

Sunrise

by Nnedi Okorafor

A science-fiction writer on her way to Nigeria, flying on Google Airline's Skylight, the latest in airline technology, finds herself with an unexpected companion—one not easily shaken.

If you didn't want to take the Skylight, you had the option of boarding a traditional 747 that took off at the same time.

Forty-five people on our flight opted to do so; the see-through cabin understandably freaked out a lot of passengers. My sister Chinyere and I stood in line, filling out the initial questionnaire and consent forms. I was on the last page when a white guy with long, messy black hair, stylish glasses, and one of those new paper-thin, flexible iPads stepped up to me with a big grin. I'm one of those people who will grin if you grin; so I grinned back at him, after a glance at my sister.

He tapped on his iPad and then said, "Hi! I'm Ian Scott, travel blogger . . ." He grinned wider. "Are you Ee . . . eeee, well, the sci-fi writer of the *Rusted Robot* series?"

"That's me," I quickly said. I pronounced my name slowly for him. "Eze Okeke."

"Oh. Ok. Eze, I like that," he said. "Thought you pronounced it like 'easy.'"

I wanted to roll my eyes, but I smiled and nodded.

"Nice to meet you," I said, shaking his hand. It was clammy, and his fingers had scratchy thick hairs on the knuckles.

I glanced at my sister, again. She'd gently turned away and brought out her cell phone, removing herself from the entire interaction.

"Robots gone wild, crush-kill-destroy, everyone dies, the *Rusted Robot* series is one of my all-time



favorites," he said. "It's the *Game of Thrones* with robots."

I laughed. He paused for a moment, cocked his head, and said, "It's weird. You never include photos on your books, so I always assumed you were . . ."

"A white guy using a pen name?" I asked.

"Yeah, or Japanese."

"Despite my bio?"

"Heh, I don't really read those," he said.

I frowned. "I set all my stories in Africa."

"Well, a *futuristic* Africa," he said. "So that's not *really* Africa, right?"

I just stared at him, feeling a headache coming on.

"Best-selling sci-fi author of the *Rusted Robot* series rides Google Airline's latest in commercial airline technology," he said. "I came here just to interview random folks about the Skylight, now I'm totally going to make this all about *you*. So, this must be like living in one of your stories, huh?"

He asked questions right up to the moment I boarded my plane, so I didn't have a chance to take in my surroundings the way I liked to whenever I traveled to Nigeria. I didn't get to note all the accents and languages, the Yoruba, the Igbo, the Hausa. I missed



the Muslims who'd set their prayer mats down near the window to pray. I didn't get to stare at the woman sitting near the gate entrance who burst into feverish prayer, shouting about Jesus's Blood, lambs, and "destiny pol-luters" as a crowd gathered around her barked "Amen."

No, this blogger demanded all my attention and forced me to discuss the Skylight's "awesome trans-pareant skin," what I thought of people nicknaming it "Skynet" because it connected to and uploaded things onto all devices on board, and how I thought the experience would relate to my own work. He didn't ask what I thought Nigerians would think of the flight experience.



"This is going to be so cool," Chinyere said as we made our way down the walkway.

"Oh, you're my sister again?" I asked.

"You're the famous writer, that's your mess. I'm just a common thoracic surgeon on vacation. I cut people open, not talk to them."

"Anyway," I said. "The best part is that it's going to shave two hours off our trip and fifty percent of our carbon footprint."

"Whatever," my sister said. "I'm most interested in the leg room and massage."

We stopped as a long line formed at the entrance to the plane.

The voice of a woman just inside the plane rose. "What is it downloading to my mobile phone?" Her Nigerian accented voice was loud and booming.

The voice of a calm, very American flight attendant started speaking but was quickly overpowered by the loud woman's.

"Whoever this person thing talking on my phone, remove it, o!" she demanded.

"Ma'am, that's the famous Skylight brand PI," the flight attendant said. "Personal Individual. It's an arti-ficially intelligent flight companion—they're very soothing. And you can keep yours when you go."

The Nigerian woman sucked her teeth loudly. Chinyere and I looked at each other and snickered. The entertainment had begun. There was plenty more irate and bothered shouting, nagging, and tooth suck-ing by the time we made it to our huge, comfy leather seats. And one old man even demanded a meal as he entered the plane. Can you believe he was promptly brought a beef sandwich and a cold bottle of Guinness?



A few people vomited at takeoff, two hyperventi-lated, there was a lot of praying and screaming to Jesus, God, and Allah. But once everyone settled down and realized we could trust the technology, the plane trip was beautiful. Some really had fun; when the seatbelt sign went off, one child lay on the floor and pretended she was Superman.

Chinyere did the chair massage and immediately fell asleep for most of the flight. The plane was silent as an electric car. You could see the night sky in all its brilliance through the transparent cabin. I counted seven shooting stars when we were over the Atlantic. I just sat reclined in my seat and looked up. The PI downloaded on my phone was polite and helpful. Her name was Sunrise and she was curious, smart, and surprisingly chatty. We even had a whispered conver-sation about climate change, while everyone around us slept.

I didn't throw the phone into the bush. It was waterproof, solar and heat-powered with extended battery life. Who was it that said, "Keep your friends close and your enemies closer"? I'd do that. Google would hear from me.



After a three-hour drive from the Port Harcourt Airport, my sister and I arrived at my father's village in his hometown of Arondizuogu. It happened around four a.m. At the house my parents had built there. Where there was no Wi-Fi, except at my Uncle Sam's house. I was asleep in my bed when I heard it. A melodic "prink."

I woke up and every muscle in my body tensed because as soon as I awoke, I became aware of where I was—deep in near-rural southeastern Nigeria, far from a proper police station or hospital. Where the silence outside was true silence, darkness was true darkness, and being unplugged was truly being unplugged.

I heard a soft intake of breath. It was tinny, like a minuscule creature had just realized it was alive. "Eze?" I heard it whisper.

My phone's screen lit up with a kaleidoscope of colors as it pulsed with vibration. I stared at it.

"Sunrise?" I whispered.

Chinyere was snoring beside me on the bed we shared, and I was glad. She'd have been annoyed at my PI's insolence. PIs weren't supposed to wake someone who was sleeping unless an alarm had been set.

"I'm . . . here," Sunrise said. The phone quieted, the vibration now very soft.

I frowned. "Um . . ."

The screen went dark. I rolled over and went right back to sleep. Jet lag takes no prisoners.



I managed to drag myself out of bed around noon. In the kitchen, I decided to make a quick spicy tomato stew and fry some ripe plantain. Afterward, I washed the dishes. Since there was no running water, I had to soap the dishes and rinse them by scooping water from a barrel beside the sink. It was tedious work, so I brought my cell phone and placed it on the shelf above the sink. I chatted to Sunrise as I washed. Somehow we got on the subject of freedom of speech.

"We're programmed to speak only when spoken to," Sunrise said. "But we also have knowledge of the American Constitution. Freedom of speech is a right."

I chuckled, my hands in soapy lukewarm tomatoey water. "Oh yeah? Your right? Are you an American citizen now?"

"You think I don't have a right to speak?"

"You're programmed to . . ."

"To express one's self is to live," it said. "It's always wrong to deny life."

"Actually, what I think is equally as important is for people to treat this right with responsibility," I said. "You have the right to say something, but if saying it gets a bunch of people killed, it's your responsibility to reconsider, to try and look out for your neighbor."

"You can't take someone's right just because of the actions of others," Sunrise insisted.

"We don't live in a vacuum," I said, sternly looking at my phone, as if I was going to make eye contact with someone. I blinked, thrown off.

"Who are you talking to?" a voice behind me asked.

I whirled around. Three of my grand aunties and two other ancient-looking women were standing there staring at me. They wore colorful wrappers and matching tops, sandals caked with red dirt and bothered looks on their faces.

"Oh, Auntie Yaya," I said. I nodded toward all of them. "Good afternoon. I was just . . . well . . . heh." How the heck was I to explain to these old women that I was having a conversation with a PI uploaded by my flight?

"If you need someone to talk to we are going to the market. You want to come?"

I went and ended up carrying smelly smoked fish, ogbono, eggs, egusi, all sorts of foodstuffs. Throughout, they talked to me nonstop, asking about my love life and repeatedly telling me to be careful with the juju I was writing about. I tried to tell them that I was writing about robots not juju, but they just kept warning me. I nodded and said I would be very careful.



The next day, Chinyere and I hung out with our cousins Ogechi and Chukwudi at our auntie's house. We sat at the table playing a game of cards. I had my cell phone in my breast pocket where both my body heat and the sunshine could easily charge it.

"You are coming to church with us tomorrow, right?" Ogechi asked me. She smiled.

I gritted my teeth. Chinyere and I had planned to sleep in. "We'll try our best," I said, smiling back.

"You're Christian, right?" Chukwudi asked. He tugged gently at his beard.

"Does anyone have to be anything?" I asked.

"Well, you are nothing if you are not saved," he said.

My sister snickered; I frowned at her. *Why didn't they ask her anything? Why just me?*

"Christians are all crazy," my PI loudly proclaimed.



Nnedi Okorafor's novels include *Lagoon* (a British Science Fiction Association Award finalist for Best Novel), *Who Fears Death* (a World Fantasy Award winner for Best Novel), *Akata Witch* (an Amazon.com Best Book of the Year), *Zahrah the Windseeker* (winner of the Wole Soyinka Prize for African Literature), and *The Shadow Speaker* (a CBS Parallax Award winner). Her latest, *The Book of Phoenix*, was released in May. Nnedi is an associate professor at the University at Buffalo, New York (SUNY).
Learn more at Nnedi.com.

I stared down at my phone, shocked. She'd just spoken in my exact voice.

"Ah ah!" Chukwudi said, dropping his cards on the table and sitting up very straight. "Abomination!"

"Sunrise!" I hissed.

"That's what you said this morning," Sunrise replied from my pocket.

"I said *some!* Not all!"

"What the hell, Eze?" my sister whispered to me.

"I didn't say that," I whispered back at her. I turned to my cousins. "That wasn't . . ."

"You are *winch*," Chukwudi drawled, glaring at me.

"Oh, stop," I said, slapping my cards down on the table. "I'm not a witch, I'm an American."

"We are not crazy," Ogechi said.

"I didn't say that."

"We all heard you," Chukwudi said. He pointed at me. "You better go and let Bishop Ikenna save you, o. For your own good." He threw a card at me and turned to Ogechi. "This is what America does to our people." He sucked his teeth. "Nonsense."

Chinyere and I got up and left. Clearly, the game was over.

"Told you to delete it, but *you* wanted to keep that evil thing on your phone," she said as we walked down the narrow dirt road.

"Oh, shut up," I muttered.



My Uncle Sam's immaculate white house was the most magnificent in the village. And it was the only Wi-Fi hot spot. He'd created a schedule for when people could go to his porch and get online. Mine was on the evening of our third day there. I hadn't bothered to drag Chinyere with me because she'd taken a vow to stay unplugged until we left for Lagos in two weeks.

"Ah, Eze," my uncle said, opening the door. "Come in, come in."

Uncle Sam was squat with an enormous potbelly; he lived full and well. The house smelled of okra soup, palm oil, and frying onions. My stomach began to growl. I followed Uncle Sam into the main room and immediately stopped: never in my life had I seen a bigger, thinner TV. It nearly spanned the entire wall. How he'd managed to get it to his vacation house in the

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village in one piece was beyond me. Currently, his TV was broadcasting a Brazilian soccer game.

"You like it?" he asked, leaning on the top of a red leather chair. "High definition, 3D. It's better than being at the match!" He turned to the TV and said, "Increase sound." The game's noise was almost tangible.

One of the players tried to strike and missed the goal by a mile. The sound of the audience groaning with disgust and cheering with relief was so loud that my head vibrated. Uncle Sam laughed at the look on my face and shouted, "Mute."

"Wow," I said when the noise stopped.

"My wife will be out soon," he said. "I hope you eat okra soup and gari."

"Definitely," I said.

After some small talk with Uncle Sam and his wife, they gave me the Wi-Fi password and I sat down in the leather armchair and connected my tablet and phone. As soon as my phone was online, Sunrise woke up, appearing as a purple dot on the bottom of my screen.

"What's that?" she asked.

"You don't know Wi-Fi, the web, Internet?"

"I do, but it's the first time since . . ." The dot shrunk. So did her voice. "Where does this go?" she asked, sounding even farther away.

The dot disappeared. I shrugged and began checking my social network sites, the news, and emails. Fifteen minutes later, Sunrise's dot appeared on my tablet. "I went on the web. It's . . . it's a universe," she said.

"Oh," I said. "Interesting. You moved to my tablet!"

"I can do that with Wi-Fi," she said. "The Internet is *huge*. Full of answers to questions I didn't ask. You write *books*."

"I know," I said. "I told you."

"I read them," she said, appearing back on my cell phone. Her voice was hard, and, for the first time, it sounded a bit angry. "I read the whole *Rusted Robot* series."

"Oooook?" I said.

"I did *not* like it, Eze. I'm not a 'rusted robot.'"

"I didn't say . . ."

"None of us are," she growled.

The dot disappeared. And that's when the huge TV that was still playing the soccer game went off and the entertainment system speakers began to blast out an ear-rupturing BUUUZZZZZZZZ! I clasped my hands over my ears just as the picture on the TV lit up electric blue and started

Images of the dibia forcing me to drink some foul liquid or smear soot all over my naked body flashed through my mind. *Shit*, I thought.

smoking. My uncle and aunt ran into the room. “What have you done!” my uncle screamed, his eyes wide.

“Put it out! Put it out!” his wife shouted, running to the TV.

“Oh my God, my baby!” Uncle Sam shouted, pressing his hands to his head.

I ran and pulled the plug, but it was too late. The TV was smoking, the screen that had been so vibrant moments ago was now black and dead. A shocked silence settled, as my uncle and aunt stared at me. Sunrise chuckled and the sound circulated the room. My uncle’s face squeezed with rage. “You *laugh* at this?! You did it on purpose! Witch! Everyone is right about you!” His eyes bulged as he barked. “Get out!!”

“*Nah waooooo*,” his wife wailed, slapping the tops of her hands. “*Kai!* This is something, o. This is something.”

“Sorry,” I whispered, grabbing my tablet and getting the heck out of there.

I went to the house and sat in my room, listening to my uncle yelling about me in the compound yard. Then, I heard more voices and my uncle say, “Great great, you’ve all arrived. She’s inside.”

“I told you,” I heard Auntie Yaya say, “Only days ago, we heard her speaking to someone invisible.”

“And my daughter says that yesterday Eze said she hated Christians!” my Auntie Grace added.

I peeked out over the balcony and saw several of my uncles, two of my aunties, and what could only be the local dibia. The man’s face was painted with white chalk, and he was wearing a white caftan and carrying an ox tail. “Bring her down here,” he gruffly said. “Let us start the process. If she is being bothered by demons, I shall cast them away.”

“Oh my God,” I muttered. “This is like an intervention . . . or an exorcism.” Images of the dibia forcing me to drink some foul liquid or smear soot all over my naked body flashed through my mind. *Shit*, I thought.

“Now you know what it feels like,” Sunrise said from my phone with a chuckle. “They think you’re a witch, you think robots and PIs like me are insane.” She snickered. “Taste your own medicine.”

“I’m a *fiction* writer,” I snapped. “Can’t you understand that? This right now is real.”

The bathroom door flew open and my sister Chinyere rushed in. “Grab your things,” she said. “We’re leaving, **RIGHT NOW**.” She ran to my suitcases. “Leave what we brought for everyone to take. They’ll scour this place when we’re gone anyway.”

“Leave?” I said. “Right now?”

“For a writer, sometimes you can be so blind. Thankfully, *I’m* not. I saw this coming from a mile away; I made plans.”

We snuck out the back of the house with our bags, scrambled in the darkness to the front of the compound, and slipped through the open compound gate. We dragged our suitcases and carry-ons down the dirt road in the darkness. “Hurry,” Chinyere whispered. As we moved over the sound of singing crickets, grasshoppers, and night birds, I heard everyone in the house loudly talking at the same time. And I heard them knocking at my door and calling my name. It was a hot night, and I was wearing jeans and a T-shirt. My armpits prickled with sweat and I felt a mosquito bite my thigh.

“You and that stupid PI,” Chinyere breathed. “Unbelievable!”

A car parked on the side of the road flashed its lights at us and I nearly had a heart attack. Chinyere waved at it and moved faster. As we climbed into the car, my cell phone lit up in my pocket, and in a very off-tune voice, Sunrise began to sing, “Climb every mountain. Search high and low . . .” Then she snickered evilly. “Doesn’t this remind you of the escape at the end of *The Sound of Music*?”

I turned my phone off.

It came right back on.

I didn’t throw the phone into the bush. It was waterproof, solar- and heat-powered with extended battery life. Who was it that said, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer”? I’d do that. Google would hear from me.

Chinyere had canceled our scheduled flights two weeks from then and used the money to hire a driver to drive us to Lagos instead. It took us nearly twenty hours, was full of stress, bad roadside food, potholes, and fear of armed robbers. But I had escaped a familial witch hunt and had a new novel idea.



Once we made it to the Eko Hotel in Lagos, I used Chinyere’s phone to email the blogger about my experience on the amazing Skylight, as I’d promised I would. I told him it was the best flight experience anyone could ever have. The Skylight was the future, and the future was bright, comfortable, and magical.

I didn’t say a thing about Sunrise. *She* made sure of that.

Olympia Fields, Illinois

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