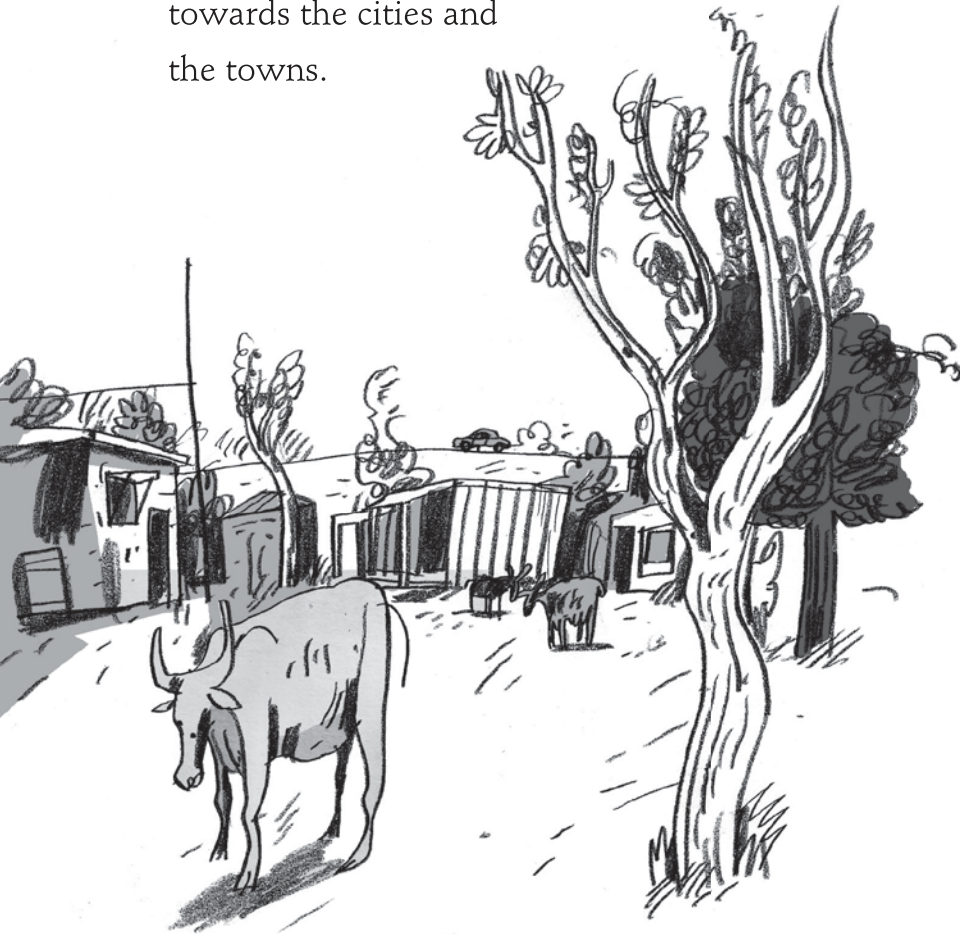




The No.1 Car Spotter

On the continent of Africa, you will find my country. In my country there are many cities, all with skyscrapers, hotels, offices. There are also many smaller towns, all with tap water and electricity and television. Then there is my village, where we only talk about such things.

Our village has a few compounds and many goats and several cows. It is in between the forest and the river and the road. The main road. The road brings cars past our village; many cars speeding towards the cities and the towns.



There are some few people in our village.

My best friend, Coca-Cola, lives in one compound with his old grandmother, his newborn sisters, Sunshine and Smile, and his mother, Mama Coca-Cola.

My sister's best friend, Nike, lives in another compound with her two elder brothers, Emergency and Tuesday, and her father, Uncle Go-Easy.

Beke, Bisi and Bola, the small children, live with their mother, Mama B, and Auntie Fine-Fine.

There are other people, in other compounds, but these are the people who know me well.

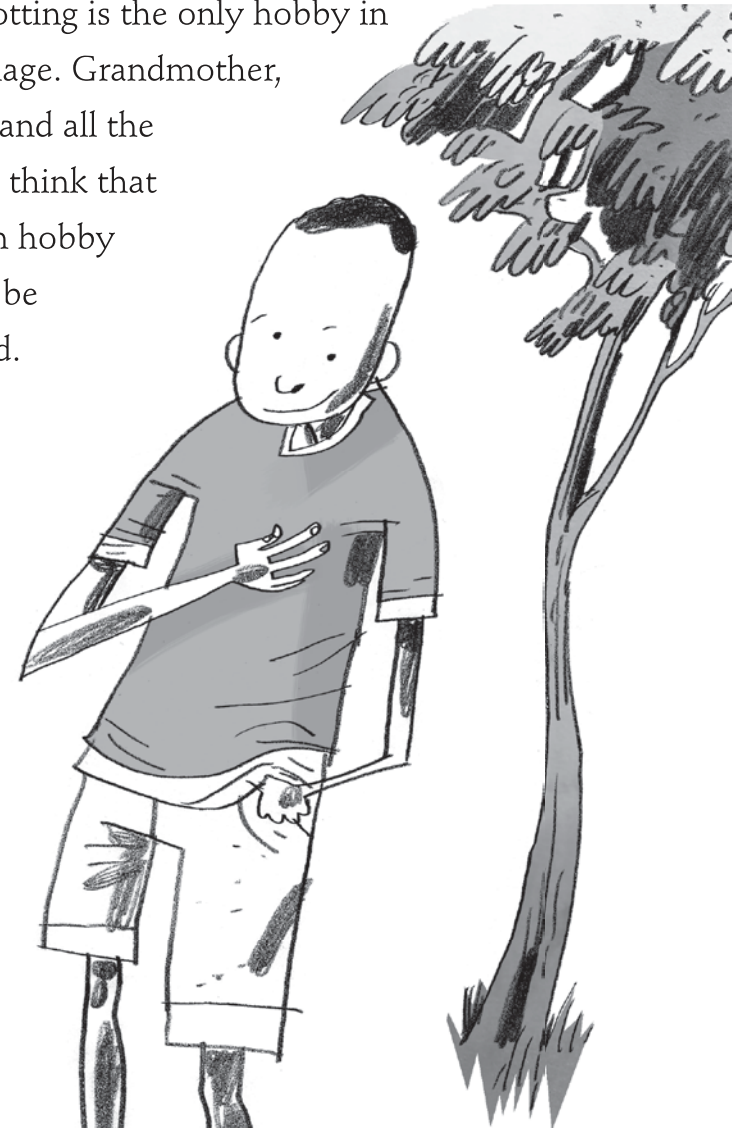


I live in a compound with my grandfather (who taught me everything I know), with my grandmother (who wants me to obey everything *she* knows), with my sister, Sissy, (who thinks I know nothing) and with my mother, who loves and feeds and looks after us all. My father, of course, lives in the city.



Let me introduce myself. My name is Oluwalase Babatunde Benson. But everybody calls me No. 1. The No. 1.

I am the No. 1 car spotter in my village. Car spotting is the only hobby in this village. Grandmother, Mama and all the aunties think that no such hobby should be allowed.



"Spotting cars does not take the goats to grass," Grandmother complains.

"It does not water the cows," Mama insists.

"Cars do not collect firewood," Auntie Fine-Fine confuses.

"Or carry yams from the fields," Mama Coca-Cola agrees.

"Cars won't fill your belly," Sissy joins in.

Sissy thinks spotting cars should be banned by the government. Sissy thinks that because I spot cars I am not doing my share of the work. It is not true. I work hard all day. I do everything Mama and Grandmother and Coca-Cola's mother and my Auntie Fine-Fine and Uncle Go-Easy and everybody else in the village tell me to do. But while I am doing it I spot cars!



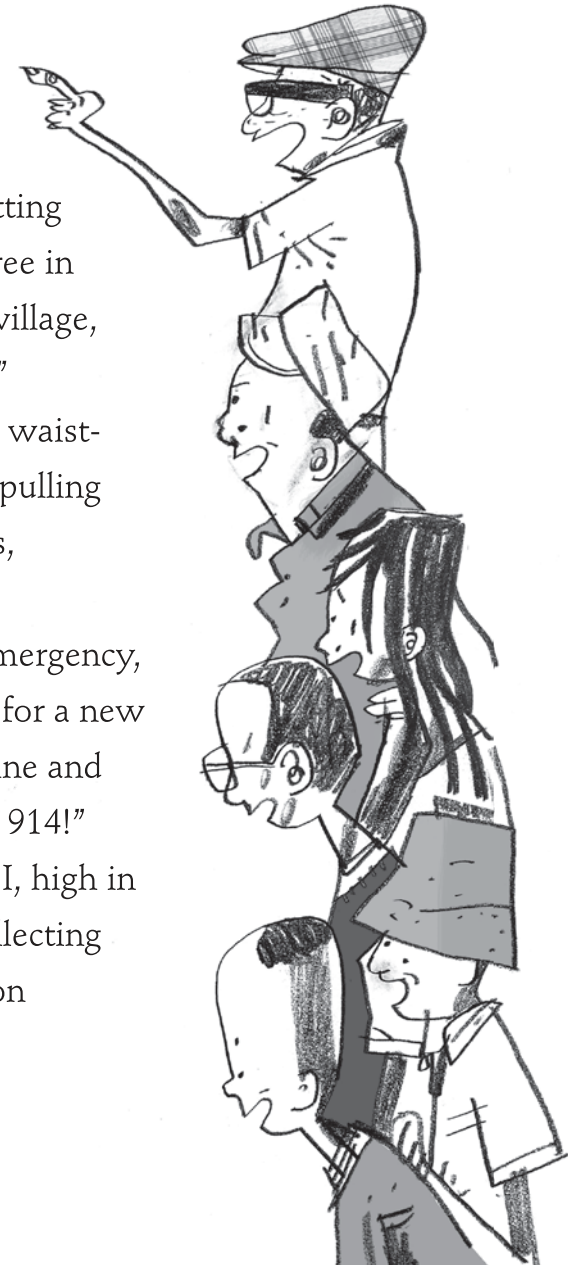
Who can help spotting cars when the road runs directly past the village? It is what we men do.

Grandfather, sitting under the iroko tree in the centre of the village, shouts, "Firebird!"

Uncle Go-Easy, waist-deep in the river, pulling in his nets, shouts, "Peugeot 505!"

Tuesday and Emergency, clearing the bush for a new field, hear an engine and shout, "Mercedes 914!"

Coca-Cola and I, high in the palm trees collecting nuts, shout, "Aston Martin DB5!"





Our village might be a poor village, lost in the bush, but a No. 1 road goes directly past it.

And I am the No. 1 car spotter! I can spot them before I see them. From the sound of their engines, running sweet or backfiring, I know them.

“Daewoo! Suzuki! Land Cruiser!”

It was Grandfather who taught me to be a car spotter. He spends his old age under the iroko tree watching the road. When I was a baby I stayed with him there in the shade of the tree while Mama worked on our farm. Grandfather taught me my ABC. My 123.

“Peugeot, Passat, Porsche...!”

What Grandfather does not know about spotting cars is not to know.

Grandfather and I love all cars. But I love the Corolla the best. It is the No. 1-and-only car of our village!

One time when I was very small I heard its engine from far. Grandfather told me what it was.

“Toyota Corolla,” he said.

He held me up on my small legs to see. I saw dust. I saw smoke. I saw the Toyota Corolla crawl into the village. I saw it cut out right in front of me. I saw the driver call a taxi to return to the city with his head in his hands.

Since then the Corolla has been there in the heart of the village. Every time my cousin Wale the mechanic comes from the town he looks at it and shakes his head. It will not go. It will never carry us around like rich people. But it is still my favourite car. Often I dream I am driving this car along the road, fast!