That could not be true. Everybody, men, women, married and unmarried alike, should be allowed to lock certain things in a secret safe. The question was: should this be one of them?

Poor Noah. Only four years old and already a victim of this ineluctable clash of cultures. But was it really a clash of cultures? And was it really ineluctable? Maybe everything stemmed from her own silliness. Or stubbornness.

Noah. They did not exactly name him thus in common accord. As the train left Dartford station, she recalled how she had pressured Charles into following her wishes.

“You must be joking!” her husband shouted when she told him that should they bear a son, she would like him to have her father’s surname. “How can I give someone else’s surname to *my* son? It is not even your surname, for heaven’s sake! Why do you want us to do that?”

“Because it is the tradition of the Ewondo people!” she shouted back. “-6(o(he)4(te)4(t.a, f)3(o(kee(t)-12(l)-64(n)n)-2(r)3(a).3 Td [(w)-2a)-4(5m16(”)5(kee(t)-12(l)-6)-1(i

"Meba, like my mother. As we both fancy Gloria, she would be Gloria Meba-Powell."

He squatted and placed his hands on her bulky belly. As he began to caress it, he whispered very gently: "We are eagerly awaiting your arrival, Mr Nathan Noah-Powell, or Miss Gloria Meba-Powell."

*** *** ***

Life was not her husband though. She could not manipulate it at will. Her intransigence could well end up destroying her. Or worse still, Noah.

She reminisced about the events of the previous night. Charles was out dining with some American customers. She put Noah to bed at 8 pm as usual. He began to cry, bellowing like a mad bull, about ten minutes later.

She hesitated for a moment, then opted not to go and see her son. She had accompanied him to the toilet, read him a story and kissed him goodnight. So he had no reason to complain.

"No, I will not allow myself to be treated like one of these silly, weak Western parents bullied by their own children," she thought as she turned up the volume of the TV.

An hour later, she rose to go to the lavatory, located on the second floor. As she emptied her bladder, she was, all of a sudden, startled by a series of explosions accompanied by loud crackling noises. After a few seconds, they stopped as abruptly as they had started.

She flushed the toilet and washed her hands. As she dried them, the explosions and crackling noises began again. She suddenly thought about Noah and rushed up to his bedroom, on the third floor.

He had stopped crying, but the little boy was still wide-awake. Curled up under the enormous quilt, he was shaking convulsively. The explosions could be heard much more loudly in his bedroom.

"Mum, I am frightened," he said when his mother entered. "I am so frightened. Please hug me, Mummy."

She broke down as she bent over and picked him up. "I am so sorry, Noah," she whispered as she cradled him, tears streaming down her face. "I am very, very sorry."

The explosions carried on stopping and starting intermittently. She put Noah on her shoulder and half opened the curtains. She then saw multicoloured flashes, and realized that these were fireworks.

She went downstairs, carrying Noah with her. When he fell asleep, she took him to the matrimonial bed for the first time since his second birthday.

*** *** ***

Guy Fawkes Night. What was the point of commemorating something that happened more than four hundred years earlier? Hadn't British Catholics and Protestants made peace with each other yet?

No. That was not the issue. The problem was her reaction, not the celebrations. She had failed to comfort Noah when he needed her most.

The train stopped. She peered out of the window. Barnehurst. Still six stations before Lewisham.

She glanced down at her wristwatch. Twelve noon.

She sighed as she mused. Nothing could guarantee that only Asian Muslims would always be the main victims of the current climate of suspicion and resentment. She remembered hearing or reading that there were young black Caribbean men involved in both the 7/7 attacks and the recent plot to blow up transatlantic aeroplanes. And what about Richard Reid, the British shoe bomber currently serving a life sentence

wo30* [(i)-2n nd r,0(e)4(s)-1(.)]T0/TT1 243TI4(n b h)elim5-ll-4(ll-4w)2(oi)-2l(a:)3(a.-4(b)T4(n hck)

in, or convert to Islam; like the shoe bomber and all the other men of Caribbean descent involved in Islamic attacks and plots. And the possibility of this happening was minimal.

But doubt soon gnawed at her. If it were all about the Islamic religion, how was it that the Muslim parents of the current Islamic radicals lacked their children's abhorrence of the Christian West? They would never have emigrated to Western nations otherwise. Would they?

Perhaps, although these parents did not hate it, they were, like her, constantly positing themselves as outsiders in relation to the West. In so doing, they failed to inculcate in their progeny a sense of belonging to this society. Ultimately, they compelled them to turn to their roots and religion to develop a sense of identity.

As a black African immigrant, she had certainly been confronted with Western racism and rejection on numerous occasions. She remembered how many of her French classmates used to taunt her for her accented French. She also reminisced how, at a supermarket in Gravesend, a blond man had shouted, "F…ing coon!" when she had inadvertently bumped into him. She was sure that had she returned to her native Cameroon, it would not have proved impossible for her to become a French lecturer, as it had proved so far in Britain. But was all this enough to justify her tendency to define herself in opposition to the Western society in which she lived?

"No, I will not allow myself to be treated like one of these silly, weak Western parents bullied by their own children," she kept repeating last night while her terrified son was crying his eyes out. She often claimed that she wanted nothing more than Noah's happiness. Yet, rather than his well-being, her chief preoccupation when she heard him cry was not to behave like an unassertive Western mother.

She now realised that detachment was not the solution. How could she sit on the fence, in perpetual judgement of a society in which she hoped to live happily with her loved ones? All she had offered her son so far was only negativism and social separateness.

This had to stop. She had no intention of transforming Noah into a Western-based island of anti-Western feelings. There were already too many such islands. She did not want him to be part of this murderous archipelago.

*** *** ***

The train halted. She glanced out of the window. Eltham. Still another two stations to go before Lewisham.

She looked up. At that moment, a black woman in her mid-thirties boarded the train. Their eyes met. They both smiled.

"Hi, Melu," she greeted the woman in Ewondo as she came and sat beside her. "What are you doing boarding a train in Eltham?"

Melu struck her hands together, then put the right on her heart. It was a common Ewondo way of expressing disappointment. Shaking her head, she replied: "Ah, Ngali, my sister. What can I tell you about the damn trains of this damn country that you don't already know? The one I took in Gravesend this morning trundled its way to here. Then we were asked to evacuate it. I hoped I would be in Peckham by now."

Ngali could not suppress a smirk. A Cameroonian complaining about the lack of punctuality of British trains? When did she last catch a train in Cameroon?

"Well, Melu," she said. "At least that gave us the opportunity to meet. I am really glad to see you."

"Me too. But tell me, how come you are not tied to your Master's trousers today? Where are you going alone?"

Ngali grimaced. She had only herself to blame. They had met at their GP's surgery three years earlier, and gd

"What have I just told you?" she asked triumphantly. "An immoral society. All these young people can't even give up their seat to that poor elderly man."

Without giving her friend time to reply, Melu stood up, walked towards the old man and, while indicating her empty seat, asked him in English: "Would you like to sit down, Sir?"

"You are most kind, my child," he nodded.

Ngali rose as they approached, and gave up the corner seat to the old man. He thanked her and made himself comfortable. Ngali sat next to him, while Melu stood beside her.

"What a shame!" Melu exclaimed in Ewondo after a moment. "They call themselves civilised, but they can't even let an old man sit down."

"You are right," Ngali agreed.

No sooner had she said this than Ngali felt uneasy. Whatever happened to her recent decision to stop her constant criticism of Westerners?

"Mind you," said Melu. "This old white goat is not blameless either. Why can't the stupid thing stay at home with dignity as befits his age?"

Ngali hesitated. Then she shrugged. What the heck, it was just a harmless chat. "They have no dignity, these people," she declared. "No dignity, old or young."

"None at all!" shouted Melu. "This silly old one here, what must he do now that he couldn't do when he was younger?"

Ngali was about to laugh when, in an accented but otherwise perfect Ewondo, the old man asked: "Why are you badmouthing me, my dear children? What have I done to you?"

Bemused, Ngali and Melu exchanged glances. No words needed. They both knew they had to go to another carriage.

As they walked away, Ngali could not help looking back at the old man. At that moment, he rested his elbow on the window frame. His coat opened up, exposing his neck. Only then did Ngali notice his dog collar.