that the bus has its air conditioning system on, many girls have their windows down and are dreamily hanging out the windows. From above it might look as if the bus were a mutated centipede with short legs, oddly placed along its side, and a fat body.

In the distance, because he's in front, Sellig can see a bird of some kind, a hawk with yellow legs and a buff-and-white chest and withers, on an abandoned pole. It's standing still with its head turned watching an object in the distance. When it alights it circles and then crosses the road in front of them. It's in full pursuit of its prey and it jerks and shifts to mimic the pursued's movements. He can see that it's directly behind its victim, a very small, light-yellow bird.

Sellig has to bend to see part of the pair's movements and it's clear the smaller bird is being evasive, but the hawk is intent. The small bird flaps rapidly and the raptor makes sweeping drafts of its wings. Before anyone can realize it the hawk, with the

smaller bird just now in its talons, has flown pell-mell through one of the open windows, past a girl's face, and struck a closed window across the aisle in the bus. All the girls begin screaming when the smaller bird escapes the bigger bird's grasp, caroms wildly from wall to wall, and then disappears.

From a distance the hawk appears lifeless to Sellig, and there is a sliver of blood on the seat and between the feathers on its forehead where it has struck the window. He and Lowell approach and stand watching for a moment.

It's a beautiful bird, a smallish hawk with a proud grey beak, and Lowell wonders if it's dead.

"Hard to say," Sellig responds. "Might have broken its neck or just knocked itself out."

"The little one that got away will have a story to tell at dinner tonight."

Sellig reaches down and picks the bird up and still no movement. He holds it with his hands around the wings, to prevent it from flapping up in his face should it turn out to be alive. Sellig touches the beak and marvels at the claws. The driver suggests he remove the legs and hang them from the rearview mirror of his car. Even though he thinks it's a proud bird and a bit irreverent to do so, Sellig says if he had a knife he'd do it and the driver produces one from a sheath.

The knife has a sharp blade and Sellig finds the bird's tibial joint where it enters the body. With a quick motion he cracks the skin and then the white cartilage of the knee, taking the legs off. There is no blood and he sets the bird on the seat and holds the talons up like a trophy. A few of the girls tentatively touch them and Sellig drapes them from his ears, like earrings, and when he talks like a pirate they giggle nervously.

Like a teenage boy, Sellig teases Sadiqa by scratching and pursuing her with the talons. While he is doing this the hawk begins to struggle on the seat where Sellig set it and shakes itself awake, trying its best to stand aright, minus its legs. Amazed, those around the bird watch as it gathers itself on its stumps and flops and shudders its wings, finally finding a way to clear the nearest window. And the rapt passengers watch in amazement as it flies away, all wondering how it will manage to land.

"Put up the windows, ladies," Sellig says, "because when that bird comes looking for its shoes it's going to be really pissed off."

As the chatter dies down the bus riders drift into circling reveries, fluttering their hands and arms, opening and closing their painted beaks, swaying and rocking and bouncing, as they float over the asphalt ocean.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Andrew Rooney recently returned from a two-year teaching assignment at the American University of Nigeria. His novel, *The Fact of Suffering*, based on his time in Africa, is with an agent. He has a number of degrees, one of which is an MFA from Naropa University. His linked fiction collection, *The Colorado Motet*, was published by Ghost Road Press, March 2005. *Travels in Ekphrasia*, a collaborative art/writing chapbook, was published July 2006. Works-in-progress include *The Cardinal Heart* (crime fiction) and *Sofi in a Stroller*, a children's story. Recent fiction has appeared in

Please Stay on the Trail Anthology, *Open Windows Anthology*, *Wazee Journal*, *Edgar Literary Review*, *Awakenings Review*, *Spectacle Journal*, *Hardground 2000*, won first prize in *Seedhouse* magazine's fiction competition (1999), Winnow Press Chapbook Award 2004 semi-finalist, and was a finalist in the Faulkner Novella 2000 Competition. You can reach him at arooney3701@gmail.com.