

Edible Bones



Unoma Azuah

EDIBLE BONES

Unoma Azuah

Demarche Publishing LLC

P.O. Box 824

Yorktown Heights NY 10598-9998

<http://www.demarchepublishing.com>

The author does not guarantee and assumes no responsibility on the accuracy of any websites, links or other contacts contained in this book.

Edible Bones

All rights reserved.

Copyright © 2012 by Unoma Azuah

Cover design and digital photography by SeanDrakes.com

PRINTING HISTORY

Demarche Publishing/ 2012

All right reserved.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including scanning, photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. Please do not encourage piracy or plagiarization of copyrighted material in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

ISBN: 978-0-9823077-8-6

Library of Congress Control Number: 2012954835

Printed in the United States of America

Praise for Edible Bones

Edible Bones (Original edition) "Aidoo-Snyder Book Award Winner."

"Edible Bones casts a cold eye on the life of African immigrants in the U.S. The economic and political realities of living in the American underclass have been well documented, but usually in ways that suggest that the core human values of working-class culture – love, trust, and solidarity – can either triumph somehow over injustice or at least provide some consolation for it.

Edible Bones provides no such escape route. The characters' relationships seem as mercenary and hollow as the world outside. Readers will have a hard time deciding whether to like or dislike Kaito, whether to sympathize with him or despise him, and, at the end of the novel, whether to wish him well or wish him good riddance. Edible Bones is an unrelenting, though often very funny, anatomy of a world so consumed by the struggle for money, luxury, and status that no alternative seems possible anymore."

--John McAllister: Professor of Literature, Gaborone, Botswana.

"Edible Bones narrates the suffering of Nigerians whose successes are moored to the America dream. However, unusually, Edible Bones combines the usual with the rarely told. There are the immigrant issues, the gay syndrome, the psyche of the American culture, the hypocrisy of the American system, the beauty and ugliness of African communality and the coldness of modern life; all which add a refreshing twist to the narrative. Kaito's encounters become the folder of other stories, stories that come to define the value of an immigrant life. Subtly, though more brilliantly, the tales of two different worlds are bared. Nigeria may be a home of wants; America is [not] a land of easy coins. With its simplicity of plot, naturalness of characterization and smoothness of descriptiveness, Edible Bones worked my reading appetite."

--Joseph Omotayo: Literary journalist, Lagos, Nigeria.

"Unoma Azuah's delivery is exquisite, done in simple language, and a free-flowing narrative. She does not try to impress. She simply tells a good story so well the intrigue and captivation would have a lot of readers continuously flipping the pages..."

Unoma writes well about the senseless struggle of Kaito. [F]or this young man, there was no going back to the land where he had seen no hope [so he] agrees to wash dishes, clean floors in America ... to earn a living while constantly looking over his shoulder for law enforcement.

I enjoyed Edible Bones. On the whole, Edible Bones is a fulfilling read.”

--Kurannen Baaki: Nigerian writer, Kaduna State, Nigeria.

Table of Content

[Title Page](#)

[Praise for Edible Bones](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[About the Author](#)

Prologue

It was not yet 4 a.m. Still, like a trail of ants, a large and eager crowd was lined up outside the American embassy in Lagos. Each morning, while it was still dark, three hundred plus visa applicants would arrive at the embassy. They hoped to receive the legal documents authorizing their travel to the US. Though the processing office would not open until 8 a.m, that

morning, like on every other morning, the anticipation of the coming masses had, by 1 a.m., set a bustling fray of ambitious enterprise into full swing. Those at the front of the line were poised to sell their prime spots to late-comers for a fifteen thousand, perhaps thirty thousand naira . A few yards away began a stretch of vendors, in place to sell water, fruit, and other goods to the visa hopefuls.

By 3 a.m., a throng of at least four hundred had formed around the entrance gate. At 8:20 a.m., Kaito, the security guard, was making his way toward the crowd for the fifth time in the last three hours. He eyed the men and women furiously with an urge to open fire. He had yelled at them, cursed at them, and managed to push them back, away from the building. But as soon as he returned to his cubicle, they would drift right back to the same spot. He couldn't wait for 2 p.m. when his shift ended. He waved his hands at them, a sign they understood to mean that they should move away from the fence, but they ignored him. It was as if they knew his partner had stepped out to pee and therefore, could be of no help in containing them; so they pressed even closer to the entrance gate. Some looked up at the height of the fence, as though they intended to scale it and then hurl themselves into the embassy.

Kaito closed his eyes, opened them, unlatched his long leather belt from his waist and charged the crowd. He lashed out blindly with the belt, flogging those nearest to him. Their eyes, faces, chests, backs, legs, necks, anywhere his swooshing belt reached, were flogged. Shrieking and wincing, the people pressed back. Most of them looked tired but eager to maintain their positions close to the entrance gate. Kaito whipped even harder, this time, his eyes tightly closed. The embassy with its whitewashed walls glistening in the early morning light was like a massive dome in the middle of a sea of sand. The mass of people huddled together like a herd of cattle, determined to get to the greener pasture on the other side, to enter the golden gate. Kaito kept thrashing furiously. They started shifting away like a receding wave in the ocean but then came crashing back. Kaito, overwhelmed, lost his balance somewhat and almost fell backward. Exhausted and panting, he ceased the licks. He started moving back away from the crowd. A gaunt-looking man with a loose tie stepped forward from the crowd, at that point.

His left cheek had been struck and slightly gashed by Kaito's belt. He wiped blood that was dripping down his cheek with a brown handkerchief and glared at Kaito with anger in his red eyes. He'd taken a good amount of beating. Kaito caressed his gun; the man stood unflinchingly.

"I've been here for the past twenty-four hours. Your men would only allow their friends and relatives in, even when they were late. My appointment was for 8 a.m., and my brother is waiting for me in New York."

Kaito eyed him. He was well dressed: a black suit with a matching black tie. The tips of his shoes were caked with mud, the top two buttons on his shirt were missing. "Let me see your appointment letter." He did have an 8 a.m. appointment; his was one of the first. A cool wind blew across their faces, but the man wiped at the beads of sweat on his brow. Many others pushed forward, holding out their letters of appointment with shaky hands. A group of three women and two men formed a circle and yowled in prayer. "We claim that path you have made for us in the Red Sea! We claim our path to America! Lawd, yes! We are the children of Abraham and the world is ours to have and live. We banish and cast out all principalities and powers that have tried to block these gates because we know that the devil is the father of liars! Yes lawd," the women proclaimed simultaneously. The men repeatedly hit the Bible on their laps, followed by cries of "In Jesus' name!"

Kaito led the man into his post and asked him to sit down; he would be the first to go in. Those already in the front of the queue screeched in protest. They said they all had 8 a.m. appointments as well. Some pushed, punched and kicked each other as they tried to maintain their positions on the line. At the cubicle Kaito's partner, Mamman, greeted the man. He asked him how he got the cut on his face. The man looked down at his mud-caked shoes and did not say a word. Mamman offered him a cup of tea. There were three cups on the small table in a corner of the cubicle. Mamman was already sipping from a cup. The steam circled his face, and the hot liquid began to scorch his tongue, causing him to squint his eyes. The man said *thank you* and kept staring at his feet. Kaito asked him what he did for a living. The man had been an accountant at the Nigerian Stock Exchange until he was relieved of his duties a few months ago.

His elder brother owned an accounting and tax firm in New York. He had a job waiting for him. The loud voices of the protesting people in line drowned the rest of their conversation. Some of them scurried up to the security post and accused Kaito of showing favoritism to his Uncle. They said they knew the man was his relative. Kaito glowered. Mamman rushed at them with his *Koboko* wipe; they ran back, screaming. Kaito was glad he was not one of them; his visa to America was due in a matter of weeks. That was the privilege he enjoyed as a junior staff member. A grin hovered around his mouth. He looked forward to America.

Chapter One

Kaito made sure he had the two addresses his family gave him. One was for a family friend, Abuda, who had left twelve years ago. The other was for Kamalu, another friend who had been gone for only three years and was studying at the University of Quentin. Kaito was also certain to follow the directions the train driver gave him ---straight up the wide road leading away from the station to Lennon Street. At the end of Lennon Street, on the left, was Brooke.

Kaito could see the name Brooke in bold white letters on a dark green sign. He flipped through his address book to look for the exact house number --- 1437 Brooke. He looked up the street and could see house 1431 but not 1437. He walked ahead faster. On each side of the street, he saw houses surrounded by trees. They looked like castles towering into the sky; their well-trimmed lawns were a luxurious green. Except for chirping birds, not a sound could be heard. This was a far cry from even a small city like his hometown where, at this time of day, the average street would be bustling with a swarm of people walking by or standing around chatting. A slight wind blew across his face. He looked at the address for the tenth time and continued

scanning the numbers on the houses. Still, there was no sight of 1437. He started getting worried because the afternoon was drifting into early evening. He decided to stop by the house closest to him to make inquiries. This huge white house was draped with clinging vines. Its walkway was littered with broken bicycle parts that Kaito was careful not to step on as he approached the front door. Stems of leaves crawled into its cracks and hinges. As he stretched his hand to knock an automatic sprinkler came on, spraying sharp gushes of water. Kaito was startled. The water swirled in large circles, showering the surrounding grass and flowers. Finally, he tapped on the door. A boy of about six peered through the window near the door and disappeared. Kaito knocked again-this time lightly. A window cracked open above him, and a bald, middle-aged white man emerged yelling.

"What do you want?"

"Sir, I am looking for number 1437 Brooke."

"Well, this is not 1437 Brooke. Try the East side."

"Ok, sir. Thank you."

"Where are you from? Is that an accent I hear?"

"I am from Nigeria. I am looking for my brother, Mr. Abuda."

"Oh, Africa! I have a friend in South Africa. He brings home interesting recordings of the Zulu dance clan. Do you know the group?"

"No, sir."

"Alright, the East side is quite a walk from here, so go to the end of the street and take the G5 or the red line."

The train station seemed deserted. Kaito swallowed an imaginary lump. His eyes followed the glittering train tracks into the horizon, hoping the train would return. From the moment he got to the airport, getting directions right was a problem. The signs were confusing. When he got to the baggage claim area and retrieved his bag, he was not sure about which direction to take. He walked aimlessly around a number of times before finally asking a teenaged boy for assistance. The boy allowed Kaito to walk with him as he was headed the same

way—downtown. Breaking into Kaito's thoughts was the commotion of an approaching train; he smiled at the sight of it.

The dwellings on East Brooke were not as impressive as the ones on Brooke. Most were rundown row houses or crude looking brick houses that were at best moderate in size. There were children playing on the street corners, and men with bare chests were playing basketball. The atmosphere felt familiar, like home. When Kaito knocked on the door of 1437 East Brooke, he was relieved. A few minutes later, a woman yelled from the door, "Who is that?" Kaito said, "It's me, Abuda's brother from Nigeria." A light-skinned lady who could have been in her mid-fifties showed her face through the half-opened door that was bound from behind with a chain. She asked again, "Who did you say you are?" Kaito could not tell if she was black or white. A mop of hair covered half of her face, and she reeked of cigarette smoke.

"I am Kaito, Abuda's brother from Nigeria."

"Who?"

"Abuda's brother," Kaito said.

"Well, Abuda is dead and does not live here anymore."

"Dead? When?" Kaito asked. His eyes were wide and a vein on his neck bulged. He placed his right hand on his chest; his heart throbbed as if it was about to pop out of his chest. If Abuda was dead, how was he to complete his journey? He may get killed if he ended up sleeping in the streets. He had seen a lot of guns and violence in the American movies he watched back home. Some of the actors did not think twice before they started shooting. And what would become of him, if he did not find Kamalu? And why was Abuda's corpse not brought home? As an elder, he was supposed to be buried in his ancestral graveyard, not in a foreign land—that was an abomination. He could feel his palms getting moist. "But what happened to him? How did he die?" he asked.

"He is dead to me. I threw him out months ago."

Kaito was relieved. "But how can I find him?"

"I don't know!"

"Please, Madam, can I have a drink of water and then rest for a few minutes? I am so hungry and tired."

"Hell no! I don't know you."

"I am Abuda's brother," Kaito said. He dug his sweaty hands into his traveling bag to fish out Abuda's picture and showed it to the lady.

"That's Abuda alright. How do I know you're not some fake-ass nigger with some fake-ass African accent trying to rob me?"

"Please, if you can tell me where to find him and allow me a few minutes of rest, I will leave. I promise."

She hesitated and then unhooked the chain. He entered. The living room was clouded with wisps of cigarette smoke. Kaito coughed lightly and sat on a leather couch close to the door. Beside the couch was a small table with five scattered coffee-stained mugs. There was an overturned ashtray on the floor.

"Can I have something to drink, please?"

"Soda?"

"Soda?" Kaito was confused. In Nigeria, Soda was a type of soap. The lady saw the confusion on his face and tossed a can of Coca-Cola at him. He caught it mid-air and uttered, "Thank you."

"Here is some left-over chicken, and my name is April by the way," she said, placing a bucket of fried chicken before him. In bold red print was the inscription KFC on all the sides of the bucket.

"Yes, thank you." He had never seen so much chicken for one meal in his life.

"Help yourself. I will go upstairs and search around for the phone numbers of Abuda's friends. They might know where he is."

Kaito polished off the last bit of chicken and guzzled the entire can of Coke. He belched and settled back on the couch feeling much better. Then a sharp pain pierced through his stomach. He grabbed his stomach with both hands and cringed in pain. He let out a loud fart and had a sudden urge to use the toilet. "April!" He yelled up the stairs. "Where is your toilet?"

"To your right!"

He had barely pulled down his pants before a loud spurt of feces splashed all over the toilet seat. He sat down on it desperate to relieve himself. The stench was intense. When he finished, he grabbed a can of air freshener from the windowsill

and tried to spray, but it was empty. He then wiped the seat with long pieces of padded toilet tissue. Before lowering the lid, he flushed the toilet several times, but the odor held strong.

"Hummmm! What's that smell?" April shouted from the stairs with a distorted face.

"Oh! It's the toilet."

"What? You? Please, out!"

"I'm sorry."

"Take your sorry stinking African ass outta here, Mothafucka!"

Kaito begged as April violently opened up all her windows. She left her door open and dragged a chair outside.

"Really sorry!"

"If you don't get off my property I'll call the cops, heifer!"

Kaito was shaken. He didn't understand why somebody would be so upset over the smell of shit. He hurried on to the sidewalk. If they were home in Nigeria, they would laugh over it. At home his family felt free to even fart in each other's presence. His father would often let out a loud one, and his mother would hurry out of the place, and then come back to scold him. It was never an issue. His father might apologize afterward, but he was never ostracized for a shit or fart odor --- nobody was. Because their toilet was not far from their main house, a strong odor of excrement habitually hung in the air, but nobody complained. Kaito was left distraught after what had happened at April's place but determined to find Kamalu and even Abuda.

Frustrated, Kaito managed to make his way back downtown. He could not find any buses with the number 27. This was the bus the cashier at the station told him to take in order to get to the University of Quentin. At the bus stop, every person he asked about the bus schedule either backed away or ignored him. They were mostly middle-aged. For the first time since his arrival in the U.S., Kaito observed a group of people casually hanging out, standing around socially and engaged in spirited discussion. This reminded him of home just as had the sight of children playing on East Brooke. The group of people was in what looked like a garden right in the middle of the T-junction, downtown. He scuttled across the road and into

the garden. His gaze settled on a bunch of Christian evangelists warning about the end of the world from blaring loudspeakers. Pigeons flapped away in fright. Beside him was a statue of gargoyles spewing water. The showers of water from the fountains were endless. At the base of the fountains were glittering coins. After about twenty minutes of listening to the preaching, Kaito asked the man standing next to him where he could catch the 27 bus. The man obliged, but at that moment the P.A. system so loudly amplified the preacher's voice, Kaito could not clearly hear the man's instructions. Kaito thanked the man for his help just the same and scampered to the bus stop across the street. A bus was approaching. It was the 27. Kaito boarded and asked the driver to let him know when they got to the stop for the University of Quentin.

Kamalu's dormitory was a four storey brick complex. When he entered the lobby, he was struck by the aroma of brewing coffee. The Caucasian lady at the reception desk asked if she could be of assistance. She had a wide smile. Her black hair was held in a ponytail with a blue band, except for a few strands that brushed her ear. She informed Kaito that she had not seen Kamalu for days. She phoned Kamalu's room, but there was no answer. She told Kaito that Kamalu normally returned at 9 p.m. unless he was out of town. He usually travelled south for extra summer classes.

Kaito sat in the well-furnished lobby. A movie was playing on the giant screen TV, but he was uninterested. What if Kamalu never turn up, he thought. A few minutes later, the lady at the desk joined him with two cups of coffee. Her red lipstick was smeared at the edge of her white mug. Her face powder did not quite hide the light wrinkles on her face.

"What's your name again?"

"My name is Kaito."

"Coffee?"

"No, thank you."

"It might help calm your traveling nerves."

"You are right, thank you. What is your name?"

"Beth."

"So you believe that Kamalu is out of town?"

"Well, I haven't seen him in quite a few days. Are you related to him?"

"He's my brother....from my village."

“He didn’t know that you were coming to visit?”

“I sent him an e-mail and left messages on his phone, and when I hadn’t heard from him, I purchased a ticket anyway because my travel visa was almost running out.”

Beth’s eyes settled on his muscles. “You look quite fit. Are you an athlete?”

“No.”

“You and Kamalu are from where again?”

“Nigeria.”

“And the name of your village?”

“My village is called Iwu. I’ll show you pictures.” Kaito retrieved some pictures from his bag.

“The lake in the photo of you fishing is beautiful.”

They spent some time going over the pictures until a little after midnight. Beth’s shift had ended, but there was no sign of Kamalu. She sat with Kaito while he waited. At half past, there was still no Kamalu, so she announced that she was ready to leave.

“Do you know if there’re any cheap hotels around here?”

“What do you call cheap?”

“Seventy dollars is all the money I have.”

“That wouldn’t pay for more than a night. Well, I tell you what, give me fifty bucks and you can crash at my apartment until Kamalu comes back. But we have to make sure no one sees you. If my apartment manager suspects that somebody is staying with me, I could get evicted. I have a roommate, Kyle, but he’s been gone for a while though --- something about taking a semester or so off to work.”

“Ok, thank you. Thank you very much.”

Beth’s red Toyota Corolla car was cluttered with pieces of paper, a couple of half torn novels, empty cups of coffee and stubs of cigarette. She gathered the piles of papers from the passenger’s side of the floor; she asked Kaito to toss to the back the half-torn books that were on the seat. Then she put a CD into a rectangular slot on the dashboard of the car and loud screechy music began to blast. “That’s *Girls of Summer* by Aerosmith,” she shouted.

“Ok.”

Beth nodded her head to the sound of the music; Kaito found it noisy and wondered what she enjoyed in the music. He did not ask. A few minutes later, Beth drove up to her apartment

complex, which sat at the top of a narrow driveway on a quiet but cluttered street. There were trash bags lying around as well as huge plastic containers, some of which were overturned. They walked up a creaky flight of steps to her door. She held Kaito with one hand and opened the door with the other. The living room was nearly empty except for a CD player and TV in a corner. A couch was in the middle of the room. Beth brought out cans of beer and peanut butter sandwiches. As they finished eating and drank some beer, Beth brought out a piece of paper, rolled up some weed in it, and asked Kaito if he smoked. He hesitated, then took the blunt. They smoked until dawn.

When he woke up, Kaito could not tell when he had fallen asleep. His groin hurt, and his pants were on the other side of the room. Next to him was a note from Beth saying she'd left for work and was grateful for the night. He smiled at the note. He could not wait to tell Kamalu and his friends in Nigeria that he had had a white girl. For the first time in his life, he had slept with a white girl. He felt very happy and lucky to have found her.

Kaito's next several days at Beth's were spent indoors listening to music, watching movies, switching entertainment channels and eating as much as he wanted. It did feel like America; there was plenty to eat, perfumed showers, no stress, and the electricity never blinked. Beth kept replenishing the food as well as the packs of condoms. As weeks passed, though, Kaito started getting restless. Kamalu was almost forgotten; the pain in his groin did not go away; and he felt guilty that he had not called home to let his family know he had arrived safely.

Beth made a final effort to help Kaito find Kamalu when she helped him call the school where Kamalu was supposed to be for summer classes. A staff person told them Kamalu had completed the program and left. They had no further information. After that, Beth seemed to lose interest in the search for Kamalu. Meanwhile, Kaito's growing restlessness made him wonder if there might be other Africans who lived in the area, but Beth insisted that Kaito never leave the apartment or walk around the neighborhood without letting her know. It was dangerous; she claimed, and they needed to make sure her

apartment owner didn't discover Kaito instead of Kyle. The apartment began to feel like a prison.

One day, Kaito decided to sneak out for a walk. He stumbled upon a store where he could buy calling cards. He still had fifty dollars and some coins but didn't know their value or what they were called. The store was small and had all sorts of snacks. Some of them looked like the snacks in Nigeria. Jerky Steak caught Kaito's eye. It looked exactly like *Suya*, the hot, pepper-spiced, grilled steak meat he loved eating in Nigeria. Another snack with the words, Coconut Chips, printed on the wrapper reminded Kaito of the slices of fried coconut his grandmother made for him when he was a child. The store also had assorted calling cards. A lanky, heavily bearded man emerged from the back door of the store with a frown. Kaito greeted him. The man grunted. However, his expression softened as soon as he saw Kaito's big smile. Kaito asked him which of the calling cards was best for Nigeria.

"You from Africa?" the man asked him.

"Yes, Nigeria. I am Kaito."

"I'm African too, from Morocco. This is my store. Amin is my name. "There some Nigeria students in Quentin University down the road."

"Do you know Kamalu?"

"Not know Kamalu, but I know Momodu from Nigeria too. He is a senior student, doing his Masters at Quentin."

They conversed for a while and became instant friends. Before Kaito left, Amin gave him Momodu's address and told him how to get there and how to return to his store by bus if he did not find Momodu.

Momodou was working in a lab and peering into a microscope when Kaito walked up to him. The place was stuffy and didn't have much light, but there was an overhead lamp right above Momodu's head. Unfriendly, he scowled at Kaito and did not say a word. Each time Kaito asked him a question or made a statement, he shrugged or responded with, "What?" and "So?" He did give Kaito surprising information, however – Kamalu had returned from Atlanta a couple of weeks ago. Kaito didn't believe him; Beth would have told him so. A sudden

dampness settled on his palms. He begged Momodu to take him to Kamalu. Momodu refused but told him that it was only a few blocks away. He pointed through the only open window in his lab, indentifying Kamalu's four-story brick residence hall. Kaito hurried to Kamalu's dormitory only to stumble upon a very angry Beth. Her face was red and greasy; she was sweating. The scarf she had over her head was almost falling off.

"How dare you leave the house without telling me?"

"I didn't know I would be here. Somebody told me Kamalu was back."

"Somebody where? So, you've been sneaking around without letting me know!"

"Sorry, but you should have told me that Kamalu was back."

Beth denied knowing when Kamalu came back. When she finally agreed to call Kamalu's room with the telephone at the reception desk, Kamalu didn't pick up the phone so she gave Kaito the room number. When he opened the door, Kamalu was astounded to see Kaito there. He was even more flabbergasted when he learned that Kaito had been in Cleveland for weeks.

"Where in hell have you been? I sent a reply to your email as soon as I got back weeks ago. I even called home. What's going on?"

"Man, I lost track of time. Beth put me up at her place. I didn't realize you were back."

"Beth? Who is Beth?"

"The receptionist. She's nice."

"I saw her when I got back but she didn't breathe a word to me about you. Are you out of your mind? That woman is crazy."

"But she said she didn't see you."

Kaito and Kamalu sat down and Kamalu revealed quite a bit about Beth; she was a whore, a drug-head and had a multiple personality disorder. Kaito didn't believe Kamalu, but he resolved to take his bag from Beth's place and return to Kamalu's the same day. Kamalu knew it was not going to be easy for Kaito to extricate himself from Beth and he told him so, but Kaito's response was, "Man, I can't wait to settle in with you and begin to make fat American money." It was at that point that Kamalu inquired about the type of visa he had. It was a visitor visa—only for six weeks.

“I don’t believe you could forget yourself this quick and move in with a stranger...for what? Two months? You think this is Nigeria? Now, you’re out of status. You could have at least married her.”

“Married who? That woman is not marriage material. She keeps me up all night.”

“That way she could have been of some use to you.”

“Please leave that witch out of this. Tell me what to do. I’ll do any kind of job. I can start small by washing dishes and cleaning floors at some café or somewhere.”

Kamalu laughed at him and schooled him on the laws of social security numbers, employment and the hounds called immigration officers. Kaito could feel the sudden sweat on his body. He was full of questions. Each response from Kamalu made him confused.

“So what do I do?”

“I don’t know. We could start with Amin. If he agrees to offer you a job and pay you under the table you’ll be lucky.”

Fraught with nervousness, Kaito felt on the verge of a panic attack. Such episodes had occurred frequently in Nigeria. He graduated with a degree in History from the prestigious University of Udi. He could not find employment for six years. When he eventually found a job, it was not based on his credentials as a graduate but on his physical build. He became a security guard at the American Embassy in Nigeria. All his friends envied him. With time, he warmed up to somebody at the Embassy who knew somebody that could talk to somebody about a visitor visa. To increase his chances of receiving the Visa, he lied about a sick sister in Ohio, who could not afford a home nurse and was in dire need of assistance from a family member. His parents sold the remaining piece of family land to buy his ticket. They had sold three other pieces of land to put him through school. The seventy dollars he had was a parting gift from his friends. He winced at the thought of telling his family and friends that he couldn’t make it in America. They would ask him if the other Nigerians who sent cars and built mansions were more intelligent; if they had two heads and he had only one head. There must be another way, he thought. Kamalu must have been too slow not to have made it in America within two years.

When they got to Beth's house the next day to collect Kaito's bag, Beth refused to give it to him. "You have bills to pay, stupid!" she bawled at Kaito.

"Bills?" Kaito stuttered.

"Yes, bills. The bills you accrued from my heat, water, food, and shelter."

Kamalu asked her how much they came to. Kaito's mouth was agape. He could not believe that the nice person he had lived with for weeks could turn into a monster within hours.

"Twelve hundred. He won't be going anywhere until I am paid up."

Kamalu called Kaito aside and advised him to stay with her until they could save up the money. At first, Kaito was disappointed that Kamalu did not own a car. That he could not afford to loan him one thousand two hundred dollars threw him off even further.

"It would take me nearly a year to save \$1,200."

"What! But if I continue staying with this woman, I will die. I am telling you now."

"I've never seen a man who is afraid of sex," Kamalu laughed into Kaito's ear.

"This is not funny, it's a savage attack."

"If you could bear it for six or more weeks, you can manage for as long as it takes."

Kaito's eyes watered. He felt the tears build up. He swallowed hard and stared at the ground. Then he suggested that they should force their way into the apartment, take the bag and run. Kamalu warned him that if she involved the police he would be heading back home in no time.

Beth smiled at them from a distance and called out, "C'mon, it was not so bad Mocha. We could make a good couple, you be the house husband and I the breadwinner."

Kaito glowered at her and grimaced.

It was going to take Kaito more than a year to pay off Beth. Amin could only afford to pay him half of the minimum wage. Kaito moved in with Kamalu and worked all day long, mining the store. During slow hours, he fried chicken and refilled the coffee dispensers. But Beth tried to persuade him to

spend some nights with her. He refused and focused on paying her all he owed her. Kaito worked all day long. He minded the store, and during slow hours he fried and replaced the chicken in the display case of the store. He also made sure he refilled the coffee pots till afternoon. He lost a lot of weight in a year and spoke very little to anybody. Kaito continued working for Amin until the store was robbed .

One hot and humid summer day, a Caucasian young man of about eighteen with freckles on his cheeks entered the store, smiled at Kaito, and walked to the refrigerator that contained six-packs of beers. He snatched a pack of beer and slammed the refrigerator door shut. As he pulled up his sagging pants, he plunked down the pack of beer near the cash register without looking up at Kaito.

“May I see your ID?”

“For what?” he asked and then, pulled the hood of his jacket onto his head, covering his eyes. He held on to his pants with one hand and used the other to pull out his wallet.

As Kaito studied the ID, the man tossed a large piece of foil paper at him and told Kaito to obey every instruction and that he had a gun. “Tie up the camera with this piece of foil. Quick!” He snapped at Kaito.

“I would need a chair to reach it. With my height, I can’t reach it,” he lied.

“You will. Do it!”

Kaito reached up and tied the screen of the camera behind him. When he finished, the young man moved closer to the cashier desk and demanded all the money in the register.

“It’s not much. I have only fifty dollars here.”

“Do you want me to blow out your brains? Get the whole shit together and toss it here!”

Kaito fumbled and the bundle of money fell to the floor. He raised his hands and asked if he could pick it up. The young man grabbed a box of Benson and Hedges cigarettes and flung it at him, then pulled out a gun from his underwear and waved it at Kaito’s face.

“I ain’t playing with you!” he yelled. “Now, with one hand, pick up that bundle of money, and give it to me. Keep your eyes on me, and keep the other hand up. Any games and I will kill you!”

For a split second, Kaito thought about all the security techniques he learned as a guard at the American Embassy in Lagos. As he lowered his hand to pick up the bundle, Kaito bolted. Because the young man didn't know where he had disappeared to, he waited. As soon as he heard the back door of the store --- which was behind where Kaito was standing --- creak open, he fired blind shots. He heard Kaito yell, and then silence. The thief abandoned the money but ran out with the box of beer. A piece of Kaito's right ear was blown off.

Since Amin did not want to risk exposing Kaito to deportation, he did not ask him to give a police report, instead, he fired him. Kamalu nursed him in his room. With money Kaito had saved, Kamalu bought over-the-counter drugs; it was money Kaito had hoped to send to his parents to see if they could begin saving towards buying back a portion of their land.

Kaito stayed indoors most days and worried about money. So, one day, Kamalu suggested that they pay Abuda's ex-wife, April, a visit. Maybe Abuda could help Kaito find another job. Kamalu knew Abuda managed a MacDougal's eatery somewhere in town, but the number he had for him had been disconnected.

To their surprise, when they got to her house, April was pleasant. She did not only give them the numbers of Abuda's friends, she offered them iced tea and some corn bread. Kaito refused to eat, but Kamalu ate his and put the leftovers in his school bag. April did not mention the embarrassing encounter with Kaito, instead she warned him to watch what he ate.

Abuda was a bulky, clean-shaved man in his mid sixties. He invited Kaito and Kamalu to sit down in his small living room. His floor was littered with books. He told them that even though he retired twelve years ago as a senior professor of sociology in Nigeria, he still researched and wrote papers when he was not at MacDougal's. When Kamalu introduced Kaito, Abuda's face lit up.

“I knew your grandfather. He was my grand uncle’s closest friend. They both took me hunting as a teenager. How are you?”

Kaito told him his story; he narrated his more than one-year experience of being in America. And Abuda chided Kamalu for not trying hard enough to locate him; he could have asked Momodu or the other Nigerian people in his school. Abuda revealed that he got rid of the cell phone because April kept leaving threatening messages for him. “Women! You can never predict them and I have not been lucky. Nobody is these days, so don’t feel so bad. Whatever job you can get, take it and live each day one day at a time,” he told Kaito.

He promised to give Kaito some of his hours at the MacDougal’s restaurant he was managing, but cautioned that they keep it a secret. He also advised Kaito to leave town after a year or so to avoid being tracked, especially with Beth in the background. When Kamalu explained that they knew no one in any other part of the country, Abuda assured them that his friends in California could assist Kaito when the time came.

On their way home, Kaito jumped with joy. He decided to send the remaining three hundred dollars he had to his parents, since he knew he could save more from the new job. He would send the money on the day he started work.

Showered and dressed for his first day on his new job, Kaito was eating breakfast when someone began to knock on the door. He answered it, and there was Beth. His heart almost jumped out of his mouth. She was there to let Kaito know that she was pregnant. She needed money for an abortion. Kaito dropped the plate of food he was holding, looked at Kamalu and then at Beth. He rushed to the door, grabbed her by her hair and pulled her into the room. He smacked her across the face and was about to smack her a second time when Kamalu pushed him away from her. Beth let out a screeching yelp. Kamalu ran and closed the door.

“Are you mad!” he yelled at Kaito. “Are you crazy? This is not Nigeria; you will destroy our lives here!”

Beth had scrambled up from the floor crying, and headed for the door. Kamalu blocked her way and begged. Tears trickled down his cheeks. He knelt down and pleaded with Beth. She insisted that she would take the money for the abortion and then file an assault charge against Kaito. When Kaito saw Kamalu’s

tears, the gravity of what he had done dawned on him. He begged Beth too and offered her all the money he had saved. Kamalu offered up money as well to convince her to forgo pressing charges against Kaito. She warned them that she would keep coming back until her medical bills were paid.

A harrowed and weary Kaito arrived at the MacDougal's restaurant that night. He was surprised that MacDougal's had almost the same design and layout as a fast food restaurant in Lagos called Sweet Sensation. The children's sections of the two restaurants were identical. He did not want to tell Abuda about the Beth episode. He made up his mind to keep his problems to himself. Abuda had enough to worry about. Kaito cleaned the grill and tidied up the cooking area as instructed. While Abuda took orders at the drive-through window, he took orders at the front counter.

Four hours into Kaito's shift customer traffic had slowed to a virtual stop. Abuda took a restroom break and Kaito stood at the drive-through window. When a woman walked in and up to the counter, Kaito dashed over to take her order.

"Welcome to MacDougal's, may I help you?"

"No, I want to see your manager now!"

"Are you sure I cannot help you Mam'?"

"Move your ass before I drop you!"

Abuda was already making his way to the counter and heard the exchange.

"Hello ma'am. I am A.B. Martins. Is there a problem here?"

"This spider-infested store has my daughter in the hospital, and she might die!" she bellowed.

"Madam, we don't have any bugs here."

"This was the last place she ate, it was this exact MacDougal's, and doctors found several spider eggs in her mouth and nose," she said crying. "You bastards made my daughter!" she shouted.

"You may have to contact the regional manager," Abuda said.

"No! I need to see the franchise manager!" She shouted and cried uncontrollably

"Ma'am, like I said, we don't have bugs here. If you're up to something, this is not the right place."

Unexpectedly, the woman pulled out a gun from the back pocket of her jeans.

Abuda tried to grab the gun, and they began to struggle. “Call the police!” Abuda hollered at Kaito. Kaito dialed and was about to say “Hello” when he heard a shot. The woman ran out. Abuda held onto his side and moaned. There was already a pool of blood forming around his leg. Then he fell and passed out. Another cook at the end of the grill area screamed behind Kaito and said something about 911. Kaito felt caught in a whirlpool. His head and eyes were spinning out of control. Abuda’s limp body was on his arm. All he could hear and remember were sirens, and Beth, and Amin’s store, and gunfire. He may have to go: home, to jail, to California, to wherever the sirens took him. But he would not let Abuda’s body down onto the cold concrete floor.

**If you enjoyed this sample, continue reading. Buy Now at
<http://www.demarchepublishing.com>**

About the Author

Unoma Azuah is Assistant Professor of English at Lane College in Jackson, Tennessee. *Edible Bones*, her second novel, garnered the 2011 Aidoo-Snyder Book Prize.

Her first book, *Sky High Flames*, won the Urban Spectrum Award and the ANA/Flora Nwapa Award. Azuah is also the author of *The Length of Light*, a short story collection, and *Night Songs*, a poetry collection.