

They Said...(Third prize, Deddington Festival, 2014)

Kwame walks up the hill, scuffing his feet in the rutted red earth. It's dry now, but when the rains come, this will be a water course, pouring mud and stinking filth into the main street below. He turns through a broken-down gate and walks across the yard. A mangy dog tied with rope to a ring on the fence jumps to its feet and yelps, then sinks back on its haunches and follows his movements with its eyes.

The building was painted white once. Pale flakes cluster around rusty lines where the structure is breaking through the pitted concrete. In the single row of windows running below the flat roof, several panes of glass are missing.

Five women sit in the dirt against the wall, taking advantage of the shade from the over-hanging roof. As Kwame unlocks the shiny new padlock on the door, they rise and slowly follow him into the building. A cloud blocks out the sun and the first raindrops splash into the dust.

The rain hits the corrugated iron roof like stones from an angry crowd. Kwame uses a metal pole to stir the thick, creamy liquid in the cleaned-out oil drum. They'd given him the pole to replace the old wooden stick he'd used before. 'Splinters in the mixture means an extra filtration stage,' they said. 'That would add time and money to the process,' they said. 'We can't afford either,' they said — and neither could he.

The men were coming back today, bringing brightly coloured labels and delivery instructions. They would be cross if the bottles weren't filled ready for labelling and packing. He didn't want them to be cross again.

They'd been cross when he suggested testing the ingredients before making the medicine. They showed him pieces of paper with green stickers and words in another language. They told him to 'just get on with it.' So he did.

When Kwame ran out of the glycerol used to sweeten the cough medicines, they brought him drums in a battered lorry and told him to 'get them unloaded and stored in the lock-up.' The drums were different from the ones he'd had previously. These were red. Last time they were blue. The name was different too, longer. They told him it was just the chemical name for the same material. He pointed to the place where warning symbols and storage conditions were usually printed. The labels had

been scratched and scraped; none of the words was legible. The men laughed at him and told him to 'just get on with it.' So he did.

The men arrive just as the last of the brown bottles is being filled. They'd been pleased with Kwame when he managed to source these from the local glass plant. For eleven months each year, the plant made beer bottles, then the mechanics switched the moulds and they made smaller medicine bottles, a year's supply in just four weeks. There are a lot more beer bottles than medicine bottles needed in Africa.

These bottles are rejects, slightly misshapen, no good for an automated bottling line. But Kwame's filling team holds bottles under a tap, one at a time, operating the pump with a foot-pedal. He was able to negotiate a good price for them — and the bottling plant was able to hide the true reject rate, so everyone gained.

The perfect bottles would be sold to the reputable companies, the subsidiaries of multi-nationals or local companies working under licence to one of the well-known names. Kwame's father's company had been one of those. For more than twenty years, they made cough syrups with someone else's name and logo on them. Once a year, auditors would fly in from London, talk to all the managers and some of the staff, check through a couple of batch documents — and confirm the renewal of their licence.

Then, five years ago, in a meeting far away, a decision was made and a take-over launched; two companies became one and thousands of lives were changed for ever. With a super-sized factory in South Africa supplying the entire region, there was no need for licensees producing their cough syrups. Kwame's father lost the contract and, with it, his factory. Within six months, he was dead and Kwame was head of the family. Two days later, the men came to visit for the first time.

The labels are pink and blue with white writing. The company name — this time an American one with an address in Milwaukee — is printed in small letters at the bottom. The picture of a mother and child look comforting, although Kwame wonders why they always use white people as models.

Just before the men drive away, they hand Kwame an envelope, stuffed with stained and greasy bank-notes. Now he'll be able to pay the filling team. Now he'll

be able to buy supplies on the way home to his family. Now he'll be able to pay for his mother's appointment at the clinic.

The vans drive off into the night, heading for unprotected borders, to meet other vehicles driven by other desperate men trying to earn enough to feed their families. Kwame sits slumped in his office, too tired to move, and tries to still the doubts flying around his head.

The men had told him the American company wouldn't mind. 'They sell medicines all over the world,' they said. 'They won't miss a few sales in Africa,' they said. 'You're helping people get hold of medicines they couldn't normally afford,' they said. 'It's a public service really,' they said.

He glances at the dispatch instructions for the latest batches of cough syrup. There are six names on the list: three government purchase houses; two regional hospitals; and a large distributor. They are spread across Kenya, Uganda and Zambia. He is relieved, as always, to see his own country missing from the list. Not his people, not this time. But, one day, he knows, it will be their turn.