

K I S A S E R I E S

**OF
DEADBEATS,
BASTARD
CHILDREN
& PAGAN
WIVES**

Stories

Title: Of Deadbeats, Bastard Children and Pagan Wives: Stories

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To lovers of gossip, chaos, and great storytelling



Of Deadbeats, Bastard Children and Pagan Wives

Moses 'Tezzar' Atese

They say behind every successful man is a woman. With my parents, though, it was quite the opposite. Mother was the successful one. Dada was content being the parent who stood behind, supporting—only in this case, he did not support at all.

At 11 a.m. on a Monday, he would sit beneath the almond tree that stood outside the large compound and take large gulps at his Heineken bottles while Mama went about her business, shuttling between her cocoa farm and her Adirè shop. Dada would line drinks in crates, rushing at them like he was in a competition, often knocking himself out in the process. He would stay drooling on the ground until the other woman's children would carry him inside. Of course, it had to be her children who did that work. After all, he didn't pay heed to any of us—not that we cared, not really—but to them.

Growing up, we all despised *Dada* so much that Kehinde used to say she would kill herself if she grew up to take his 5'4" height or his oval face. As we grew older, distant relatives and old friends would exclaim in wonder upon seeing Kehinde, saying she was the spitting image of *Dada*. I would tease her, saying she jinxed it with her constant prayers, such that God gave her the exact thing she hoped against.

My parents always had fights, ranging from small to huge issues. On the occasion of *Dada* taking a second wife, they raised their voices so loud one night that we couldn't sleep. I felt real anger for the first time when I saw my *Iya's* bruised face in the morning. I demanded that she leave *Dada's* house and take us with her to Ijebu-Ode. She sharply clasped her hands to my mouth and cautioned me not to speak of such again. When I brought it up again because of my father's negligence towards us and his contrasting devotion to the other woman and her sons, she turned to me painfully, "*Kí nì mo lè se? Ehn, Taiwo?*"

I didn't have an answer, so I watched as she continued ranting, more tears streaming down her face. "*Mò daju pé o jẹ fún àwọn ipinnu amojuto àti iyara tí mò se nígbà ewe, tí Orunmìlá se n jẹ èmí l'esan.*"

She believed the gods were angry at her for dishonouring her family by getting pregnant out of wedlock and so punished her by making the subsequent marriage a bed of thorns, which bruised her without ceasing. *Dada* had said during one of the loud quarrels when he was to marry a second wife that he didn't marry her because of love. He said it was because she got pregnant and that it was to save Mother's face from shame that he married her. Mother insisted she was going to stay because she wouldn't leave us in this hellhole with *Dada*. She also couldn't take us because we would grow up without a family name. I didn't care if I never answered *Alabi* as a surname, and Kehinde already loathed the name as things stood. We didn't tell our mother to leave again. Even though we knew she was fed up with *Dada's* shenanigans, a part of us understood her reasons for hanging on.

With resignation in her heart, my *Iya* stopped crying. She couldn't care less when *Dada* moved to the other edge of the compound with the other woman.

The fights dwindled to an abrupt stop. To Mother, it was as though *Dada* no longer existed. I watched with admiration as she poured all her focus into the farm and the *Adirè* shop.

Dada lost his handyman job at the government construction company and quickly made bed with his newfound friend—alcohol. We all watched as he slipped further and further into the abyss. The fights resumed, but this time, not with us. Funmi, *Dada's* second wife, would hold him by his trousers, with her wrapper tied firmly to her chest, and yell into his ears when he wouldn't give her money to get foodstuff, which was always—the man only had money for drinks, you see. The quarrels developed into full-time battles, with Funmi hurling stones at him as curses rolled freely off the tip of her tongue.

The street people usually gathered on such days, either playing spectators or peacemakers between them. And while I always buried my head in shame, asking God why he let me be born to such a man, I always took solace in the knowledge that Mother was far from any drama. She was thriving, and her *Adirè* business had somehow overtaken the cocoa farm by raking in profits. Tales of her expertise spread far and wide, such that wives of colonial administrators and academics in faraway Ibadan came to patronise her. With time, my *Iya* replaced the thatched roof with corrugated iron sheets. We were among the first houses in Mowe to do that, aside from the Catholic Church and some houses belonging to influential people in the colonial government.

On the day the iron roof was installed, *Dada* walked into the compound in his now routine drunken style. He didn't go in his usual manner to the house he shared with Funmi but stared at the roof in wonder. He swayed and set his arms apart in an attempt to maintain balance as he flashed his eyes around to be sure he was in the right compound. When his darting eyes landed on us: Kehinde, Mother and I seated in front of the house, he smiled, showing missing teeth that must have been lost in brawls at the local bar.

"*Iyawo mi!*" he hailed, stumbling as he came closer. Mother didn't answer but continued at the tray of beans she and Kehinde were picking.

"Does my wife not hear that her husband calls her?" he thundered, making me look up from the book I was reading. I observed him carefully as he staggered across the short distance to where we sat. Kehinde looked at me, then at *Dada*, and returned to her picking. She loathed the very idea of him and never hesitated to show it. *Dada* swayed before us, heaving deeply. His breath smelled like a mix of local gin and beer. His—formerly—white *agbada* was steeped in mud, most likely from the many falls he must have had on his return.

"I am the head of this family. I'm the head! You hear me?" *Dada* said, the words coming out as drawls rather than as the shouts he intended. Mama looked up but immediately returned her gaze to the beans spread across the tray.

"Nonsense!" *Dada* shouted and kicked the tray off the bench. Brown beans splattered all around the black earth. Kehinde stood up abruptly, her eyes red with fury. *Dada* put his right leg behind him to steady himself and sneered at her.

"Who are you staring at in that manner? Of course, you would disrespect your father, wouldn't you?"

"I don't have a father!" Kehinde spat.

Dada threw back his head in an attempt to laugh but was instead engulfed in a coughing fit. He recovered soon after and looked at Mother. "You see what happens when you don't listen? *Motun*, do you see? But of course, you never listen, so instead of advising Kehinde to marry, you egg her on at school. Can't you see how much of a witch they're teaching her to be in that school?"

Kehinde opened her mouth to respond, but Mother held her firmly. "Go inside, Kehinde. Go get the remaining beans from that sack and sort them."

Kehinde stared hard at *Dada*, but then she picked the tray from the floor and went into the kitchen area. *Dada* scoffed. "You're the one who encourages her to be insolent, but am I surprised? No! The apple never falls far from the tree."

Mother didn't respond. She beckoned on me to shift the bench the other way, and then she began sweeping the beans *Dada* had split to the floor. He continued raging. "Insolent mother, insolent daughter. Why am I surprised? Are you not the one who is bent on showing the whole community that you're successful and that your husband is a failure?"

Dada growled. Mother's refusal to answer his taunts angered him greatly, and it was written all over his face. I sat still. Funmi's children must have heard *Dada's* yells because as soon as they ran into the house, Funmi came out, her wrapper tied to her chest. She had this faint smile plastered on her face, pleased that *Dada* was fighting with someone else today for a change. *Dada* continued in his gin-induced rants.

"You can imagine my shock when I was told at the bar that carpenters were working on my house. My house! They were installing the iron sheets, and you didn't think to inform me, the head of the house, about it?" He blocked her path.

"*Dada*," mother sighed. "Please leave my path. Allow me to finish sweeping in peace."

"Why did you not inform me? Ehn?" *Dada* dragged the broom from her hands and threw it to a far end. Mama looked at him with anger in her eyes. She shook her head and made to go pick the broom.

"If you move an inch, woman, if you move an inch!" *Dada* glowered, half staggering. Mother turned regardless to go collect the broom. He caught her hand, drawing her back. At that moment, I didn't know if it was the fear in my mother's eyes or if it was simply the need to stand up to *Dada* for once, but I sprang

to my feet just in time to stop his raised right hand from hitting her. With my chest heaving with anger, I pushed *Dada* back. Whether it was a surprise or the alcohol, I'd never know, but he stumbled and fell to the ground. I put my mother behind me as he got up, with a disbelieving look plastered on his face. He looked at the floor from which he had just fallen, at me, then at Mother. I stared him down. I didn't care what he would say or do, but I swore his hand would never touch Mother again. Out of the corner of my left eye, I saw that a small crowd had gathered at the entrance of the compound. The spectators and pacifists had shown up. I didn't care.

"Hei!" *Dada* shouted. "*E wá wo o!*" He waved his hands at the people standing, beckoning them to come to see what he just witnessed. He gestured to me and began speaking rapidly. "Can you people believe this? That this boy who passed through my own bowels pushed me, his father, to the ground?"

Shouts of "Abomination!" filled the air as the onlookers took turns wagging their fingers and telling me off for bad behaviour. I wanted to reply to all of them and ask them if, secretly, they didn't give thanks to God that *Dada* was not their father. I wanted them to deny that they, although strangers, didn't despise *Dada* in their hearts. But my *Iya* held me back from making any comments. She sighed as she picked up her broom and continued sweeping the mess *Dada* had made.

"I thank the heavens that they gave me a sign to take another wife who bore me virtuous children, not the *Awon omo* àlè that *Motun* gave to me!"

Some of the onlookers began cautioning him then, imploring him not to speak of his children as bastards. Funmi decided she had seen and heard enough then because she gathered her sons inside.

"Yes, take my sons inside," *Dada* called after her as she departed. "Let them not see the foolishness of this one and think of it in the future."

Mother had finished the sweeping and sat on the bench. I went to join her. The sky glowed a faint red, and the sun was leaving. The onlookers began to disperse, and after a series of charades, *Dada* continued with his half-walk and half-stagger to his room. Mother then began to cry, asking the gods again what she did and if they weren't tired of seeing her tears. Kehinde came and joined us on the bench. We held our mother and sat there till the moon shone.

A family meeting was called the following day, and the elders made us give *Dada* a goat and a well-prepared *efo riro* as atonement for dishonouring him.

As the years passed, Mother's business grew even more successful, and she began exporting the harvest from her cocoa farm abroad. *Dada* didn't bother us again. Her *Adire* business was booming more and more, and Christian missionaries who sought to connect with the locals often came to buy her famed designs. Seeing her wealth, many of them preached Christ to her. She never converted.

On the occasion of my baptism, she smiled and told me I looked immaculate in the white clothes. When I asked why she wouldn't convert, she laughed and said she would never understand the concept of a god who didn't have a wife but had a son. She said the concept of that son also being a joint god with his father and another spirit was too heavy for her mind, and she preferred the much more familiar *Orunmila* and her *Ifa* worship. I laughed then, knowing I could never convince her. I didn't really want to, either.

Kehinde left home before me to enrol at the teacher's training college in Calabar. I enrolled in the army two years later, in 1964, as an officer and made my way to the Nigerian Military School in Zaria.

On the day of my departure, my mother woke me early and said her prayers to the gods for their protection before leaving for the market that morning. I left the compound dressed in smart khaki pants and my polished boots, drawing stares of admiration as I walked to the main road. As I stood waiting for the lorry that would take me to the train station, Bankole, Funmi's younger son, ran up to me. He was breathing heavily.

"What is the matter, Bankole? Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes, everything is okay," he assured me, still trying to catch his breath. "Father sent me to you. He said he didn't know you would leave so early, so he sent me."

The word *father* seemed very unfamiliar, but I didn't say anything. Instead, I threw a questioning glance at him. I could hear the lorry's throttle, and I'd have to jump in very soon.

"He says he sends his regards and that you should go well," Bankole said. I nodded at Bankole and gave him a five-kobo coin. He jumped in excitement as I boarded the lorry.

"Brother!" Bankole called as the lorry began to move. I stuck my head outside at him.

"Can I keep your bicycle?"

“Yes, you can, if you can ride it!” I yelled back at him. He leapt for joy and turned, running down the path home. I smiled and watched him get smaller as the lorry sped away from him and onto the dusty road leading to the Ibadan train station.



Bobina

Stephen Adinoyi

Bobi ... Bobi...

Na ... Na ...

Bobi ... Bobi ...

Na ... Na ...

She would dance to the rhythm of whatever tune or beat constructed by the mouths of her peers. Her typical dancing style hardly required her to move an inch from the place she stood. At the chant of “Bobi Bobi,” she would shake her body clumsily upward as if wanting to increase her height, then dance downward upon hearing “Na Na.” The up-and-down dance could go on for thirty minutes or until playmates stopped (she was rarely the first to stop).

Bobina was her name. Some called her premature; to some, she was an imbecile; and to others, abnormal. Even her father, Oche, called her ‘this thing.’

Onyilo could not produce a child for her husband for years until Bobina became a prayer answered. The Joy of Oche seeing his wife, Onyilo, pregnant was enough for him to invite friends to his house to merry with beers and peppered fried beef. The biting gossip in the neighbourhood, especially from enemies whispered into his ear by friends, was about to stop: Some said he was sterile,

and to some, his manhood was dead to an erection. Others threw the blame on his wife for having a Sahara Desert womb.

Now that he was on his way to recover his lost pride for impregnating his wife, he must start the celebration before the main celebration, and he did celebrate his wife's six-month pregnancy. Oche would have done that earlier, but he patiently waited for his wife's belly to shoot out very well for enemies and pretending friends to see. Being a tailor, he had sewn six baby wears for the coming baby.

Oche had already chosen a name for the emerging child: Bobby, or Bobina if the child came out as a female. Way back in his secondary school life, Bobby Brown was Oche's favourite musician. In those days, he was called 'Black Bobby' because of his deeply dark complexion and knack for dancing the Bobby Brown's dance and singing Bobby Brown's *Don't Be Cruel*, and *Every Little Step I Take*. On his head, he had a Bobby Brown's hairstyle. He knew every market selling fairly used clothes imported from America. He always struggled to look for money to buy and wear clothes similar to Bobby Brown's. He was Bobby and Bobby all the way.

It was no wonder that he announced to his tipsy friends, who had come to merry in celebration of his pregnant wife, that the coming baby must be called Bobby or Bobina.

Three months later, the child arrived as a female. Seven days later, a naming ceremony was organised. Father and mother were at the peak of something beyond joy, something they could not express other than laugh and laugh and laugh. Oche felt his own heaven during the ceremony and drank himself into a stupor. In his stupor, he became torpor and a clown tickling many stomachs to laughter. He was carried into his house in deep slumber by friends at the end of the occasion.

It took the parents almost three months to notice that something wasn't right with their daughter. They complained to their doctor, who was already in the know a few hours after the child's birth but kept it in secrecy in order not to puncture the joyous state of the couple.

Reality set in as the baby grew up clumsily. The sputum coming out from her mouth was uncontrollable. Her face twitched as if she was in pain or gravely

frowning at something. As she came nearer to one year of her existence on earth, Onyilo asked her husband about his plans for their daughter's birthday.

Oche, who had become almost depressed over his daughter's outlook, scoffed with suppressed anger in response to his wife. "Birthday? For this thing?"

"My baby is not 'this thing!'" Onyilo bawled with blazing eyes.

Oche released some of his bottled anger. "Look at all the years I have waited. This is what you can give, and you are bold enough to even request a birthday for it!"

"It's what you gave me I brought out, you madman!"

Oche sprang up furiously, breathing heavily and poised to pummel. "Call me a madman again and I will manifest the madness now ...!"

"And what's going on inside that room?" It was Onyilo's mother. She had been with her daughter since the birth of her granddaughter, tending to the infant. The ageing woman, a sufferer of rheumatism, hobbled out of her room, heading to the room of the couple. "What's the problem, my children?" she said as she pushed aside the blue curtain of the door.

"Nothing, Mama," Oche replied with a forced smile that completely covered his cold countenance and went out.

Later that night in the bed, when his anger had been subdued and his bitterness had lessened, Oche issued an apology to his wife and explained, "Every father desires a birthday celebration for his child. But in this case, how could I? Some people are laughing at us secretly because of Bobina. How can we now increase their laughter with a birthday for Bobina?"

Onyilo replied, "Every child deserves love and a birthday. I feel pain to have this kind of child, but she's mine. This is God's gift to me, and I will live with it."



Bobina's birthday was special. The crowd of children was unusually large. Most neighbours and friends actually brought their children as an opportunity to see the celebrant who had been tactically shielded from the public and to

confirm, with their *naked eyes*, the rumour about the baby.

The first five years of Bobina's life were unpalatable to her parents. It was a cold war intensified by Onyilo's inability to have another child. Though Oche never again allowed their quarrels to degenerate to the point of threatening to assault his wife, he wielded his tongue like a weapon, lashing out at his wife and punishing Bobina for imagined offenses. The only reason the man didn't disown the baby and accuse his wife of infidelity was squarely because the child's facial resemblance to him was unquestionable.

By the time Bobina turned seven, Oche had learned to accept his reality and live with his wife cordially. Though, his contempt for his daughter remained but veiled. Bobina's uncontrollable spittle became controllable on its own. It could not be attributed to a medical remedy. Her parents had spent a fortune on different medications until they got tired and backed off. The burden of the mother to constantly wipe saliva dripping from her mouth to the jaw and then splashing to the chest suddenly became banished. Though still secreting a large volume of saliva, she was capable of holding it, and the double joy was that she could now walk. She would walk to a place to spit it out. Bobina was almost six when she began to gait like a one-year-old baby and babble. A year later, her gait transformed into a penguin-like gait.

It was Onyilo's tact that persuaded her reluctant husband to enrol Bobina into the community primary school in one of the suburbs of Otukpo, close to their residence. As an eight-year-old, she had far outclassed nursery schooling. Her teacher, understanding her peculiarity, gave her more attention and care, but not so with her peers in school. They knew she was different, a difference that became more obvious in their primary three and four. Many children, taking her to be an *ojuju calabar*, fearfully avoided her because she kept twitching or twisting her face.

But Bobina was somewhat brilliant, at least to the assessment of teachers who had taught her, who, considering her abnormal nature, wowed at her ability to go, on some occasions, shoulder to shoulder with some of the brightest pupils in the class. In her drawling, dully voice, which teachers had become acquainted with, correct answers to questions were given.

She had a handwriting laced with clarity and beauty, unequalled among her classmates. The beautiful handwriting came from a hand whose palm looked swollen and had unusually short fingers and a thumb unusually longer than the fingers. Her father, during one of his past barbs on his wife, which he often transferred to his daughter, said that Bobina's hands looked like a gorilla's.

By the time Bobina reached Class Six, most of her classmates and students from other classes had got accustomed to her. It was around this time that a song about her was created—either for entertainment or perhaps for mockery:

Bobo ... Bobo ...

Na ... Na ...

Bobo ... Bobo

Na ... Na ...

Ojuju Bobo ...

Na ... Na ...

And she would clumsily dance and dance and dance, sweating profusely at the playground, never stopping until her classmates stopped. There was a day she got so tired, but her mischievous mates continued singing. Two pupils knocked her on the head and bolted—but she danced on in pain until a teacher, who had noticed she was actually being taunted, rebuked and drove them away; she had the two pupils that struck her punished. Some pupils sang on secretly. During break hours, they would lure Bobina to a secluded place.

The *Bobo Bobo* song even made its way to Bobina's home, carried by neighbours who attended the same school. But the day Onyilo found out, she stomped from her compound and tagged her dancing daughter away. She warned with all threats to bash anyone that sang the song within her hearing again, notifying parents to caution their kids. She also went to Bobina's school and complained bitterly.

Bobina's only friend was Ada, who lived with her parents in the immediate next building. Onyilo had allowed the friendship because Ada was naturally nice to Bobina; perhaps it was because she shared Bobina's reality in some ways.

She protected her whenever she could. She was the one who apprised Onyilo that the neighbourhood children had a song for Bobina, which in turn made Onyilo alert until the day she found out.

Ada was a one-armed girl, six years older than Bobina. She became one-armed from an accident she suffered when she was a preteen. It was a car accident that saw her left arm suffering a broken bone. It would have been mended easily, but the menace of quackery caught up with her. Her parents hired the service of a local bone mender living in the next community after theirs. By the time the unfortunate parents realised that the man mending the arm of their daughter was a quack, the arm had begun to rot, leaving amputation as the only option.

Ada, like her friend, had been taunted and even bullied in school because of her disability. But unlike Bobina, her brain was sound enough to understand that she was being taken advantage of, and she would defend herself whenever she could.

When she was newly admitted into a private secondary school, a particular boy in her class was a pest to her. Onu would, at any opportunity, want to make Ada feel miserable, always confronting her with a recurring taunt: "Adasco, go and bring your left hand from where you kept it. Please do that for me, please!"

Several warnings from Ada to Onu to desist were ignored. Ada refused to report him to any teacher; she planned her own way of sorting out the nuisance. On a certain day at the playground, the scoffer gaited with mockery mien to his victim. He was midway into his jeer when Ada grabbed his neck. Onu was skinny built, making it easier for Ada's relatively large right hand to almost surround her mocker's neck.

She tightened her grip while Onu struggled for air. Classmates ran closer, begging her to release Onu. One boy tried unsuccessfully to remove her hand from Onu's neck. She was unperturbed as she focused with a blazing countenance on her foe, shouting, "I told you! I told you ...!"

It was the passing by school cleaner, drawn by the gathering crowd of students, who dashed to the spot and shouted at the girl to release the boy and forcibly removed Ada's grip on Onu's neck. Onu fell, panting weakly on the ground.

"Are you a killer?" asked the horrified cleaner.

Ada stood boldly, glaring at the dishevelled Onu, breathing deeply with no response and remorse. She was just sixteen at that time. Soon, a teacher scooted to the spot.

When findings were later made on the matter, Ada was given a one-week suspension, while Onu was given one month. Students were strongly warned by the principal at the assembly ground never to ridicule Ada or anyone else. No one dared her anymore. Not for the fear of being punished by the principal, but the fear of being killed by Ada.



Bobina seemed to be the only child Oche and Onyilo would ever have. Seventeen years had passed since the birth of their daughter without the birth of another.

Oche was more worried. The house he lived in was inherited from his dead parents. *Who will continue with the inheritance?* Was a recurring question begging for an answer in his mind. He was an only child whose dream was to make up for his parents' inability to birth many children by flooding himself with as many children as his manhood could produce. And now his own dream had unexplainably mocked him by giving him a Bobina and kept mocking him by refusing to give him a worthy child. He brooded.

Oche, being a Christian, understood he could not have another wife when the wife at home was still alive. He scouted for an alternative, or more correctly, a solution. His solution was to secretly sleep with mistresses in hopes of achieving the prize longed for. Yet, none resulted in pregnancy. He began to question the fertility status of his manhood, secretly seeking medical and herbal remedies without the knowledge of his wife. But none of the remedies worked.

He often shuddered whenever he thought of Bobina being his only child.

Bobina's abnormal mould didn't affect her growth; she grew normally according to her age or age group. At seventeen, she had visibly shot out ripe breasts, and potential big buttocks were emerging. The twitching on her face had lessened, and also the secretion of her salivary gland. She now walked faster,

but still maintained her penguin-like gait. Only her slow, not-too-clear speech remained unchanged.

Perhaps it was these bodily changes that attracted her to a tenant and she got pregnant when she was midway through her secondary schooling.

Adebisi was Oche's only tenant in his building. He lived in one of the five rooms inside the compound: Two of the rooms served as the bedroom and parlour; a room was assigned for visiting relatives; the last room was used as an extra storehouse from the main store close to the kitchen.

Not too long ago, Oche got a boom in his tailoring business and renovated the building. He cleared the extra storehouse for his emerging adult daughter to occupy.

Adebisi, a university graduate in his early thirties, was the very quiet type. He worked in a factory in Otukpo town as a clerk and was known in the community as 'the suit man.' He wore a suit every working day, except some occasional Fridays when one would see him on something that wasn't *suity*.

Not a soul knew he was ogling at Bobina; not even Onyilo's very protective eyes on her vulnerability-prone daughter saw that Adebisi was *remoting* Bobina to his room for copulation and even daring to do it sometimes when Onyilo was having a nap, and Oche, watching the telly in the sitting room. Bobina, now having a personal room, made it easier for the youth to have access to her.

The day he removed her virginity, he nursed her like a passionate nurse, fully alive to his duty, ensuring every stain of blood was wiped out, and he washed her private part well before she stepped out of his room. To further cover his track, he gave her a speedy, pain-relieving drug.

At times, he sneaked into Bobina's room at night to have it there. He never gave her any gifts, afraid they might become evidence and expose his secret. Bobina, on the other hand, never thought about receiving gifts, nor did she care about it.

The thing Adebisi usually gave her after sleeping with her was tickling her stomach until she burst out laughing. Anytime Adebisi forgot to do so, she reminded him.

Adebisi always used a condom, but the one time he didn't, it resulted in a pregnancy.

Bobina was nearly five months pregnant, with the growing foetuses in her belly, when her mother became suspicious.

It was a Saturday morning. Onyilo stood face to face with her daughter at the doorstep. At seventeen, Bobina was almost the height of her tall mother.

She scanned her daughter all over, flinching with uneasiness at changes in her frame. Things would have been clearer if it were another girl. The constant spitting of saliva could have been a clue for most pregnant girls, but not for Bobina, a natural constant spitter.

"What happened to you, Bobi?"

Bobina naturally preferred gesturing to speaking. She shook her head.

Onyilo examined again, gathering more convincing evidence. She asked gruffly, "Who touched you?"

She shook her head again, wondering what was alarming her mother.

"Speak!"

She gawped at her mother.

"I said, speak!" Onyilo repeated, breathing heavily.

"Speak!"

"Maaaaaaaa," she said, staring confusingly at her mum. Onyilo remembered she wasn't talking to any other girl but her daughter. She stepped down to a communication she understood easily.

"Bobi, did any man touch you here ...?" she asked calmly while touching the teenager's breast and pointing down at her private part.

"Yees."

"Who?" Onyilo's heart cut.

Bobina's head turned ponderously towards Adebisi's room. The index finger of her right hand pointing at the room.

Onyilo needed no further revelation; she strode to Adebisi's doorstep, banging on the door with all the strength she could muster.

The slumbering youth barked at the nuisance that had rudely awakened him. "Who is that?! Aha!!"

"It's Mama Bobina, Adebisi," replied Onyilo softly, holding tightly to her anger.

Adebisi flinched with surprise. Except for her husband, the landlord's wife had never knocked on his door for rent renewal—not even now, when renewal was still far off. His restless mind wandered swiftly, searching for the reason why the woman was so eager to see him and couldn't wait for him to wake up. Why the heavy knocks on his door?

Is it about Bobina? He quickly banished the thought of his secret escapades being exposed by the mere one time he didn't put on a condom. And what more? Bobina had no understanding and was incapable of dishing out such an adventure to her parents.

"Adebisi," Onyilo interrupted the tenant's mulling.

"I am coming, Ma."

Adebisi concluded it might be an emergency needing his attention, unconnected with what he was thinking. He rose quickly from his bed in his flowery shorts and opened the door.

Onyilo spoke immediately without waiting to give or receive a greeting.

"Adebisi, why did you sleep with my daughter?"

It was a bluntness that instantly struck the tenant with a tied tongue. Just as he was about to recover, she hit him with another.

"You are the one that impregnated my daughter!"

"Ma ..."

"Yes? You want to deny it?"

"I ... em ..." Adebisi knew lying or putting up a defence wouldn't save his neck; he needed to say something to the aggrieved mother, only he didn't know what to say.

“I didn’t come here to have you just stare at me—speak!”

Adebisi fell on his knees and begged with a visage of remorse, “Please, Ma, I am sorry.”

“Sorry? Wait for Bobina’s father to return from work, then give him your ‘sorry.’” Onyilo hissed and left him, but that was after he had unleashed vitriol on him.

In less than two hours, to avoid the landlord’s wrath, Adebisi sneaked out from his room with a few clothes inside a leather bag. His room was the closest to the entrance of the building. It was easier to leave unnoticed.

Oche came home to receive the news and stomped out of his house to his tenant’s room. Finding the door locked, he stood there, exhaling deeply with eyelashes fluttering with fury.

“I didn’t even know when he went out,” said Onyilo, who had come out to meet her spouse. “He must come back home. Let us go inside.”

Oche said nothing; he returned to his abode.

It was very clear the following morning to the couple that Adebisi had absconded.

“If I go and break his door, pack his things out and turn them into ashes, will I be branded as an evil man?” asked the man menacingly.

“No need for that,” Onyilo advised. “Wherever he ran to, he will come back one day to pack his belongings.”

Oche heeded his wife’s opinion. This was one of the rare moments the couple shared thoughts peacefully and respected each other’s views. It amazed Onyilo that her husband didn’t rain insults on her for allowing their daughter to go astray, straying afar into the arms of an abuser right inside her vicinity.

Perhaps, she concluded, her husband had thought equally like her: Adebisi’s catty courtesousness creamed with godliness gave no room for suspicion.

Adebisi ran to his friend’s house in a faraway location, narrated his story, and set out the following Sunday morning for Ibadan. Before leaving, he had called

his superior to favour him with a three-day off from official duties to attend to an emergency in the village.

His intention in his hometown was to beg his elder brother and an uncle to come down to Otukpo to pacify the girl's parents.

He succeeded. Two days later, they arrived to placate the man and his wife.

Oche insisted Adebisi must marry Bobina, which initially was a considerate idea to the kinsmen of Adebisi. But when they desired to see their would-be daughter-in-law, and Bobina was called in, the kinsmen winced with bewilderment but quickly changed their mood to avoid infuriating the placated parents. They applied felicity and promised to discuss further on preparing a marriage.

The relatives left for Adebisi's room.

"Is this what you impregnated?" asked the uncle quietly in his Yoruba language immediately they stepped into the house, without sitting down. His three tribal marks on both cheeks appeared wider on the grave grimace glooming his face.

"I don't know what entered my brain, Baba," replied the nephew with all remorse.

His elder brother was speechless. He kept shaking his head disappointedly.

The uncle added, "Now, are you going to marry her?"

It was a question to confirm whether his nephew had gone mad. Adebisi did not disappoint him.

Shaking his head, Adebisi replied, "No, Baba."

"No? You know you cannot marry such a human being, but you are sleeping with her. You should be ashamed of your worthless self, Ade!" shouted the older brother, unable to hold on to his anger.

To avoid anyone overhearing them, the uncle quickly gestured with his hand to his older nephew to still his tongue and spoke on.

"Marrying this kind of girl into our family is completely out of the question—it's impossible, even if you wanted to. My advice now is to find a way to squeeze yourself from them. If it means relocating from here, do it. But you

must support the girl financially, and if they so desire, we shall in the future take the child and take over his or her upkeep when he or she is about five years old.”



The relatives returned to their destination the following morning while Adebisi went to work and came back in the evening. He was inside his room undressing when Bobina entered and began to undress, too.

Dazed with surprise, the first thing that came into his mind was to peep outside; the parents were inside their sitting room. He could hear the telly's sound. He was a bit relieved and, without saying a word, picked up Bobina's wrapper as she was about to remove her underwear, wrapped it around her, and tied it. Bobina protested by murmuring, her twitching face became more pronounced.

“No, Bobi,” he said quietly as she held her hand to take her out, but she stood firmly and yanked her hand from him. Adebisi stared helplessly at the teen; he was visibly scared.

“Make meee laaauugh,” said Bobina.

He began tickling her while leading her out as she laughed. She left the room laughing, and Adebisi shut himself in. Henceforth, the youth shut the door when in.

But on a particular Saturday at noon, the girl caught him. Adebisi went to take his bath in the bathroom inside the compound and returned to meet Bobina, who was lying on his bed. He tried to lure her out, but she was defiant this time. Not even the stomach tickles took her out. She only laughed and remained unmoved from the bed. This time, she wore a white tee-shirt and a pink skirt, which she kept folding upward while Adebisi kept pulling it downward.

“Dooo it, dooo it,” she kept saying with a soulful face that eclipsed its twitching.

“Is your father at home?”

She gestured a no.

“Where is your mother?”

“Maamaa iiiis sleeping.”

Adebisi chuckled. He realised that Bobina might be short of a full brain yet knew some things. The recent happening gave her an understanding of what her parents liked and disliked. The two times she entered his place unannounced were carefully planned to ensure her parents remained unaware.

He went outside and saw no one. He thought of calling the attention of Bobina’s mother, but wouldn’t that worsen his situation in a different way? Wouldn’t the mother happily encourage him since his relatives had created an impression that he was her soon-to-be son-in-law? He thought critically.

Adebisi wasn’t prepared to allow such encouragement. He went inside and did what the teenager wanted—and also tickled her to laughter. She left immediately.

From then on, Adebisi intensified his security: His door was always locked anytime he visited the toilet or the bathroom, even when washing his clothes outside.

Time kept increasing Bobina’s belly at a fast pace. By the seventh month, the girl had earned a very large stomach like one set to bring forth a baby in a few days.

Onyilo wasn’t the only one tending to her daughter. Ada was fully in the picture. She most often went with Onyilo for Bobina’s antenatal care.

She told Onyilo that if she were living in her compound, no one would have touched her friend.

She despised Adebisi. And even more, because Adebisi had shrewdly proven he wasn’t going to be a husband to Bobina.

Oche had smelt that, too. He had thought Adebisi would hasten a marital arrangement before her daughter gave birth. But nothing was heard again since the first meeting with the tenant and his relatives. From the onset, the man and his wife had had their doubts about the young man marrying their daughter.

Now that it was clear, he issued a quit notice letter to Adebisi with a grace period of two weeks to pack out or else face eviction. He strongly warned him never to approach his doorstep in the future to claim any child. He refused to give the remaining monetary balance for the tenant’s unexhausted tenancy.

Adebisi saw the letter as freedom regained and as a clear route for escape. He gratefully relocated less than a week after the issuance of the notice.



On delivery day, Oche, Onyilo and Ada took the pregnant girl to the general hospital in Otukpo inside Oche's first and newly bought car.

In the labour room, Bobina produced a set of fully healthy twins; however, the obstetrician battled unsuccessfully to save her life when a complication suddenly developed.

A moment of sorrow gripped the trio. Onyilo's wailing was equally matched by Ada's. Oche held himself tightly from letting his emotions overwhelm him.

Towards twilight, a few hours after the dead mother's corpse had been moved to the mortuary, the obstetrician discharged the twins after prescribing the appropriate baby formula as a substitute for breast milk, along with other necessities.

As the news of Bobina's demise spread around, sympathisers, including those who had poured contempt on her, trooped into the family's compound. Beholding the lovely twins served as an icing to the mourners, and even more to Oche.

Staring at the twin male and female the following morning brought a mixture of bliss and guilt. Oche knew he had not really been a father to a daughter that turned him into a grandfather.

He shambled into his late daughter's room for the first time and sat on her bed and whimpered.

Seven days later, at the naming ceremony attended by many, Oche gave the twins the names Bobby and Bobina.

GLOSSARY:

1. Ojuju Calabar: In Nigeria, someone who puts on a mask to playfully scare children. It could also mean a masquerade.
2. Naked eyes: In Nigerian Pidgin English, it means to personally witness or see something clearly.
3. Remoting: To lure someone.

The Lost British Subjects

Kariuki Banda

Effendi Ajak Darfalla looked at the lean, little baby and said, “He’s going to be tall, a true Nubian.”

“And he’s dark-skinned,” Cherotich said with a smile, “like a true Nandi.”

“We Nubians are dark-skinned too,” Darfalla protested, “and he’ll be a soldier too, like me.”

Cherotich looked lovingly at her husband. She was proud to have given him a son on the first attempt.

“Oh, my soldier man,” she said, looking Darfalla in the eye, “he’ll be as great a soldier as his great Nandi kinsman, Koitalel Arap Samoei.”

“Or his great Nubian forebear, Pharaoh Rameses the Second.” Darfalla searched out his wife’s eyes. Then they hugged.

But even as they wished little Mohamed all the greatness in life, Cherotich’s heart harboured a little monster that was growing every day. The monster was

a fear. The little monster fed on her uncertainties; uncertainties common to all first-time mothers, and threatened to roar out of her throat and upset the little island of happiness on which she and Darfalla lived. It was about the boy's right-hand fist.

Soon after his birth, Cherotich noticed the boy would not unclench his right fist even when he cried. It did not bother her then. She pried open the fist from time to time and was consoled that the boy's fingers were not stiff. Weeks turned into months without change. Had they been living in the village, there would have been a mother-in-law, a co-wife, or an older relative to seek advice from. But they lived in the barracks, and as the youngest soldier bride, she did not know any of the other soldiers' wives well enough to confide in them. The monster grew till it roared out of the confines of her heart. She told her soldier man.

"What's the use of a clenched fist to a soldier?" Darfalla rued, "A battlefield is no boxing ring."

They were both silent for a moment.

"The trigger... dear wife, you know, is the soldier's life.

"Let's not worry, my soldier man. He'll outgrow the problem—I know he will."

Cherotich did not believe what she had just said and knew Darfalla did not believe it either. Her heart now had two monsters—the fear about the clenched fist and the worry in her husband's heart. That night, sleep did not come to her. At cock crow, an idea stole into her mind like a thief; brilliant and beautiful as the morning star, the idea shone. She got off the bed, careful not to rouse Mohamed, and slipped beside her husband on the mat beside the bed. She tapped his hairy chest to wake him up.

Darfalla slept on a mat because his camp bed was not big enough for the three of them. Furthermore, he feared he would squash the baby dead in his sleep if he slept in the same bed with him. The arrangement was fine with his wife, for she explained that in her Nandi culture, a married man's bedroom had two beds, one for the husband and the other for the wife.

"My soldier man..." she said once he was awake, "I have the answer."

"What answer?" he asked, groggy with sleep.

“The clenched fist.”

She whispered the idea to him. He agreed with her, even as he felt stirrings in his groin. He drew her closer. They later fell asleep till Mohamed’s little squeals woke them up in the morning.

Cherotich’s idea was to seek divination from a seer among her clansmen. Darfalla did not object, for he had heard of the supernatural powers of the seers from her people. If a seer from the Talai clan of the Nandi tribe said to you, “Do not take this road,” then it was wise to do as advised. For, as sure as the sun rises, there was bound to be danger lurking ahead. Their fellow Nandis knew this. They called them *Bikab metit*, people of the head. It was Kipnyolei Arap Turugat, a Talai seer, who had predicted the coming of the ‘butterfly men’ with their long smoke-spewing snake that would traverse Nandi country. He asked his people not to allow the snake into their country. His prophecy came true when the British reached their territory, building the Kenya-Uganda Railway. His son, Koitalel Arap Samoei, was the great Orkoiyot who resisted British occupation before he was shot in cold blood by Colonel Richard Meinertzhagen.



In the *Bikab metit*’s hut, the seer waved Cherotich to a mat on the floor. He, himself, was sitting cross-legged on another mat. He did not have cowrie shells, smooth stones, or leopard skin headgear like witch doctors did. He did not ask for a goat to slaughter so that he could examine the entrails for signs. They did this when divining a calamity that befell the entire community. Cherotich waited to be asked what it was that had brought her here, but *Bikab Metit* was silent for a long while, looking straight ahead through the open door. He gazed far out into the hills before turning his eyes to the sleeping boy strapped to his mother’s back. Cherotich’s heart glowed with hope.

“Go tell your husband to give the boy his leadership.”

The mother returned home with her young child and told her husband the message from the seer. “But I’m not a leader,” Darfalla said.

“But you’re an effendi,” Cherotich countered. “A sergeant’s position is leadership enough.” That evening, the father briefly placed his swagger stick in the

boy's right fist, and the couple went to sleep believing they had fulfilled the seer's instructions. Two days later, nothing had changed. They tried placing the neatly folded sergeant's uniform on the boy's chest and later, the beret on his head. Nothing changed. Darfalla gave up. Cherotich did not.

She returned to the seer, who gave her one brief look and shook his head.

"I said you give the boy his leadership, not his father's."

"How is that to be done?"

"Woman, you're from among our people. What do we use to crown leaders? What do we use to sanctify marriage unions? What do we use to bless our heroes...?"

"*Sinendet*?"

"Let the father weave a laurel from the *Sinendet* plant and place it around the boy's neck."

Were it not for the weight of the baby, Cherotich would have skipped home like a little girl. Along the way, she deviated to a sacred grove, pulled strands upon strands of the *Sinendet* silk plant, and rushed home. She carried more than was needed for a single laurel, but what harm could that do? Her little Mohamed was going to become a soldier after all.

Mohamed Darfalla grew up beloved of his parents and community. His playmates affectionately corrupted his name, Mohamed, to Mamadi, a name he carried into adulthood for those who had known him in his childhood. His parents preserved the secret of the *Bikab Metit's* prophecy in the safest recesses of their hearts. The prophecy came true when, later in life, he became the only Nubian soldier under the colonial British King's African Rifles, the KAR, to rise to the rank of captain. It was a long journey from being Mamadi to becoming a captain, a long journey indeed.

The journey was even longer when added to his father's. The journey of Ajak Darfalla, and that of the other 'Nubian children' began in the Nubia Mountains in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. German-born Isaak Eduard Carl Oscar Theodor Schnitzer was the Pasha governor of the then Equatorial province of the Anglo-Egyptian Empire. He converted to Islam and took the name

Mehmet Emin. As governor of the region, they called him Emin Pasha.

Ajak Darfalla was fifteen and thus not old enough to get drafted when Emin came recruiting. Emin, however, let ambitious Darfalla join the carrier corps. The all-Sudanese force moved south into the new Uganda Protectorate and pacified the Baganda and the Banyoro Kingdoms for the British Empire. Darfalla had come of age by then and was officially drafted into the army.

When Emin Pasha left his force and entered the service of the German East Africa Company, Salim Bey took over command and moved into the British East Africa Protectorate and helped subdue the Wanga Kingdom. Koitalel Arap Samoei's Nandi tribe offered the last resistance before the protectorate was fully pacified and turned into a colony. In peacetime, the Nubians found a kindred spirit among the Nandi, for the Nandi claimed to have originated from the North, just like the Nubians, in a place they called Misri. Their sons and daughters intermarried. Darfalla married Cherotich.

"You're one lucky man," an old clansman told Darfalla.

"Why?"

"Your wife."

"She's beautiful?"

"Impetuous youth!" the old man said indignantly. "What's the use of beauty in a wife?"

"Tell me then, Father, tell me."

"You see, we conquered the Baganda in war and conquered their women in peacetime—obedient women. You were there and saw for yourself. They will kneel while serving their husband and call him *Ssebo*—sir. Those of us who married there said, 'These are wives like we will never find back home.' I was one of them."

Darfalla was listening.

"Among the Luhya of the Wanga Kingdom, we married too. You know their women: voluptuous hips and heaving chests. Thick, fleshy legs that held our men's gaze like metal to a magnet. They were hot, I tell you, real hot. I married

my second. We are here among the Nandi now. I wish I had the energy and the wealth to take in a third. You have taken your first here, and you know what you've got? Loyalty man, loyalty. There is nothing like loyalty in a wife, I tell you, Darfalla. Nandi women have that; I tell you."

Whenever Darfalla had thought of his wife, the image of a dark, slender, shapely, smiling nineteen-year-old came to mind. When he remembered her, he saw her looking him in the eye and calling him 'My soldier man.' He saw loyalty.

There was jubilation when the Nubian force was absorbed into the KAR, forming the Third and Fourth battalions. They were now officially Her Majesty the Queen's musketeers. Marching orders came for the battalions to move to Nairobi, the capital of the new colony.

Bugles of the First World War began to blare shortly after the Nubians reached Nairobi, and the force was called to readiness for battle. Mamadi's father died fighting for the British against the Germans in Tanganyika. When the war ended, the colonial government issued the Sudanese ex-soldiers permits to 'build a hut and cultivate a shamba in the military reserve to the west of Nairobi city.' This was a reward for what the government called 'gallant and dedicated service'. The reserve at the time was just a *kibra*—a forest. Thus, the new settlement came to be known by the Nubian word Kibra. The widows of fallen soldiers got the permits, too. So it was that Mamadi, his mother, and his siblings settled in Kibra.

Mamadi joined the army as his late father had anticipated and came face to face with colonial discrimination. The Second World War happened, and Mamadi and his fellow Nubians fought in Ethiopia, Ceylon, and Burma. But the pay for African soldiers was different from that of whites of the same rank. And black soldiers could only rise to the rank of *effendi*, the equivalent of a sergeant. Mohammed Darfalla led a mutiny, but when he presented their grievances, his white superiors said he was trying to be smart. The Nubians took up the name and, to spite the bossy commanders, named their leader Effendi Smart. The mutiny ended with the signing of a memorandum of understanding. Henceforth, promotion would be without discrimination, and demobilization benefits would be the same as those of the whites— but the whites would still enjoy separate, and better sleeping quarters, and their pay remained higher. Smart was promoted to captain, but when he remained uncompromising, no other Nu-

bian was promoted to captaincy till the end of the war. That was how Mamadi left for war as Mohamed Darfalla and returned to Kibra as Captain Smart.

But Captain Smart is retired now; he's been retired these many years, retired from the many battles he has fought in and out of battlefields. In fact, today, this exact day, Captain Smart is going to die. Today is his ninetieth birthday. Recently, he's been seeing this date in his mind, seeing it like he has seen other events before, and he knows he cannot be wrong. He is probably already dead, but it is difficult to tell. Lying here on his bed on such a beautiful sunny morning, he is so calm and peaceful. And the aches of his old body seem to have gone overnight. Beside the bed, on a coffee table, is the breakfast his wife Zena placed a while ago. He saw her tiptoe in and out to avoid disturbing him. He did not turn, but he saw her every move. Maybe it was his spirit eye that saw, but then again, it was probably his mind playing games with itself.

Captain Smart has no regrets, for he has done his part in fighting for the rights of his fellow children of Nubia. In the mornings, he reads the day's paper and chats with friends who come to read his paper and share his mid-morning coffee. On Fridays, he walks to Al Masjid Mosque at Makina for the midday salah. There is a Mosque at Lindi, near his house, but Captain loves the half-kilometre walk to Makina and back, stopping to acknowledge greetings here, chatting with a friend there, and watching more and more wattle-and-mud structures get erected every day in the few remaining vacant spaces of the Kibra.

Is this poverty-stricken slum a just reward for the pain, tears, and deaths endured by the Nubian children on behalf of the Queen? This once green-and-leafy Kibra is now a sprawling rusty-iron-sheet suburb. Half the households here have no latrines; excrement is put in plastic bags and thrown into the rivulets of raw human waste that snake along narrow footpaths and behind houses. Flying toilets, they are called.

Jobless Nubian youths idle away their time at shop corners. But who will employ them if they do not have national identity cards? Whenever they go to the District Commissioner's office to acquire the cards, they are asked to bring their parents' identity cards. However, the only identification documents the colonial government had ever given their parents were the permits to reside in the Kibra. "No," the youths are told, "the colonial permit is not acceptable proof of

nationality.” It’s the fourth decade into Kenya’s independence, and the Nubians who left their Nubia home are all dead and gone. The surviving ones were all born on Kenyan soil, yet they remain stateless.

They say Kibra is the largest informal settlement in the world. Informal settlement—a polite word for a slum. And lately, some world celebrities have been visiting to take photos of the poverty here. And to add insult to injury, senior government officials would be in tow, with ear-to-ear smiles as the cameras clicked. They even had a name for this tourism: ‘poorism’ they called it.

Every Friday afternoon, after his salah in Makina, Captain Smart visits the Nubian Cultural and Heritage Centre. It is not much of a place, being merely a community initiative. Preserved there are woven Nubian artefacts that some British scholars said resembled those excavated from the pyramid of Rameses II and taken to museums in England. Samples of the uniforms worn by Nubian soldiers in the expedition with Emin Pasha and in the two world wars are there, including Smart’s donation of his father’s 1914 and his 1939 uniforms. Permits issued to Smart’s mother and other Nubians to settle in the *Kibra* are there, too, as are their samples of the 1928 replacements. On the walls hung pictures of the officials of the Sudanese Association of East Africa taken in 1951 and donated by the Sennussi family, along with one from 1952 which was Smart’s own donation. Then there are documents and correspondence upon correspondence, records of the trials and tribulations of what Smart called ‘the lost British subjects.’

Smart knows all the documents—their feel, their worth—even though, many a time, their contents had not been honoured. They are documents that make Smart smile with pride, though. El Hajj Sennussi El Idriss’s case stands as one such jewel, marking the first time an African triumphed over Her Majesty’s government. The Sudanese Association of East Africa had sponsored El Idriss to go to Khartoum and petition the newly independent Sudan’s government to accept home the ex-Sudanese soldiers, a move that irked the colonial government of Kenya. Upon his departure, El Idriss’s house was burnt down by the government and his right to residence in the *Kibra* was *revoked*. But he came back when the mission proved unsuccessful and sued the state for compensation. Kapila and Kapila Advocates led the litigation and secured a landmark compensation of a hefty four hundred and fifty shillings.

The papers are there, but Smart knows that oral traditions are in danger of being lost unless they are passed on. What is written can be erased, but what is spoken lives forever. Hadn't Smart read the documents at the National Archives and seen what a different story they told from what he himself had witnessed? Was there any record of the 1895 Battle of Chetambe Hills? There wasn't. Yet his own father, who had fought on the British side, had spoken highly of the bravery of the Bukusu of the Wanga Kingdom in their resistance to colonial rule. As for the last battle, the one at Chetambe, Captain's father had said what a massacre it had been on both sides. What of the death of hundreds of Nubian soldiers in a bomb attack by the Japanese in the Second World War? There was no record. What about the memorandum of understanding between the British war authorities and the Nubian fighters—that the Nubians would get equal treatment to their white counterparts? The Carter Land Commission Report was there alright, and so was the Colonel La Fontaine Survey of forty-seven. However, the recommendations that the Nubians be given titles to their parcels of land were never implemented.

Smart, therefore, told what was passed down to him, what he had read from the records, and what he knew from his personal testimony. They called him to speak at the Heritage Centre when important visitors needed a detailed account of his people's history. He spoke to visitors who called on him at home. He spoke to Nubian youth, too. The magic of the spoken word must not be left to die.

Smart's narratives always began with a question that set how far back into the past he would go. If he asked, "Do you know that Rameses the Second was Nubian?" His audience, more often than not, found themselves open-mouthed in disbelief.

"Rameses, the Egyptian pharaoh?"

"Yeah, he was a short black man. Anwar Saddat, too, was Nubian, you know that?"

"The Egyptian president who was assassinated...?"

"Yes, yes, that one." He would then tell of dark-skinned inhabitants of the Kush region that straddles modern-day northern Sudan and southern Egypt

and how they built a kingdom that rivalled their fair-skinned Egyptian neighbours, even at one time colonising them. He narrated how Christianity came to these people before the Islamization of the north of Africa converted them to Islam.

Then, he would launch into the journey of the Nubian children, whom he lovingly called the lost British subjects. He told of Emin Pasha and Salim Bey.

“Salim Bey contracted malaria in the Rift Valley as the Nubian force moved towards Nairobi. For five days, he shivered and sweated. On the sixth day, he showed his lieutenants the exact position where he wished to be buried if he died. On the seventh day, he was in a delirium, calling to Emin Pasha to order an attack on Arap Samoei’s positions. Then, he would summon his second in command and order the boiling of all Nubian soldiers in the half-drum kitchen containers. ‘Cut them to small slices,’ he would say confidentially, ‘boil them, boil them, boil them for three days, and then feed them to the Nandi warriors.’”

His soldiers understood his delirium. Emin Pasha was long dead, but it was he who had brought them all from Sudan. As for boiling soldiers, they remembered their last battle before the Nandi resistance was quelled.

In the last years of the nineteenth century, British traders who left the coast and entered the hinterland in search of ivory had to avoid the vast area occupied by the Nandi if they hoped to go back alive. Later, their *Orkoijot*, Koitalel Arap Samoei, would not let the British build the railway line across his kingdom. Nandi warriors constantly disrupted work on the railway line and stole anything metallic to replenish their spear and sword arsenal. Meanwhile, Arap Samoei would not hear of a peace agreement. War parties against them, led by the white officers, were repulsed now and again. It was when they killed two white officers in one battle that the Nubian force in the service of the British came to the rescue. Salim Bey said to the white man, “Stay behind us. The Nubian force will conquer the Nandis.”

It was a hard-fought battle. The Nandis retreated, but the Nubians knew their adversaries would be back. The White commander ordered them to cut up the bodies of two dead Nandi soldiers and boil them in half-drum cooking containers. The Nandis attacked in the afternoon when, as they said, the sun was hot enough to boil Nubian blood. They found a deserted camp, the bodies of their

colleagues boiling in huge drums. It was thus the belief that the Nubians were man-eaters that made the Nandi minimise their attacks. But the war did not end then, for the Nandi were proud and fearless warriors. Their sporadic attacks forced the mighty British to extend an olive branch and call for a peace meeting.

“Salim Bey’s men knew it was this boiling of the Nandi soldiers that was now replaying in his sick mind. On the eighth day, Salim Bey died and was buried in the exact spot he had indicated. But the following morning, to the surprise of all, a spring had emerged on the very spot they had interred him. The spring grew in size into a big pond. A few days later, it was an enormous lake. The Nubians named it Naipasha—the lake of the pasha. The Whiteman recorded it as Naivasha.

“We moved up the escarpment and camped in the cold area above the escarpment. I say ‘we’ because, at the time, I was a small boy of about six years. My father was now in charge of the company of soldiers from the Muru clan. Our camp was called Laini Muru. A town grew around our camp and was called Laini Muru, but the white man, in his quintessential ability to mispronounce names, recorded it as Limuru.”

Captain Smart always concluded the story of his people in a solemn voice. “So it is that we Nubians are still here in Kibra to date; homeless. Abandoned by the British who brought us here, rejected by new Sudan where our ancestors came from, and still denied birth right by Kenya where we were born. Now you understand why I call my people ‘The Lost British Subjects?’”

When time allowed and his audience asked for more, he often told of his Nandi heritage. He told of his mother’s *Bikab metit* seers, the greatest of whom was Koitalel Arap Samoei. He told of Somoei’s murder by the British colonists.

“Now, on the day Samoei went for a peace meeting at Kapkoimet,” Smart would tell, “he had foreseen his own death. He had told his people that the white man would kill him, but they had not believed him, for it was supposed to be a peace meeting. All the same, they sent a squad of their best warriors to accompany him just in case the white man had something up his sleeve.

”He came with his wife as Colonel Meinzarghen, the white man in charge, had requested, and they were well-received. His warriors sat at a distance, each

pinning his spear to the ground as a sign of peace. The white man had two chairs set, one for Samoei and the other for his wife. Now, a Nandi man is allowed by traditions to sit on a chair or any other seat; a woman is not. A woman is supposed to sit on the ground, feet neatly stretched in front of her. And here was a white man conducting Samoei's wife to a chair! The warriors got up, all the warriors, to protest the breach of traditions. Colonel Meinzarghen later claimed he had thought the warriors had meant to attack him; he had, therefore, opened fire and killed Samoei. The Nandi side claimed it had been a cold-blooded murder. Samoei was dead, dead, dead. The bloody battle that ensued could not bring him back to life."

There was one secret he never told, though: that he himself was a *Bikab metit*. In Ceylon and Burma, his visions often helped him steer his regiment away from danger. Even his white superiors had learnt to depend on his premonitions, though they promoted him to captain only grudgingly. His mother had known, but she was long dead. Now, only Zena, his wife, knew. Zena, beautiful Zena. Faithful and loving companion. His other soul. When he was ready to marry, he remembered his old man's words: "Loyalty before beauty." Zena is seventy-five years old now, yet she still makes all the meals in the house. The Sennussi girls come along every day to help her around the house, but she never lets them cook for the captain. How lonely she is going to be! Yet he has not dared tell her he will die this day.

He can see her now. She's chatting with Zakia at her fruit and vegetable shed not far down Lindi Road. Rukia, her other best friend, is also there. Her vegetables are cut up and neatly packed.:

"Well, I have to leave now. You know my soldier man is all alone in the house," Zena says.

"Now come slowly, Zena," Zakia replies, "our great Captain Smart does not easily get bored. He's probably rehearsing his narratives for visitors who may..."

"Tough soldier, that one," Rukia adds, "but it's hardly ten in the morning... there is enough time to cook his lunch."

"It's about his lunch. You know he takes only one meal a day. His ninety-year-old guts, you know...it's about ...eh... his drinks."

“Drinks?” Rukia and Zakia chorus.

Zena leans forward and lowers her voice.

“I have never told this to anyone...I don’t know why I feel compelled to tell you today. It’s about the war. When he came back, he was different.

“You mean he could not...”

“It’s not what you think, Zakia. He came back hard—hard as the metal they used to make rail lines. It’s my soldier man’s fear of water...drinking water. He has not taken a drop since he came from the war. So, I make him drinks: coffee, tea, juice, anything else but water.

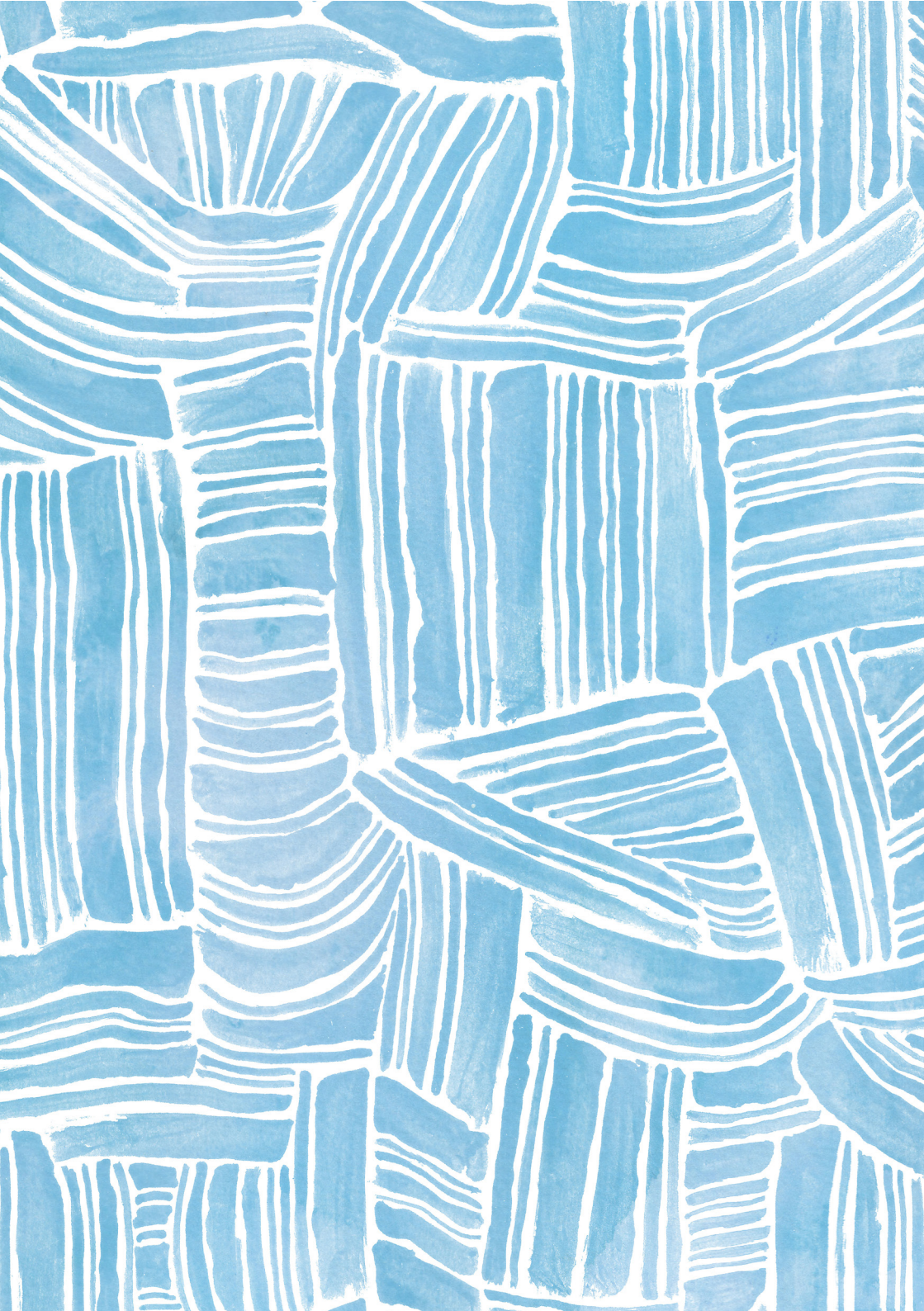
“The war changed us all. I was a young wife when the KAR battalions moved north to fight the Italians in Ethiopia. His mother, Cherotich, did not want him to go to war. She feared he wouldn’t return, like his father. But what shame would follow a soldier who baulked out at the call to war? What would he do to feed his wife and two little children?

”My soldier man came back alive from Ethiopia; we were all overjoyed. But his battalion again left for Ceylon. Cherotich died of grief soon after. Cherotich, who had been the leader of war widows, died. I felt like I had been widowed. She had been my rock, my shelter in the time of storm. She had taught me to call my husband, ‘my soldier man.’”

Zena falls silent. Rukia and Zakia say nothing. Zena starts again.

”The water? I’ve not forgotten about the water. During the war campaign against the Italians in Ethiopia, many soldiers on the British side died after drinking water from a well. The retreating Italians had poisoned the well. My soldier man had been warned in a dream not to drink water from the well. He warned his colleagues, but no one believed him.”

Captain Smart now feels weightless as he hovers over Kibra. He is at peace. As he floats higher and higher, he knows he has a proud account of himself to give to Ajak and Cherotich Darfalla, Salim Bey and Emin Pasha. To Rameses the Second and Arap Samoei, too. He will tell them as well: the lost British subjects are yet to find a home.



The Evolution of My Hair

Rebecca Nambinya

Growing up, my hair journey has been nothing short of an epic saga that rivals the most dramatic telenovelas. My hair and I have been through a lot together, from the dark days of disastrous home perms to hopeful beginnings of braids and cornrows.

I was born with a head full of thick, unruly curls. As years went by, my mother—bless her heart—had no idea what to do with it. She would spend hours every Sunday evening detangling my hair while I sat in front of the TV, wincing at every tug. The neighbourhood kids nicknamed me ‘Mop Head,’ a title I wore with reluctant pride.

By the time I was in primary school, the texture of my hair became a point of contention. My hair was like steel wire, difficult to manage, and often unruly. My parents, ever watchful of societal norms, wielded scissors with clockwork regularity. My mother’s hands, usually gentle, turned firm when they gripped the scissors, snipping away at my crown.

“Hair ages you,” my father would say.

At school, uniformity reigned supreme. The school regulations did not allow for such “unmanageable” hair, and so, much to my dismay, I was forced to keep my hair cut short. My mother and I, both novices in hair care, did not seek the support or knowledge we needed to maintain it properly. The result was a childhood and adolescence marked by a struggle with my hair’s natural texture.

By the time I hit the A-level, I was tired of my hair in its natural state. I wanted straight hair like the girls I saw on TV. Since my new school allowed A-level students to grow and maintain hair without braiding, I begged my mother for a relaxer. Reluctantly, she agreed, and we bought a kit from the local beauty supply store. The instructions seemed simple enough. How hard could it be?

Turns out, it was much harder than I thought. We left the relaxer on too long, and my hair started breaking off in clumps. The chemical burn was so bad I had to cut it so that I could be presentable for the first term of joining the school.

After the relaxer fiasco, I swore off chemical treatments. I decided to embrace my natural hair, but it wasn’t easy. There were days when my hair looked like a wild bush, and I felt like giving up, but I persevered.

My parents decided it was time for a change as I joined university. My mother took me to Auntie Stella, the local hairdresser renowned for her expert braiding skills. Auntie Stella worked her magic, and soon, I had neat, tight cornrows that showcased intricate patterns. I felt like a queen, even if my scalp was on fire for the first few days. At this point, I began to see my hair as a canvas for self-expression. I experimented with braided wigs, cornrows, and braids. Each style brought out a different aspect of my personality.

Despite the freedom to experiment, I still struggled with styling my natural hair. Having missed out on the years of practice that come with growing and maintaining one’s hair, I often found myself frustrated. Adding to this frustration was the fact that my hair never seemed to grow long enough, always falling short of the length I had dreamed of.

As my hair journey progressed, I began to notice the cultural significance it carried. Hair, in many African cultures, is not just about aesthetics but also about identity, heritage, and social status. This became apparent when I travelled to visit my grandmother in the village one festive season. There, the elders viewed

hair with a blend of reverence and scrutiny.

I arrived with my braided wig in tow, ready to embrace the rural tranquillity. The first evening, as we sat around the fire sharing stories, my grandmother observed my hair with curiosity. “Why do you cover your beautiful hair?” she asked, her eyes narrowing. She had always worn her hair in a traditional style, neat and adorned with beads, reflecting her age and status in the community.

I explained the convenience of wigs and the freedom they offered me to change styles without damaging my natural hair. She listened patiently, but I could sense her disapproval. “Our hair is our crown,” she said, touching her own neatly plaited hair. “It tells the world who we are and where we come from. When you cover it, you hide your true self.”

Her words struck a chord with me. Here was a generation that saw hair as an intrinsic part of their identity, a silent storyteller of their lineage and life experiences. Yet, my generation often saw hair as a fashion statement, a canvas for self-expression that could be moulded and reshaped at will. The clash between tradition and modernity was palpable, and I found myself questioning my choices.

That night, I removed my wig and let my natural hair breathe. The following day, with the help of my cousins, I braided my hair in the traditional style of our clan. It was a painstaking process, but the result was worth it. I felt a sense of pride and connection to my roots that I hadn’t experienced before. My grandmother smiled approvingly, her eyes twinkling with pride.

When I returned to the city, I carried with me a newfound appreciation for the cultural significance of hair. I began to incorporate traditional elements into my modern styles, blending the old with the new. This fusion of cultures became my signature look, a way to honour my ancestry while still expressing my individuality.

However, this cultural enlightenment did not come without its challenges. Friends and colleagues in the city rarely understood my new hairstyles. “Why the sudden change?” they would ask, puzzled by my shift from wigs and weaves to intricate braids and natural styles. I found myself explaining the importance of cultural identity and the stories behind my hair choices, sometimes meeting resistance but often sparking curiosity and admiration.

In a way, my hair became a bridge between two worlds—the modern, fast-paced life of Kampala city and the rich, storied traditions of the village. It allowed me to navigate both spaces with confidence and pride.

Now, in my twenties, I've come to terms with my hair journey. While I may have struggled with styling and length, I've also discovered the joy of embracing my natural self. Each phase of my hair has taught me something about resilience, self-acceptance, and the importance of seeking knowledge.

At the beginning of 2020, which was dubbed 'twenty twenty,' the year of COVID-19, I did 'the big chop!'

Tired of the damage from years of different styles and chemicals, I started fresh. It was both liberating and terrifying. This time around, I utilised the services of a unisex saloon to cut away the past and start anew. The result was a short, natural look that made me feel empowered and in control.

Looking back, I wish my mother and I had sought support on how to maintain my hair when I was younger. It would have saved us both a lot of frustration and heartache. But those experiences have shaped who I am today. They've taught me to be patient with myself and to appreciate the beauty in imperfection.

While scrolling through Instagram one day, I stumbled upon a picture of a woman with beautiful, long dreadlocks. Inspired, I decided to start my loc journey. It was a bold move, but I was ready for the commitment. By this time, my hair had grown back to a reasonable length. The initial stages were awkward, and my hair looked like tiny worms, but as the months passed, my locs began to flourish.

Currently, my dreadlocks are long and healthy, and they tell the story of my journey. From the painful detangling sessions to the disastrous relaxer, every twist and turn has shaped who I am today.

People compliment my hair everywhere I go, and I wear it with pride. My hair and I have been through a lot, but we have emerged stronger, more beautiful, and more confident. This is the evolution of my hair, and I wouldn't have it any other way. As I continue this hair journey, I am constantly reminded that it is about more than just aesthetics. It's about self-discovery and personal growth. I've learned to love my hair for what it is, not what I wish it could be.

So, if you ever see a woman walking through the streets of Kampala with her dreadlocks flowing in the wind, know that behind those locs lies a story of perseverance, humour, and self-discovery. And that woman might just be *me!*



A War Artist

M. A. Kelly

Jacobi led the way across the grass in front of the gift shop exit, scanning right and left for a free picnic table. However, it was well past midday, and all the available benches were taken by middle-aged couples in pastel leisurewear and a few groups of younger people picking at their spreads of food bought at the various stalls surrounding the lawn, and sipping inviting-looking drinks from plastic pint glasses. Eventually, he turned to me and nodded at the huge, square cushions that were spread out on the ground further away.

“Looks like we’ll have to bed down there, then. That’s perfectly OK, though, isn’t it?”

His question seemed apologetic but was delivered in such a way that it was clear he expected no objection from me. I’d got used to this from him by now—seeking my agreement on a declaration yet framing it so that any answer I might offer was always going to align with a decision he’d already made.

We located a patch of grass just being vacated by a couple of women in saris who were walking off and using the tips of their fingers to push morsels of food from plastic tubs into the mouths of four or five small children flocking

around them. It was a nice spot, shaded by rhododendrons and other shrubs whose names I didn't know. Jacobi pointed to some bits of food scattered on our chosen seats.

"You'll just sort out this mess while I go grab us some grub, will you?"

He came back balancing two slopping beers in one hand and a tray heaped with vegetarian wraps and Mediterranean dips in the other. Since it was taken for granted by now that the meal would be on him, the choices were Jacobi's to make. However, after three weeks at his family home, where each meal largely comprised salads, seafood, hummus, and hunks of gritty, worthy bread, I was starting to crave some budget student fare made from cheap, processed meat.

Jacobi laughed approvingly as a mob of sparrows began scavenging the scraps of food I'd flicked onto the grass. He then settled himself down and gazed about, appraising the crowds who'd come along on this summer Saturday to do a quick tour of the Ravilious exhibition, then get down to the more important business of socialising and eating an overpriced organic lunch. I imagined a few other people—like the Indian ladies and their families—were simply taking advantage of the open space to give their children a bit of freedom to run about and enjoy a homemade picnic.

I took another opportunity to admire the perfection of Jacobi's golden-boy profile: his long, narrow nose and fleshy upper lip, straight from a Cocteau portrait; his rower's physique, accentuated by the slightly too-small pastel-coloured polo shirts he always wore; and his artfully unruly hair, not falling down in coy floppiness like that of his friends but cropped close, showed a boyish sun-bleached cowlick that made women of all ages feel protective towards him. But most noticeable of all, he wore a disdainful jut to his chin, a bearing that announced his innate, incontestable superiority.

I thought it would perhaps be rude not to offer an appreciative comment about our surroundings. I patted the third cushion, positioned between us, on which our tray balanced. Like the others, it was covered in some maroon tapestry fabric, with bold geometric designs in blue and yellow.

"What do you call this pattern, then? I do like it. I like they put these out here for people to use."

As usual, his reply brooked no argument. (How I loved repeating that expression to myself! It would be one I could use to good effect once I got back home.)

“Turkish? That’d be my guess. We sailed there last summer; otherwise, I wouldn’t have a clue, naturally. Not *our* boat, I should add. Frightful friends of Harriet.”

This was his stepmother, much younger than her husband, and the lady who’d suggested to Jacobi that he invite his new African friend from uni to spend part of the summer holidays at the family’s London home. She was a sweet enough person, although I found her habit of taking millions of photographs of us throughout the day on her iPhone quite disarming. She would arrange Jacobi and his many siblings around me—the shy centrepiece—and then snap us and chivvy us to post the resulting pictures on our social media. She once asked me if I didn’t have something ‘tribal or ethnic’ I could wear to make a few of these tableaux more interesting.

At this, Mr. Acaster—I’d never been invited to call him by his first name, which was Piers—looked up from his newspaper and glared darkly, first at Harriet, then at me. He was seated at the end of the massive oak table in the basement kitchen of their Georgian terrace house, a benign tyrant keeping his subjects in check with an occasional gruff word or dismissive snort over Sunday brunch.

I registered the contempt with which he regarded me, and it chilled me. Like his eldest son, he had a way of stating something innocuously while making his true feelings very clear:

“Harriet, the poor boy isn’t a museum exhibit. Leave him the hell alone, or we’ll wake up one morning to find he’s bugged off.”

Although I rarely saw Mr. Acaster—he only usually put in appearances at home during weekend mealtimes—his rare conversations with me exposed two inescapable facts: I made him feel deeply uncomfortable in his own home by my mere presence there, and, consequently, he was simply itching for me to leave. His hearty enquiries about my “plans for the rest of the summer” always included a hint or two that, on no account, must I outstay my welcome in Primrose Hill, not even by a day.

Once Abi, Harriet's fifteen-year-old daughter, started inserting herself next to me in those dreadful group photos, Mr. Acaster's suggestions became decidedly more pointed. Didn't I want to maybe look up some other chums and see if Benjy or Oliver weren't heading to their respective family villas soon? Maybe I could tag along. The weather—perchance—would be more to my liking...



The cushions began bothering me. Many things about that summer day almost a decade ago now had discomfited me, but the cheery invitation implied by the enormous, new-looking seats somehow embodied the difference in Jacobi's upbringing and mine, writ large. Nowadays, I suppose we might say that they triggered me.

"These must have cost a small fortune. If we were back in Jozi chilling in the park, we'd be just sitting on the grass."

"Yep, granted. But they must take them inside once the place closes up of an evening. Clean 'em up for the next day. Chuck the ghastly ones."

Why didn't he state the blindingly obvious? I supplied the reasoning myself:

"And so people don't just jump over the fence and steal them, I 'spose."

He gave me a quizzical look, checking to see if I was serious.

"No. Not so much that, Cosmas. Rather so that they don't get crappy if it rains, I'd say. This is Dulwich, man, not some Third-World slum."

There was a sting in the reference. Jacobi knew nothing of Johannesburg, my hometown, so the only way he could picture a city that contained squatter camps was to cast his mind back to some film about the Brazilian favelas that he'd watched on his course. The thousands of miles between our homes—in distance and in life's immutable truths—hung there in these few words. How I wished to see somebody breezily walk out of the gate with a couple of those cushions tucked under each arm just then. Preferably someone white.



“Well, my grandfather knew him, of course,” Jacobi had brayed an hour earlier in the voice he used when he just couldn’t resist showing off. The room inside the gallery was packed, despite the fact that the exhibition was using a timed ticket system to control the crowds. Ten or so heads turned in unison to see who it was that enjoyed the privilege of an association, be it ever so tenuous, with Eric Ravilious—at whose shrine they had come to worship that day.

I had been trying to block out Jacobi’s running commentary by concentrating on the information boards next to the lovely paintings in the room where the artist’s domestic interiors were displayed. I’d noticed that when I stepped in closer to try to get a better look, people tended to move away obligingly and nod at me with uncertain smiles. The only black person in the room, I was an object of interest almost as much as the pictures, I suppose.

It was unfortunate that the artist’s landscapes in the next room often depicted the part of Sussex where Mr. Acaster’s family owned a house of some distinction. It was where they were all headed shortly, and Jacobi’s next announcement reiterated, in his usual tangential way, that I could expect a late invitation to join them in vain:

“I wish you could see the South Downs in all their glory just now. Next time, perhaps? You’d find there, I really do think, landscapes that encapsulate what it means to be English. For some of us, at least, I should say. Our blue-remembered hills, our green and pleasant land—and no sarcasm intended. I’d be interested to hear your critique of that as someone looking through the lens of the previously colonised. I’ll make sure I score you an invite next year, Cosmas.”

A middle-aged woman draped in an elaborate tasselled shawl pursed her lips and gave Jacobi a sharp look. Was she offended by his haughty, condescending tone generally, or simply by the insufferable way he’d expressed his half-baked thoughts on national identity? Two years into his degree—at a red-brick university whose name Mr. Acaster could barely bring himself to utter—Jacobi tended to pepper his pronouncements with the latest academic idioms he’d picked up from certain Marxist lecturers. Few of his scattershot declarations ever really found their mark, however.

We came to the room where many watercolours from Ravilious' final years, when he was an official war artist, were displayed. I was trying, I really was, to tap into the pathos of the compositions, painted just before he was lost at sea over Iceland on a rescue mission. But by now, I'd simply become embarrassed by Jacobi's need to educate me, and, as he droned on, I was struggling to give the images the attention they deserved:

"Yes, so. Here we are. The Lost Generation. We Brits do love our fallen heroes, don't we? Christ, don't even get my father started on Scott of the Antarctic or Rorke's Drift or whatever it was. Pretty much the worst thing you can do to piss all over your legacy as an English icon is to survive some dreadful calamity of your own making. I'm joking there a bit, of course, but the trope is a pretty well-established one, or so it seems to me. Mallory, yes, there, that's another one."

As Jacobi continued his lecture, I was certain I could pick up many of Mr. Acaster's expressions and cadences in his son's delivery. Looking at a striking image of bomb disposal experts at work on a lonely beach, for some reason, I was reminded of how Mr. Acaster would eye me suspiciously whenever he spoke—approvingly—of Brexit, which was a favourite topic.

The lady with the shawl had not followed us into this room, I'd noticed, but an old man in half-moon glasses was staring at Jacobi, his mouth open in silent horror. I saw him lean forward on his walking stick as if to approach us, then he must have thought better of it because he simply turned away, shaking his head in sad bewilderment.

This was the last room of the show, and, after a cursory glance at a few drab Regency portraits on our way towards the exit, Jacobi declared that he needed a smoke pronto, but first, he'd promised to buy Harriet an exhibition catalogue, and he was duty-bound to make good on that. I was standing outside the gift shop, waiting for him, when the same elderly character materialised next to me, bundled up in a long tweed overcoat despite the warmth of the August day. He stood a little too close—as if he didn't want the people funnelling out on either side of us to hear what he had to say—and, from his posture, I guessed that he'd arrived at my side because he had a few choice words to say to me. From longstanding experience, I wearily tensed myself for the oblique insult to come.

To my surprise, he had a heavy accent—perhaps Eastern European?—and seemed to be making an effort to maintain his civility despite still being visibly riled:

“Where are you from, might I ask, young man?”

“From South Africa. But I’m here studying right now.”

“Studying...?”

“History. And politics.”

“And your friend? He *is* your friend, I suppose? *Not* studying history, one would hope.”

He said this with a liberal dose of sarcasm, and I realised with relief that the object of his animosity wasn’t me but Jacobi. I turned then to look at him and was startled when he took my hand and gripped it tightly by his side. Did he require some assistance getting down the pathway that led to the road, or was he feeling faint and needed steadying? He took a few gulps of air and then spoke under his breath with extreme urgency. I noticed that he was tapping out an agitated rhythm on the ground with the tip of the cane that was shaking a little in the twisted claw of his other hand.

“I want you to understand something. Humour me, won’t you? Don’t be taken in by your friend. Can you promise me you won’t? I don’t think you would be, but one can never tell. He hasn’t the faintest idea what he’s talking about. Not because he’s young; you’re young, and I don’t imagine you’d come up with dreck like that. It’s his caste, d’you see? And his stupidity, from years of inbreeding. All they have left is memories of a time when they could do whatever they wanted and know they’d never be challenged. We’re both clear on that, I trust?”

Out of breath from his effort, the man looked up at me pleadingly. I realised he must have caught the conclusion of Jacobi’s oration on the nature of Britishness, as my friend perceived it from the lofty vantage point of the Acaster family pile in the Sussex countryside. And so, too, he would have heard me attempt to exact my revenge in the smallest of ways.

Like a great many people who are privately educated but not intelligent, Jacobi seized on any opportunity to display his spotty learning, thus laying bare his

deep, generational ignorance. Just before he'd disappeared inside the gift shop, he'd made a final bid to ensure I understood his line of reasoning, and the old man had obviously overheard this exchange:

"I think you do see by now how there's a very clear sense of what it means to be born English, a pride, let's say, encoded in the output of artists from our past. I flatter myself I've turned you into a bit of an Anglophile by now, so you can appreciate the throughline: 'Adelstrop,' Colonel Blimp, 'Jerusalem,' and all that. You know."

I didn't know, and Jacobi was very well aware of this. His discourse had turned into cunning point-scoring, and it was time for me to redress the balance a little, or try to:

"Whatever it was that being British meant to them back then is no longer relevant today, though, is it? Not really. Come on. You're talking about more than seventy years ago, aren't you? Is so much nostalgia and sentimentality really healthy now?"

Jacobi was rarely driven to consider what other people thought of him, however, and the way he'd cheerfully led us outside on our search for somewhere to sit and eat soon afterwards let me know that he'd taken no offence. Anyway, I'd spoken with enough airy neutrality that he could readily infer that my criticism was directed at other people because—I'm obliged to admit—although Jacobi's had been the loudest voice raised in wistful longing for the past and its hide-bound certainties, it hadn't been the only one I'd heard over the last couple of hours, not by any means.

My practical-minded parents would have disowned me if I'd chosen to pursue an arts degree, so I'd contemplated Ravilious' works with an untutored eye that day. My recollection, after all these years, is that I often found something ominous about them, though, like illustrations from a children's book that have dark, threatening undertones. Or that could be hindsight on my part. I also didn't have the right background against which to admire their almost perverse frivolity, although, having read up about the artist later, I believed I might have liked him as a man.

On that particular afternoon, though, I was left in no doubt that his mythical, pastoral England wasn't just another country but a distant universe towards

which I could never hope to complete my journey. Maybe, right there, was the genesis of things to come.

Harriet was out when we returned to the house, and Mr. Acaster was making a performance of cooking his famous cassoulet, with its attendant drama of crashing copper pans, messily peeled tomatoes slathered over chopping boards, and breadcrumbs crunching underfoot. It was his habit to make elaborate dishes requiring painstaking preparation at the weekend, leaving all the clearing up for the Polish help who came in on Mondays.

He peered up from the stove as Jacobi placed the exhibition catalogue on the only part of the oak table not covered with jars, opened tins, and packets of sausages and pork from the deli wrapped up in brown paper. Then he came over to take a better look, dripping fat onto the floor from the wooden spoon he was holding. He tapped lightly on the book with the corkscrew he was brandishing in the other hand, leaving a small dark stain on the cover:

“Socialist, wasn’t he? Probably a pacifist, too. They all were back then, you know. Would be going on all these blessed protest marches nowadays, I dare say.”

Jacobi had been paying some attention to the information displayed next to Ravilious’ work and knew this remark of his father’s to be likely untrue. And he knew that I knew this, too. Yet, through indolence, or indifference, or just plain fear, my friend refrained from contradicting Acaster senior. It occurred to me only hours later that his father’s outburst wasn’t really aimed at the long-dead artist anyway.



I’ve always been grateful that I’d only met Jacobi after I’d been at university almost a year—his flatmate had suffered some kind of protracted, very public breakdown and had dropped out, and I’d been looking for a place to rent once my year in the halls of residence was over. By then, some of what Jacobi may well have described as my ‘rough edges’ had been smoothed over through close contact with others just like him: mediocre fellow students from London and

the home counties who insisted on referring to Africa as a country, no matter how many times I tried to put them right.

To a large extent, my attempts to fit in tended to be undermined by everyone's desire to view me as an exotic novelty. And once I was sharing digs with Jacobi, I'd become aware not only of the obvious, glaring differences between us but also of those signifiers of class—subtle, unconsciously applied—that distinguished him from the state-educated students we knew. This was despite the fact that Jacobi, too, was trying to mould his own identity into one he felt was more socially acceptable. He would invite certain people to call him Jake if he decided that his given name might be the cause of some mirth or antagonism, for example.

Ironically, this had recently caused a big fight between him and his father, one that I'd felt very uncomfortable to have witnessed. A university administrator had phoned to speak to Jacobi on some problem to do with his coursework—he'd evidently been ignoring the emails she'd sent him on the matter during term time—and when Mr. Acaster had picked up the ringing landline, he'd been asked if "Jake" was at home. He stood in the library scowling at his son in silent bafflement until the subsequent conversation was over, then launched into his nasty tirade:

"Jake? I'm sorry—is that you now? Hey? What? Jake? Your mother and I gave you a perfectly decent name, and now you bastardise it so that people will think you were spawned in a tower block in Neasden or somewhere?"

It was interesting that the modification of his son's name was the cause of more grief to Mr. Acaster than the fact that Jacobi was perilously close to being made to re-do some modules because he had failed to turn in satisfactory assignments.

'Decent'—now there's a word for you. Groaning under the weight of its significance for a certain type of person. From Jacobi and his friends, I'd intuited that it had nothing to do with integrity or ethics but was code for something whose inferred value placed it above the dreams of the common herd. Thus, a decent little cottage was one of charm and character in a West Country location, even if it was so dilapidated that it had no functioning plumbing or heating. A decent job was one with an eye-watering starting salary, in a position that was unlikely

to be offered to a man unless he'd attended certain public schools. A decent wine cost more than what many of my compatriots made in a month.

Disdain is the prerogative of the upper-middle-class in Britain, yet Mr. Acaster had come by his status only lately, and by a roundabout way, it turned out. When I discovered something of his history from Harriet, I also realised that there's a marked distinction between family wealth and riches acquired relatively recently. The mansion in the countryside—which I never did get to see—was purchased by Mr. Acaster's grandfather, who'd come by his money through marriage to the daughter of the owner of a department store, where he was the under-manager. Piers himself had married well, twice—hence the accretion of heirloom ottomans and wonky chandeliers that now filled the impractical, six-storey London townhouse. Harriet was actually the one with semi-aristocratic forebears, yet she never showed any overt signs of snobbery, just a kind of genial cluelessness about people without her many advantages.

Harriet and the males of the family could argue—loudly and at length—over what sort of platter one of them needed to order from the local *fromagerie* (yes, there was one of these across the square), but they wore their lack of interest in world affairs or any matter that may have challenged their complacency as a badge of honour. Their studied indifference even extended to each other: I once asked Julius, one of the teenagers, what his twin brother intended to study once he left school and received an apathetic, bored shrug in reply.

It also struck me as odd that Mr. Acaster's four sons all had names beginning with 'J,' as if together they constituted his storied legacy, his endowment to the world, but were of little concern to him individually.

Jacobi himself was astonishingly incurious; he took no notice of how other people lived, although, in the course of late-night conversations, I'd learned that at least three times a year, he and a rolling entourage of friends and family would travel to some incredible place, about which he inevitably had almost nothing to say. The Lofoten Islands, Costa Rica, Tasmania?—they were all just new backdrops against which members of the clique could argue about aperitifs and roaming network charges. Touchier members of an ensemble would then be excluded from the roster of future invitees, replaced by others more useful to the Acasters' upward social trajectory.

I was relieved that none of the family ever asked to see any photos of our house in Savanna Hills or of my parents—posing awkwardly in formal attire at a conference or church event. Where I had once taken pride in their modest, European-style clothing and newly built modern home, I now saw only a sort of inverse vulgarity. Signifiers everywhere—the bland, generic artworks from Weylands; acres of earth-toned upholstery, and huge fluted terracotta pots on the front lawn—of people still so deeply unsure of their status that they could not bear to display individuality and thus risk exhibiting a lapse in taste.

By contrast, the Acasters' London home was decorously untidy, every corner and alcove stuffed full of good pieces of ancient provenance. ('Good' was another word that I'd come to understand meant implicitly valued only by a certain category of discerning person.) The fact that tatty old sofas were shedding stuffing and were covered in crusty stains and dog hairs meant that they were somehow good—in a way that new, clean and comfortable seating was not. Their many, rather confrontational abstract paintings were also declared to be good, daubed in acrylic primary colours by up-and-coming artists who turned out to be family friends. Initially, the canvases looked most incongruous to me, hanging like a clashing rebuke above the decaying antique furniture and faded rugs—but I soon found myself absorbing these lessons in refined living, even suspecting that I might come to look down on my parents' insipid interior-design choices eventually.

Of one thing I was certain—my mother would never spend more on a ratty old piece of falling-apart clothing than on something durable bought at the mall. Conversely, 'vintage' was a concept that Harriet was prepared to indulge in at vast expense, judging by the price tags I'd spotted hanging from some of her esoteric purchases.

The long list of archaic words and expressions I'd been collecting as notes on my phone while living with them represented echoes of a simpler time for the Acasters and their ilk. If I ever got to try these out at home or some place where I wanted people to understand that my education had not been crippling parochial, would this then make me as big a snob as Piers Acaster? I wondered.

Well, I reassured myself from time to time that if I was ever mocked for my affectation at some point in the future, I would know to turn the joke against

myself and defuse the situation with self-deprecation. In this, at least, Acaster and I could not have been more different—I never, not even once, heard him make fun of himself. Only other people. Only all the time.



We graduated the next year—Jacobi barely scraping a Third-Class degree once his prodigious coke habit and propensity for cribbing other people’s work came to sabotage his studies—and packed up our rented flat together as we talked about what we might do next. He was off to another stint in rehab, after which his father would find him a job in the city. Not the best use of his BA, but then Mr. Acaster had insisted, from the start, that it was a Mickey Mouse degree that would open no doors whatsoever. By then, Jacobi had sort of given up bumping heads with him and was deferring to his father’s directives with ill-mannered resentment whilst also acknowledging that he’d basically run out of other options.

I had no choice but to return home and then try to wangle a place on a Master’s programme so I could come back to Europe. When I finally did so, I didn’t feel particularly guilty about not trying to meet up with my old flatmate in person. We’d been following each other on Facebook for a while, but to be mercenary about it, we had little to offer each other once our student days were over.

I did notice that Abi was pursuing a photography course, though, and in late 2019, she invited herself to come and visit me in South Africa, although coronavirus then put her plans on hold and the idea ultimately fizzled out. A portfolio I found later on Flickr seemed to consist of pictures taken in hospital delivery rooms and NICUs towards the tail end of the pandemic—strange, affecting triptychs of masked-up men, women and exhausted-looking medics alongside close-up shots of grief-stricken brown faces. I can’t be certain where they were taken, but I’m pretty sure it wasn’t a country in the Global North, and certainly not in the UK.

Her oeuvre seemed to comprise commentaries on the people missing from family groups: grandparents and even a few fathers who ought to have been present for the births but whom the disease had taken away. I was glad that the

young girl I'd remembered as quiet and thoughtful—unable to assert herself in the male-dominated household of quarrelsome Acaster extroverts—had been able to carve out a successful niche for herself. Last time I looked, I believe she'd won some photojournalism award or other.

(This is maybe the moment to confess that I'd stolen an idea from her when I was casting about for a name for my first book. I made a note of the words “void” and “lacunae” when I'd been reading about an exhibition she was mounting, and, inspired by their brevity, I'd jettisoned the lengthy, overblown titles I'd been considering.)

But although I'd swiftly detached myself from the Acasters—not even bothering to send condolences when one of the three younger brothers was killed in a snowboarding accident—at least two of them had not, it seemed, forgotten about me.



A would-be author flounders about in a sea of rejection. If they are lucky, at some point, a submission is accepted and a career takes off in fits and starts, as happened to me. Then, eventually, a few find they can really commit to writing—not just in the small hours of the morning, but on a semi-professional basis, and secure in a job whose workload is not too burdensome. They are warmed by the respect of those they respect, accepting good faith, valuable suggestions from established writers at workshops and retreats, and honing their craft.

And then comes a weird moment of personal triumph. Not yet the award of some lucrative prize, perhaps, but the gratification that comes from being roundly criticised by a person whose opinions are antithetical to your own.

A month or so after my satirical novel, loosely based on my time in British academia, had appeared to some encouraging reviews and respectable initial sales, I'd received an email from Jacobi's father. Now signing himself 'Sir Piers Acaster QC,' he'd expressed regret that I hadn't extended him the courtesy of an informal approach while I was preparing my manuscript for *Hauntologies*. Otherwise, he would not now be forced to send me the attached cease-and-desist letter from the family lawyer.

Whether he was now growing imprecise in his old age or he'd deliberately left his allegations vague, it was difficult to work out what *exactly* I was being accused of doing. It seemed that he'd taken offence at the (deliberately sketchy) caricatures of a clan somewhat similar to his own that I'd scattered throughout the chapters of *Hauntologies*. Improbably, given his line of work, he deemed that these amounted to libel—despite being entirely innocuous and clearly exaggerated for comic effect.

A far more serious charge implied that I'd plagiarised content from Jacobi's forthcoming auto-fictional account of his decade-long struggle against addiction, a battle that had worsened once he acquired a circle of drug-dealing friends at university. Apparently, excerpts of this story had appeared occasionally on Jacobi's blog, and his father now accused me of ripping these off for my own work.

It was all total nonsense, naturally. My publisher had been scrupulous about clearing my manuscript with their legal department, and I knew Acaster didn't have a leg to stand on. I'd not even known about Jacobi's blog, 'A Lad Undone,' although I now used a VPN to take a quick look. If Acaster was truly concerned with matters litigious, he would have done well to analyse his son's posts with care since Jacobi's ill-disguised portrait of me constituted grounds for a much stronger counterclaim.

I Googled Acaster and discovered that he'd only recently retired on health grounds. I pictured him at the kitchen table, now in a shabby cardigan and badly in need of a haircut, yet still wanting to exercise his argumentative zeal. I could hear him castigating poor Jacobi and listing his many failings, telling the boy that he'd squandered all his opportunities—ones generously set up over the years by Acaster senior and his wide circle of associates. Now, he would have to find a way to monetise the only thing he'd managed to do—consuming every illicit substance known to mankind—since he'd left university more than five years ago.

I read the long threatening email again and then, scrolling down, noticed at the bottom a 'PS' that I'd almost missed:

'Irrespective of the legal issues drawn to your attention in the attached, I shall point out that your book is, in my opinion, wholly without merit. It is not funny, merely spiteful, and its observations of the English—given the not incon-

siderable hospitality you enjoyed at our expense—do you no credit whatsoever. I would remind you that my family and I treated you only with the good manners for which the British are rightly famous, despite the upheaval your stay with us entailed and the disastrous influence you obviously had on my son.’

I forwarded the email and unread attachment to my agent for her to deal with, along with a note asking her to check the link to Jacobi’s blog. In disputatious times, it’s never a bad idea to be forewarned that someone is preparing legal action, even if it is one doomed to failure. Pulping a book is an expensive business; restoring a reputation is perhaps an even more onerous task. By 2021, a number of writers and academics far better regarded than I had been caught up in accusations of copying other people’s work. Even after they’d eventually exonerated themselves, the taint still lingered.

I printed up the email and took it over to my window seat to read again by the silvery light of the Oregon autumn afternoon. Across the way, the grand, Gothic-style architecture of one of the college’s main buildings seemed to gently mock the aspirations of a man like Acaster. What had troubled him more: that I’d never been impressed by his money and status or that he perceived he had a failure for a son, whereas I had achieved some modicum of success?

I returned to my laptop, opened a new file, and began to compose the response I knew I would never send. The document I ended up with covered several pages of closely typed text: explanations, clarifications, repudiations, and justifications. A little hint of shock and outrage, but not too much. I alluded to the ‘Ghanaian student’—the shifty supplier of Class A drugs exposed in Jacobi’s blog—and casually mentioned how easy it would be for a reader of his forthcoming roman-à-clef to assume this was a thinly veiled reference to me, should he be foolish enough to include it.

There was more along those lines, but mostly, I paged through the copy of my own book that I kept in my messenger bag, re-read the paragraphs that would have had the potential to inflame Acaster the most, and dismissed his fabricated claims in a terse bullet-point list. After almost an hour, I can’t deny I was pretty pleased with my handiwork.

I then saved the file in a folder I’d named ‘Cuttings’ and soon forgot about it. My agent had assuaged my worries about Acaster’s threats within hours of

receiving the message I'd forwarded her, and the whole storm in a teacup faded from my mind in the mad scramble to get my next manuscript outline to the publishers before their deadline.



Today, almost two years later, as I did a bit of spring cleaning on my laptop before upgrading it to something more fitting for a 'Top Forty under Forty' author, I found myself reviewing the 'Cuttings' folder and re-reading the various drafts I'd archived there. Thoughts on the writing process that I used as the basis for interview material; lists of writers I'd once wanted to check out; the plot for some speculative fiction that never really came together; and then, 'Responses to Acaster, June 2021.'

I have an excellent memory, and I began reading thinking I would recall, with some accuracy, what I'd set down there. I'd typed without much consideration for how my words would be interpreted by my accuser or his lawyer because—needless to say—they were never going to see them. It's a technique I'd used a few times when I found myself temporarily mentally besieged—writing that letter-you-are-never-going-to-send is a cheap and effective form of therapy, I'd learned, a powerful way to disarm hurt and confusion and achieve some closure.

Except that, when I scanned those three pages, I was taken aback. Where I'd fully expected to find only dispassionate reasoning and mature rejoinders, instead, I discovered whole paragraphs of cringing abasement. I'd thought I'd addressed Acaster as an equal, man to man, and shown—unequivocally—that I was not someone to be trifled with or intimidated. I could barely recognise the person who'd written with such obvious approval-seeking intent, excuse following excuse, interspersed—I saw—with five instances of the word 'apologise.'

I went to the cabinet where I kept drinks for visitors and poured myself a small glass of vermouth. I was profoundly shocked at what I'd set down by way of exoneration, and once the unaccustomed liquor had started to take effect, I had a moment of heart-stopping panic when I momentarily imagined that perhaps I'd emailed the mea culpa to Acaster after all.

Had he been right before when he'd accused me of being a cuckoo in the nest, enjoying his hospitality while secretly planning to mock him and his family later in print? Had he correctly guessed that I'd disguised myself back then, a sly sycophant plotting to uncover his pretensions? I tried to remember any conversations we'd shared where a desire to ingratiate myself had been embarrassingly clear. It seemed possible, from a review of the email I hadn't sent him, that even up until recently, my need for his approval was far stronger than I would ever have admitted.

There'd been no further communications from Acaster or his lawyer after his first threatening message to me. The matter had been dealt with by my agent and my publishers, who—Manuela informed me—simply fired off a blunt email in response, demolishing every claim against me and suggesting that Jacobi's manuscript for his own novel ought to be checked over in case he'd been tempted to cast the same kind of aspersions against me that I'd been falsely accused of writing.

The entire thing ought to have been ancient history, yet here I was now, typing out a draft rebuttal in far more censorious terms without any clear notion of what I intended to do with it. And then I stopped.

If I had misremembered the contents of the email I'd never sent, what of Acaster's original blast of opprobrium? That would need to be revisited for sure. Also, what had become of Jacobi's novel? Maybe that was something I ought to look into as well, before committing to anything rash.

I did make an effort to stay current with new books, but the self-published little volumes, online journals and niche imprints now proliferated at such a rate that it would've been easy to overlook anything Jacobi had managed to convince someone to put out. (Plus, well, here's the thing—the reception my own debut work received from friends and colleagues had been underwhelming, to say the least. This was especially true of the ones struggling to complete their own first literary efforts, who could barely bring themselves to comment 'congrats' on my social media. So, the entire cohort of my would-be competitors could basically go fuck themselves, so far as I was concerned.)

I struggled to locate much information online about Jacobi's book—*Elegy for the English Damned*—since most references to it were buried within the many gleeful

articles about the vicious family feud that the autobiographical work had ignited. Acaster senior remained as combative as ever and had taken severe exception to the way that his estranged son had chosen to depict various events in their shared history, most especially the aftermath of the accident in Switzerland in 2018 that had killed Jonty.

Since its recent publication, barely a day seemed to have gone by that one of the British newspapers hadn't published a claim or counterattack by father or son, or sought some doorstepped comment from Harriet and the two other brothers—all of whom had quite differing recollections and reasons to defend their own behaviour.

It would have taken but a second to itemise the very few sins that Piers was *not* being charged with by his eldest son in all this clickbait but actually, I was too busy scanning the pieces for any oblique reference to myself to give his accusations much attention. Eventually, I conceded that there was nothing for it—I'd have to place an order online at some point and read the bloody thing myself to see if I could be identified within the pages of its 'excoriating,' 'eviscerating' prose.

To date, though, nobody had apparently put two and two together regarding my long-ago relationship with Jake Chyld, as he was now styling himself (I vaguely remembered that the latter could have been the maiden name of his very absent birth mother). Manuela hadn't been in touch yet to warn me that perhaps I might receive a call from a journo asking for my take on the whole shoddy affair either, but I found a pen and some scrap paper and began noting down a few recollections, just in case.

A whiff of notoriety, a vindication of the hints contained within *Hauntologies*, an opportunity to indulge in a bit of self-promotion to boost my own novel's sales... Manuela was always lecturing me that I needed to be less reticent about leveraging my outsider status and now here could be a perfect chance to attach myself—albeit as an innocent bystander—to the scandal playing itself out across the UK press.

It might be a good idea to suggest she got off her skinny ass and stirred up things with my publisher, too. Maybe line up some interviews for me so that I could ride on the seedy Acaster coattails awhile, as I'd anyway been accused of

doing two years back by Jake's father.

Or perhaps not. There seemed to be enough people already behaving very badly on the other side of the Atlantic. Did I really want to associate myself with the unseemly, multi-generational war of words currently scorching the earth in Primrose Hill? Was the highroad a preferable route for me to take right now? It would do no harm to sleep on that particular conundrum before I put in a call to Manuela tomorrow morning.

During a recent Facetime with my father—one of the very few people whose opinion I valued—I'd recoiled at his remark that I was becoming "cynical, mercenary, like an American." It was a critique I'd do well to bear in mind as I plotted my course through the next several days.

Yet, all in all, the afternoon was turning into one ripe with any number of possibilities for me, wasn't it? Could it toss up some new ideas for my long-overdue sophomore novel, even?

I was already running late for a department meeting, but I would maybe look Abi up on her social media once I got back to my room and then put out a few feelers. See if there wasn't something to be gained by re-establishing a connection with her. We always liked each other and possibly shared an unspoken mutual attraction, as young as she was back then. I could even maybe engineer an invitation to visit.

The irony was definitely not lost on me: I was beginning to feel rather nostalgic for good old blighty.

Formula for Murder

Ozoya Irene Christopher

Detective Malu Okarime walked into the lavishly furnished office of the Detective Superintendent, a fat, bald man with bulging eyes, a prominent beak-like nose, and a soot-marked moustache. In his opinion, the DS was not only cantankerous; he was also fussy.

Three powerful LED lights illuminated the office's ceiling. Those within the precinct who accessed this space always claimed they experienced a soothing ambiance, but his view was contrary—he always felt uneasy whenever he was in there, especially with the mind-boggling case that was fast gaining infamy in the eyes of the public.

The DS was typically ensconced in his massive leather chair which backed a window overlooking the rambling grounds of the precinct.

Before him, a thick, glass-topped table laden with a towering file tray, a monitor, a sleek telephone, a diminutive yellow canister labelled 'chlorhexidine'—which he surmised might be a prescription drug—and half a dozen framed pictures of the DS alongside family and friends.

The walls, too, had a couple of framed pictures, each depicting a hyperrealistic perspective of nature expertly executed in oil and acrylic.

Two potted plants were evident, adding a touch of green to the office.

Two other suited men were seated within the plush space. They were the doyens of the Criminal Investigation Department. The man on the left had a lithe frame. With sombre brown eyes, a long nose, and thin lips with a jaunty jawline, Detective Jonah Ibe, who headed the homicide unit and the 'Free Zone Tripartite Murders,' as the tabloids christened the gruesome killings, had been called to the DS' office.

The other man possessed a stout physique, a long face, large eyes with double-creased eyelids, a downturned nose, pouty lips, and an angular jaw with stubble. He was Detective Okoye Emecheta—a hard nut in the force, rumoured to have an inkling for anything 'fuzzy.' However, to Malu, they were just rumours. Firmly clutched in his hand was a bulky white file.

"Good morning, sir," Malu said obsequiously.

The DS waved Malu to a seat opposite him, his expression loathsome. "The public outcry over the three murders at the Free Zone is becoming overwhelming. It's been three months, and no suspect has been apprehended."

"Not even any lead from the coroner's office?" Okoye asked.

Jonah frowned. "Autopsy reports reveal nothing significant. Therefore, we must review the facts of the case."

The DS nodded and added, "The reason I sent for the lead detective was to brief us on his findings so far."

Malu took a few seconds to gather his fleeting wits. He retrieved his reliable pad from the breast pocket of his sleeve and took a cursory look at the pages he had scribbled with key points regarding the case. "The three Free Zone murders are quite typical in nature. The murdered victims were prostitutes, aged between twenty-five and twenty-nine.

"The first victim, Sarah Balogun, a short, stout lady, was allegedly strangled with a ligature and transported in a black sedan to an alley illuminated by a chain of floodlights on a distributor road at 8:28 p.m. The owner of the vehicle dumped the body at that location. A CCTV camera installed at a nearby spa was unable to capture a clear image of the killer because the body was dumped

at the blindspot of the surveillance.

“Three minutes before the arrival of the police, a hooded, plain-clothed figure, captured by the spa’s CCTV camera, walked close to the body, made some observations, and then drifted into the darkness.”

The three men looked at him curiously.

“Three weeks later, another corpse identified as Bella Odu, a twenty-six-year-old woman, was discovered fifty metres from where Sarah Balogun’s body had been found. Autopsy reports also indicate she was strangled with a ligature. Similarly, a CCTV camera installed on a low-slung building abutting the street—a boutique—, captured the black sedan stopping some yards away. An unidentified individual dumped the body in that area, and like the latter, it was also on the blindspot of the camera. This occurred at 8:29 p.m. Minutes later, again, a hooded figure appeared, observed the corpse, and vanished into oblivion at exactly 8:33 p.m. While we are not certain if it’s the same person, my analysis of their physique suggests it is.”

The DS listened with rapt attention, a tinge of concern evident on his countenance.

Malu continued, “The third body was that of twenty-nine, Caroline Ofeye, a woman with a statuesque physique. Unlike the other two, reports from the coroner showed traces of fluids and a strong antiseptic agent in her lungs, suggesting she was drowned in water, likely a pool or a tub containing the substance. At about 8:29 p.m., investigations revealed a similar pattern. Her body was dumped near a gaudy building housing an eatery, transported by a black sedan. This location was about eighty metres from the previous murder. A CCTV camera attached to the building’s flat roof captured the body being dropped, and like the earlier murders, the action was carried out at the blindspot of the camera. At 8:30-something, the hooded figure appeared to examine the body again, and, as with the last two murders, he departed the scene.”

A sudden silence enveloped the room like a blanket. The four men, all befuddled, exuded grim facial expressions.

The telephone on the DS’s shimmering table suddenly buzzed. He scooped the receiver from its cradle and said in a calm voice, “Hello?”

The three men could pick a male's muffled voice, speaking unintelligible words.

The DS responded with a face that suddenly exuded a dint of anxiety, "You mean he came on his own? Okay.... The lead detective will be there shortly."

The click at the other end meant the line had been disengaged.

The DS shifted his gaze to Malu, "An informant has emerged. I have just been informed he walked into our Ikeja division office and wishes to speak to the head detective of the case. The informant agreed to speak on the condition that his name is not disclosed."

A flurry of excitement welled up in Malu's stomach, though he found it queer that the informant would not disclose his name. He lurched to his feet instantly. "I'll be on my way, sir."

Okoye was on his feet too, a broad grin spreading across his face. "That's great news."

The DS' face was aglow. Jonah's was mild, a smile apparent on his face

"You can go, and please report back to me as soon as you're done," the DS emitted in an excited voice.

Malu nodded and swiftly walked out of the office into the long corridor. He was halted halfway by Okoye who was outside the DS' office alone, his once beaming countenance looking solicitous, "Detective Malu, can you spare a minute?"

Malu walked up to him, "Ensure you quiz him professionally and try to ascertain the validity of his statements, especially if he alleges the crime was committed by suspects you might consider unconventional."

"I don't get your point, sir."

Okoye bored his eyes into Malu's. "As an experienced detective, I can decipher the validity or falsity of any informant's statements. My engagements with suspects given such conditions have shown that three out of every five persons who claim to provide valid information are either demented or liars; so, tread with caution."

Malu nodded and plodded to the stairs that led out of the building.



It was 7:00 p.m. when Detective Malu Okarime entered the dingy interrogation room of the Ikeja division of the Force, holding a flimsy white file in his hand.

The room was a small, decrepit space that could accommodate no more than three persons. Apart from a small elevated slot which had a laminated pane that served as a source of light, the space was virtually dark and almost etiolate. A table was positioned at the centre of the room, and behind it sat a middle-aged man with damp, unkempt hair.

His countenance looked sullen and was creased with wrinkles. With sunken, bloodshot eyes, the man had a rugged, almost rebellious appearance. His bulbous nose and thick, rubbery lips concealed a gap-toothed dentition. His plaid long-sleeved shirt was soiled, suggesting he had been involved in a scuffle of sorts.

Malu tossed the file on the table and exuded an indifferent countenance, "So you came here on your own?"

The man expressed a smile, his set of gap-toothed dentitions becoming evident, "I obviously don't wish to waste any time here. I hope you are aware of the caveat if I have to unveil all I know."

Malu was becoming peeved by this man's impudence. "I'm aware of it. There's something strange about this case."

The man leaned back in the iron straight-backed chair, absorbing Malu's remark with a disposition. Malu sat back in his chair in a similar way.

The Detective opened the file, rubbing his scrawny jaw. "I have been going through your written statement, and it's strange that you claim to always be in the wrong place at the right time."

Malu raised his head and stared thoughtfully at him. The man remained stoic.

"Three murders were reported around the Ikeja Free Zone within a hundred-metre radius, and from the footage obtained by our men from various places around the area, you were consistently seen near the scene. Can I know why?"

The man's inexplicable pause further angered Malu, but he restrained his emotions from boiling over.

The sombre-looking man responded mildly, sensing the rage simmering in the detective, "There's no need to get all emotional about this case. I am not your regular informant, so don't feel I'm here to create a scene that would become a hot sensation for the dailies. I need to take my time to present the facts as I know them."

Malu could see the man had a steely mien—one that could not be cowed or intimidated.

The man added, "However, my presence at all three locations was deliberate. And if you must know, I'm carrying out an assignment for an outfit I can't disclose because of classified reasons. However, I'm ready to work with you in your quest to unveil the killer of the three victims. Why do you think you've neither a clue nor a suspect regarding the murders?"

Malu shrugged.

"That's because your killer is masked within the institution meant to handle situations of this magnitude."

Malu was shocked by the man's coherence. He had taken a cursory look at the file back at the precinct before making his way here. He recalled the salient points of the case.

Three women had been murdered in the last two months. The crimes were all committed within the Free Zone, a coastal area designated as an *entrepôt*.

Interestingly, the *entrepôt* had become a leisure hub comprising hotels, bars, and other recreational hotspots over the years. The influx of people from the hinterland would forever transform its landscape. Men and women of shady backgrounds thronged the Free Zone, consequently opening a portal for the *imbroglia* that would become prevalent within the economic district—the peddling of contraband, particularly drugs.

The crimes soon skyrocketed with muggings, violent assaults, and even murders happening daily—an occurrence that was gaining an alarming traction. The tripartite murders were the final straw.

Malu furrowed his brow, feeling the plaid-clothed man had more information on the strange murders.

The man discerned the detective was flummoxed by the intricacies surrounding the case. He assumed a bolt and upright position, shoulders hunched and eyes aglow. Malu could see the man was ready to speak.

"I have been following this case, and there's one probable reason the killer has evaded law enforcement agents."

"Why?" Malu asked, looking at him askance.

"Firstly, it's important that we examine the three murdered victims. They were all call-girls, and typically, they were drawn to men who would patronise them. However, one of these murders was targeted at a specific victim simply because she was an informant of the police and was involved in a bust that saw the apprehension of prominent members of a cartel, among them a certain John Omenka, aka, 'Milkman.' The others were mere distractions. The girl in question was no other than your last victim, Caroline Ofefe."

Malu smirked, recalling what Okoye had intimated to him earlier at the precinct.

"How can you substantiate this claim?"

The man responded, "The spa where the first body was dumped belonged to John Omenka. You can go there for confirmation. All three girls hung around there, and it's a melting pot for drug peddlers and users. There is footage of the meeting held in the week before the first murder, precisely on the 12th of March. Three characters were captured in that footage. She was seated right between two out of the three men in question. One of the three men is your killer. Caroline, meanwhile, was gathering information for the drug enforcement agents."

Malu scrawled down the information on his pad and added, "Is this the only evidence you have?"

The man replied curtly, "No. The black sedan used to transport the corpses is registered to a certain Isidore Olu, a prominent scrap metal vendor located about a hundred metres from the port. Now, this character may not be well known to law enforcement agents, but he lent that car to the killer in a bid

to ensure his drug-peddling business thrives. The car is currently in his yard, parked somewhere behind a dilapidated building in the yard.”

Malu continued to scribble, amazed at the way the informant dished out the facts with such a level of confidence that oozed from his very being.

Malu sprang to his feet and banged twice on the door. A fair complexioned officer walked in. He ripped the page he had scribbled and handed it over to him. “I want these two places searched now!”

The young officer frowned. “What if a warrant is required?”

“This case is in the public domain. The instructions are for us to apprehend the killer at all costs. Such exigencies are not relevant at this point.”

The officer nodded and studied the details on the paper before walking away.

Malu returned to his seat, staring at the man whose eyes were fixed on him.

“And what if you are wrong?” Malu asked slowly.

“I walked in here by myself. If I wasn’t right, I wouldn’t be here in the first place. The fact that you have no suspects makes me a guinea pig, but I intend to shift the focus to the killer.”

“Go on,” Malu said.

“After the bust by the Drug Enforcement Agents on the other suspects, it was obvious one person who held a very senior position was part of the deal, and he didn’t want to be implicated.

“Don’t you find it mind-boggling how drugs still make their way into the city despite the efforts of the police and Drug Enforcement Agents? The drugs are peddled from the ports, and the seeming indifference of security agents there could be blamed for this. It’s little wonder why the various top officials of the police force have done nothing to stem the influx of drugs into the city.”

Malu instantly made a deduction, “Obviously, someone higher up in the force is allowing the drugs through the ports.”

The man snapped his fingers, his face gleaming with excitement. “Now you get the drift.”

“So, who do you think is responsible for that?” Malu inquired.

The man grinned. “You were at the scene of the crime—the guest house. I know there were no prints or nothing to link any suspect. But there was something you all missed.”

“What could that be?” Malu asked.

They were interrupted by a tap on the door.

Malu walked to the door and opened it; the fair-complexioned officer had returned.

“The patrol team attached to the Ikeja port has discovered the scrap yard is owned by a certain Olu Isidore. The team further searched around the perimeter of the yard and discovered a black sedan registered in the name of the same individual,” he reported.

The statement by the officer rattled Malu. He took a quick glimpse at the informant, who was beaming radiantly.

“There’s a problem, sir.” Malu shifted his attention to the officer. “The case file on the tripartite murders is missing.”

“What!?”

The seated man said mildly, “Whoever requested for the file is the killer you seek.”

Malu recalled his time at the DS’ office and asked, “What colour is the file?”

“White sir.”

Malu turned to the plaid-clothed informant. “I think we may have unveiled the killer.”

The man grinned. “Go get him, Detective. The damning evidence you require is right under your nose. Adding to that, he possesses a prescription that he takes everywhere with him—a medication from his doctor for a rare allergy he has for anything unclean.”

“But first, I need the March 12th footage as evidence.”

"I can hear the phone ringing. I guess it's from the patrol team that headed to the spa." The young officer grinned.



Malu tapped on the door.

The DS barked, "Come in."

He slid the door open and walked into the office. Expectedly, it was the triumvirate he had conversed with the day before—all the evidence he needed to nail the killer was right before him; it was right before his eyes.

"Sir, I have interrogated the informant and..." he paused, taking a seat and staring at the DS. "... It's quite tragic that enforcers of the law are those engaged in the impunity that pervades the society. When you instructed me to interrogate the informant, I thought it was just an exercise in futility till he unravelled the knotty issues related to this case.

"Three murders were committed for the sake of one. While the other two were mere distractions, Caroline Ofege was really the one marked for elimination, owing to what she knew.

"It's important to emphasise that the Ikeja Free Zone has a persistent drug problem that remains unresolved. These were allowed by authorities of the police force who had ties with a drug syndicate, and it happened that the young lady was a mole gathering information for the Drug Enforcement Agency.

"And then the killings started in a bid to distract the public from the killing of Caroline Ofege."

Okoye's look was distraught; Jonah's face was shrouded in a cloud of worry, and the DS exuded a perturbed visage. "What proof do you have to back your allusions?" he asked Malu.

A tap on the door set the men on the edge, except Malu, who remained impassive. He went to the door and eased it open.

Two officers walked in, looking solemn.

Malu turned to the three men, pointing to the file tray; "I can see the file

on the tray, which is ostensibly for the tripartite murders. I guess the DS gave instructions for Detective Okoye to hand the file over to ascertain what I had earlier related to everyone here.

“What you all don’t know is that the nameless informant was spot on regarding the case rather than a bunch of papers in a file.”

The DS stole furtive glances at the file which was at the top of the bundle of files.

“I guess whoever brought it here did so either for assessment or to destroy its contents.”

The DS banged his pudgy hand on the desk, his eyes narrowing at Malu. “How dare you, Detective?”

Okoye chipped in, “Sir, you requested the file yesterday because you intended to ascertain the contents of the document.”

“Mr. DS, sir, we have footage of you engaging in a conversation with the popular ‘Milkman,’” Malu interjected. “Secondly, the owner of the black sedan has identified you as the driver of the sedan who conveyed the bodies of the three murdered victims to the locations they were found and...”

Okoye and Jonah turned their attention to the DS, who looked confounded.

Malu walked to the glass-topped table and slowly picked up the chlorhexidine canister. “When I was here yesterday, I noticed a drug here. I understand it’s a prescription for a rare condition you suffer. Little wonder why this office is squeaky clean. I also recalled from my elementary chemistry class that antiseptics were in the halogen family, and I went through the report, which stated that Caroline’s lungs were filled with water containing a substance laced with an antiseptic additive.

“The coroner actually stated the chemical formula of the substance: $C_{22}H_{30}Cl_2N_{10}$..” He reached for his pad and read through a page bearing salient notes he had made, “The coroner defined the substance found in Miss Caroline’s lungs as cationic poly biguanide (bisbiguanide), and if you analyse this canister, you’ll find that these are the components of chlorhexidine.”

Malu handed the canister to Okoye and Jonah, who examined its details.

“Mr. DS, sir, you had to cover your tracks from being detected; hence, you took Miss Caroline Ofege, just like the other two ladies, to a guest house located on the hinterland belonging to the ‘Milkman.’ There, you would strangle them and dump them in the Free Zone. You were so confident that you never thought anyone kept tabs on you. With respect to these findings, you are hereby under arrest for the murders of Sarah Balogun, Bella Odu, and Caroline Ofege.”

The DS’s eyes widened in stunned silence.

The two officers walked to his table and secured a pair of handcuffs across his chubby wrists.

As they led the sore-faced DS out of the room, Jonah and Okoye stood to their feet, shell-shocked.

Malu was on his way out of the office when an abashed Okoye asked, “Who was that informant who solved the tripartite murders? Could he be a Drug Enforcement Agent or an intelligence operative?”

Malu shrugged. “His identity remains a mystery.”

Jonah raised his eyebrows. “Where is he?”

Malu grinned. “We let him go as soon as he disclosed the relevant information we needed to solve the crime.”

Malu gave an overly deferential salute before returning to his office, a broad smile spreading across his face.

A Taste of Darkness

James Obuchere

“A pipe smoker can only enjoy a puff in a peaceful environment.”

– African proverb

My life came tumbling down the day Gen. Simba Majivuno was declared the winner of the controversial polls. It was the day I understood the saying, “If you want to know the importance of light, just sit in darkness for a while.”

I had just finished high school after sitting for my final exams in November of that year. Unfortunately, our country’s general elections were also scheduled to be held around that time—towards the end of December.

Tension had been rife as the clock ticked towards D-day. Some leaflets had been found scattered in my home area, warning ‘outsiders’ to vacate Valley Springs or face the consequences.

On Election Day, people had come out in their thousands to cast their votes

in an election that pitted the incumbent, Gen. Majivuno, against Dr. Paul Karanga, the longtime leader of the opposition. Long queues had been witnessed in all polling centres as early as 6 a.m.

Apparently, people wanted change. The incumbent, an ex-soldier, had been at the helm for a long time—two terms as a military ruler, and then one term as a civilian when the former Karina Nation had become the People's Republic of Karina. And now, as a civilian, he was attempting his second bid at the top seat.

On the countdown to elections, opinion polls had predicted a 55% victory for the opposition against the ruling party's 48%. Thus, after casting their votes, people had returned to their homes to catch up on the results as they were being streamed live from the national tallying centre.

As predicted, it was obvious that Dr. Karanga was poised for victory as he maintained an early lead against the incumbent. Leki Town, his birthplace, was already in a celebratory mood.

But later in the afternoon of the same day, the atmosphere suddenly changed. Rumours started to circulate that the incumbent had plans to rig the polls. Before people could digest this news, there came an announcement on the radio and TV—Gen. Simba had garnered 52% of the votes against the opposition's 48%!

And that's the day the People's Republic of Karina went up in flames.

That evening, Mariga, my father's long-time friend, came and informed us about some youths who were planning to raid our home because we belonged to Gen. Majivuno's ethnic group—which was believed to have descended from the biblical house of Judah. Or maybe it was because we were 'foreigners' who had migrated from some far off place.

Fear gripped us, but what could we do? Valley Springs was the only home we had ever known for as long as I could remember. The land we lived on had been my great grandfather's, who had migrated from central Karina many years ago. Thus, ours was an ancestral land that had been bequeathed to my father, who was the eldest son of my late grandfather, and to Uncle Salami.

We knew things were bad when, during the 7 o'clock news on TV, we saw

houses being torched and people being chased from their homes by pan-ga-wielding youths. The same youths had also barricaded major roads with stones and burning tyres as they chanted anti-Simba songs.

The usual cheerfulness was missing in the kitchen as I assisted my mum in preparing supper. I was tasked with preparing *ugali* after my mum had finished preparing vegetables. As I scooped it onto the big plate, a line formed right in the middle. It was a sign of ill fortune, but I kept it to myself.

Around midnight, as we slept, we heard a noise some distance from our home. It sounded like men chanting and approaching our homestead.

The noise grew louder, accompanied by the sound of many footsteps. Clad only in my nightdress, I rose and sat on the edge of the bed, shaking from toe to head.

Suddenly, there was a loud knock on the door. I heard Father ask, "Who's there?" For an answer, there was the sound of something heavy banging on the door, and it crashed with a loud thud.

Mama screamed. A group of youths armed with crude weapons stormed into our house. A flashlight blinded my eyes. They ransacked the house and then descended on me in turns as I screamed and tried to fight, but in vain. Unable to withstand the pain, I passed out.

When I came to my senses, I found myself in a clean environment that smelled of strong disinfectant. I realised that I was in a hospital—Siloam General Hospital, as was written on my bed cover. A young nurse in a blue uniform was smiling at me.

"Time for your medicine, Maya." I struggled to sit up. Pain shot through my spine. She gave me some tablets and a glass of water. She watched me as I popped the pills into my mouth and washed them down my throat with water.

"Now lie down. You'll be alright," she said and sauntered off, swaying her ample posterior.

Siloam General Hospital was a sight to behold. Many people had been brought there with arrows lodged in their bodies. Even the corridors were jammed with

patients—mostly post-election violence victims, who were groaning in pain.

I came to learn that I had been brought there by the Red Cross on the morning after the attack. My dad, too, was in the same hospital with deep panga cuts. My mom and my brother Kelvin—who was two years older than me—had vanished during the commotion, and their whereabouts were still unknown.

On the third day after our admission at Siloam Hospital, Uncle Salami and Aunt Salma came to visit us. His home had been spared from the arson attack on the grounds that Aunt Salma was of the *Wakambi* tribe, who had overwhelmingly voted for Dr. Karanga. It's also the community that claims to be the original 'owners' of Valley Springs.

They informed us of how, after the Red Cross had taken us away, our house had been set ablaze, together with everything we owned. There was no way they could have taken us in unless they wanted to risk being attacked, too. This was too much to take in. I silently sobbed.

They also had some shocking news—some people had perished in an inferno that had razed a church where they had sought refuge, and that the identity of the victims had not been established yet.

Hearing this, and considering that my mum and my brother Kelvin's whereabouts were still a mystery, apprehension gripped me.

After two weeks, I was discharged from the hospital. Doctors had done a splendid stitching job on my torn hymen, as well as putting me on morning-after pills, just in case. They told me that there was nothing to fear now.

My father was also discharged on the same day, and we were taken to an emergency camp for internally displaced people (IDPs) some distance on the outskirts of Siloam.

By some miracle, we reunited with my brother at the IDP camp, but he had bad news for us.

After we had hugged each other and shed tears, he narrated how, together with Mum, they had managed to escape from the hands of the enraged youths, finding refuge in Valley springs Pentecostal church, which had become a fort for those under attack.

The youths, on learning that the church was shielding their enemies, decided to set it ablaze. Kelvin was one of those who had managed to escape through the window after yanking off the grilles. But two hundred people lost their lives in the inferno, including our dear mum. Fresh tears streamed down my cheeks on learning this, and I could not eat for a whole day.

Uncle Salami had avoided looking me in the eye as he narrated the church tragedy.

At the camp, there was news about concerns from foreign states because Karina's current situation was affecting other neighbouring countries, especially the landlocked ones. It was becoming difficult for goods from the coast to reach inland, especially since part of the railway line had been yanked off by the demonstrating youths.

It was decided that the only way to restore peace was for the two leaders to agree to work together, but this was proving to be an uphill task because of the tough stands held by the two antagonistic camps.

Meanwhile, mayhem and wanton destruction continued in the country. Numerous camps were being set up to accommodate the displaced. Many foreign investors had closed their businesses and relocated. There was limited movement of public transport vehicles, especially to and from Sunglow City, Karina's capital.

Then we heard about a panel of eminent people that the African Union had appointed to facilitate talks that would bring peace to Karina. The leader of the team was a former UN Secretary-General, Sir Kwame Tenoboa, from Ghana.

Prior to that, top world leaders had jetted into the country to try to convince the two antagonistic leaders to rein in their troops and call a ceasefire, to no avail. Among them was the US secretary of state, Madam Condry Ryce; Tanzania's retired president, Ndugu Seif Mkazo; former Azania first lady, Grace Mandy; B7; and archbishop Desmo Kumalo, also from Azania.

In the IDP camp, conditions were quite pathetic. Water was scarce, and toilets were few; thus, there was a risk of a cholera outbreak. There was also a lack of privacy in tents that had no partitions, with cases of defilement of young girls being all too common.

One Friday, after nearly a month in the IDP camp, there was a rumour that after long and tough negotiations, an agreement had been reached between Gen. Simba Majivuno and Dr. Paul Karanga and that a major announcement was to be made that afternoon. Thus, the atmosphere was tense, and people's expectations were high.

At 4 o'clock sharp, we all crammed into the big tent within the camp, which had a giant screen mounted at the far end, ready to watch the historic breakthrough.

After brief commercials from the studio of the parastatal Global Television (GTV), the host announced that they were now switching to live broadcast from the steps of Government Towers, Sunglow City.

The national anthem was played, and then the MC of the event, a middle-aged man in a grey suit and a brightly coloured tie, called upon the head of the Catholic Church, Archbishop Peter Muhunzi, to conduct prayers.

The first person to stand at the lectern, emblazoned with the words, 'President, People's Republic of Karina', was Sir Kwame Tenoboa, former UN Secretary-General and the leader of the peace negotiations.

A man now approaching his eighties, he exuded an aura of confidence, authority, and Solomonic wisdom—if his white locks, which he carried on his head with pride, were anything to go by.

He started by recounting his experiences as the secretary general of the global body and the challenges he had encountered while in office. He then enumerated the many countries he had visited in his quest to restore peace, including former Yugoslavia, DR Congo, Bosnia, Mali, Haiti, and Palestine.

He spelt out the benefits of peace: how it plays a vital role in any country's development and its people's well-being.

"No peace, no development. No peace, no stability," he emphasised.

He talked about Karina's civil war and how it had affected the economy.

"But I'm glad to announce a major breakthrough that will set Karina's economy back on track," he said with a smile.

People nodded their heads as they applauded. True, before unrest erupted, Karina's economy graph had been on an upward trajectory. But it had now taken a nosedive.

Cameras clicked. Reporters scribbled.

"After tough negotiations, my two friends here," he said, gesturing to Gen. Simba and Dr. Karanga, "have agreed to work together as a team—for the sake of Karina, for the sake of peace!"

He then called upon his fellow negotiators to briefly address the people.

Lady Grace Mandy, Ndugu Seif Mkazo, and Archbishop Desmo Kumalo moved towards the lectern.

After greeting the people and flashing a smile for the cameras, Lady Mandy—now in her sixties and wearing a long, brightly coloured *kitenge* dress with a matching headscarf—echoed the Ghanaian sage's sentiments on peace. She singled out women and children as the most affected whenever war breaks out in a country. She called upon the two leaders, Gen. Simba and Dr. Karanga, to bury the hatchet and work together for the sake of Karina and its people.

When she finished, there was a long applause from the audience, together with ululations that lasted for about fifteen seconds.

Archbishop Desmo Kumalo, a short man who wore spectacles and the emblem of his calling—a collar on a grey shirt—took to the lectern next. He quoted from the Gospel according to St. Mathew 5:9:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God."

Being a man of few words, he only urged the two leaders to shake hands and work as a team in order to unite all citizens of Karina.

When Ndugu Seif Mkazo took to the lectern, all went quiet. He had jetted in when people had lost hope in the negotiations, which, apparently, had hit a deadlock. It was rumoured that he was the one who had managed to convince the two leaders to sign the peace pact.

In his speech, he talked of how things had been tough on the negotiations table before they managed a breakthrough. He, therefore, urged the two leaders to

bury their differences and unite the nation for the sake of peace and prosperity.

The climax of the event came when the leader of the opposition, Dr. Paul Karanga, was called upon to address the nation.

Now in his mid-sixties and with a receding hairline, Dr. Karanga was a man who had seen it all. Two times, he had had a stab at the presidency but failed narrowly to glitch the seat. The first time he failed, he had suspected foul play and lodged his case with the high court. But it was thrown out due to lack of enough evidence.

The second time he contested, it was evident that the polls had been rigged in favour of the incumbent, who controlled both the government machinery and the Independent Electoral Commission. Although he vowed never to seek justice through the court again, his close friends and advisors thought otherwise. They cited the purge that the Supreme Court had undergone after the promulgation of the new constitution. And so, once more, he took his case to court.

Although the Supreme Court nullified the elections and ordered a rerun, he failed in his quest to clinch the seat. The ruling party, which had financial muscle, bought off many of his supporters. By the time of the rerun, most of his key allies had joined the opposition.

The crowd cheered and applauded. Ululations rented the air. Cameramen sought vantage points from which to take the best shots.

The commotion took about 30 seconds, and then all was quiet. Dr. Karanga cleared his throat and greeted the masses. He then stated that the main reason he had agreed to work with his nemesis was that he was committed to peace and the prosperity of Karina and its people.

He told everyone to down their weapons and embrace each other as brothers and sisters. He emphasised the need for forgiveness and reconciliation as a panacea for the healing of post-election violence wounds.

There was another round of applause and cheers. Cameras clicked. Papers rustled.

When the president, Gen. Simba Majivuno, finally walked towards the lectern,

the applause and cheers lasted just five seconds. A bald man with a protruding belly, in his mid-eighties, it was hard to believe that he had once been a soldier.

I had read about him in history and government books in my primary school days—he had been lauded as ‘The liberator,’ having waged a guerilla war against the British government to speed up Karina’s independence.

However, he failed to understand that a good dancer knows when to leave the stage. By overstaying in power, he had become drunk with the same. He ruled Karina with an iron fist, earning friends and foes in equal measure. Many people started to blame him for the many ills that had befallen Karina, like the runaway corruption, nepotism, tribalism, etc.

In his speech, he urged everyone to embrace the spirit of brotherhood and embark on nation-building.

He spelt out the measures meant to restore Karina’s lost glory and prosperity, including the pledge by the USA to fund the resettlement of the displaced victims of war who were currently living in IDP camps.

He reiterated his commitment to work with the opposition leader to dissolve any kind of animosity between them.

As he said this, there was a loud cheer and applause as Dr. Paul Karanga walked towards the lectern, led by Sir Kwame Tenoboa and the former’s legal advisors.

Dr. Karanga shook hands with Gen. Simba Majivuno amid wild cheers and applause. Cameras clicked and flashed as reporters scribbled on their notebooks.

They then moved towards a long table at the far end of the balcony, draped with a brightly coloured cloth and splendid flowers in a vase. There, they signed the peace pact that made Dr. Paul Karanga the prime minister of the People’s Republic of Karina.

Afterwards, Gen. Simba Majivuno, the president of the People’s Republic of Karina, moved towards the lectern once again to announce that they were now going to recite the ‘sacred pledge’ and that everyone was free to join in the recitation.

All the dignitaries who stood on the balcony of the Administration Towers, including the president and the prime minister, linked hands and formed a circle.

As the words flashed on the giant screen outside Administration Towers, the boom of the sacred pledge reverberated like echoes in the concrete jungle of Sunglow City:

Here we stand, as one people
Holding hands, taking a vow
Being united in love and devotion
For the sake of our land, our nation.

We have seen tears flow
We have felt the pain of our people
We have heard the cries of the children
And now we say, "Never again!"

We have seen blood, crimson-red
Flow in the streets, where many lie dead
From their homes, people have fled
Living in fear and in dread.

We have vowed to work as a team
to achieve our desired dream
Paying no heed to religion or speech
But always caring for each.

We have had a taste of darkness
That has left us in a mess
But we shall rise like a phoenix
From the ashes, towards the apex.

Hearing these words, a lump formed in my throat. I felt tears welling in my eyes, threatening to burst the walls in my dam. With the back of my right hand, I cleared the mist from my eyes. I looked around the tent and realised that everyone was doing the same.



One week after the signing of the peace pact and after the swearing in of Dr. Paul Karanga as the prime minister of the People's Republic of Karina, he, together with President Simba Majivuno, embarked on a countrywide peace and reconciliation tour. They held joint rallies in areas that had been hit most by the post-election violence, pleading with the masses to forgive and embrace each other as brothers and sisters, and to work together for the betterment of Karina.

Concurrently, plans were underway to facilitate the closure of all IDP camps. Those who had been displaced were to be resettled by the government or be compensated for their lost property to enable them to rebuild their lives.

As days went by, normalcy slowly returned to the country. Public transport vehicles had resumed business. Investors who had fled the country, fearing for their lives and the loss of their goods, were returning in droves. Schools had reopened after three months of hiatus.

As we waited for our share of what the government had for us, Uncle Salami came to the camp and organised for us to revisit our home in Valley Springs to see for ourselves the extent of the damage and whether there was a possibility of re-establishing our lives there.

Three months was a long time for one to be away from home. To me, Valley Springs was where my life revolved. I had only left it once when I joined high school—a boarding girls' school some distance away.

I remember during those days, I was so homesick that I had decided to find relief in poetry:

I'm going back to Valley Springs
Where in the morn the nightingale sings
And in farms, wheat and maize
Dance in the cool breeze.

Valley Springs, for you, I cry
Where rivers never say goodbye
And springs hum lullabies
Their water as clear as glass.

As the *matatu* hurtled along the tarmac, we saw shells of burnt houses, broken glasses in shop windows, and torched maize and wheat farms—stark evidence of the post-election mayhem.

Our home was hardly recognisable as we alighted from the *matatu*. There was nothing but a rubble of bricks, earth, and ashes where our house once stood. All our crops had been destroyed, and livestock was missing from our paddocks.

Seeing all this, it felt like a dream. Was this the place that was once full of life? Where cows were always mowing? Where we played hide and seek with our neighbours' kids until Mama called us to the house for tea and sweet potatoes?

I removed a hankie from my handbag and dabbed at my wet eyes. As Uncle Salami paced around the compound, assessing the full extent of the damage, my dad, sitting on a fallen log beside Kelvin, took in the whole scenario with misty eyes. He then buried his face in his hands and deeply sighed.

Back on the main road, we hailed another *matatu* that took us where Valley Springs Pentecostal Church once stood. In the church, two hundred people had perished in an arson inferno. There, the victims had been collectively interred, for it was difficult to tell who was who among the charred remains.

A monument had been erected there, and names of the victims had been emblazoned on a bronze plaque. Wreaths of varying colours (sold by vendors at the shrine's entrance) had been arranged around the cemented mass grave—the only way for those left behind to honour their departed loved ones.

We stood there in silence—Uncle Salami, Kelvin, my dad, and I—our mood heavy as we read the names on the plaque.

When I spotted my mother's name, my feet gave way, and I found myself slumping on the floor.

I don't know how long I blacked out, but when I regained consciousness, I realised that it was so cold and damp where I lay. I had fainted, and someone

had thrown some water over my head.

Slowly, I raised my head and gazed around. Beside my dad, Uncle Salami, and Kelvin, I was surrounded by other people who looked at me with bewilderment and sympathy.

Among the crowd was a girl of around twelve years who held a bunch of flowers in her hand. She had also lost a relative in the inferno and had come to pay her respects, too.

Our eyes locked, and I saw that she had been crying.

She removed two stalks of carnation from her bunch and offered them to me. With trembling hands, I took hold of them, and we advanced towards the gravestone. Quietly and solemnly, we knelt and laid our flowers.



Ward No.5

Wafila Mesback

That day, he woke up a bit earlier than usual. He yawned, stretching his hands and legs while kicking the air as if trying to tell sleep to leave him. He rubbed his eyes with the backside of his right hand. Now they could see clearly. He prayed. He saw no need to spread his bed and left the bedding swirling chaotically. He perched himself on the edge of the bed and craned his neck towards the clock mounted on the unplastered mud wall. It was three forty-five. From his *simba*, he heard snoring sounds coming from the house that was just a nose and mouth distance from his. They were dead asleep—his mother and seven siblings.

He went outside, picked a small eucalyptus stick, chewed one end, and applied salt to it. After two minutes of brushing, the awful smell that came from his mouth was dead. He fetched water and took an ice-cold shower outside. As a man, he believed hot water would render him impotent. Not again, he believed at that time, no one was awake. He was confident enough that all the night runners had gone back to sleep despite it being Devil's Hour.



When he arrived in the city, the place was as active and busy. It was on market day. He wondered which way to take to avoid the noisy crowds. He

couldn't. Now he realised why Nakuru town was upgraded to a city.

"Kisumu ...Siaya...Migori...Kakamega... Vihiga... here...here!" one of the *makanga* shouted at the top of his voice, repeating it so many times that it became a song.

"Narok...Kericho...Nairobi...," another one shouted, knocking hard on the sides of the bus while swinging from the threshold. Their voices faded as he moved away from them, joining another type of choir.

"Ng'araa na twenty bob...! Ng'araa na twenty bob...! Ng'araa na twenty bob..." One of the *Mitumba* sellers cried, drawing his attention in that direction. He felt the urge to go and check out the items, but he quickly reminded himself that his destination was more important, and time was not on his side.

Finally, he saw a small cyber. He squeezed through the dense crowds by dodging those who carried humongous luggage. For him, he was only carrying his documents. After making the required number of copies, it was time to board. He knew very well where Nairobi-bound vehicles were stationed. After walking a short distance, he found one that was conveniently close.

"How much?" he asked the conductor, who had stopped shouting upon seeing him.

"Three hundred," the conductor replied and immediately picked up from where he left. "Nairobi *hapa...! Beba...! Beba....! Tao...! Kanairo hapa...! kanairo hapa...!*"

The last time he was there, the bus fare was two hundred or one hundred and fifty, but since he knew the price of petrol had escalated, he never complained.

Seated on the bus, he took in the view, realizing just how deserving Nakuru was of city status. His eyes wandered over the bustling scene—heads bobbing through the crowds, businesses thriving, buildings towering, and everything else there was to see. He noticed groups of youths leaning against buildings, some idling around, others clearly eyeing potential victims — likely green newcomers to the city, fresh job seekers ripe for pick-pocketing or handbag snatching. It was a common sight in town. Some of them sniffed glue, while others lingered in dark corridors and unfinished buildings, smoking bhang and cheap

stogies. A wave of pity washed over him.

He imagined the billions of money the government collected as tax yet they couldn't provide employment. His thoughts were cut short by one of the hawkers who shouted with verve, "*Maji baridi*, yoghurt, ice, PK, biscuits, juice *hapaa...*! *Maji baridi*, yoghurt, ice, PK, biscuits, juice *hapaa...*!" From the way he pronounced biscuits as *biskits* and not *biskwits* and juice as *Jews* and not *juis*, one could tell that he was learned. The hawker looked to be in his early twenties. Everyone in the vehicle ignored him, except one woman in the front seat, who bought her beautiful daughter three packets of Manji biscuits and a 500 ml bottle of vanilla yoghurt. From where Derick sat, an irresistible aroma of *nyama choma* danced around his nose and mouth. Before he could fully register it and start imagining himself savouring the roasted meat, the driver coughed the engine to life and slithered onto the highway. The bus had taken a while to fill up, but now it was finally moving. Derick admired the view of the city that night. How the bulbs lit created an amazing scene.

When he arrived, Derick slowly stepped off the bus after settling his fare with the conductor. Nairobi city felt like the whole world condensed into one place. He squeezed through the dense crowd, carefully dodging people and even Maasai cattle wandering the streets. Taking a shortcut, he soon found himself at the interview centre.

What met his eyes left him in shock. It looked like an International Youth Conference was taking place, or maybe the president had called a special youth ceremony, or perhaps there was a political meeting promising free money to the youth. There was a literal forest of people—some standing, some squatting, others bending over, and a few sitting on the grass in the open field.

That was the day he realised that some people truly knew how to wake up early, unlike him, who had always considered himself an early riser. *The early bird catches the worm*, he remembered. The line stretched endlessly, resembling a voting queue on election day, only a hundred times longer. It twisted and turned like a giant snake, bending around corners and winding through the field. He took the opportunity to observe the latest fashion trends in town. Most men were dressed in suits, while the women flaunted vibrant *vitenges*, *Ankara*, and *kente* fabrics.

At some point, he wondered whether he was late for the interview. He glanced at his Calvin Klein wristwatch; it was five fifty-six. The interview was scheduled to start at nine. Realising he had no choice, he joined the tail end of the queue because the longer he hesitated, the more it stretched out. Being a typical Kenyan, he pulled out his smartphone and took a few photos of the unbelievable crowd; proof to show his village mates just how serious people were about finding jobs. The required number of candidates was fifty-four, yet every three seconds, two or three more people joined the line. Before long, a multitude had gathered behind him.

As he looked around, he couldn't help but notice the sombre expressions on people's faces: tired, worn-out, and desperate. Ninety-nine out of a hundred were youths, each clutching their prescribed documents in envelopes. Some held them in their left hands, others in their right, constantly switching whenever one hand grew tired.

After standing for about thirty minutes, Derick decided it would be wise to get to know some of his neighbours in the line. He focused on the two people in front of him and the two behind him. For a few minutes, he contemplated the best way to break the ice. In Nairobi, you don't just start talking to anyone; people are cautious, each suspecting the other might be a thief. You have to compose yourself and come up with an enticing story to get someone to open up.

He finally came up with the perfect pickup line.

"Will this line ever end?" Derick muttered, glancing sideways with a hint of suspicion, as if addressing no one in particular. It was a clever tactic, a bait to make them think he was talking to anyone who felt guilty or frustrated. His plan worked. One of his neighbours chuckled and nodded in agreement, and just like that, the silence was broken.

"Imagine!" a beautiful, short, brown-skinned lady behind him replied, her hands akimbo. She wore a black suit that hugged her curvy figure just right, making her look effortlessly elegant. A white silk scarf adorned her neck, and her feet were dressed in brown stilettos. Derick couldn't help but admire her: her full, firm breasts and natural beauty that needed no makeup. It was rare to find a woman in Nairobi without makeup, almost like searching for a pin in

a haystack. Unlike many others who wore wigs, her short, natural brown hair complemented her soft, smooth skin.

He couldn't help but wonder how someone so striking could still be jobless, especially in a city where beauty itself was often seen as a career. It puzzled him, maybe she was principled and strict, not willing to compromise herself for opportunities. She must have been born in the Noughties, he thought, judging by her youthful appearance.

"And the way I came here very early..." Derick answered back.

"What do you mean by early when I was already here at around four-thirty?" the young, thin, tall guy in front of him replied, surprising Derick with his sudden interjection. Derick believed him, since he had indeed found him already in line.

"I've been standing here all this time," the guy added. He was dressed in a slightly baggy black suit that still managed to look decent. His white shirt contrasted nicely with a bold, blood-red tie. Derick figured he had probably picked an oversized suit to grow into it.

"Better you, I came all the way from Mombasa. Now you can imagine how worn out I am..." the lady replied. From her talk, Derick could tell that indeed she was serious with life.

"I think the distance is the same as from Migori, on the border of this bad, merciless country and Tanzania," the guy replied with a hint of bitterness.

Since Derick was from Nakuru, not too far from Nairobi, he chose to keep quiet. Saying anything about his relatively short journey would have sounded meaningless, or worse, like a joke amidst the serious expressions of frustration.

After some chit-chat and shared complaints, Derick learned that the lady had an impressive academic background. She held three master's degrees: one in Medicine from Kenyatta University, another in Education from the University of Nairobi, and the third in Criminology from Pwani University. In addition, she had a bachelor's degree in Public Relations from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology.

The other gentleman was equally accomplished. He had two master's de-

grees—one in Statistics from Kenyatta University and another in Engineering from the University of Nairobi. On top of that, he held a bachelor's degree in Law from Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology, a bachelor's degree in Science in Health Systems and Management from Maseno University, and a bachelor's degree in Psychology from Kisii University.

It was now nine fifty-eight, and the interview had still not started.

"Mie kachoka. Hawa mabibi na mabwana nao hawafiki. Muda unazidi kuyoyoma..." said the guy in front of the gentleman next to Derick. From his accent, no one could argue that he came from the coastal region. He wore a well-ironed, clean white *kanzu* that almost reached his legs.

"I wonder why they always treat us this way. This isn't the first time I've experienced such. The last job I applied for, they kept us waiting for hours, and still, they had the nerve to demand a quarter of a million for me to get the position," said another man behind the lady. He was neither handsome nor ugly, just average, tall, and dark. He had a thick forest of beards, neatly trimmed. He looked to be in his late twenties. Dressed in a black coat, brown trousers, and a vermilion shirt, he looked clean but not quite smart.

"I've travelled all the way from Garissa, yet these people are still sleeping. Are they serious about this interview? Then they'll turn me down just because I'm not from their tribe. I wonder if my tribe will do the work for me, or if they'll judge me based on my experience," he said, concluding with a click of his tongue.

From his look, Derick could tell the man was well-educated. He had two master's degrees: one in English and Literature from Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, and another in Medicine from Garissa University. He also had bachelor's degrees in Tourism and Hospitality from the University of Eldoret and in Health Records from Taita Taveta University. From his age, he must have been in his early thirties.

"Oh! I thought I was the only one who had to worry about my tribe. Not again. Many of my bosses have always tried to persuade me to 'spread my legs' and let them use me before offering me a chance. I wonder how many women they've slept with by this time as we speak. Why should I have to use my body

when I know I'm qualified? That's nonsense!" the lady retorted, her voice filled with frustration.

After waiting for an additional thirty minutes, one of the panellists finally arrived. He was an elderly man with grey hair and a large stomach that hung over his belt, covering the metallic buckle. He struggled to walk under the weight, moving like someone riding an imaginary bicycle uphill. With each step, he hitched up his baggy trousers and adjusted his already tucked-in shirt.

When the crowd saw him, a collective sigh of relief filled the air. "At least..." someone muttered. Some stood up, others rearranged their documents, while a few remained seated. To some, he was the chairman of the company; to others, he was a figurehead at the helm of a certain government institution. Derick, however, recognised him as the treasurer of Kazi Kwa Vijana Foundation, an NGO. The beautiful lady knew him as the vice-secretary of an organisation tasked with helping people fly abroad. Derick wondered how one person could hold so many titles.

They followed him with their eyes until he disappeared into the interview room. They waited, expecting to be called in one by one, like someone eating groundnuts, but nothing happened. After a while, one of the security guards patrolling the area whispered to a few that they were to wait for nine more panellists before the session could begin. Upon hearing this, many of the candidates dispersed from the queue. The ladies, in particular, fished out *lesos* and spread them on the grass to sit. Some took a nap while others simply relaxed. In the end, the formalities of standing in line ceased, and they made themselves comfortable.

All this time, Derick was yawning. The sun was scorching hot, and those who had been foresighted enough had brought umbrellas. The kind-hearted shared their umbrellas, sometimes sheltering as many as twenty people. There were no trees, and the few that were available had vehicles parked under them. Many used their envelopes to shield their heads from the sun, while others removed their coats and sweaters, trying to find some relief. Some even found comfort under the shade created by the "DO NOT SMOKE AROUND" notice board, which blocked the sunlight. For those from the northern parts, the sunshine felt like nothing more than a light breeze. They were used to its harshness, so they

didn't bother changing their positions. Thankfully, after twenty minutes, the remaining seven panellists arrived. People craned their necks, trying to catch a glimpse of the individuals who would determine their fate.

The queue began to move, albeit at a snail's pace. It seemed like one person would take the entire year before coming out. This puzzled Derick. *How many questions were they asking in there?* His stomach churned as he shifted his position, trying to find some comfort. Eventually, he decided to sit down like the rest. To his surprise, the beautiful lady was still standing.

At noon, the panellists came out, heading off to refill their stomachs. Derick had always thought lunch was typically around one or even two o'clock. The faint-hearted gave up and left, some throwing their papers into the air in frustration. For those who were breastfeeding, it was also an opportunity to grab something for their newborns. Many, like Derick, hesitated to leave for lunch, knowing how difficult it would be to find their place back in the queue once they returned. Besides, grabbing food would mean walking all the way back home. Judging by the expressions on their faces, it was clear their stomachs were longing for something. Their collective yawns seemed to help Derick feel the hunger even more.

Two hours later, they came back. Two of the panellists were missing. Derick wasn't shocked, as he was aware of how office workers, especially government officials, treat their offices like personal bedrooms, coming and going as they please. It was clear the two had slacked off. At 4:37 p.m., he heard the familiar call: "Next!" It was his turn. A wave of dizziness washed over him, and his heart began to race irregularly. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach, making him feel even more uneasy.

The tiled, slimy office floor looked vast enough to accommodate the whole country. At the centre stood a classy, large, transparent marble table surrounded by the six panellists. Each had at least five sodas in front of them, except for one whose bottles were all emptied—the one with a massive stomach, as if pregnant with sextuplets ready to be delivered any moment.

On the wall hung an old, worn-out manila paper with bold, faded letters that read, *'This Is A Corruption-Free Zone.'* It fluttered gently in the cold breeze from the air conditioner.

“Please have a seat,” one of the panellists said, gesturing toward the swivel chair. He was almost done with a cigarette held between his fingers, its pungent, choking odour irritating Derick. Still, he pretended to be perfectly fine.

“Thank you,” Derick replied as he sat.

One of the panellists, who was sipping Coca-Cola through a straw, looked at him with a fierce expression. His unkempt beard—peppered with white and black hair—and an old scar on his left cheek made him look both intimidating and seasoned.

“Now, tell us more about yourself,” he said.

“My name is Derick Mwema, and I am 26 years old. I attended Amani Primary School before joining Alliance High School, where I achieved a mean grade of A-. I then trained as a surgeon at the University of Nairobi and later pursued a law degree at Kenyatta University. Additionally, I earned my master’s degree in Engineering and Commerce from the same university. In summary, I hold three bachelor’s degrees and two master’s degrees,” he said, swallowing hard as one of the panellists sipped soda. “I learned about this advertisement from the Daily Nation newspaper on the 15th of this month,” he added, handing over his documents.

“Wow, this is impressive! I can see you were truly a top performer in school,” one of the panellists remarked after pulling the documents from the brown envelope and examining them, flashing him a toothy smile.

“Thank you,” Derick replied, smiling back, knowing he had just added another feather to his cap.

“Now, what are you doing currently?” another panellist asked.

“I’m a cobbler,” Derick said.

“What! A cobbler?”

“Yes,” Derick replied confidently.

“Oh, that’s quite unique. By the way, which community does your surname belong to?” the panellist asked in a cajoling tone.

“What do you mean by that?” Derick asked, feeling a surge of nervousness.

“Aren’t you Kenyan? In other words, what is your tribe?” the panellist demanded.

“I’m a half-caste—Kamba and Luo,” Derick answered, not fully grasping the situation as his eyes remained fixed on the sodas.

“Okay, leave us with your documents. We will call you...” the other panellist intoned, flipping from one channel to another on the thirty-six-inch black Samsung television that hung on the cream-white painted wall.

“Okay. Thank you,” Derick answered.

Derick left the interview room, not knowing whether to be happy or sad. He was happy because he was done with the interview, but he was sad that he had always been told “We will call you” a million times. He was sick and tired of being promised to be called. He was tired of leaving his contacts behind. He was tired and sick of leaving his duplicate documents. He was tired of everything. All he wanted was a job.

At home, hours passed. Days passed. Weeks passed. Two months passed without him hearing a single call from any of them. More often than not, Derick would check his phone a million times per hour, hoping for good news that never came.

Her mother’s ailment was now becoming worse. For the sixth time, she was rushed to the hospital. As Derick sat in the waiting area, his thoughts heavy with worry, he spotted Lydia—the beautiful lady he had first met during the interview. She recognised him, too, offering a small, sympathetic smile.

“Hey,” she started.

“Hey, Lydia. How are you? Long time...!” Derick replied as they embraced, feeling the warmth and fullness of her chest against his.

“I have been good. I missed you, Derick,” she said, giving him an enticing, romantic look.

“Oh! I’ve missed you too.”

“Nice, what are you doing here? Are you sick?”

“Nope, I have brought my mum. She sustained a snake bite...”

“Oh! I’m very sorry. Hope she will be well. Where is she now?”

“Ward No.5.”

“What!...No.5...?”

“Yes, what’s wrong with it?”

They sat down on a nearby bench, away from the patients. Lydia lowered her voice and explained to Derick how Dr. Kimani Paul had bribed his way into the job. Despite having no medical experience, never having stepped into a medical class or lab, he was appointed because his wealthy family pulled strings. Dr. Kimani had studied veterinary medicine, but his father, a politician who once dreamed of being a doctor himself, used his influence to secure the position for him. Tragically, every patient admitted to Ward No. 5 had died under his care.

Derick felt a surge of dread washing over him. It was invidious and deeply unsettling.

“And how did you get this job? Were you called?” Derick asked, trying to process it all.

“No, I waited and waited until I gave up,” Lydia said with a hint of frustration. “I eventually had to come here and beg the HR manager to let me work temporarily. Many government workers here retired long ago, but they’re still holding on to their jobs. I’ll let you know if they allow me to stay here permanently.”

“Oh, I see.”

“They should have retired, but there are no signs of them packing up.”

“This world is not fair. Anyway, I will appreciate the slightest effort you will put in to at least have me here.”

“Okay, I’ll try my best. Let’s hope for the best.”

Derick hesitated, then asked, “Did they even select anyone from the interview?”

Lydia sighed. “That day, they were just fooling us. They already had a list of selected candidates prepared two months before the interview. It was all a sham,

just a way to cover up their corruption by pretending to follow the proper process. Many of the interviewees got tired and applied for jobs abroad. As we speak, a lot of them have secured well-paying jobs overseas and aren't planning to come back anytime soon."

Unknowingly, she had crushed Derick's hopes. His anger boiled over, and he decided to confront the interview panel. The offices were just a stone's throw from the hospital. When he arrived, he saw the 'we will call you' guy still sitting there, glued to the TV. Derick struggled to keep his anger in check.

"You didn't call me. I've been waiting all this time!" he shouted, his voice caught between frustration and command.

There came no response.

"I'm talking to you, you lazy slob!" Derick added, shouting.

"Young man, who allowed you in?" he retorted.

"Where are my documents?" Derick shouted.

The man craned his chubby neck and glared at the dustbin at the corner, then continued to watch the Afro Cinema movie.

Derick rushed to the dustbin and found his papers, along with thousands of other applicants' documents stuffed in the dustbin.

No sooner had he stepped out of the room than he heard a phone ringtone, '*Ukizaliwa wewe ni kijana, ukose kazi tabu zote zitakufwata*'—a song by Daudi Kabaka. It was Dr. Kimani.

"She is dead," the voice said.

Beauty

Bright Aboagye

The first time I stepped into the Legon Botanical Gardens, it felt like walking into a dream—sweet and unforgettable, lingering just beyond reach. I stood at the entrance, barefoot in spirit, as though the air had peeled something off me, something hidden in my heart, and carried me with an ominous lift. The peace around me wasn't empty; it listened. It held its breath, waiting. Trees arched like old friends bent in prayer, their patient leaves brushing the sky.

Light filtered through the canopy. The air smelled of green things—moss, wet bark, and the quiet rustle of leaves in conversation. A river curved along the path like a shy child; a canoe lay sleeping at its border, belly pressed to still water. I watched it all unfold, my gaze drinking in the surroundings. There was something haunting in the beauty—something sacred and retiring, like a memory returning in fragments. It reminded me of everything I'd once held close and everything that had slowly slipped away. They say beauty lives in the eye of the beholder, but what they don't say is how it sometimes burrows painfully into the heart, like an old photograph I don't know where to keep.

I found beauty in the life I lived last year—in the way things clicked into place, as though they'd been waiting for me; in a kind of love and ease that felt like destiny, not accident. It was the best time of my life. I can still taste its sweetness,

lingering in my throat long after it's vanished into a place time cannot reach.

There was something sacred about that river, the way it mirrored the sky without asking for anything in return. That spot still sings with the magic of my first visit. It held me. It made me think of romance—the real kind. The kind that doesn't perform but simply exists. The water shimmered the colour of love—not red like lipstick or roses, but something deeper. A red that seeps into bone and stays.

Mama came with me to the gardens. She always knew when silence had overstayed its welcome inside me. That morning, she dragged me out of the house the same way she used to take me to the beach as a child, whenever the world felt too sharp. I loved the beach. I still do. I love nature—not for its grandeur, but for its simplicity: a trembling leaf, the sound of water against stone, the honesty of soil and tide. It's where my soul rests without needing permission.

Mama knew this. Nature was my sanctuary, my prayer, my meditation. She didn't say much, but her presence beside me was like shade on a hot day. Sometimes I wondered what held her together—how she remained my constant when everything else dissolved.

She unpacked the food and set the plates on the mat. I watched her—slow, certain, like performing a ritual. She scooped jollof rice and added chicken, her fingers steady with love. I reached for a spoon, took a mouthful, and felt it scratch my dry throat. There was a path in me that had forgotten how to be watered. The food moved slowly, meeting a thirst I hadn't named. Even water had become a kind of beauty I missed.

As I ate, my spoon moved in slow circles—not from hunger, but from something deeper. It was searching, tracing the outline of something I had lost. My mind wandered, dipping into rough places. I felt an emptiness inside me, like a bucket waiting to be filled. I turned to Mama, my voice gentler than usual.

"Mama," I said. "Why do beautiful things leave? Why can't they stay?"

I paused, reaching for air that didn't want to come.

"Why can't beauty last forever? Why can't I hold onto the kind of beauty that makes people turn and look? Why must it disappear just when you've come

to love it?”

My voice cracked—not from weakness, but from holding too much. Tears pressed behind my eyes, but I held them in. I’d promised myself: no more crying. I would build a dam inside me. Still, the salt began to rise. A dark cloud gathered in the small blue sky I kept in my mind. I imagined it stretching, threatening to pour. But I knew how to hold storms. There was a barrel inside me that caught the tears before they fell. I would not cry—not today, not in front of Mama.

Mama looked at me with the kind of knowing only mothers have. She saw the storm rising in my eyes and didn’t flinch.

“Beauty,” she said, “isn’t built to stay. It blooms, it shines, and then it fades. It’s not punishment. It’s just the way of the world.”

She touched her cheek and gestured toward it.

“See these wrinkles?” she asked. “I used to be the most beautiful girl in town. Every man wanted me. I couldn’t walk a street without someone turning to stare.” Her voice softened into a laugh, as if her younger self had whispered something amusing.

“But look at me now. The years have kissed my face and left their mark. Nothing stays the same, my child. Nothing in this world holds forever. We’re made to change. To leave. To let go.”

I looked closely at her. Her skin, fair and beautiful, carried stories of the sun. Her face was round like the moon in its early rise. Her lips still held their pink, her eyes as blue as ocean glass—still lovely, even as time marked her. I had her nose—the pointed, slightly bent one. But her beauty—her full beauty—belonged to her alone.

She had raised me on her own. Carried me in her belly while her heart broke over a man who wore a wedding ring for someone else. She never told me to hate him, but she never asked me to love him either. Sometimes, I felt guilty for not inheriting more from her—her strength, her patience, her determination to live through a story filled with pain.

My gaze shifted to a tree where two birds were feeding side by side. One gen-

tly passed food to the other. The image clutched at my chest. It reminded me of him—the first man who loved me. The one who made me believe in wings. The one who taught me to fly. He fed my hunger—for attention, for safety, for touch. And for a while, I did fly.

The birds didn't speak, but I understood. They carried hunger and fulfilment at once—just like I once did. I watched in silence, the sky above them clear and blue, as if nothing had ever gone wrong.

He polished me to perfection—not with force, but with care, sculpting a future with his hands. Every time I entered a room, attention curved in my direction—heads lifted, eyes lingered, voices lowered. My friends teased me, saying I was the reason they couldn't find boyfriends. But I knew it wasn't just charm. Kojo had given me something deeper: the gift of presence. He didn't just make me beautiful—he made me belong.

In rooms that once forgot my name, he gave me honour. Not loudly. Not theatrically. But in the way he looked at me while I spoke—even when no one else listened. Before him, I was a stone: ordinary, overlooked. In his hands, I became a rock—rooted, noticed, and never erased.

I met him on campus, on a morning more sorrowful than most. The world leaned on my shoulders, and my braids—two months old—carried the dust of worry and exhaustion. I almost skipped my social psychology class. I couldn't face the classmates who spoke to me like skimming a book they'd never read. But something—hope, perhaps hunger—made me go.

The lecture hall was almost full. I stood at the back, heart racing, unsure where to sit. Then I saw him. Broad-shouldered. Calm. Eyes like warm coffee. He didn't speak. He just moved aside and made space, guiding me to a chair as if it had been waiting for me all along. That was kindness. The ache in my chest eased. The noise faded. I sat, and for the first time in weeks, the world shrank to a bearable size.

At home, Mama was fighting to keep us afloat. Tuition bills pressed in like storm clouds. My belly had memorised the silence of skipped meals. Smiles were my disguise—my way of saying emptiness wasn't winning. But that morning, Kojo gave me more than a seat. He gave me steadiness. Not rescue. Not

romance. Just enough to get through the week.

I later learned he was the lecturer's assistant. That explained his ease—the way people moved around him, the calm in his voice. I'd heard the rumours about TAs and first-years. But Kojo didn't chase. He stayed. He listened. He looked at me as though I wouldn't break—and that's how it began. Not with falling, but with becoming.

His skin reminded me of earth after rain—dark, alive, full of promise. His eyes didn't just reflect light—they held it. And they held something else: a quiet understanding of longing. He was beautiful in the way a promise is beautiful—not because it's loud, but because it's kept.

I kept my distance at first. I'd been warned. We all had—taught to distrust kindness, to question care. But Kojo was different. He brought me lunch and never asked for anything in return. He taught me how to write with structure, how to argue with authority. When I graduated with honours, it was his voice that clapped the loudest. His eyes held pride I didn't know I deserved.

My favourite place on campus became a wooden bench under the mango trees. It wasn't just a seat—it was a sanctuary. We spent hours there. Some days we didn't need words. We just sat, our hands close, our breaths synced. There, I learned the language of love—not the kind that declares, but the kind that prepares.

One golden afternoon, light filtered through the trees and touched his shoulders. I turned to him.

"Kojo," I said, truth rising in my voice, "thank you for being the kind of man who helps a woman grow."

He looked at me and smiled—not widely, but deeply. Then he kissed me. Slowly. Fully. As if my lips were not just lips, but home.

He stayed. After university, when others scattered to find themselves, Kojo stayed and found himself with me. He got a job. I moved into an apartment he filled with books, plants, and things I loved. There, I learned how to build a home. How to argue without cruelty. How to forgive without pride. I was no longer surviving. I was living.

One Saturday, he asked me to dress up. Said he had somewhere special to take me. I wore my finest dress, powdered my cheeks, and placed Mama's earrings in my ears. I looked like someone who had been loved well—and I felt it, too.

The place glowed with quiet elegance—strings of warm bulbs, flowers tucked into glass jars, a band playing music that still hums in my chest. Friends gathered, their smiles wide, their eyes full of wonder. Then Kojo took my hands, and the world disappeared.

He looked at me for a long moment, as if choosing his words with care.

"I've searched the world for what I found in you," he said softly. Then he knelt.

The ring sparkled, but it wasn't the centre of attention—Kojo was. Time paused. I nodded before my lips could move. The yes had already bloomed in my eyes. It had lived there long before that day.

His family received me with mixed arms. His father was kind. His sisters—sweet and curious. But his mother... her gaze held thorns. At our first meeting, she sat across from me, arms folded, voice cool.

"Why my son?" she asked. "Aren't there other women in the world?"

I said nothing. My words stayed buried, afraid. Kojo stepped in.

"She is the woman I choose," he said. His voice was calm. Final.

That night, in my room, I cried. Her words left bruises. But for the first time in my life, I didn't have to cry alone.

Mama welcomed Kojo with ease—the kind that comes after years of prayer. She had raised me with stretch marks and faith, with coins that never seemed enough and a love that always was. She saw the way I shone beside him, and that was enough.

Marriage taught me quickly—it wasn't always warm tea and soft Sundays. His mother visited often. Her questions scraped.

"You're not getting younger. When will the children come?"

I smiled, held Kojo's hand tighter. I was trying. Month after month. Prayer after prayer. Still, nothing.

Some nights, sleep would not come. I'd sit by the window, watching the lights across the city—watching time. I thought of the girl with dusty braids, the woman I had become: standing, learning, hoping.

Kojo would wake, find me, and wrap his arms around my waist. He didn't speak. He just breathed behind my ear—slow, steady. That breath was enough.

Because love, when it's real, doesn't perform. It stays. It listens. It holds the tired places—and remains.

After the kicking. After the nurses' shouts. After the fear that gripped my bones like iron. The nine months were worth it. That's what I felt when they placed her in my arms—this precious being I had summoned into the world. She was pain and love and purpose, all in one fragile body.

Mama guided me through it, piece by piece. Even Kojo's mother changed. She smiled when she saw me. She called me 'daughter.' For the first time, she loved me—in her own way. Because I had given her something: someone to carry on her family name.

My status rose. Mama's, too. We no longer had to wear masks at church or family meetings. People said, "She did well, raising her daughter alone."

They forgot what they used to say—that I wasn't really a child. That I was a half-thing, missing a father's discipline.

But I remembered. I remembered how everything wrong was always our fault. How Mama's dignity was always on trial. The laughter behind closed doors. The necks craning. The mutters that stung even when unsaid.

I remembered the day I followed Mama to work at the Nimakos' house. School fees hadn't been paid. I didn't want to stay home feeling useless. I broke a champagne glass—an heirloom, apparently.

Mrs. Nimako screamed until her voice scratched the ceiling. Rage filled the room like smoke. Mama shrank, her hands clasped, voice pleading like prayer.

"I'll pay," she whispered. "Even if it means half my salary."

But Mrs. Nimako wasn't done. Her words sliced.

"Money isn't the issue," she spat. "The issue is you left your child alone. She

has no father. So train her properly.”

She waved her hand like she was parting the sky. Like she owned the room, the oxygen, our breath. Like she owned us.

Mama’s salary was halved. Half. That month, our choices were simple: miss school or miss meals. She chose neither. Somehow, I ate. Somehow, I went to school.

I saw her fast. I heard her stomach rumble and watched her pretend it was holiness.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” I kept saying.

She hugged me, whispered, “There’s nothing wrong with it.”

But there was.

There was everything wrong with it.

So when my child came, I gave her a name heavy with meaning. I named her Beauty. Not for her skin. Not for how she looked. But for what she brought. For what she was—a light that chased every darkness. My treasure. Breathing. Dependent. Loved.

Kojo adored the name.

“My Beauty,” I whispered, cradling her.

“Our Beauty,” he replied, his eyes full of awe.

That day, I chose not to attend the family event. My body had given up—tired in the kind of way sleep doesn’t fix. And truthfully, I didn’t want to see his mother. She still looked at me like I’d borrowed Kojo’s love on a short-term loan.

He wore the green kaftan shirt I’d gifted him on our anniversary—the same year Beauty was born. It still looked new on him. Just like our love still felt new, even after all this time.

I told him to go. But I knew he wouldn’t leave without at least asking.

“What if you can’t handle the stress?” he said, his voice filled with that quiet

concern only a husband can carry.

I kissed him gently. My hand searched his face. My eyes searched his soul.

“You’re a good husband,” I said. “You’re a wonderful father. You love me whole. You love our daughter, too. I can handle anything—because of you.”

He smiled. “You always flatter me.”

But I shook my head. It wasn’t flattery. It was truth. He had given me things my mother had never touched—things still new in my story.

As he drove away, I stood by the window and watched the car trail off, a line between presence and absence. I held the goodbye in my throat. The premonition hummed softly. Then came the sudden sharp pain. It gripped my stomach and shot down my spine. I dismissed it. Women always feel something, I told myself. But this time, it stayed. And later, it made sense.

The phone rang. I answered it with the kind of hesitation only wives know—the pause before a new grief walks into the room. Kojo was gone. And he hadn’t gone alone. Beauty was with him.

They said it was quick. They said it was fate. But all I could think was: if I had gone with him, I might have said a better goodbye. I might have saved her. I might have saved myself. Maybe even him.

If Kojo had died alone, maybe I could have learned how to walk again. Maybe I could have grieved cleanly. But everything I had laboured for—the kicking, the screaming, the sacred swelling—was buried in the same soil. In the ground where termites feast.

I had returned to that place Mama knew too well. The ugliness. The emptiness. The ache of womanhood stripped of reward. I had been unmothered. Unpartnered. Unmoored. It was like the world took back its promise—like a Grammy revoked.

At the funeral, my body folded. I didn’t just weep for Beauty. I wept for the promise she carried. I wept for the love I’d never get to give her. For the arms that would never carry her into her first classroom. For the fingers that would never twist her hair on Sunday mornings before church.

Kojo's mother cried too. But her grief had teeth.

"This is what happens," she wailed. "A girl born without a father becomes a woman who can't keep a man. How will her daughter ever keep hers?"

Her tears did not wash her words. They dropped, but they cut. She didn't see me. Not really. Not the hole in my chest. Not the soul I'd already buried. Not that everything I was—everything I'd fought to become—lay inside that tiny white casket. She still had sons. She still had time.

I had yesterday's clothes and arms that no longer knew what to carry. My heart didn't just break—it collapsed. Into dust. Into my mother's shape. Into the sorrow I thought I'd escaped, only to have it find its way back, silent and sharp.

I had no more titles. No more masks. No child to saddle. No evidence of what I had survived. I was a woman, once again, with nothing the world would call complete.

Crimson Chains

Maxwell Kamau

The time on my Casio F-91W watch reads 3:13 a.m. My hands and feet are numb from the dampness, and my skin feels clammy and cold, as if I have been wrapped in a wet sheet for days. I have been leaning against these bare walls for over four hours; only the tiniest scuffs remain on the original brick surface, symbolising the loss of the freedom I once had when I was not incarcerated. I am solely to blame for everything that has been lost. I had the chance to experience more of life, but I lost it entirely.

The air in this cell, which I share with John, tastes of centuries-old stale water and bread. Everything here is sterile, and neither of us tastes fresh oxygen. John has been talking about his fear of dying in this cell for the past four days because of the appalling conditions of the prison.

“Ofafa, what are your thoughts on the matter of a prisoner’s right to life and proper treatment while serving their sentence?” he asks in a weak voice, putting on a brave face of innocence and flicking his tongue out every time like a chameleon catching a confetti of flies. “I can no longer stand it. The government officials who are performing their duties here are depriving prisoners of their rights,” he says, his words laced with bitterness for hours on end. As he laments the denial of his rights, all I have been doing is widening my gaze and acting as though I am paying attention. “Are you going to stand with me for our rights

as prisoners, or are you just going to lie there like a stupid person and stare at me?" he retaliates.

"You should be thankful for what they provide for you, John; you complain about them too much."

"What should I be thankful for? The shit that they feed us at mealtimes? The clogged sewage pipes in the toilets that leak into every nearby cell? The trash we sip as water? You have to be crazy!"

"Go to bed; your whining will not make a difference. Who in this jail, after all, wants to hear the complaints of a serial killer?"

To be honest, I occasionally get annoyed with him. That remark silenced him for seven hours. What right is he arguing for when he chose to give up his freedom?

Last night, I ignored his conversations because I get nothing from them. But I am only human, and sometimes it is sensible to be considerate of others. I will listen to him if the topics he brings up benefit me. Despite everything, he remains the only man I have ever considered a friend—since the day we were led to this cell by heavily armed security personnel.

Making friends has been tough for me since then. Ever since Judge Florence's final ruling three months ago, which sentenced us both to life in prison without the possibility of parole, Cell D254 has become our new home.

The room itself is a depressingly small stone box, barely six by four feet. The walls are made of the same thick grey stone as the dwellings in this region, but instead of a wide window with a flower box, there is a narrow barred opening with thick metal bars and no glass. In the summer, the fresher air is a relief, helping to alleviate the stench of festering sewage, but in the cold seasons, it lets in a wicked draught and reduces the temperature to near freezing.

Inside, it is no brighter than the gathering gloom of dusk, even at midday. The bed is a simple wooden plank supported by legs, topped with a thin, unpadded mattress and covered with just one thin blanket. The silence is suffocating, broken only by the screams of tortured inmates. A filthy toilet and sink sit in the corner, while the air, thickened by our breath, clings to us like a layer of frost.

John is correct, but what other options do we have? In every cell, the circumstances are the same. Nobody seems to mind. The only second chance at life that we serial killers have been given is to live out our remaining days in these cramped cells, working long hours every morning while we age and grow wiser from our mistakes.



“Sadists, your time is over. Get ready for more work tomorrow!” Manny, the chief of the prison facility, growled in our direction. One facet of his personality is his habit of croaking and yelling at the prisoners. With a swift motion, every prisoner digging close to the septic system dropped their spades and stood with their heads held high.

The ‘not-to-mess-around-with’ guards, who had been assisting him greatly in supervising the entire task, now marched quickly in our direction, each firmly gripping an AK-47 rifle, the magazine loaded with at least fifteen live rounds. John had told me about them during one of our sporadic lunchtime chats. How he came to know so much about them is unclear to me, as I’ve never seen him interact with any of the long-term prisoners. I know that no guard would be inclined to divulge such information to any prisoner. They shun the rest of us like the plague.

Right now, that does not matter to me—as long as I follow the rules. In the brief time we have been here, everyone has read and comprehended all the rules that govern our behaviour inside and outside our cells. We are required to read them every day before we leave our cells for more gruelling labour. Manny was very explicit about that.

We had all straightened into a line in less than fifteen seconds. The air was thick with the sickening stench of fear as guards rushed to shackle our legs. Bollocks! All of this intimidates us greatly.

Clearing his throat, he yelled, “And... keep in mind that you have just four days left to finish digging that hole! I have noticed that everyone has been moving slowly today. Boys, there will not be a day’s grace period. Are you aware that if you work slowly, you will face a harsher penalty?”

“Yes, sir!” we all respond simultaneously.

“Or does anyone have a problem?”

“No one, Sir!”

“All right. Who has the register book?”

Sensei, his valet, swung his body to stand beside him while tucking his gun into its holster.

“Here it is, boss!” he replied.

“Have you verified the attendance of everyone? I do not want your negligence to cause the same incident again. It nearly cost me my job.”

“Boss, everyone is cleared. There are no loose ends today,” he answered, forcing a smile that barely masked the fear in his eyes.

“All right. However, I am calling them out once more.”

With an awkward nod, he stepped aside and said, “As you wish, boss.”

As usual, it would take him an additional five minutes to ensure our inclusion in the small procession. I will admit it—starting with Manny, the entire process stinks, especially for us prisoners. You never know when he is going to yell or call your name.

After his allotted time with us had passed, we were eventually searched and taken back to our cell block. The unit Corrections Officer (CO), Mwanza, would wake us up again at 5:30 a.m. for his morning count.

As soon as John and I were locked inside, a foul odour hit us. Raw sewage is backing up in the toilet.

“CO!” I shout before he disappears. “We have a backed-up toilet, and crap is flooding our cell.”

He walked back, looked at us with a blank stare, and said, “This is prison,” and walked off.



Our cell block is blue-trimmed all white. Ninety percent of the sixty men on the tier are Kenyans, all dressed in official uniforms. Even now, they are guiding additional detainees to their quarters. The echo of their steps against the walls of the walkway reaches my ears. The smell of decay and wet sewage assaulting my senses is unbearable, but the wardens do not seem to care. They are too busy making sure everyone is safely locked inside their cells.

Weary, I curl up on my thin mattress and wrap a scratchy blanket around me. I slowly spin around to face the walls again. Crafted and scrawled upon, they are brimming with indignation at the injustice and the lost chances.

John does not give a damn about his health at this hour; otherwise, he would be grumbling by now. *Or is it that he knows I will ignore him once more?* *I am not certain.* I laugh off the thought of him, but then another idea creeps into my head, haunting me like a ravenous ghost searching for flesh and blood to eat. What the heck drove me insane again? How am I even here?

I reach under my lumpy pillow and pull out my journal—it has helped me understand myself a little better. My goal in this zombie-and psycho-controlled world has always been to spread chaos. Not just chaos, but negative chaos born from the spirit of liberty. All I want is to see the world burn, and I enjoy stirring up trouble.

I mean, all I have ever been is a lonely person, abandoned to freeze to death in the bitter embrace of no one's desire for me. I've been pouring my heart out on every page, detailing the chaos and the horrifying things I did before my confinement: anger, betrayal, destructive conduct, psychosis, pseudobulbar affect, homicidal tendencies, and substance abuse. If not in writing, then how can I express all of that most effectively? A soul for soul, they say.

I have fallen into a deep, long-term depression because of the weight of my transgressions. The slight relief I find in journaling every day is comforting, even though I do not deserve such generosity. The earthy, smoky scent of paper wafts into my nostrils as I search for a blank page on which to begin a new entry. It

comes from something pressed between the pages of my journal for a while—a folded piece of paper. Curiosity tugs at me, and I unfold it.

Pain shoots up my arm like fire at the slightest glance. I shudder. It bursts into a blinding whiteness inside my head. Lightheaded, I reel from it. The emotional anguish caused by these words feels like alcohol-soaked needles driving through my skin, as if my arm has transformed into a conduit of ice and electricity wired directly to my spine. It is a prose piece I had written to myself during a period of mental instability. Yet, amidst the pain, I also made countless positive promises to myself.

Psychosis

26/06/2014

Invictus

My heart hurts amidst a bleak night. My finicky brain refuses to shut up. A pall of unease has descended upon this mental institution—my home, my everything. I struggle to focus; I struggle to sleep. The night has returned with its eerie nocturnal backdrop. The ghosts that lurk behind these walls are after my poor soul, seeking to break in, and I am powerless to stop them.

My body, weakened by lacerations, has lost its bravery and fortitude. I can't defend myself. I am so weak that I cannot even walk around. I am powerless. I curl up in my bed helplessly—that's all I can do. Help me. Help me escape this awful existence, please.

Hear them—my hollow bones grating against one another. Nothing much came of those late-night injections today. I am losing all of my battles, both mental and emotional. No one can save me now. I am slowly disintegrating from the inside out.

Gushing thoughts of suicide and a sense of worthlessness consume me. My mind feels like it is on fire, with contradictory ideas and feelings. I reason with myself—I stand to lose more than I could ever gain. I shut my eyes for a brief moment, then I open them and look out the window. The moon shines a faint light over the surface of the earth, but the void remains.

I tell myself that the night will pass in a matter of hours and that the sun will rise once

more. Strength comes from vulnerability, and I want to recover. I turn to look around and see the ghosts scuttling across my bed. These enemies have infiltrated my ward, but my soul is impenetrable—Invictus. I cannot allow them to take it.

I hold the flame of my soul, and I am prepared to fight back. It cannot be extinguished by anyone or anything other than God.



I detested Isabella for a plethora of reasons. Yet, it was not difficult for me to extend my forgiveness to her; after all, we are only human, and we cannot always demand perfection from our actions or way of living. There are always oddities that will eventually irritate us.

Despite the minor irritations I experienced from her, our love blossomed like daffodils in the springtime, and I could never compare it to anything else. Upon creating her, God did indeed see beauty. She enjoyed spending most of her afternoons at the park next to our former residence. I could always find her there when I got back from work, her legs pumping on the swings, an apple in her cheek. She had such a radiant smile that I could not help but smile back at her. I loved her soft curves. She was the first amazing girl I had ever met—she had the muscles of a football player, yet the softness of a baby. She was also a blast to be around.

Being a good listener can be beautiful; it allows one to see things from different angles, correct others, and feel joy. Maybe the best way to describe her was through her eyes—safe eyes. She was so beautiful that she gave the impression that she was more substantial and genuine than those billboard-style princesses. That was my woman; it was who she had always been, even before she became mine. That kind of beauty was timeless and unaffected by age. She was my anchor—the one who gave me the strength to fight the demons that haunted my mind.

I was in so much pain and chaos because of my mental health issues, traumatic childhood experiences, abusive and drug-addicted father, and loneliness. Nevertheless, I trusted her, and she saved me. I felt somewhat healed just by resting my head on her velvety thighs. My agony subsided in her presence.

I had never seen myself as a hero in my life because pain had worn me down to nothing. All I was waiting for was a gust of wind to take me away. This time, I had to overcome everything and prove myself a hero because her peculiar behaviour made me believe she was an adulterer.

Then came the war. I will never forget it—she went overboard. Did she need to betray me, of all people, just because some other man gave her pennies? She was someone I looked up to. This couldn't be real. I was enraged beyond belief. I vowed to keep going until they were defeated, and I had no intention of stopping. I intended to kill them.

They had nowhere to hide because I would track them down and undo the work they had begun. I only wanted their icy black eyes to be extinguished from this world; I did not care how it would happen or if they suffered. You might think it was an overreaction. But you didn't know how much I loved her.

I was coming; I did not want to follow 'the rules.' She didn't notice.

After she had fixed dinner one Saturday night, I decided to address the matter with her. She was cheerful, but I couldn't understand why. How could she be so happy?

"Isabella," I muttered.

"Oh, sweetheart, would you like more chicken soup?" she enquired.

"My belly is full. I'll get into trouble if I eat more chicken soup."

With a smile, she said, "I'll serve you the remaining portion tomorrow." She took a stance. Her phone vibrated as she cleared the table. A message. It was him. Again.

Her eyes were fixed on the right side of the table, where the phone was. I started tapping the table with both thumbs, trying to restrain the agony that surged through me like a river overflowing its bank.

"Is there a problem?"

She replied, pretending to smile, "Ah...mmh...it is nothing, my love."

"Are you certain?" I asked again.

“Shaking Thomas’ belief! When did I begin lying to you?”

“Well, then, I am going to bed. I have a ton of operations at work tomorrow.”

“Love, you are leaving me here alone like that? Kindly hold on for me.”

I disregarded her pleas and strolled by her, wandering up the stairs. I reached for the light, and she did everything she could to pull me into the abyss. She had duped me. Until she hurt me repeatedly, I was faithful.

Real faith requires the heart of a true warrior, a true fighter. A kind of toughness that is devoted to kindness.

Our newly discovered love was crumbling. My holy grail was true, enduring love. But it was never eternal.



Four months had passed. Isabella was a completely different person. Like the faintest trace of smoke in the air, her regard for me dwindled. She was slipping away. She had become increasingly strange, and her tantrums broke out when I confronted her about the man she had been seeing covertly. I was just an anonymous person to her, as she would spend the entire week at nightclubs.

Then I found out she was expecting a child with the man. Was this the woman I was supposed to start a family with? To grow old beside? I couldn’t bear the pain of losing her. If I couldn’t have her, no one could. Both of us had to lose her.

I ended her life.

The crime I had committed dragged me into yet another episode of psychosis. Fleeing didn’t seem like the right choice—freedom was never going to come. I was never going to reach my destination. To be free, there had to be peace. And there would never be peace.

I had committed an unimaginably horrible act. I turned myself in after seven days—guilt was keeping me up every night.

I had fallen from grace.



I sat in the chair, struggling to remain composed while the police ridiculed me. Sweat trickled down my cheeks. I turned to face the cops, their laughter slicing through the room as they laughed at me. They knew what I had done. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, getting louder and louder—until I was sure they could hear it too. When the realisation of what I had done became unbearable, I took them to what had once been our perfect home—the place where I had taken Isabella’s life. As soon as we stepped inside, I pointed to the floor and whispered, “This is where it is—beneath the floorboards.”

I started tearing the boards up to expose Isabella’s body parts. She had mocked my pain. She had blown a hole through my heart with an ice-cold magnum. But I was always worth more. I just needed to educate myself on how and why.

All the while, a poem by Sagar Garg kept coming to mind. I had been wrong from the start when I thought that causing chaos would demonstrate to everyone that I was a man. I was just demonstrating to the world that I was a murderous psychopath. The voices in my head started criticising me.

Guilty Conscience

Silence falls over me at the night,

Covering me in a heavy blanket of darkness and guilt.

I try to exhale my sins but they smother me back

as I am forced to breathe them back in.

The hands on the clock taunt me with their sound,

acknowledging my lack of sleep.

My vision is blurred. My judgment is compromised.

Nothing can undo what I have done.

The rain will not wash away my guilty conscience.

The sun will not brighten my inner darkness.

It will only serve to expose the truth

when the shadows dissipate and unearth my face.

Denial is no longer an option, it never was...

That was the end of me. Remorse is like a snow globe; you have to shake it and examine it from all sides before letting it land on you and collect dust.

My mind lashes out occasionally. The knowledge that I will die in Kamiti Prison makes me feel even more trapped in this cell. I acknowledge my sins—this is not an excuse.

I tried to be kind, to be considerate, but something triggered me. Something in me turned cold, and because of that, I struck an innocent person. I once pledged to myself that I would become a better man, but I have fallen short of that expectation. I am deeply disappointed in myself. I let myself down.

Love isn't possession, it's the wind beneath the wings of the one you love. And I clipped Isabela's wings. Now I must face the truth. I must keep my eyes on this dark flash that has emerged within my soul.

Please understand, my anger was only a flaming mask for my weakness. I truly loved Isabella, the daughter of Mzee Nzau. No amount of time will lessen the pain as the days pass. My heart remains shattered.



I remembered I wasn't my mother

Annab Atane

I hear that chant of happy women in my neighbourhood, and it is you I remember. I bring myself to the fence in our backyard with swift curiosity. I reach for the wooden ladder and climb carefully to throw glances over the fence. A bride is being escorted to her matrimonial home—to be received by the groom's family.

We haven't spoken about marriage in the past three years. I dodged the discussion like a bullet. That day, we were pillow-talking when you stylishly lurched a question in the middle of the conversation. You said, "I want us to talk. I want us to share our future plans."

I knew where it was leading to, so I chose to paddle my canoe to the other side of the river. I answered, "I want to finish school and start a business while I pursue a master's degree." That was all, enough response to prune everything.



"Barka da gida sabuwar amaryar mu" (Welcome home, our new bride), a fat *bajiya* seated on a large mat said as she rested her hands on the shoulders of the

young woman kneeling before her, veiled in a lacy white fabric.

“Ayerr yerrr yeerrr reeerrrai,” the other women chanted loudly, pinching their noses with their hands.

“Za mu ji kukan jariri” (We will hear the cry of a baby), she continued.

“Ayerr yerrr yeeeeerrr rerrai,” the other women chanted again. The rest of her words followed in whispers; I assumed they were prayers.

I had folded myself behind that fence in the scorching sun, peeping above its cleft and returning my head back into my arm to avoid being caught. I remember the words of my mother six days before:

“I am going for Hauwa’s *chin chin*. I will also join the other women to chant when she is brought back home to her husband.”

I nodded in agreement. After all, it wasn’t news that she was present at every wedding in Sabon Gida.

“One day, it will be your turn. The women will also join me to celebrate.” She pointed a hand forward in the air, loosened her wrapper, and tied it back; it was meant to be a dance.

“I won’t get married ...” I snapped.

She pursed her lips and then continued, “Stop saying that. One day, you’ll clock twenty-something. And by the time those little children in the neighbourhood begin to call you *old cargo*, nobody will tell you to find a husband.”

I sighed. She, my mother, never bothered to ask me why I had said I wasn’t going to get married. Perhaps she assumed I was still snarled by juvenile reasoning.

I never quite liked the idea of marriage; sometimes, I felt I had been jinxed, but I was gradually shoving it into my pocket, which should by now have been empty because I didn’t want to go back and find it anymore after we met. I loved my parents differently; it was difficult to love them both—their marriage. Each time I tried to search for the beauty in their union, it felt as if my eyes were trying to look at themselves directly.

James Bond was a taxi driver and a notorious womaniser—the most devoted

of his kind. He would speed out of our street early each day and come back home late, sometimes very late, with a pack of *snja* or cold drinks. He drove fast and steady the few times he dropped us off at school. As for my mother, she owned a provision store down the road from our house. She opened early and closed early in the evenings so she could have enough time to prepare our father's meal. Sometimes, she left us there and returned home. My brothers and I would shove sachets of cowbell milk, sweets, and biscuits into our pockets when she was away. Most times, we asked and got disappointed.

"This is for business. If we eat all the provisions with our mouths, how will we fill the shop, eh?"

Each time she said these words, we would feel a pang of remorse for a while and resume asking another day.

It was 2003, and I was twelve. My father returned home drunk at about 11:30 p.m. He staggered through the door, dragged my mother out of the bed, and smashed her head on the wall; the loud thud woke me up.

"Stupid woman, if I had not married you out of your poverty-reeking family, you'd still be in the street, selling oranges at that junction." His voice was irascible; I gave him a hard stare. If I wanted to stand up for my mother, my mouth would have poured like a broken tap. I would have asked him why we were sent home for school fees every term, why my mother owned only two sets of hollandaise wrappers, why we ate rice only on Christmas Day, and why he was never present at his family meetings.

After he had slept off and poisoned the silence with his loud snoring, my mother lit a candle. The reflection spattered on the smooth concrete floor of their room to the door. I watched the reflection; it looked like the image of a sunset on a body of water. I eavesdropped as she prayed.

"Oh God, your daughter is here again. Have mercy on my husband, for he knows not what he is doing. Bring him back to me and restore the good times for the sake of my children." Her tears dropped on the floor, and a little portion jumped on my skin. I despised her devotion.



You were like the rainbow painted on the blue sky. I had no specific reason for loving you, and that day when you asked me to be your girlfriend, I was wondering if you could cope with everything, the triggers and pain that wear themselves over me like skin. But you didn't have to try too hard to peel them off with your pristine heart, they stripped themselves before your commitment after two years. We were so much in love with each other that every bird could tell that we were dating, even if we walked apart. I guess our chemistry was so strong that it oared the eyes of many—The good, the bad, and the ugly. I loved you—God knows I did.



By December 2003, in Harmattan, it became a ritual—my father was verbally abusing my mother, torturing her with words shaped into spears. He did it without remorse, in my presence, with our eyes locked. But I never truly developed any hatred for my father—maybe it was because of the suya, the cold drinks, the roasted fish, the plastic toys he brought us, and the way he drove his taxi like my favourite villain—James Bond. I cursed my mother for being helpless, for constantly allowing my father to cripple her with his drab and barbaric masculinity.

On certain nights, just when he would be returning from work, my mother would set his dinner table—two plates with matching colours in a stainless tray, a bowl of water for hand-washing sitting separately on the table. She would dress my brothers and me in clothes that helped as repellent for cold. It was from one prayer house to another, one-night vigil to the other, praying, crying, and rolling on the bare floor. Most times when we returned, the tray was left untouched and my mother would give the food to homeless boys who begged in the early hours of the day. Sometimes, she would warm it and eat with us.

“So you think you can poison me? Me? Akugbor? You lie!” He would laugh, a dark, resentful laughter, into her face and walk away.

In no time, the news of my father's torture had travelled the community. My mother would walk past groups of women, and they would shake their heads in pity. Sometimes, they whispered in a noticeable tone—

“Na she be that, na the woman wey we de talk be that,” they would say, pushing their chins in her direction.

“The husband don beat am sotay sotay sotay, meat no dey him body again.”

They went as far as using her to preach the gospel of a virtuous wife because she didn’t stop cooking for her husband, she didn’t stop washing his clothes, and she didn’t stop going to church to pray for him.

One afternoon, I slunk into the house, and I heard my mother sobbing from the sitting room. Our neighbour, the community’s gossip, was patting her on the back. I wondered what had turned their once full-of-life conversation into a funeral. Like I knew, it was about my father.

“So it’s Aisha? Aisha is behind all this? And she comes to buy things from my shop? Ahh! No wonder! No wonder people have been laughing at me.” She shook her head from left to right. Her throat was clogged with sobs.

I almost ran to dump myself in her arms and catch the tears before they reached her cheeks, but that would only mean adding petrol to the fire. So I stood there, huddled behind the faded red curtains, inhaling the stench of dust.

Aisha was a single lady in her late 20s, still blooming in her feminine figure. She was dark, a shiny black woman who moved her hips like a serpent. She wore one gold tooth and a nose ring with arms bathed with henna. She always wore a dangerous perfume, the type known for snatching people’s husbands and boyfriends. They called it *kayamata*. Women and young girls who abhorred her or got involved in a triangle involving Aisha and their men called her *kamawa* or *Ashawo*, and the learned ones called her ‘home wrecker or prostitute.’ I preferred ‘home wrecker.’

Aisha didn’t care. She saw herself as a beautiful, unmarried woman drooling in her physical endowments. Stodgy breasts and watery buttocks, showing off in long dresses and large veils. A criterion for home wrecking. Her name reigned secretly on the lips of so many. I haven’t just learned it. One time, we heard she bewitched the Bulama—the town chairman. That she had placed him in a spiritual bottle and buried it in her soak away. Some said she sent his wife away, and others said she killed her. And now, she decided who owned land in Sabon Gida. But my question was, if she had the Bulama to herself, why choose a man like my father? To wreck?



Days before you asked about our future plans, when I asked you who Maryam was, you said, “She is just a friend,” and guffawed.

“If she was just a friend, why do you both go out without my knowledge?” I asked.

You hissed. “What are you trying to say? That I am cheating on you?”

“Answer the question.” I flinched.

“You answer yourself!”

I was about to burst into tears, but then I remembered I never wanted to be my mother, so I said, “You are a he-goat, a smelly he-goat.”

“What did you just say? Take that back. Apologise to me right now!” You grabbed my throat and plastered my body against the wall. My skull almost leapt out of my jungle braids. I was coughing, struggling to take your grip out of my neck while I stared into your burning eyes. You looked like a beast, a very mad beast.

You reminded me of him, my father. That night was silent; he wasn’t drunk, and his eyes were sharp as the glistening sun. His senses were assembled in the right corners. Without a word, he snagged my mother out of her sleep like one who had just caught a thief. He grabbed her by the throat and slapped her—so hard, my ears buzzed. He threw her to the ground and kicked her belly thrice as she shielded them with her weak, trembling hands. He diverted to her bottom for several kicks and back to her face. She was calling his name.

“My h—uuuu—sss...” She never completed the words before a kick reached her. His eyes were submerged in terror. He resembled Undertaker.

I watched my mother slowly disappear into the darkness, her wafting breath counting the pain of love, loyalty, and commitment. I couldn’t help her. So, I ran to call the neighbours. They flew into our house with torch lights, almost a legion of them.

“*Oga*, why now? Wertin she do you wey you beat am like this?” Baba Habu asked him with a disappointed tone.

“E don kill this woman finish, e don kill am oh, e don kill am last last!” Mama

Hauwa screamed—my trauma was complete. Only later would I learn that Aisha had stirred my father's anger after my mother secretly threatened her to leave her husband alone.



“Darling”—as you fondly called me. I loved that name until you started sharing it like a souvenir.

First, it was with Boma, your colleague who never left home or went to bed without calling you. On a quiet Friday morning, I met Boma at your house. I walked cautiously into your sitting room after finding a pair of Zara slippers at the door. I stood beside the two-seater cushion, not knowing what to do after seeing you both lying side by side on your centre carpet, shoulders touching, with your bellies facing the ground. A laptop kept open sat in front of you two. I guessed work brought her. I remember being shocked by how she jokingly called you “darling” before she left. You did not tell me about Boma until that day. Later in March, I found her waist beads in your wardrobe. I knew they belonged to her because I caught a glimpse of them wrapping her panties as she struggled to raise herself from the floor on my last surprise visit—it was war. It took me months to give us another chance. I thought, *Who has ever succeeded in love and commitment without being given another chance? Without forgiveness?*

The second one was Kauna. I had never heard of her until the day I picked up your phone. I ran through the texts; my heart bled. You betrayed me the second time, but somehow convinced me to stay. You told me how much you couldn't compare what we had for each other. How the blind, the dead, and the living could bear witness. You knew how to flip my mood and win back my heart. But subsequently, it went on and on and on, weeks, months, and years. You didn't change. You couldn't stop. Your words of reassurance went stale, like fermented urine.



“How about you?” I asked.

“Secure a loan or get a new job and also pursue my master's,” you coerced a happy expression.

I kissed you and our pillow talk ended. We made love. The day was silent. The world stood still. I prayed for myself while we were at it.

It was that day I left. It was that day I got tired, went to the market, and did not return. I gave up on you. I gave up on us because I never wanted to be my mother, Tega.

Pieces of Beautiful Nonsense

Despan Kwardem

Morticia knew he wanted her.

She could see it. The usual suspects in such sensual adventures--the liquid eyes, the quivering lips, the heightened breathing, the incessant stretching and yawning, the bulging trousers--were all speaking to her womanhood. And she wanted it. Him. She was ready for him.

Her heart pulsed with every hot breath she expelled. She could feel oestrogen saturating her system. Her womanhood was alive, livid with expectation. Every inch of her was on a sensual riot. Yet, she was also very scared. What if it hurts like it always did? What if she didn't.... Then his hands brushed against her thigh, sending fresh sparks of electricity all through her region.

Somehow, she survived that first night.

Breakfast the next day was a sort of buffet of sour-sweet flavours, deliberately intended to compensate for the disaster that was last night. But it turned out to

be one of her worst. Their actions—the occasional clashes of the eyes, then the quick withdrawal to focus them on the omelettes, or the cup of tea, or whatever else—were all mere mechanical ordeals, each an unconscious motion that connoted interest but which, in reality, betrayed the hurt, the bitter disappointment, the ‘whatevers’, of the sordid night.

Morticia didn’t know what was going on in Jerry’s mind, but for her, she was swirling in her pains, trying to subdue her emotions. She was very confused. And angry. And downright disappointed. She wasn’t used to surviving such closeness.

She wasn’t used to surviving men.

It wasn’t like she was wayward. At least she didn’t go about opening her legs to just about every jerk that came around. Yet, she wasn’t a saint either. She lost it to one of those grisly creatures long ago—she wasn’t even yet seventeen at the time. Naive, fresh out of secondary school, full of hopes and dreams, she didn’t see it coming. At least, not from him; someone she took for a friend, in fact, an older brother. He was much older than she was and was helping her with her JAMB lessons, telling her about life in the university, and even warning her to be careful with men. So when it happened, she was totally caught unprepared. He ripped the most precious part of her, and she vowed never again to allow any man the chance.

Morticia packed the dishes to the kitchen, where she dumped them in the shallow sink with such force that some toppled over and fell to the floor. Their clanking protest went unnoticed, her mind had drifted back to its search for answers. Was something wrong with her? Wasn’t she attractive enough? Morticia knew, and had long admitted to herself, that she wasn’t in the A-category when it came to beauty—she didn’t have those slender faces with long noses and sleek mouths and fair skin that most men tended to define as beauty. But she wasn’t ugly either.

At five feet six inches, she had height going for her, at least. Yes, her *behind* wasn’t as endowed as the Kenyans’, but her long, slim fingers with their squoval nails should surely compensate for some of those ‘inadequacies’, much like her full bust was doing a great job representing her frontals. So what was Jerry’s

problem? Unable to find any answers that made sense, she started singing. Not that she was such a singer, but she sang all the same. She just needed something to distract her mind.

Nonetheless, the thoughts kept creeping back, obstructing the song, taking up the spaces between the lyrics. Why didn't Jerry take her last night? She was ready for him. She wanted their souls to connect; she'd emptied herself for him, ready to receive all of him. To let him fill her till everything in her was him.

They went through the motions of the day without any incident. He went to work and returned. She served dinner, and they talked. But the tension simply lurked beneath the false giggles, the deft touches, and the attempt to make everything look okay.

And the second night came.

And the third; each a torment of apprehension, desire, and the ever-last-minute freaking out, the sequence as predictable as the rising, each morning, of the sun.

She came that Wednesday because it was his birthday. And she wanted to give him a gift: that special part of her that he'd always craved. She wanted to make it special for him. To let him know she loved him and was willing and ready to share her life, world, and everything with him. She wanted to let him know he meant the world to her, and that after that night, she was never going to allow another man to have her...

She knew he also wanted her. He'd always wanted her. He'd made several advances before, but she had always held him back, keeping him at bay—she was on her period; she had a headache; she wasn't in the mood; she was too tired; she wasn't safe—anything that would stop him. And Jerry had always understood. Sometimes, he questioned her; other times, he got angry though he tried to mask it. In fact, he threatened her at one time, but she held her ground, instantly manufacturing an excuse that made him defer to her; she even pitied her and apologised.

Well, it wasn't that she'd not had sex since that unfortunate first time. One here, another there, but that was it. So she wanted this to be special. It was why she came to his place. But he wouldn't even insist. What sort of man would

not insist? This ‘thing’ that men were running after like crazy. Or was he seeing another woman? That had to be the explanation, though she’d never seen any sign. Not even a chat, a text or a call. Jerry was the only man she knew who allowed her unrestricted access to his phone. She’d searched for anything incriminating, anything from another woman, but the ‘saint’ passed the test. So what could be his problem?

As though in answer, a frightening thought assaulted her. Was he.... For several seconds, Morticia couldn’t allow the imagery to form in her mind. Was Jerry really... she couldn’t bring herself to complete the thought.

No!

The bulge in his trouser was enough evidence. Gay, perhaps?

“I can wait until you’re ready,” he whispered into the tense silence.

“I’m ready.”

“No, you’re scared.”

“How did you know?”

“Know what?”

“That I’m scared?”

“I see it all over you, and it’s my duty to protect you, even from myself,” he told her. “I sense you’re not ready. I want you, yes. I sure want to make love to you, but I want to do it when you’re ready. I don’t want to force myself on you.”

She never told him; how did he know? Had he found out? What else did he know about her? A sudden chill ran through her body. Was that why he was avoiding making love to her? Maybe he thought she was a worthless prosti... she couldn’t say the word. Or maybe he didn’t even know anything. Maybe he just believed her, not knowing all was mere gragra. The truth was that she was so frightened of sex that the very thought of it sickened her.

To be fair to him, Jerry had made some attempts last night, but she had remained docile, at one time pretending to be asleep. Even when he tried to draw her close to him, she’d stretched and started complaining about how hot the room was and then shifted to the edge of the bed, out of his reach. The digital

panel on the air-conditioner read 18 degrees.

God! What was she thinking?

However, several minutes later, she tried to bring up a conversation, to explain herself, to assure him she loved him and wanted him and would do anything for him, but only silence responded to her blabbing. It was the loudest, longest silence she'd ever encountered. In fact, that was when she realised how heavy silence could weigh. She respected herself and retreated into her shell, determined not to be bothered by the selfish man who claimed to love her. She wasn't going to allow his mood to spoil the rest of the night for her.

Several tense and agonising moments later, however, Morticia capitulated, defeated by her frustration and guilt. It was choking her. Her body responded first by trembling, and then the tears breached her defences. And streamed down unrestrained from the corners. "I am very scared," she whispered into the silent darkness. "I'm very scared of sex. It means nothing to me anymore."

She felt his hand on her shoulder, and then his golden voice said, "Why? Who did that to you?"

The gentility in his voice further broke her. Jerry was such an angel. His sense of care soothed her, expelling the turmoil. Yet, she hesitated. Should she tell him? Did he mean it the way he sounded? Did he really care? Would he really want to know? It was her secret. She'd kept it all these eleven years. What would he think of her if he learnt she'd long been violated, that she was no longer a virgin, no longer pure enough for him? Yet a part of her urged her to speak out. Something told her if she did, she would also find some relief.

But Ugo was his friend.

How would he feel? Would telling him change anything? She didn't want to be the cause of their separation. Not that they were really that close anymore.

"It's okay if you don't want to talk about it." That soft, alluring voice disrupted her tumultuous soliloquy. His hands wandered down her side until they found hers. Gently, he entwined his fingers in hers, then applied some little pressure. The current from him energised her, and the words spurted out of her like the spit from an angry snake anxious to subdue an elusive prey.

"It was Sparco..."

He laughed. Her heart sank. Just what she feared; he didn't believe her. "Come again," he mumbled.

"Ugo, your friend," she told him. The silence that followed was even more unnerving. Jerry withdrew his hand. Was he angry? Should he be angry at her? What was he thinking? Well, she decided to continue before she lost her nerve completely. "One day, he called me to his house to help him with some chores. I was naïve. I trusted him too much. He started like play, but before I realised it, he hit me on the head, pulled down my skirt ... and...."

She squeezed her eyes, trying to extinguish the memory. Ugo's wicked thrust took away her breath. Her world. Her everything. The pain that followed... she'd never imagined it. Millions of sparkling fires exploded in her head, fanning out like a plague until they engulfed all of her being, each fiery spark piercing her soul with the intensity of a thousand furnaces. She had never imagined such pain, never thought she could experience it, nor believed she could survive it. How she lived through it was still a mystery. But each time she came close to a man, Morticia was never herself. Each encounter brought a fresh attack of that dark episode. Oh, the sons of Adam. She was so done with them.

However, there was something different about this version besides her. His presence felt like a bulwark. His demeanour dispelled her fears, bringing reassurance. And it happened in such a surprisingly pleasant sort of way that she always looked forward to it with heightened anticipation—the way a child jumps restlessly as the mother peels open a bar of candy for it. Was this love? Did it mean she loved Jerry, or what?

Jerry drew her to his chest, wrapping his hands around her. The tears became a torrent. And the pain shot through her throat, jetting out in a brash eruption of sound that frightened even her.

"It's okay." He tried to calm her. "It wasn't your fault. Ugo was just a coward who couldn't face his fears. But one day, he will pay." Would Jerry make him pay? Oh, how she so dearly wished someone would make Ugo pay. The beast that he was. Strangely, too, she felt light. She was no longer afraid of how Jerry would perceive her. "I think men who do such are the least among cowards. In contrast, their victims, the women they rape or violate, are the real heroes in every such battle because they always come out stronger, more determined, and

more focused. And”—he cleared his throat—“you know there’s no force greater than the force of focus.”

Jerry’s words sparked a new fire in her. She’d never looked at her issue from that perspective. Maybe she’d been too consumed in her pity party, but Jerry was right. For Ugo, raping her was just three minutes of pleasure; for her, a lifetime of pain, the scar never going away. Yet, it was in that same scar that she found a fierce determination to never again allow herself to be so fooled or so naïve; what Jerry had named the force *of focus*.

“You’re not mad at me?” she asked, baffled.

“I knew. Ugo confessed to me,” he replied. “I was waiting for the day you would open up.”

She wanted to be angry, to yell at him. How could he know this all the while and still be able to keep his cool? How dare he not show any anger at what his friend did to her or even a hint of empathy at what she went through all these years? Did he really love her?

“What Ugo did to you was the most despicable thing any man could do to a woman.” He broke in before she could find the appropriate words to use to assault him. “Ugo tried to destroy your capacity to love sex, to enjoy sex, to look up to it with dignity. Sex is beautiful. God made it so. Ugo took advantage of you, and that’s utterly unacceptable. So no, I’m not angry at you.”

She tried to look into his eyes. Did he mean what he just said? Will Jerry help her overcome her fears and this loathing for sex? She searched desperately for any sign that would betray him—a flicker of hesitation—but all she saw was his sincerity. He had no pretence in him. And she saw something else: a layer of mist coated Jerry’s eyes. He was crying. Jerry was in agony.

“I love you,” she mumbled and attempted to kiss him, but he simply held her and allowed the silence to fill the space between them. Soon, she heard him snoring and knew the night was over.

They were scheduled to go to church together that Sunday, but before Jerry woke up, she packed her stuff and left. She was done. She wasn’t a photograph!

She returned home angry and disappointed. For two days, she shunned Jerry—no calls, no texts, no chats. He called, sent text messages, and even came to see her, but she pretended she wasn't home. Two days turned into a week, then two. After one month, Jerry seemed to get the message. He stopped trying.

And now, one month had turned into three. There was no word between them. She'd always thought he couldn't do without her, that he loved her too much to quit. Now she was getting scared. Had she lost him? But he ought not to just walk away like that. She was in the middle of this confusion when, one Sunday afternoon, while sitting at home, bored as usual, someone said something on TV. She wasn't such a fan of TV talk shows, but she turned her attention to the lady anyway.

“When a guy restrains himself from taking advantage of you, it is called respect. In our present world, where all the guy wants is your body..., you enter a guy's room, and before you sit, he's all over you..., his hands going to places they shouldn't.... And when you find this guy who's willing to wait for you, who accords you the worth of your value... girl, when you find such a guy, what you need to do is not to deny him, but to teach him how to love you and exercise that respect in the manner that works for you...”

Morticia didn't wait to hear the rest of the woman's sermon. She ran out of the house and found a taxi that took her to Jerry's neighbourhood. On reaching his house, an unknown couple told her Jerry no longer lived there. She returned home devastated and cried the whole of that evening.

Unable to sleep, she retreated to her treasure chest, to the evidence of their love, to those notes, their little pieces of beautiful nonsense, words scrawled by hand on tiny pieces of paper and left in unlikely places—the inside of a shoe, squeezed into a ball and dropped inside the cup of her bra, or placed inside the hand mirror she carried in her bag or a shirt pocket... And to think Jerry dropped this one inside her sugar jar:

Imagine...

...how life would be

if we don't have to live apart

*...how sex would feel
if it doesn't have to be
with another she*

Despite her sour feelings, Morticia smiled. She read the poem again and again until the tears obscured the words out of her sight. Had Jerry found another woman? She brought out her phone and dialled his number. It rang and rang and rang. Over the next days and weeks, Morticia called and sent texts, but Jerry wouldn't respond. Even when she called using other numbers, Jerry would cut the call the moment he recognised her voice. *To hell with him*. She finally decided. And so she floated through life, the thoughts of Jerry effectively banished from her mind. Three months became six months; six months rolled into two full years.

One day, as she was scrolling through her WhatsApp status updates, Morticia got the shock of her life. There, posted by a distant acquaintance, Jerry's face stared at her. Her heart missed a beat. The announcement under the picture was even more traumatising. The pain was as though someone had pierced her heart with a knife. It wasn't possible. Jerry was her man. How could he get married? She would never allow it. By all intents, she reserved the right of first refusal. How dare he? Rage and anguish and indignation filled her as she glared at his liquid eyes and boyish grin. She would stop the wedding. He wasn't permitted to marry another woman.

It took her countless hours of emotional versus logical battle and counter battle, of contemplations and counter contemplations, but eventually, she attended the wedding. It was huge by all standards. Everyone who needed to be there was present. But for Morticia, everyone meant nothing. All she wanted was to see the woman who had stolen her man. Not her cake, as was the preponderance of most women. Or the wedding gown, or the decorations. None of those mattered. Only the girl, not even the bride.

And she did.

Despite herself, Morticia had to admit—the girl was a black beauty..., slender, her curvature asserting the very essence of womanhood, affirming the feminine mystique of grace in weakness; the alluring virtue that enslaves men to them.

The girl could easily pass for a goddess. Even she, Morticia, was happy that it was Jerry who found her. She couldn't imagine such a precious, delicate soul falling into the hands of monsters like Ugo.

Morticia was blown away by the number of girls who went through hell every day in silence... enduring the sight of their predators walking about freely and not being able to do anything about it. These beasts steal away everything from you. They look you in the face, gloat at you and carry on as if it were their right, as if you deserved what you got. And they would do it again and again and again... And nothing would happen. There were no support systems anywhere. Not at home, not in school, the church or mosque, and not even in the community.



They started small during her youth service in Kano. They would get together, share their experiences, pains, and confusion, and try to provide answers to those questions that were difficult, very personal, and sometimes shameful, even to them as women. It wasn't easy, but it helped. *She Refuge*, her small NGO, had gained traction. In just three years, they were already doing hundreds of girls. Not those who attended the conference, but those who came for the weekly sessions, where they nourished their famished souls and equipped them with the tools that would help them to defeat societal stigma and free them from the crippling grip of shame and fear. For indeed, each of them, in some queer sort of way, was a warrior forged from the foundries of suffering. And so she danced with Jerry. And wished him a happy married life.

"Today, eight years have gone by. Jerry is somewhere, happily married to his love, and here I am, talking to you." Morticia looked into the camera. It was her annual *Women of Steel Conference*, which brought together young girls and survivors of sexual violence to share experiences and forge alliances that would make them formidable foes against a cruel and unrelenting world. "So, never disdain your pain. Inside, it is your grain for a gain."—With a bow, she concluded—"Until I see you again next year, remain the women of steel that you are. Thank you."

The hall erupted into a thunderous applause. The red seats squawked and

quaked as though in jubilation at her success as their occupants' restraining weights freed them to rebound. Soon, Morticia started her ritual of book signings that usually accompanied the end of such conferences, scribbling and scrawling her signature across the pages, book after book.

"Madam, that was awesome. I'm super thrilled to meet you at last," a husky alto female voice said to her.

"Oh, thank you so much," she answered, collecting her book as she looked up at the speaker. The woman was a stunning beauty. She was in her late thirties, perhaps, but it was the man beside her that made her gasp. "Jerry!" she screamed and flew into him, almost knocking them both to the ground. Morticia squeezed herself into him, absorbing much of him, allowing herself to get lost in the moment. She didn't care what the others thought. Her Jerry was here.

"Tadin insisted we must come for the conference," Jerry explained as he disengaged from her embrace and pointed at the woman.

"Tadin...?" She cocked her head to the side questioningly.

"My wife," Jerry said, turning to his wife, "This is Morticia."

"So this is the famous Morticia," Tadin said, her face awash with her smile. "I'm happy to finally meet you, ma." Tadin seemed not to have noticed their initial exchange, or if she did, it didn't matter. "Your name is a household name in our house."

Morticia only smiled back, overwhelmed by the very presence of the only man she'd ever truly loved. Jerry's butterflies were flying all over her.



Morticia returned home exhausted. All she wanted now was to have a hot shower and sleep. *The conference was a huge success*, she thought as she quickly unlocked the door. *And seeing Jerry again after all these years... He was chubbier and even looked more handsome.* She pushed the door back, but something was preventing it from closing.

"Smallie," a guttural voice sounded.

She froze. Only one person called her that. It wasn't possible. But the voice.... She managed to look at the figure by the door. Those sunken eyes, broad nostrils, thick lips... a lot heavier and older than what she remembered them to look like, but it was him, the bushy beard notwithstanding. Was she dreaming? Or was this his ghost?

"Ugo?"

"You look beautiful," he said. His wrestler arms, with their muscular biceps exposed from his near-sleeveless vest, made him look more monstrous.

"Won't you ask me in?"

"Why should I?"

"My baby..."

"Who's your baby?" she retorted. "Ugo, leave before I scream."

He stepped inside. "I've been looking for you."

What did he want? Who showed him her house? Had he been stalking her? "How did you find my house?" she asked.

"You're all over the TV, your conference..." Without warning, she felt Ugo's distasteful lips swallowing hers. However, she pushed roughly, hitting him.

"Stop it," she yelled as she retreated further into her small compact room. She used to lament at its smallness, but now, it suddenly seemed too large... Ugo would have ample space to do anything he wanted. He merely smiled. Then she found herself floating as he swept her off the ground.

"You are mine," he muttered. "Do you know how long it took me to find you?" His face was now only inches from hers, his hot breath a mixture of stale tobacco and alcohol, heating up the tip of her nose. She turned away. He dropped her roughly, grabbed her by the neck, and with her small chin cupped in his thick hands, forced her face towards him. "You look at me when I'm talking to you."

"You're hurting me, Ugo. Please stop."

"Now, take off your clothes."

Not again, Lord. Not again. She prayed. "Why are you doing this?" she whis-

pered. Her throat felt very dry, the quaver in her voice betraying her fears. Suddenly, Morticia felt like her bladder was leaking.

"Jerry is married now. You have only me," he told her. The look in his eyes worried her more. Her eyes strayed to his combat shorts... The bulge was noticeable. What would she do? Scream? But would anyone come to her rescue? "Did you think I'll allow another man to have you?"

Her heart skipped a beat. So, had he come to complete what he started...? After deflowering her without dignity, now he was here again, feeling entitled.... What manner of a beast was he? What was she going to do? Then, an idea struck her.

"Ugo darling, no need for this drama," she said, mustering as much sweetness in her voice as she could. "We had something before..." Her voice seemed to calm him down. The tension in his hands eased up. Gently, Morticia raised her hand to his face and started caressing it... "What makes you think I've not been craving for you? You're the first man, remember?" she said, her tone seductive, her tongue pursed over parted lips and her eyelashes flickering at him. "We have all night, don't we?" Then she removed her top and flung it away. "Can you undo the strap for me, please?" She turned her back to him. After a few seconds of fiddling, she felt the grip of her bra relaxing. She flung it away and turned to face him. Ugo's face lit up at the sight of her exposed breasts. Then down went her skirt, exposing her tight, her last but one piece of defence. She kissed him quickly and then said, "Let's go have a shower together."

Without waiting for his reply, she dragged him by the hand into her tiny bathroom, which she knew wouldn't contain them both.

"You go first," he told her.

She did. And found him waiting for her on the couch. Naked.

With the towel wrapped around her and the tight underneath, Morticia approached Ugo. Squatting, she worked her palms over his stomach to his chest. She made him sprawl on the couch, his face looking up to heaven, eyes closed, and two arms spread out like a priest in supplication. Her fingers travelled all over him, teasing him with pleasure until they finally encircled themselves around his hard rod.

It felt repulsive to her. She wanted to throw up, but Morticia willed herself to stay strong. It was expedient that she did. Her very life depended on it. She continued until she had him writhing in a serpentine motion, lost in pleasure.

Using her free hand, she reached for her hairpin. She couldn't afford a mistake at this time. She only had this chance. Anything less, and she was doomed. The tension in her increased, and the adrenaline saturated her system. *God, please help me*, she prayed as she drove the metal hard into the hole of his cursed penis. Ugo jerked upright as pleasure apparently turned to instant unimaginable pain. He grabbed at his penis with both hands, his eyes straying to her and back, apparently confused.

At the same instant, Morticia grabbed her shoe and, with all her strength, hit his face repeatedly with the pointed heel. After unsuccessful attempts to fend off her ferocious attack, Ugo resorted to protecting his bleeding face. Then suddenly, Morticia packed his clothes, jammed the door, and ran out shouting, "Help, help, rapist!"

Moments later, the neighbours dragged the naked Ugo out to the middle of the compound, where they surrounded him while they waited for the police to arrive.

Rigmarole

Emem Bassey

TIME CAPSULE:

Panic engulfs the earth

A lot sick, a great many deaths

Tears, sadness, sorrow

The description, no words to borrow

Empty streets, covered faces, no beauty

Frantic steps finding solutions, uncertainty

Our unseen ally, the wind

Like against it, humanity has sinned

Contaminating man with the virus of death

Friends giving each other a wide berth

In all these, I see a lesson

As the virus creeps upon the world like treason

*That human life is fickle
When the 'harvester' comes with his sickle,
We have wasted our time not loving each other
Fighting and betraying each other with no bother
Greedily amassing 'whatever' like it matters
Calamity strikes, all you gathered scatters
No warnings, no signals
Your life flashes, your scheming, betrayals*

*But we were created to love
In the image of our creator above,
To cure the earth
His treasures to unearth
To be a shining light to each other
To be the keeper of our brother
We have failed in many ways
The earth is no home; no one stays
For as long as we are in this 'bus'
May we never forget we all need us
Let's discard inhumanity and embrace humanity
For, in the end, all is vanity.*

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RUMOURS

JANUARY 2020

Ama Gideon loved working at Gregg Couture. She likened it to being on the set of *Ugly Betty*, her favourite TV series, where she was the Betty of Gregg Couture. Like her archetype, she enjoyed being in the midst of beauty while flexing her brain with numbers.

“Have you guys heard of this deadly virus discovered in China and its rapid spread to other countries?” Ama asked her friends and colleagues, including Chika, the head designer/seamstress, and Rita, the business development manager.

Chika groaned, dropping her head dramatically. “I just knew this’d be the first thing you bring up today. You’re too fatalistic.”

“And scared,” Rita added, looking around the white-painted fashion studio where a meeting would take place.

Ama shifted close, forming a semi-circle with her friends. “This one seems serious, guys; maybe worse than Ebola.”

“Jesus,” Rita exclaimed, lifting her palm over Ama’s eyes. “Chika, change the topic.”

“Did you bring us cakes as promised?”

Ama smiled. “I can still speak, you know.”

“I don’t want your lip gloss on my palm,” Rita replied. They all chuckled, Rita removing her palm.

“Yes, I brought the cakes,” Ama grinned when her friends danced. She also enjoyed cooking and sometimes creating clothes she hoped she’d be courageous to wear someday.

Colleagues trickled in for the meeting. However, a distinct tread made Ama stiffen. It was Sandra Larry—niece to the MD, stylist, and the rumoured Assistant Creative Director for the new fashion magazine by Gregg Couture. Beautiful, fair-skinned, and every bit the Wilhelmina to her Betty, Sandra lingered at the entrance, her gaze sweeping the room with practiced disdain.

Her perfect nose wrinkled at the sight of Ama. Narrowing her eyes, she approached the group. “What are you doing in my studio?”

Nervous, Ama coughed, tongue-tied as usual.

Chika huffed, eyeballing her. “Don’t tell me you’re getting senile, Sandra.”

Sandra’s pretty face stiffened in an affronted frown.

“The MD called for a meeting of department heads,” Rita pointed out slowly, making Sandra sound daft.

“So?”

Chika grinned, presenting Ama in a flourish, “Representing the Accounting Department, Your Highness.”

“I just cannot abide the sight of your massive flesh in my studio,” Sandra said disdainfully, as she hissed, rolled her eyes and sashayed off, leaving Ama decimated.

“You’ve got to stand up to her at some point,” Chika huffed; Rita nodded. They couldn’t keep castigating her as Stanley Okon, the Media Head approached them.

“Hey ladies,” he greeted with his signature handsome smile, his gaze settling on Ama.

Even though her heart fluttered, she couldn’t return his smile. He frowned and was about to ask Ama what was wrong, but just then, the MD walked in. Everyone began dragging seats, arranging them to face the podium.

The MD cleared his throat. “Good morning, everyone. As you well know, Gregg Couture is set to activate last year’s plans for the maiden edition of our fashion magazine.”



With the accountant on sabbatical, Ama was acting as the accountant, but she maintained her cubicle in the general workspace of the Accounting Department.

Stanley showed up there after the meeting.

“Hey, you weren’t looking too good earlier. What’s up? Is everything okay?” he asked with genuine concern.

Her heart trembled, wishing for the umpteenth time he could be more than her platonic friend. Ama had a crush on Stan since their university days. She knew Stan’s spec in women and understood that it’d never be her—yet her crush persevered.

She was about to respond when Rita sidled up to her cubicle. “Eh, Stan, does Sandra know that you’re down here in the trenches?”

Stan narrowed his eyes in mock anger. “How could I have forgotten to tell her? Oh, I’m done for,” he said dramatically, and both women laughed.

“Abeg, give me cake before this guy hustles you out of my share,” Rita chuckled.

“There’s enough for everyone,” Ama sat down, grabbing her large purse. She handed Rita a wrap of two cupcakes.

“What about mine?” Stan asked eagerly, craning his neck to see into her purse. Laughing, Ama handed him a similar wrap. He grinned, leaned down, and kissed her cheek with a loud smack. “Thanks, babe,” he said, walking away.

Ama’s heart rate increased drastically as she watched him leave.

Rita sighed, shaking her head. “Clueless men everywhere,” she muttered.

FEARS

FEBRUARY 2020

“Thank God it’s Friday,” Rita sang, hooking her arms into that of Chika and Ama, walking out of Gregg Couture at the end of work. “Where are we hanging out, ladies?”

“They announced the first confirmed case of the coronavirus in Nigeria today,” Ama pointed out, frowning and wondering why her friends weren’t more apprehensive.

Both friends groaned. “I swear, Ama, you’re worse than Channels TV on this Corona updates.” Chika sighed wearily. “I can’t hang out, Rita. I’m too tired. Designing and getting approval for dresses for this magazine is killing me.”

“Oh, I understand, dear.” Rita sighed. “I think I’ll head home then, perhaps, get a head start on my copious laundry.”

“Hey, ladies.” Stan’s voice had them turning to watch him jog over.

“Hey Stan,” Rita and Chika greeted; Ama smiled at him.

Stan grabbed Ama’s wrist. “Please, excuse me, ladies, can I talk to Ama for a second?”

The warmth of his hand quickened her pulse. They took two steps from her friends. “I’m sorry to do this, but can you spare me five thousand naira, preferably cash? My bank app is acting up, and I forgot to get a new debit card. I need to pay my mechanic.” He seemed desperate.

She looked over his shoulder, seeing a man dressed in dirty overalls by his Toyota Venza. “When are you going to renew that card of yours? It’s been months since it expired.” Ama shook her head while reaching into her purse for her wallet. She gave him the money, belly fluttering at his instant smile and a quick hug.

“You’re too weak for him.” Rita shook her head when he left.

“He’s using you and dating Sandra,” Chika added angrily, breaking Ama’s heart. “Couldn’t he have got the money from her instead?”

“He told me they’re in the talking stage,” she defended weakly.

“So, you *nko*?” Chika pushed.

“We’re just friends.”

“Then stop acting like his wife,” Rita hugged her before getting into her Bolt ride with Chika.

Ama wondered how she would break her crush when Stan returned her money by bank transfer on Sunday. Then on Monday, he surprised her with lunch from her favourite restaurant as appreciation for her help.

SPREAD

APRIL 2020

"You're just stringing that fat chick along," Tommy, Stan's friend and colleague, teased, drinking his beer straight from the bottle.

The bar wasn't as full as usual. Stan ground his molars. "Don't call her that."

Tommy's eyes widened at his affronted tone. "Abi, you don't fall in love?"

Stan choked on his beer, chuckling. "Come on, be serious. You know Sandra is almost agreeing to my chasing efforts."

"I could've sworn you were chasing the fat chick."

"She has a name, use it. Ama's my friend. I have known her since uni days."

"Hmm, does she know you're just her friend? Because, the way she smiles at you, both of you might be married in her head."

Stan was saved from responding to the uncomfortable observation by the five men who were shouting over each other on the next table. There were so many opinions since the announcement of lockdown in Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun states by the President to curb the spread of COVID-19.

"Guys, the government is simply creating new avenues to steal the country's money. You can't tell me otherwise."

"You're right. Have you heard the amount mentioned for providing protective and preventive measures? Ridiculous."

"Even this talk of vaccines is sounding like the Illuminati is finally taking over the world."

That particular opinion made Stan scoff.

"You don't believe them?" Tommy asked.

"Guy, shore up your immune system and hope to avoid this fatal virus."

Tommy eyed him. "How do you know?"

"My mom is a retired UK nurse. Since there's no treatment yet, we should focus on keeping healthy and following the required preventive measures. Soon,

I'll stop hanging out."

Nodding, Tommy coughed, making Stan look at him suspiciously.

"Guy, stop it. My beer went the wrong way." Tommy rolled his eyes. "Besides, I've been meaning to ask, why Sandra?"

Stan shrugged. "We make sense. Imagine S&S on a wedding card—perfect. We look good together."

"Right, so I can go after Ama now?"

Unexpected pain twisted his heart. He swallowed hard, striving to sound casual. "I never stopped you before."

Tommy scoffed, "Yeah, right."

PANDEMIC

MAY 2020

Everybody at Gregg Couture received emails announcing preparations for imminent lockdown in Akwa Ibom State; all workers had to stay home.

Ama and friends headed towards the gate for home when Chika said, "So, this thing is really happening. People have died." She sounded shocked. "I can't believe my wedding will be cancelled."

"Haba, who's being fatalistic now?" Ama teased, and even though she was terrified every day, she stepped out. She was sure every inhale was the coronavirus entering her body.

"Your wedding is simply postponed indefinitely, not cancelled."

"What she said," Rita concurred.

Chika sighed. "Anyway, my fiancé is coming over. I'll rope him into sewing with me. With his help, I'll complete the dresses for this magazine shoot if it will ever happen with this new development."

"I've decided to go to my parents' house before total lockdown. I need to be with my family and pray. My siblings and I think managing our finances in one

household is better than doing it separately,” Rita shared.

“Sounds like a great plan. What about you, Ama?” Chika asked.

Chest hurting from watching Stan drive out with Sandra without waving at her, Ama sighed and turned to her friends with a strained smile. “Well, since I’ll be alone, I’ll stock up as advised, and maybe pursue some creative passions.”

“Why doesn’t he ever give you a lift?” Rita asked. “I heard he lives on Oron Road. That’s close to your street, right?”

“It’s the next street from mine,” Ama croaked in pain.

LOCKDOWN

JUNE 2020

The Akwa Ibom State government remained strict on curfews, as well as the present lockdown. Streets were deserted as if the Armageddon had occurred. Cops weren’t friendly with anyone seen on the streets. Only health workers with passes drove around undisturbed.

Stan was bored crazy one week into the lockdown. Despite his side hustles online, phoning family, and playing video games, he still suffered from the monotony. Therefore, he called Sandra to visit.

“There’s a lockdown, Stan, how will you get here?”

“I’ve got ways.”

Sandra scoffed. “You’re funny. You want to risk the virus or arrest just to fuck?”

Stan winced at her crassness. “I’ll do anything for love,” he joked.

“Hmm, we did it before lockdown now. I hope you’re not a sex addict, oh.” She sounded suspicious.

He laughed it off. He also heard a definite male chuckle in the background. “Who’s that?”

There was a slight hesitation, then calmly she said, “My neighbour. I’m out on the verandah.”

The call ended like they weren't dating. Stan expected eagerness and concern from her. Sandra didn't sound like she missed him. However, he waved off her attitude as people were struggling with the new reality of the virus and lockdown.



Ama did her respiratory test—holding her breath for twenty seconds, as she'd done for the two weeks of the lockdown. Since the common symptoms of COVID-19 were nasal congestion, dry cough, tiredness, fever, and sore throat, a medical consultant on Instagram had said holding one's breath for that long meant being negative. As a daily assurance, Ama tried to surpass twenty seconds.

So many cure suggestions were online, like quinine tablets and antibiotics; some people swore that mixing Moringa leaves in local gin would kill it instantly. Ridiculous as they all sounded, it still gave Ama hope that she wouldn't be helpless if she ever got the virus. Others were adamant with the maxim—"*Disease no dey kill Africa.*" Ama wondered if they were deaf to the death tolls of COVID-19.

Mental health consciousness became a trend. Ama tried belly reduction exercises, swearing to herself that she wasn't doing it for Stan but for her health. She had some exciting dress designs for herself, different from her usual jeans and button-downs. She read e-books and saw movies on her phone.

One evening Stan called, as usual. They checked on each other, just as Chika and Rita did with her. Except today, he announced his visit.

Her first concern was the police on the road. "Is that allowed?" He only laughed.

Then she panicked because he'd never come to her house. She scanned her large, self-contained apartment, biting her lower lip as she considered changing the one-day-old bedsheet.

When he showed up twenty minutes later, she was panting without physical exertion.

“Hey,” she greeted, hoping her eyes weren’t as excited as she felt seeing him.

“Hey you,” he greeted in his sexy voice, his black lips revealing beautiful dentition. His lean, muscled physique outfitted in dark jeans and a white t-shirt.

Ama stared at his large feet, having pulled off his leather slip-on. She wondered if the corresponding feet and dick size applied to him. God, she was such a pervert. Hurriedly, pulse racing, she picked her hand sanitizer and spritzed some into his equally big palms.

“I see you’re serious about the preventive measures,” he smiled approvingly.

Ama floated, nodding; she docked her head shyly and waved him into the only seat she owned. Stan ignored it and rather dropped comfortably on her bed. He looked too good on it for her sanity. Then he offered her the white polythene he’d brought.

“Shawarma,” he announced.

Gasping in shocked joy, she looked into the bag to confirm. “How?”

“A bar beside my house is still running on the down low for some selected customers.” He winked at her.

She shook her head despite belly butterflies. “Nigeria,” she scoffed.

“So, their in-house shawarma guy takes orders, and I simply have to get mine over the fence.” His grin was self-satisfied.

“Ah, this is nice. It’s so nice to see your face too. Being alone for this long is crazy.” She was busy getting them plates and drinks from her fridge.

“At least the electricity company is trying their best.”

“Yes, thank God for that,” she said, sitting on the floor and biting into the snack. “This is good.”

Stan nodded, his mouth full. “Don’t worry, I’ll get you their suya next time.”

Her heart leapt happily at the possibility of a next time. She itched to ask if Sandra knew his whereabouts but held her tongue.

Swallowing a bite, she looked up, catching him staring. She blinked, and he

looked away. Ama tried to analyse that look when he cleared his throat and asked, “Did you get the pay cut email?”

Ama sighed sadly, instantly forgetting the look. “The girls and I were talking about it. I worry if the pay will return to normal after this.”

“We can only hope.”

She sighed. “How are we supposed to survive on pay cuts with the high cost of food?”

EASE

JULY 2020

The lockdown was four weeks in. Stan visited twice a week for the last two weeks, always showing up with goodies.

Staring into the bag of provisions, Ama shook her head. “I appreciate all this, but I worry for your pocket,” she frowned, guilty about taking his gifts.

Stan scoffed. “Babe, I’m not surviving on company pay alone,” he said, stretching his tall body on her bed. “Due to lockdown, I have more clients needing their videos edited despite the steep cost. I’m good,” he assured.

Ama was in love with him at this point but knew nothing would come of it.

“Besides, I worry about you always giving out food to those street boys. I’m not sure it’s a good idea.” He was referring to the kids on her street.

Wrinkling her nose, she shrugged, sitting on the bed. “It’s just leftovers that I don’t want anymore. Instead of throwing them away, I give them out. You know things are hard for them.”

“You’re too kind,” he smiled at her.

Her heart swelled. “Besides, with you bringing me stuff, I’ll never lack.”

He chuckled. “Hmm, don’t be too dependent. MD says they might ease the lockdown by end-month with some local flights activated. So, I might travel for that long-awaited shoot.”

Pain slashed in her chest at his words.

Later that night, after he'd gone, someone banged on her door. Frowning, she asked who it was. A gruff voice replied, "Mama, we dey see your boyfriend dey bring palliative, we just wan collect our share," the thug declared in Pidgin English.

Blood drained from her body, and her kidney weakened, almost spilling urine. Choking on her breath, she picked up her phone. She whimpered when they hammered her door again. An iron protector guarded the wooden door from the inside, but she wasn't assured.

With shaky hands, Stan was the first she could think to call.

"Pretend as though you're speaking to the cops," Stan advised the moment he understood the situation.

In a shaky, slightly loud voice, she did as he said, describing her address and crying that they should come immediately.

"Omo, she don call AK, oh," one thug said.

"Make we comot for hia," another said, followed by rapidly receding steps.

"Thank you, Jesus. Oh God, they're gone." Ama kept thanking God until Stan told her he was at her door. "What?"

He hugged her the moment she opened the door. Her body trembled in his arms. "I'm sorry this happened to you," he said, kissing her braids.



For five days, Stan stayed at her home. He brought over his smaller smart TV that played movies through a flash drive. The man couldn't abide seeing movies on her phone.

His knapsack carried clothes, toiletries, and his laptop. Then he moved some of his food items over. Ama happily cooked them, never informing her friends about the new development even though she told them about the almost break-in. She read her novels while he worked on his laptop, and then they binged on

TV series at night. They were like a married couple without the sex.

Ama was sure she was the only one feeling sexual tension. However, she got confused when she caught him staring.

Then it happened.

They were seeing a hot scene in *Game of Thrones*. Ama pressed her thighs together under the covers, trying to control her rapid breathing when Stan snatched at the fabric.

“You’re always hogging the covers,” he grumbled, exposing her soft nightie.

Illumination from the TV had her noticing his gaze lowering to her breasts. Her nipples hardened when he licked his lips. “God, Ama, your body is driving me crazy,” he groaned, pulling the covers and staring at her entire body hungrily.

She whimpered, twisting on the bed to curb her arousal. He held her gaze, communicating viscerally with her. Stan scooted close, his nose almost touching hers. She covered the space between them and kissed him on the lips for the first time.

Time stood still. His heart pounded loudly in her ear. She enjoyed his growl and rough pull of her body to his. Her belly encountered his hardened phallus. The dark room fuelled her courage. Ama reached down to his groin, grabbing his dick through his shorts.

Moaning, he undulated his hips, pressing his hardness into her hand. Her heart about beat out of her chest when he shoved down his shorts, grabbed her hand and put it on his hot, naked dick.

Everything felt surreal. Her body ignited when his fingers found her core under her nightie. She was embarrassingly wet. None of that mattered as he touched her lovingly, driving her to the brink with pleasure.

When he climbed on her, condom worn, she eagerly widened her thighs, receiving his huge length. They fit so perfectly. Ama moaned so loudly that her neighbours would surely give her weird looks in the morning.

Stan was as insatiable as she was, their long friendship having led to this moment. He took her three times that night. He moaned passionately, unable

to help his hunger. He took her so wildly that she believed this was the start of something.

Except, by morning, he'd disappeared—his knapsack, everything, gone—leaving behind a woman who felt thoroughly used in the most ravishing manner.

RELICS

AUGUST 2020

The initial ease of lockdown had businesses rushing to recover. Informal labourers were worst hit as their livelihood depended on daily income. With the economy almost in shambles, hunger was prevalent, and people became desperate. Before long, the number of new COVID cases skyrocketed, preparing the country for more lockdown time.

With this development, getting permits in Lagos to shoot themed photos in some locations became difficult. Apart from struggling with guilt for deserting Ama so cowardly, the recurring thoughts of that night, Stan worried about Sandra's coldness. Did she know about Ama?

Unable to keep the momentous event to himself, he'd confessed to Tommy. Of course, Tommy teased him. Now, Stan worried that Tommy might have told someone who somehow leaked the secret to Sandra.

Dialling Tommy's number, Stan walked away from the hotel garden, where Sandra directed the refreshing of the models' makeup.

"Hey, umm, did you tell anybody about that stuff?" he asked, rubbing the back of his head, stomach heating up from the steamy memory. Tommy pretended he couldn't recall. "Stop playing, now. Did you tell anybody I slept with Ama?"

"Guy," he chided. "I'm not a child now. That's not a conversation for the masses."

Stan sighed in relief. "Thanks, man." When he ended the call and turned around, Sandra was there, giving him the death glare. She'd heard everything.



After crying for days, Ama readied to forget Stan's betrayal. However, Sandra called, hurling insults at her.

Shame engulfed her. Ama couldn't believe Stan had confessed to Sandra. It meant he loved Sandra, and their night together had been a huge mistake.

Heartbroken, Ama embraced the lockdown. Even if Sandra told her office minions, staying home made it difficult to experience their disdain. She stopped following updates of the Lagos shoot on Gregg Couture's WhatsApp group, plunging herself into work.

Ama worked so hard that, at first, she thought she might be hallucinating seeing discrepancies worth two million naira in the report. After two sleepless nights, she traced the loophole to the Creative Department headed by Sandra.

She was confused about the steps to take. Reporting this discovery would smell like revenge. Yet, could she risk her job to please that bitch?

CRISIS

SEPTEMBER 2020

COVID-19 brought some madness with it. Results from the gubernatorial primaries were shocking, erupting a crisis in political parties throughout September. National-level officers were sacked, parties divided, and defecting candidates ruled the day.

Stan was happy to be home, finally done with the shoot. He was one of the staff who worked at the office, hand in hand with the creative and publishing department to produce the best maiden edition magazine. He loved his job; however, work wasn't normal with the enforced nose masks, sanitizers, and constant temperature checks.

There was the imminent COVID test, which the MD declared everyone must take before all staff could resume physical duties. Stan dreaded that test because it'd mean seeing Ama. He didn't know how he'd act. He was on probation after Sandra had forgiven him.

Nonetheless, he faced a crisis since he couldn't stop thinking of the damn mistake.

INSURRECTION

OCTOBER 2020

Ama hoped the world would end, so she'd never see Stan or Sandra again.

October came with its brand of happenstance—The End SARS Movement. The youth-driven protest gained momentum, sweeping through the country and making international waves.

When the wagon arrived in Uyo, Chika called to ask if Ama would attend the rally.

"Apart from the violence, do you see how no one is observing social distancing? I know I sound unpatriotic, but I'll sit this one out. I've posted updates on social media," she added to ease her guilt.

"Hmm, my sister, the violence has increased since those palliative warehouses were discovered."

"My dear, at least we can resume work in January after this COVID test MD announced."

"Are you scared? Me, I'm dreading it," Chika said worriedly.

"A little," Ama said, but she was thinking of Stan and Sandra.

TESTS

NOVEMBER 2020

Nervously, Stan watched Ama walk through the company gate. She looked different. Dressed in a white t-shirt that moulded her big boobs nicely, tucked into a knee-length, gathered Ankara skirt, paired with ballerinas. Her hair was styled in a bun, and her makeup made her stunning.

Belly humming in awareness, mind-reeling images of their unforgettable night,

Stan stuttered, "Hey, Ama."

"Hey, Stanley," she responded aloofly, with no smile. She headed to the line to get tested.

He stared. Sandra appeared in his line of sight, frowning. "Really?"

Stan knew what she meant. "I was just saying hello," he stammered lamely.

Flouncing off, Sandra marched to the line, body-checking Ama as she walked by. "Whore!" she spat loudly.

Stan gasped, his feet moving without thought to defend Ama because he knew she'd cower for Sandra.

However, to everyone's shock, Ama spat back, "Thief!"

A sharp murmur went through the crowd as Sandra marched back, facing Ama. "What did you say?"

Ama fully faced her. "What did you say?" she sassed back.

Sandra smiled wickedly. "I said that you're a whore, not worthy to clean my new Louboutins because you're dirty from sleeping with my boyfriend."

Stan's stomach dropped.

"And you're a thief because you need to explain to the boss why your expense report has holes in it. How can you afford new Louboutins when we're reeling from recent pay cuts?"

Was this simply a catfight? Stan stared as everyone else did, watching Sandra sputter speechlessly until the MD appeared.

"Both of you see me in my office after your tests."

Sandra hurried off while Ama looked calm. Stan couldn't explain why her new confidence aroused him.

Tommy sidled up to him, whispering, "What just happened?"

Staring at Ama, he said, "I've no idea, but it's brilliant."



Ama wrinkled her nose, clearing her throat from the effect of the testing that involved the health office inserting a scarily long cotton bud into the nostrils and throat to swipe for a sample.

The MD, a stately middle-aged man, settled in his executive seat and glared at Ama and Sandra. “Miss Gideon, explain your accusations.”

“Well, sir, I’m more aware of the budget cuts than most since the idea of the fashion magazine came to light. When Mrs. Fabian ran the show, there was a budget for ten extra tailors. However, the budget cut scrapped that expense.

“At first glance, Miss Larry’s financial report looked okay. So, I didn’t think the hole was from hers. After a deep investigation of everyone’s report, I found out that Miss Larry still included the two million naira for the extra tailors in her report.”

“It was a mistake,” Sandra cried. “I simply used the template from the old report. I copied and pasted.”

“So, where’s the two million? I should have found an excess of two million naira in my numbers, but it’s swallowed in your expenses, over drafting the budgets of other departments,” Ama declared passionately.

ISOLATION

DECEMBER 2020

With Sandra on suspension, pending investigations, Stan got the worst news—he was COVID positive.

Disbelief came first, then denial. However, he couldn’t deny it for long as HR sent a follow-up mail addressing his right to a retest in another facility, of course, paid by him. Nevertheless, the company was responsible for his stay at an isolation centre to manage his condition. He was advised to clear out his desk immediately and return only after the isolation centre had deemed him well.

After the COVID result email caused a buzz, Stan abruptly left the office at

noon. He was sure even the staff working from home would hear about it. Feeling lost, he drove to Sandra's house. She stood on her verandah while he delivered the news from his car.

"You thought to come here first?" she screamed, making him worry about her neighbours hearing. "To infect me on top of my suspension?"

"The result isn't conclusive. I'll get another test."

"Do you realise my salary account is frozen? Like if you infect me, I won't have money to treat..."

"Did you do it?" Stan finally asked her about the two million.

"Fuck you, Stanley!"

Stan left her home, heading straight to a test facility. He called his mom after the retest. Her shock came through the phone. "How are you holding up?"

"I don't feel any of the symptoms, so I don't know how this is possible."

"Well, you're asymptomatic."

"Yes, they told me that. But I'm still positive, mom."

"Being asymptomatic might be good. That means it hasn't got deep enough and can be easily flushed with a combination of broad-spectrum antibiotics, feeding right, exercising, etc. Don't worry, you'll be fine, my dear. I only hate that it's happening close to Christmas. We'll miss you. I'll be sure to send your Christmas food, okay? You won't miss much."

Stan missed everything. Three days into the two weeks he was supposed to stay in isolation, Sandra stopped answering his calls. He missed Ama but couldn't reach out. He didn't know what to say after his cowardice.

He wondered if she'd heard of his status. Did she think he deserved it for how he'd treated her? Depression hovered in his mind. He wondered how he'd taken all precautions but still ended up COVID-positive.

RECUPERATION

JANUARY 2021

Ama heard about Stan's COVID status. Despite all that'd happened, she had a terrible Christmas worrying about him. She shouldn't worry about Stan after his betrayal, except that people had died from this disease. She was scared for him.

Besides having to see his small TV, recalling his kindness during the lockdown broke her heart. By New Year's Day, she gave up struggling and reached out. She experienced pain when he didn't respond to her chat; an hour later, though, he called.

Her pulse racing, she answered. He apologised effusively. "I'd been asleep, I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. How are you feeling?"

Stan sighed wearily, sounding down. "I feel fine, no symptoms. I'm still confused about how I'm positive."

Pity crowded her heart. "I'm sorry, Stan."

"No, Ama, I'm the one that's sorry for how I treated you. Please forgive me. I don't know. I panicked, okay? My feelings were jumbled up. I'm just...I'm sorry."

Swallowing the lump in her throat and blinking off tears, she croaked, "It's fine. How is that place?"

"Well, the facility is actually cool, like a hotel with an en suite bathroom. I have a roommate. We get food, medicine, and electricity, too."

Their friendship resumed. Ama cared for him more than before. She baked him cakes and pies, dropping them off at the facility's administrative office. Stan sounded teary when he thanked her.



Stan stopped calling Sandra. Between his family and Ama, he had no time or regrets. Ama's calls or chats had his heart thumping excitedly.

“Hope I’m not disturbing you,” her sweet voice calmed his nerves.

“Disturb me, please. All I have is time in this place. Besides, I just got the depressing news that I might stay here for an extra week.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, let’s talk about something else.”

“I wanted to share some novels with you. There’s this writer I just discovered. She writes romance featuring plus-size heroines.”

“Really?”

“Yes, she lives in Uyo. Her name’s Emem Bassey, yet she has enthusiastic international readers.”

“What? Now I want to read her book.”

“I was hoping you’d say that.”

The e-book Ama shared with him—*Never Imagined*, was about two colleagues attracted to each other even though they were competing. Unknown to the heroine, the hero has always crushed on her. When he finally gets a chance, he pursues her passionately. The book gave Stan ideas. The love scenes left him panting as he recalled how Ama had felt under him. He wanted her.

Halfway through the book, the doctor informed him that having reviewed his test results, he could go home the next day. He assured Stan that an email was sent to Gregg Couture about his full recovery.

Stan was ecstatic to see his brother the next day. However, he asked him to drive him to the test facility for a retest. Stan got confirmation a week later before visiting Ama.

“Who’s there?” she asked at his knock, her voice thrilling him.

“Stanley Okon.”

Her loud gasp made him smile. Her wide eyes showed pleasant shock when she opened the door. “I thought you were getting out on Saturday.”

“My test results came out early.”

“Oh my God, it’s so nice to see you. Thank God you’re okay,” she gushed, ushering him inside.

“Yes, I’m grateful,” Stan croaked, his body trembling as he saw her bed, memories flashing.

“But you should’ve called me. I’d have cooked something special to welcome you.”

His heart somersaulted at her blatant care. “Please, don’t be angry with me. I got out a week ago.”

Stan felt terrible as her face fell. “Oh.”

He quickly explained. “I had to get retested.”

She frowned in concern. “I thought you were cleared.”

“I just needed to make sure before coming to you. I needed to protect you,” he said, holding her gaze, hoping she understood that he was pursuing her now. He wanted a relationship with her.

Wide-eyed, she gasped, “Oh.”

Chuckling, he invited her to dinner. She explained how she was still afraid of going out. So, they stayed in her house, discussing Gregg Couture. She updated him on Sandra’s case. Apparently, since she was the MD’s niece, she wasn’t sacked, but had been demoted to the lowest level in the Creative Department.

BULL’S EYE

FEBRUARY 2021

Ama had been thrilled these past three weeks. Since Stan returned, he’d been solicitous with her. She’d fallen in love even harder this time, but she hesitated, still recalling his betrayal.

Of course, he’d apologised profusely, explaining how Sandra had found out about them. Ama held back despite Stan taking her to his house, cooking romantic dinners that melted her heart. Ama couldn’t bear more pain if this turned out to mean nothing.

Having resumed physical duties at Gregg Couture, she was aware he wasn't on talking terms with Sandra. Yet, she couldn't hope, despite Chika and Rita constantly hounding her, that Stan was head over heels in love with her. Ama would be ecstatic if that was the truth. Nonetheless, she staunchly protected her heart from further hurt.

On February 14th—Valentine's Day—Ama walked into the office, shocked to find red Valentine-themed balloons floating on ribbons from her cubicle. Colleagues smiled at her as she hurried over, heart thumping.

Her table was covered in gifts; she could barely take them all in. Disbelief had her asking, "Who owns these?"

Rita grinned, sidling up. "You, of course. Read the card," she said giddily, handing her a cute card.

While colleagues stared, Ama shakily opened the card. Her heart skipped when she recognised Stan's writing.

It'll make me so happy if you could be my Val from now on.

Gasping, she looked up, and he was there, smiling handsomely. "What do you say?"

"Say yes!" Rita shouted, and other colleagues echoed the sentiment.

Ama couldn't speak through the log in her throat. She nodded enthusiastically, and everyone cheered. Stan rushed forward, hugging her and kissing her cheek.

"Eh! Social distancing, oh!"

"See, love!"

There was laughter around them, but Ama simply held Stan tightly, her heart finally getting its desire after all the rigmarole.

The Blood Price

Isaac Attah Ogezi

He makes his way gingerly through the rundown building, which bears faint testimony of the existence of earlier human habitation but is now a ghost of itself, taken over by dust and spiderwebs. No loudspeaker cries calling the faithful to prayers are ever heard again since that night, changing the whole world into a confused and lawless zoo where life is as short and brutish as the dark primaeval period.

The loud, eerie rustling sounds emanating from the debris briefly arrest his steps. What could that be? He pauses awhile, debating within himself whether to go forward or retrace his steps from this deserted and haunted place. Though widely acknowledged by both friends and relations for his daredevilry, which sometimes verges on the suicidal, he has a secret phobia for snakes. What he is now running from is worse than a thousand snakebites. *I must brave all dangers now to save my head*, he thinks as he takes a determined step forward.

Suddenly, something jumps from its hiding point and flies almost unnervingly

close to him. Instinctively, he steps backwards. It is a monster rat almost as big as a rabbit with proprietary airs, diving into another part of the debris. Before it scurried away, screeching, it looked at him condescendingly as the owner of a place would a trespasser.

Where is he running to? Who will provide him a sanctuary? These, amongst other questions, rack Uwaiyi's brains and involuntarily slacken his steps. He'd run away from No. 23 on Lawrence Ochefu Street, where his parents owned a duplex when it was no longer safe for him to continue to live there with his brother Ogebe. Their parents were nowhere to be found since that night of bedlam. What had become of his parents and Bianca?

He remembers retiring to bed late after a night of carousing at Good-Time Hotel in the capital city. As usual, he had left without Bianca, his intended, who always abhorred, in her own words, such 'bacchanal gatherings' as they were capable of leading one into sin and causing them to fall short of the glory of God.

In the fitful, brief sleep that followed, he saw himself in a world enmeshed in a war-like crisis, full of confusion, aimless running here and there from what he couldn't tell was after them, parents looking for their missing children. The World was running amok.

Suddenly, there was an ear-splitting sound that reverberated all over the city, shaking the entire foundations of buildings as though they would pitch over like in an earthquake—then he awoke, breathing heavily in his sweat-soaked pyjamas. Alas, it was to a more sinister world that awaited him. The world beyond his window was awash with daylight brightness, but why were people screaming and crying at the same time? What was happening around him? Quickly, he tossed the blankets off his legs, jumped out of bed, and bounded into the sitting room. He ran into Ogebe, descending from the staircase that led to their parents' bedroom.

"What's happening, Ogebe?" he asked tremulously.

"I'm equally in the dark, brother," replied Ogebe, wearing a pair of boxers and a vest.

"I hope our parents are okay?" Uwaiyi asked as he headed for the staircase leading to their parent's bedroom, but he was restrained by his younger brother.

"There's no need for that now. I was just coming from their room, and it was empty. I searched everywhere to no avail. Our parents and the housemaid were nowhere to be found. I was surprised that in the midst of the pandemonium that held our world by the balls, you could afford to sleep through it," queried Ogebe.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Uwaiyi remembered with a smirk Bianca's favourite quote from the Bible, 'But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed weeds...'

"So what do we do in the meantime?" he asked. "Mind you, this is not the time to apportion blame," he added.

Without bothering to give him a reply, Ogebe rushed to the entrance door, and Uwaiyi followed, not bothered by what they were wearing. The brightness outside that he had woken up to had given way to darkness, perfunctorily broken by bulb lights and lights from innumerable rechargeable lanterns and mobile phones as people took to the streets to find answers to the turmoil of the night.



As rundown as this edifice is—it used to accommodate thousands of people in its glory days—it is safer than the streets where he could be spotted and rearrested by dreaded hooded fellows in patrol vans, looking for people like him who are yet to come to terms with the new regime.

He wonders how quickly a building untenanted can fall into ruin as he picks his steps cautiously amongst the rubble. When he gets to the dim-lit, narrow staircase that leads to the minaret, he pauses, undecided. As his eyes search for the least dusty place he could remove his trousers and long-sleeved shirts and spread them on the floor to sleep, they light on a shiny, glossy object. Curiously, he goes and picks it up. It is a disused smartphone screensaver with several cracks. He remembers the endless times Bianca's phone rang, unanswered on the night that the entire course of their lives was changed.



While the neighbourhood took to the streets looking for their loved ones, holding their flashlights and mobile phones to give them light, he whispered to Ogebe where he was going. He didn't bother about the danger the hair-raising speed posed to his life as he engaged the Highlander Jeep in gears.

In his dazed state, he missed his way once and had to reverse with screeching tyres. As he neared his destination, he noticed that the streets here were also taken over by the inhabitants holding flashlights and mobile phones, perhaps looking for their loved ones like him. He didn't have to branch off the Y-shaped junction to Bianca's place when he saw her friend, Agnes, among the bewildered crowd. Before he could cut the engine of the car after swerving to the pavement, she was already by his side in a few bounds.

"It's good you are here, Uwaiyi," she said, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Where's Bianca, Agnes?" he asked without an exchange of pleasantries. The charged atmosphere didn't call for such a needless ceremony.

"She's the one I'm looking for," she answered.

"Where could she have gone?"

"Who knows? That's the question on the lips of anyone looking for a loved one. It seems we shall never recover from what this long night portends, if not already birthed."

He couldn't ask her what she meant by that pessimistic statement lest she confirmed his fears. His parents were nowhere to be found that night, and now his Bianca. The streets all over the city had been taken over by shell-shocked people looking for their loved ones. Could what he was afraid of really happen and take him unawares like every other person?

Perhaps for want of what to do with his time, he runs his fingers over the cracked, glossy surface of the screensaver as he lies on his trousers and long-sleeved shirts spread on the floor. Now dressed only in a pair of shorts and a vest, he reminisces on the events of that night—How he drove around with Bianca's friend, searching for her, before returning home to his brother.

That was a few weeks ago, yet the aftermath of that night still plays out like reel after reel of a horror film where he found himself an active participant. Now those like him—who refused to submit to the new regime—are hunted like prey. The manhunt was so fierce that he had to destroy his mobile phone when he discovered that it could give away his location to the masked secret police. Worse still, airspace is now a privilege reserved for the initiates of the system.

The nightmarish events in the wake of that fateful night were nothing short of bizarre. To keep themselves abreast of the unfolding chaos in their country, Uwaiyi and his brother, Ogebe, became social media and TV freaks overnight. It was with great relief that they discovered on global news channels that the strange occurrences of that night were not unique to their country but part of a worldwide phenomenon.

The missing—people like their parents and Bianca—had not been found. Several theories were propounded, but the one that seemed to hold sway among most world leaders was attributing the events of the night to the invasion of the earth by aliens. People even claimed they saw the UFOs abducting Earth's inhabitants and whisking them away to an unknown destination. Meanwhile, their nation's President and members of the National Assembly were helpless and perplexed. In an urgent national address, the President urged citizens to remain calm and vigilant, assuring them that his government was 'on top of the situation.' The military was placed on high alert to be on standby in the event of any outbreak of law and order.

This didn't quell the tension and discontent of the people, with all the indices indicative of a failed nation. The disenchantment had given way to incessant violent demonstrations, rapes, thefts and destruction of life and property. A few days later, the whole nation awoke to the sounds of martial music on their radio stations and TV airwaves, followed by a dawn national broadcast of a military coup d'état. The people took to the streets again, this time to celebrate the fall of an incompetent democratic government.

Events moved in a swift and frenzied manner that baffled historians. Rumours about a new world order where nations would merge into one global entity, and a new world government would take control. Was that another form of colonialism? The new military Head of State, General Lamido Bukara, promptly

assuaged the fears of the people by saying that any alliance with their country would be a kind of worldwide confederation, which would not erode the sovereignty and unique identities of his country's people.

Not long after, the one-world government began to take shape before their very eyes. Now, one passport was all that a person needed to travel anywhere without restrictions with global currencies unified into one. National armies merged into a single, impenetrable force. The last stroke that broke the camel's back was the ban on religious activities, which carried a stiff punishment of public execution by firing squad without trial for any breach. The pockets of resistance against the proscription of any form of religious gathering were ineffectual and easily contained by the secret police.

It was indeed the wrong time to be alive, and one stood the chance of being whisked away in the night for any strains of belligerence. For the discerning few, knowledge tempered their resistance to the ban on religions. Not hoodwinked by the theory that some aliens were involved in spiriting people away to an unknown destination, they had an explanation for the fateful night. Obviously, the saints had left, and those left behind were sinners condemned to suffer tribulation at the hands of the agents of the Beast. Yes, they knew better, after ransacking the scriptures, that the owner of souls could not be too unrighteous to leave the sinners without an escape, a sort of reprieve after one has been found guilty and condemned—the royal pardon. This was only possible through the blood price, Uwaiyi could recall Bianca telling him in the early days of their relationship. *“For those who could not make it at His Second Coming, they must make atonement for their sins with their blood,”* she had stressed.

Uwaiyi was astounded by the supersonic speed at which things changed. National borders had vanished, leaving behind a single, unified world governed by one central authority with a common currency. However, dissatisfied with the unbelievable breakthroughs and in a bid to combat global warming, the central government abandoned its paper currency in favour of a more cashless policy. This move also allowed for 24-hour surveillance of the population and provided a cost-free means of buying and selling. A simple, infinitesimal mark was made on one's forehead, followed by a prick on the left bicep to implant a code unique for every individual.



Although Uwaiyi wouldn't openly dare to oppose the new regime over this obnoxious fiscal and security policy, Uwaiyi vowed to challenge it in his little way. He fondly remembers the country he returned to after his postgraduate studies in Finland. At that time, a democratic government was in power, and the people had left behind decades of military misrule. Despite the disparity in living standards, corruption, banditry and terrorism, things were not so bad for people of his class. Apart from returning to take up a choice job with a multinational corporation where his parents had a lot of influence, he was to marry a girl among his people. He had resisted the temptation and promptings of his close friends to marry Jane, a Finnish doctor from the upper rungs of her society.

Although he led a bohemian lifestyle, hopping from one club to another with friends till the wee hours of the next day, he was inspired by his parents' blissful marriage of over three decades and wanted to replicate it. He believed he could only achieve this dream by marrying a God-fearing woman, not one of the worldly ladies he partied with. The opportunity availed itself one Saturday morning when a tall, ebony-skinned woman in an unfashionable long black skirt that nearly dragged on the ground, wearing a white striped long-sleeved shirt beneath a brown cardigan—its collar folding around her neck like a turtle's shell—walked towards him—flanked by her equally conservatively dressed Sisters in the Lord—,clutching a Bible in her hand.

She reminded Uwaiyi of Christ's love and how He died for them on the Cross of Calvary while they were yet sinners. She reminded him of the need for him to give his life to Christ and be born again, for "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." While she talked, he appraised her. Behind the heavy black head-tie, was an oval-shaped beautiful face with a cornrow of teeth that defied the clothes she wore, which sought to hide her beauty. When she finished her short sermon on repentance, Uwaiyi agreed to say the prayer of salvation after her. Before he could ask her for her phone number, she beat him to it and saved him the embarrassment by asking for his first to enable her to follow up subsequently.

The following Sunday, Uwaiyi honoured her invitation and the next. As he continued to attend her church, the bond between them became stronger. It was not long before he asked for her hand in marriage, and after weeks allowed her to seek the face of the Lord, she accepted, albeit on the condition that their courtship must be sex-free as ‘marriage is honourable with the bed undefiled.’ Uwaiyi toyed with the idea of his born-again status in Christ, encouraged by his dream of marrying a God-fearing lady, which he believed only the church could give him. Within himself, he found the idea of Christianity and religion generally as escapist.

Man in search of answers to his existential problems, turned to metaphysics, he reasoned. He was long-suffering in listening to Bianca’s endless sermons about the last days and the need to be in right standing with God always as no one knew the day they would die nor when Jesus would return again in the clouds of glory as “there is no repentance after death. And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.” But deep within himself, he received her words with scepticism lest he hurt her feelings and in the process jeopardise their engagement. He might have disbelieved her some months ago, but the events of the last few weeks after the night have disabused his mind and now he knows who is right.

The curtailment of fundamental rights to life, speech, fair hearing and freedom of movement by this repressive regime made Bianca’s warning prophetic. Otherwise, why had the UN suddenly lost its voice in the face of this barefaced Siberia-like abrogation of human rights? Probably silenced or in complicity with this world tyranny in fulfilment of the scriptures? Most likely. A decree was recently promulgated, which carried stiff punishment for those without the marks on one’s forehead and the code on the left bicep, they cannot buy nor sell. In fact, bearing them is the passbook to life. Men and women without them are subjected to indiscriminate arrests in the night, denied access at checkpoints, and detained without trial.



As the world writhed in a climate of fear unleashed by the agents of the

new regime, staying indoors no longer felt safer than being out on the streets. Uwaiyi and Ogebe lived in perpetual fear in their house as purges of dissidents were now daily door-to-door occurrences. The sound of the doorbell no longer brought excitement to the faces of the inmates of the house but rather sent shivers down the spine as one wouldn't tell if the caller was the secret police or neighbour. Even among neighbours, the seeds of discord are sown such that only an air of distrust subsists between them. You cannot tell what neighbour is a friend or agent who will inform on you.

The helpless citizens, brutalised and traumatised, could not speak with one voice as their ranks were infiltrated by the police. When the marks and codes were introduced, Uwaiyi took his time to explain to Ogebe what awaited all those who were foolhardy enough to accept them on their foreheads. Were they in peacetime, Ogebe, who prided himself as a polemicist, would have argued vociferously, but recent events lent weight to his elder brother's scripturally backed warnings. Since all those who submitted to having their foreheads marked and their biceps pricked had signed their souls off to eternal damnation, both brothers swore that even if they were to be the last two men standing, they'd rather die than accept the marks and braced themselves for the repercussions of their silent resistance.

Their curtains were perpetually drawn as though no life existed within. Doorbell rings were left unanswered, and only one television was used at midnight, its volume turned very low. To survive, they took turns pilfering food from neighbours' kitchens.

Everyday life for the non-conformists under this gruelling totalitarian regime became unbearable. Hounded from their homes and the streets, their only option was to live a fugitive life. Even those confined to the foul, inhumane cells of the secret police were not spared the relentless torture designed to break their resistance to the marks and codes. The few dissidents who foiled arrest resorted to a Spartan lifestyle. Cooped up indoors all day, Uwaiyi and his brother ventured out only at night for fresh air, moving like shadows.

When the electricity authority officials came to the house, and their doorbell went unanswered, they disconnected the power. But under the cover of darkness, Ogebe illicitly reconnected it to a neighbour's supply. Luckily for them, their house was not linked to the general water pipe installed by the water

board, and all they needed was electricity to pump water from their borehole.

Despite the few improvisations for survival, the shortage of pilfered food began to take a toll on their health. With their mobile data exhausted, their mobile phones were as good as useless except for the ungarded occasional calls and SMS messages from friends unaware that all lines were tapped by the secret police.

While Uwaiyi accepted their current low estate with equanimity, he was afraid of the growing restiveness he saw in Ogebe. Sometimes out of frustration, he verbalised this strange, furtive behaviour with reckless utterances. Like the night after they'd eaten tasteless jollof rice, Ogebe asked, "Is it not better that one is dead than this parody of existence that we're wallowing in?"

"What do you mean?" asked Uwaiyi, alarmed by his brother's despair.

"It's high time we stopped kidding ourselves, brother," Ogebe barked. "How sure are we that we are better off than those who received the marks? Is it not better if we treasure life while we still have it than delude ourselves of a hereafter that we know nothing about?"

"Ogebe!"

"Yes, that's my name. I've had enough of this mockery of life."

"It's nice you are ventilating how you feel. But I believe we can talk it out," Uwaiyi pleaded.

"Talk what out with you? Haven't I had my fill of this life? My mind is made up and nobody is stopping me." Without saying more, he walked out on Uwaiyi.

In the ensuing days, an air of cold-war hostility hung between the brothers, exacerbated by Ogebe's newfound taciturnity. Uwaiyi noticed that his brother suddenly became nonchalant about his safety. He now went out at will without telling him. When food inexplicably grew plentiful, Uwaiyi's suspicions deepened. Ogebe's hushed phone calls, made in a conspiratorial tone, hinted at something sinister. Uwaiyi wondered what his brother was up to. How did he get the airtime to make phone calls, which was only accessible to those with the marks? Had he reneged and sold his soul to the devil? In any case, this called

for bird's-eye vigilance. From that moment, Uwaiyi was determined to always monitor Ogebe's movements within the house. He'd often sidle along the walls at night to make himself inconspicuous as much as possible when the lights were out to eavesdrop on Ogebe's phone conversation. This surveillance would continue for several days without an incident until he began to feel his fears were unfounded. The brutal regime had so well succeeded in working on the psyche of the people to the point of exorcising trust from their nature.

Since the ban on open religious activities and public gatherings, every Sunday morning, Uwaiyi conducted a miniature service in his room, that is, if one could call it a service. He'd sing in a hushed voice as though mumbling to himself some snatches of praise and worship songs he could remember and then rounded it off with a short prayer which he doubted whether it would ever get to heaven.

After the fateful night, many believers were of the view that prayers were ineffectual since the spirit of God had already left the earth with the saints. Surprisingly, Ogebe too stayed indoors throughout the day. Uwaiyi noticed when he came to his room to invite him downstairs for brunch, he evaded his gaze from falling on his bloodshot eyes. What is the matter? Uwaiyi wondered. Had something made him weep throughout the night? Uwaiyi also perceived how guiltily nice he was to him today. Was he up to something? Otherwise, he wouldn't have been wearing that sorry look about him.

The sun was disappearing behind Atape Hill, casting a red glow on the sky, when, from his upstairs window overlooking the street that ran in front of their house, Uwaiyi saw a Hilux van drive past until he could see it no more. Shortly after, the sound of a car pulling up close by could be heard, but he couldn't see it from his window. Almost immediately, he heard their doorbell ring, and a door downstairs opened with a creak followed by the patter of footfalls. Instinctively, he rushed downstairs, bounding two steps at a time on the staircase, his heart thumping wildly. He was momentarily relieved to see Ogebe coming from his room, a bit more composed than himself.

"Who could that be?" asked Uwaiyi.

"Your guess is as good as mine," answered Ogebe. "I'll answer the door."

"Wait! Since when did we start ushering people into this house?" Uwaiyi asked, visibly alarmed.

"I've as much right to this house as you do; I don't need your permission to receive visitors."

"We're not opening that door," Uwaiyi declared with a hint of threat.

"Says who?" asked Ogebe, laughing maniacally as he lunged for the door. Uwaiyi stepped in front of him to restrain him, grabbing him by the shoulders. They grappled and fought each other fiercely like two total strangers, deaf to the incessant ringing of the doorbell. Though older, smaller in stature, and sickly looking, Uwaiyi was not stronger than his brother. He knew that he could not overpower Ogebe in physical combat. He yanked at the left sleeve of the shirt, tearing it from the shoulder. Quickly, Ogebe clutched his left arm to shield the incision-like piercing marks on his bicep from his brother's open-mouthed gaze, but it was too late.

"You ... you too?" Uwaiyi stuttered, horrified by the mark of the antichrist he'd seen.

"Yes, me. There comes a time in life when we all have to take a stand and make hard decisions for our lives. I've made mine, Uwaiyi, and I'm ready to live by it—damn the consequences," replied Ogebe defensively.

"You mean after all that we'd both known and believed, brother?" asked Uwaiyi, in a voice overcome with emotions.

"Yes, I accept full responsibility for my actions. I'd rather go to hell when I die than live through this. No, I can't...." he stopped, interrupted by the impatient ring of the doorbell. Both brothers looked at the door strangely and then at each other.

"Run!" Ogebe suddenly shouted at his brother. "They're here for you."

Without waiting for another word, Uwaiyi sprinted upstairs, aiming to escape through the chimney. In a few quick leaps, he reached it and made his way out of the building. He used a ladder in the backyard to scale the barbed-wire fence around the house into the street where the secret police were waiting, anticipating his escape. But before they could shake off their momentary lethargy and act,

he had started running. He ran and ran, not knowing where he was running to, with the siren blaring behind him.

One of the areas where this new regime could pat itself on the back for having achieved its aim was how it dealt with the harshest blow on the family. It brought out a knife and tore close-knit families apart such that a child could gleefully snitch on their parents. Blood was no longer thicker than water in this dog-eat-dog world where only the fittest survive. Looking back on how he narrowly escaped arrest by the secret police, Uwaiyi was somehow mollified that his brother Ogebe redeemed himself in the nick of time.

Sometimes a man's salvation lies in recourse to his residual experience. This came in handy when Uwaiyi was chased by the secret police in their van. The bad-boy, bohemian spirit swung into action, and suddenly he knew within himself what to do to get them off his trail. Since he could not outrun the van on a straight street with no potholes, he took a footpath wedged between rows of buildings. The van screeched to a halt behind him, but he was too focused on escaping to see how the secret police spilt onto the pavement in pursuit.

He saw a nondescript one-storey duplex which looked empty and ran in through the back door. Hiding inside until the coast was clear seemed like the best way to lose them. He made his way to the first floor, and from his hiding position, he could see the police approaching the buildings around the duplex with their drawn guns. Using sign language, they divided themselves into twos and threes and each group went in a different direction in search of him. Uwaiyi had no choice but to lie still and pray that it'd not occur to them to search the building where he was hiding.

Time dragged on, each second stretching into an eternity. Just when he thought they had lost track of him, he heard voices talking on walkie-talkies as heavy footfalls climbed up the stairs from the front entrance of the house. As the voices drew closer, he decided to change to another part of the building. He moved soundlessly, sidestepping some objects on his way lest they gave him away. When he reached a half-closed door, he decided to peep inside before opening it. The room resembled an operating theatre, but what Uwaiyi saw inside made his blood run cold. Six or seven men in white lab coats and surgical caps were clinically cutting up a dead body as though performing a post-mor-

tem examination, watched by uniformed police with drawn guns.

Was this a scene from a horror film or a nightmare? Uwaiyi couldn't tell. When the knives descended again on the lifeless body stretched out on the operating table, a scream tore from his lips before he could stop it. Everything froze. The gloved hands stopped midair. The hitherto expressionless faces hardened in shock, wondering where the scream could have emanated from. Acting swiftly and in unison, the police pointed towards the half-closed door where he was peeping.

"Hold him!" they barked.

Uwaiyi quickly retraced his steps, running blindly down the staircase and toward the backyard of the building, ignoring the whistles echoing behind him. What he had just witnessed made him momentarily forget his own predicament, unwittingly giving away his location with the scream. Overcome with nausea, he threw up several times as he ran while the secret police followed in hot pursuit.

When he was sure he had lost them through a red herring, he moved stealthily from one rundown place to another until he got to a desolate spot and decided to rest a little. He knew that all he was doing was buying time as the regime would definitely catch up with him. They were only letting him run to wear him out, as they did to many dissidents who eventually gave themselves up after weeks of being on the run. He was sure that when they'd had enough of this hide-and-seek game with him, they'd easily pick him up to undergo a series of insufferable tortures in their inhuman dungeons.

Perhaps this derelict place was already surrounded by the secret police, waiting patiently for him to make the next move so that they could arrest him. He dreaded the moment they would come for him. Would his flesh fail his spirit, as it had for many saints in the past? Didn't some even trade the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory that awaited them for a temporary reprieve from unbearable pain? He wonders whether when his hour comes, he will be found faithful enough to withstand it to the end and be saved.

A creaking sound close to his legs suddenly startles him to his feet, only for him to realise it was an Agama lizard. The lizard nods its head at him as if to say, "We're in this together, pal," and continues with its press-ups, unruffled, seemingly to impress an invisible female nearby.

A Web of Mess

Vicky Okon

Had she been told her life would turn into such a tangle of mess, she would have laughed that predictor to scorn. But there she was, all tied up, wrapped up, and entangled in a web of mess.

It all started with Steve. As people attested, her relationship with Steve was rare and unique. Although they were young and inexperienced, the chemistry between them could launch a rocket. The same love had dealt her a terrible blow, making her world shatter into several million pieces, tearing her senses and emotions in the process. She felt disjointed. Words could not express her state of mind.

It was another failed attempt to convince Steve that even death should not separate them. She was in a hurry to return home to her parents and drown in her sorrow, yet she decided to walk. It felt like her problems were forcing her to go a mile—She was ready to go a million miles if it would help her senses and feelings.

The street was scanty, except for a few toddlers fighting over a plastic doll. If it were a normal day, Shally would have settled their dispute with their favou-

rite candy. Instead, here she was, staggering back home through the winding, unplanned settlement with mostly thatched homes as she'd just had enough to drink for the day.

The road seemed wide, but it could not contain her trials. The path was narrow, but it could not strangle her troubles. The cruel sun overhead was hot, and how she only wished it could melt away her troubles. Or that her storms would suddenly, by magic, calm like the cool air around her that was now stifling her. Her tears poured heavily. *If only they could wash away my shame...* She thought as her cry echoed like thunder, but it still didn't help with her sorrows. The day looked brighter, ready to lay bare all her traumas. The looks on faces seemed abusive. The eyes of passers-by were condemning—no one cared enough to comfort her. She felt revolted against and abandoned. Was it voices in her head? Or reality? She could no longer tell the difference between facts and fiction. She longed for an end, yet the future stood afar off like the home she was in a hurry to run to and hide in.

What was her crime? She was going off to the city for her undergraduate studies. Wasn't that supposed to make Steve proud—that she had broken free from the shackles of mental, economic, and social deprivation that came with being born in a village like theirs, with no trace on the world map?

Yes, they'd applied for admission together. Was it a crime that she got it first? Had he always been jealous of her? Or did he always feel intimidated by her ambitions? No, Steve wasn't such a guy, but how could she tell when she'd always been so drowned in love to notice any misgivings? She felt insulted by his rejection of her pleas to even think that giving away her pride could pacify him.

With Steve, she had hopes as tall as skyscrapers and dreams as beautiful as the streets of heaven. All she did was strive to live them. But where had those dreams gone? Her hero had become the pillow on which she rested her traumatised emotions. Where had she walked all her life when her prints were no longer on the sand of time? Her comfort had now become the walls between her and Steve—so high, thick, and cold.

Should she reject the admission and then gain Steve's love back? *Nah, never, not her.* Such was a fool's game. She could be many things, but not a fool. She hoped someone could tell her how she got to her current state. How did the

fallout with Steve happen? Was their love nothing but fables and castles in the air? She wished she could wake from the dream of reality and live in the reality of dreams.

A dark cloud suddenly overpowered the bright sunshine as her eyes lifted toward the sky, a brewing storm mirroring the turmoil within her—the same sudden darkness cast a shadow over her future. Her flowery dress danced to the tune of the wind alongside the distant trees, just like the emotions stirring inside her.

By now, she had reached the T-junction, which marked the boundary between her community and Steve's. It was a long distance from where she had come and an even longer one to where she was headed. She stopped, the pain of the long walk seeping into her feet, much like the rain soaking slowly through her gown and into her skin—like a man's touch, tactful and seductive, caressing a lady.

Shally was neither in a hurry to leave nor enjoying the pouring rain, her mind trying to accept the reality that was suddenly dawning on her. She looked around as though the answer to her pain were written somewhere nearby.

Her community was to the right and Steve's to the left when approaching from the long tail, though both communities belonged to the same village. Henceforth, it was likely she would no longer take the path leading left to Steve's. The thought of that made fear tighten its grip on her.

The word 'left' felt bitter on her tongue. She glanced to her left, as if trying to decipher the missing link. Wasn't the left always associated with everything wrong? Giving someone something with the left hand was considered an insult, a sign of disrespect. Defaulters were always assembled on the left side of whoever was deciding their fate. Was this a sign that her relationship with Steve had been wrong all along? They say all that glitter isn't gold. Their relationship had all the bling, and she took it for that—gold, and even something far more precious. Oh, how wrong she was!

But hadn't the T-junction stood there for as long as their village existed? Why had she never seen the handwriting on the wall, nor read its meaning? Oh! The realisation of that simple fact drove her off the cliff where she already

teetered on bruised emotions, and she wept as if she had been cast into eternal damnation.

Somehow, she managed to remain on her feet amidst the crises. Perhaps the pain and cold rain had turned her into a pillar of flesh, her arms wrapped around herself—the only comfort she felt. Her tears poured heavily, mixing with the rain as it washed down her face the moment they escaped her eyes. The thunder downed her voice, and both mocked her sorrow.



On the other side of town, Manny had everything: rich parents, a house of his own, a car, a career in the tech world, and a love that felt like the Milky Way in the heavens. He indeed felt like a knight in shining armour.

He was only twenty-five.

When his friends joined internet feuds about where to find love, he would laugh his heart out. Never in his wildest imagination did he think he would join their clique.

Apart from his mum, Alice was the only female Manny could take a bullet for—only for Alice to become the bullet that pierced straight through his heart. The same heart he had given to her wholly, without reservation. Many were looking for hearts to love; Alice had chosen to toy with his.

Like several other things since their break-up, Manny didn't know why he was driving to the village of all places to cool off his heartbreak? Yet he felt enchanted. Like one summoned by the gods. Though paradoxically counterintuitive, a place as grim as he was could be the balm to his wounds.

As a city dweller, he had only visited the village five times in his entire twenty-five years. As a child, he had longed for the village and even begged his parents to take him there. Now he understood why they kept their distance.

The place had a deadness to it that screamed of a horror-like setting—a sense of doom and grimness, as if it was out to get anyone who approached. Even with a few close-to-modern houses popping up here and there, the village still

lagged behind the rest of the world. It even felt like the people were travelling in the opposite direction of civilisation.

This is why most of its youth fled to the city for greener pastures. *Yet those in the city were leaving for opportunities abroad. It was a madness with no end.* He sighed, his mind shifting to the rain drumming hard on the roof and windscreen of his car, as though it were an attack.

Was the assault on his heart not enough torment? Or was it a deliberate act to get him out here and finish him off? If he had seen a single sign of this storm before driving out of his five-bedroom duplex home, he would not have embarked on the dangerous adventure. There was no going back now. He could tell that whatever was calling him in the storm was worth following.

He could see the end of the junction. His father's house was to the right. He knew nothing of what lay beyond the left, thanks to infrequent visits to the place. Then he saw the tree in the middle of the cross. It must have been planted—its position was too exact to be a stray growth. *Did the tree even have branches?* In the fuzziness of the rain, it looked like a stump or a piece of firewood someone had just abandoned in a rush to escape the downpour. It was hard to tell, even with the car's wipers working to keep the windscreen clear.

He was about to swing left and keep driving as fast as the soaked, untarred road would allow when he spotted the outline of a person in the almost dark, stormy distance. It was clearly not a tree or a pile of firewood, and there was no way he was mistaken—it looked like a female figure at that.

After his break-up with Alice, the only woman he didn't feel like gunning down was his mother. Even his sisters were culprits, capable of hurting an innocent gentleman like him. The desire to eradicate every single one of them burned strongly within.

But as he approached and saw the female figure just standing there, staring into the storm, he instinctively hoped she had not been struck by it. How and why was she out there, standing in the open during such a downpour? Whoever she was, she needed shelter and warmth. Despite the contempt Manny had for women, he felt compelled to help.



Shally saw the red SUV. It was going left when it suddenly changed direction and halted in front of her. It was the only living thing she had encountered since the storm and downpour started. The driver's door opened, and a guy, casually dressed in jeans and a polo shirt, approached her. She noticed his athletic build as he took her by her right elbow and guided her towards the car. She complied without any resistance. He helped her into the front passenger seat, hurried around to the driver's seat, and drove off.



Shally had passed by the house with a fence as tall as those in maximum prisons several times. She had always wondered what beauty it hid inside.

Yet, as she stepped in, she almost felt disappointed. It was just a moderate home with the necessary furniture and appliances you would find in any low-cost settlement in the city. It felt more like an improved version of the thatched homes in the village—like hers.

She concluded the house was merely a symbol of the crumbs from their city wealth. This was what wealthy city dwellers did—allowing part of their income to trickle down to the village, as if the villages were unworthy of proper development. Perhaps the gods of the land were incapable of holding in place mansions, streetlights, and all the beauty that made the cities what they were.

It was still raining outside. Shally and her host, Manny, sat opposite each other on the tiled floor with a centre table between them. She was wearing Manny's shirt and a new panty and bra Manny had found in one of his sister's wardrobes. "They always bring an extra pair at each visit," he explained when Shally was reluctant to accept them. It wasn't his explanations that convinced her, though. It was the labels on them. Of all the mess she wanted in her life, venereal disease wasn't a part of it. She heard girls from rich homes were as loose as their absentee parents. Her natural hair hung loosely, looking permed from the rain.

Manny sipped at intervals from a bottle of dry gin on the table while Shally sipped hers from a glass.

"I thought the beautiful ones do not cry." Manny briefly studied her sad face.

She forced a smile. "Not when burdened with sorrow."

Manny chuckled. "I bet yours don't weigh close to mine... so what burdens you?"

"My boyfriend just broke up with me..." she said, her fingers nervously fiddling with the glass. She struggled to contain the emotions threatening to spill over, her eyes avoiding his. His gaze made her feel both nervous and vulnerable. Finally, she completed her sentence in a trembling voice, "...because I'm leaving for the University in the city."

Manny laughed, sounding tipsy. "I guess just as many people die each day, many hearts get broken, too."

Shally looked at him for seconds and immediately looked away as tears threatened to spill from her eyes. "Were you also gunned by love?"

He pointed at her, impressed by her choice of words, as he took a swig of his drink. "That's the word, gunned. Shot point blank, straight in the heart..." he gestured with his hand... "Murdered in cold blood by my girlfriend of childhood love."

"What a coincidence." She smiled while staring absently at her glass.

Manny shrugged, and they sipped in silence for a while.

"So, what brought you to the village?" Shally broke the brief silence with her question, and downed the drink in her glass, swallowing the content as though forced down her throat.

"I don't know, I felt enchanted," he shrugged, "maybe you."

She began to laugh, but the laughter quickly dissolved into tears. Manny joined her at first, chuckling softly, but stopped when he realised her tears had taken over. He crawled toward her, his unsteady movements betraying how much he had drunk. By the time he reached her, he could barely manage his footing. Gently, he made her sit between his legs, drawing her close. Wrapping

his arms around her, he held her tightly, kissing her neck tenderly. It was the only comfort he knew how to offer.

Shally felt a strange discomfort with Manny sitting so close, holding her so tightly, and being so tender. This was the last thing she needed—a deeper entanglement with the turmoil she was already facing. Yet, she was too numb to react. Numb from the sting of rejection. Numb from the searing pain of losing her virginity. Numb from the cold rain that had soaked her through.

But Manny's warmth and the comfort of his embrace slowly eroded her resistance. The humility of his gestures clashed with her inner turmoil, leaving her unable to decide what she truly wanted. Surrendering to her confusion, she gave in—not by choice, but as one overwhelmed by exhaustion and uncertainty.



The bottle of liquor and the glass lay on the floor in big broken pieces. You would think a fight had broken out, but Shally and Manny lay in each other's arms, naked and snoring, their clothes scattered around them in the dark room, scarcely lit by flickers of light from the windows.

Shally sat up abruptly, disoriented. She looked around the room with the aid of light reflections fluttering through the windows. The environment was strange to her. Her legs were heavy as she kicked and jumped to her feet, kicking Manny hard in the process and startling him out of sleep. Seeing her shadow, he jumped to his feet, landing on a piece of broken glass.

"Who are you?" Both asked at the same time, confused. Shally scurried to one of the couches, avoiding Manny, who was reaching out in a bit to identify her.

"Get away from me!"

When he didn't stay back, she moved to a corner of the couch, folding herself only to realise she was naked when her palms touched her skin. Manny discovered his nakedness at about the same time. More confusion settled in.

"What are you doing in my house?"

"What did you do to me?"

“How did you get into my house?”

They began to search for their clothes, bumping into each other as both reached out to pick the same cloth.

“Ouch! Don’t you have eyes?” Shally let out, frustrated.

She got the cloth and was about to put it on, but Manny reached out to take it away from her.

“That’s my boxer.”

“How is my panty, your boxer?”

“Give me my bra,” she said, still confused.



Shally—no, Mrs. Manny, she corrected herself, that lingering smile playing on her lips. She loved the way her smile always returned whenever her mind unearthed the memory. It resurfaced often, though lately, her thoughts had begun to blur the ending of that day. The shame and embarrassment they both felt when sense had finally prevailed—the regret—no, she preferred not to venture there. Better to leave the memory where the smile usually slipped in. She smiled again, feeling the urge to borrow Angel Gabriel’s words to Mary and address herself: truly, she was blessed among women. How her life had plunged deep into hell and then soared straight to heaven, all in a single day, she could not explain.

Most times, she felt like taking a tour in an air taxi with a flyer hanging down below, proclaiming how loved she was. The thought reminded her of one politician who pulled that stunt for his election campaign. A foolish thing she called it then, a complete waste of resources. But hers was a worthy course and deserved all the publicity it could get. It was her kind of happening that was worthy of the skylines.

They thought she had something special with Steve. That was child’s play where Manny was concerned. It was almost two years since that fateful day at the T-junction. She was now a second-year undergraduate studying to become a

civil engineer. Her twin babies, a boy and a girl, were nine months old, a result of that drunken day escapade.

Their union didn't happen without a little drama, though. His parents wanted someone with some affluence. Shally wasn't intimidated. She always knew her determination to become a societal influence was affluence enough, and Manny didn't want to be named amongst those loose guys who thought it a mistake to impregnate a lady. But theirs was that... a mistake. God bless his soul a million times for standing by her, her Manny, with the body and face best described in a romantic novel. His character was even cuter than his stunning looks.

At times, she wondered why one person was so extravagantly blessed. Many had wealth, beauty, and character. Life wasn't balanced at all, but so far, the imbalance was in her favour; the world was alright.

Shally just returned home from the hospital for her babies' last immunisation. She looked at their sleeping faces in the joint cot, smiling softly at their peaceful faces. People who knew them said the kids looked more like their father, but she didn't mind. Manny was cute, and her babies had twice his beauty.

Both babies shared the same room. Shally didn't want the stress of going across different rooms to check on her babies. What if both needed attention at the same time? Keeping them in one was a lot easier to manage. The room was painted sky blue with a bit of baby pink here and there. Those pink were because Manny kept making fun of her for being inconsiderate of the girl. She felt that assigning any gender-particular colour was a stereotype. Her favourite colours were sky blue, ash, silver, and - maybe - baby pink if there were no other colours in the world to pick from.

She walked to the long ash-coloured couch in the room and made herself comfortable, taking out her babies' hospital cards from her handbag for safe-keeping in the drawer attached to the arm of the couch. It was where she kept all their hospital cards, including that of her husband. She was the custodian of many things. Before putting them away, she needed to remind herself how well her babies were growing.

Both had already started walking at nine months. The nurses and midwives at the hospital always commended her for being a great mother. She would miss

them. They were very kind and hospitable. Their attitude was not typical of the rudeness associated with general hospital nurses. Manny had suggested using a private hospital, but Shally refused to patronize those pretentious places where even basic courtesies came at a hefty price.

She looked at both cards, starting with all the immunisations from birth and those that followed. At nine months, her girl was 8.2 kg, and the boy was 9.1 kg. Both were 28 inches in length. She looked from the card to where the girl lay. "My Lady," she exclaimed with pride. "Not ready to let any boy intimidate you, huh?" she laughed at herself, causing the kids to turn in their sleep. "Sorry, children," she whispered, easing her laughter.

Her eyes went next to the parents' names, her pride swelling some more at the sight of her name as the mother. She was only eighteen years and some months old at the time of their birth—blessed as a young mother of two lovely children, and wife to a wealthy tech guru. She smiled at her fortunes, a yawn of tiredness replacing the smile. She needed some sleep while her babies were at it, too, but she was not done with the information on the cards.

Their blood group and genotype were the next stop. Shally didn't know why she felt she had to look at this piece of information. She and Manny were AA genotype, her blood group O positive and Manny's O negative. Maybe because she wanted her girl to be O positive, it was safer that way because of childbirth, but that was no longer an issue. Medical science had developed past that trouble. But she still wanted to be sure a wish could come true.

Shally lowered herself to a sleeping position on the couch, smiling satisfactorily and gradually welcoming the sleep that was overpowering her eyelids. Her girl was O positive. She could dream away gladly. She dropped that card, pleading with her eyes to at least glimpse the same information about her son. Genotype, AA, blood group... she dozed and opened her eyes again. Blood group, AB... she was about to doze again, but that information didn't settle right. She forced open her eyes.

She looked at the card again—*AB positive? Where did that come from?* The lingering drowsiness vanished. She sat up and looked at the card again. Something wasn't right. She went to the safe and got out all the cards for each. Settling down uneasily on the couch, she spread the cards before her.

She looked at Manny's AA & O negative. Hers: AA & O positive. Her girl's: AA & O positive. Her boy's: AA & AB positive.

Was that possible? What had she been taught in biology again? Could O blood group parents to have an AB offspring? That wasn't possible, was it? Shally quickly grabbed her phone from the purse in the handbag she had brought from the hospital. Opening a search engine, she typed in her concern, which was confirmed within seconds. It was impossible.

So, where did her son come from?

Was there a mistaken swap at the hospital when she gave birth? It was a general hospital, yes, but she had a ward to herself. Were they sure she had twins? She walked to the boy's cot and looked at his cute face. Perhaps she should call the hospital just to reconfirm. Shally stopped herself just as she was about to place the call. She needed to interrogate herself properly before involving a third party.

The pregnancy... how did it happen again? Her mind flipped at the rate she needed it. It had been almost two years since that fateful day on July 7. She had gone to Steve's house and willingly offered him her virginity to prove to him she could be his forever, irrespective of her admission. That act had thrown her dignity and love to the swine. That realisation always made her frown. She even felt disgusted at her discovery.

Ah-huh! There was her answer—Steve. She lost control, her mind incapable of processing any other information except his name. It taunted her memory along with her discovered reality. Oh, life! What would she do? Two children from two different men? Her life was again descending into hell. Too depressed to be consoled, she thought perhaps it was her destiny to be forever tormented.

Like the biblical Hannah, she was too traumatised. Her throat didn't even make a sound—only her lips moved, uttering a foreign language. Her eyes emptied as though they had been trained for mourning. She wished that what was about to befall her could flow out and dry away like the tears.

The Burning Candle

Leonard W. Maero

Mama was plump, with a broad nose and small, tight lips. Her face was wide, with small pimples near the folds below her eyes. A strange expression lingered on her face that always made me uneasy.

One day, I asked her why she always had a cloth covering her head. She replied, “I have so many things going on in my head.”

I couldn’t help but wonder—was that cloth the reason she had so much to think about?

Every morning on school days, Mama would come and pull away my blanket. She would throw my uniform and a small bag with two books at me and then walk away. More often than not, I would always doze off in the middle of putting on the uniform, only to hit my head against the wall. It was very painful. She would send me off to school when the big torch in the sky was still asleep, some days giving me tea in a plastic bag with one thin slice of bread. I would pretend to leave, then hide in small bushes at the roadside. I only came out

when I saw my friends walk past. I never understood why she did that to me.

I remember one day, as I lingered in my bedding, which consisted of only a few rags spread on the hard, cold floor, she came in and shouted, "Get up, boy, this is not your home for you to sleep however you want!"

After a short while, she walked in with a jug of cold water and poured it on me.

When loneliness clouded my thoughts, I found myself thinking about Nasara. Nasara was short and dark, with long hair that fell over her shoulders. I often wondered why my hair couldn't grow long like hers. One day I overheard Mama inquiring from Nasara why she had gotten pregnant with me while she was still in school.

When Mama walked to the garden behind the house, I asked Nasara, "Nasara, what is pregnancy? Did you bring it for me?"

Moistening her lips, she gazed into my eyes, smiled and said, "You're a good boy."

Nasara had a small mattress and bed in her bedroom. I only got to sleep on that bed when she was around. When she left on her long journeys, I never knew whether she took the keys with her, but it always felt like ages before she returned.

On her last visit, she brought me sweets, *patipati*¹ and a new pair of trousers. She lifted me high, looked into my eyes, and touched my lips with a finger painted the colour of the sky. I was very happy.

I don't know what I missed most about her: her warmth, her embrace or her gentle touch while giving me a bath.

One day, after she walked into her room, I stood by the door and heard her sobbing. "Why are you crying?" I asked, looking into her eyes as I held her hand.

"It's nothing," Nasara whispered between gasps, took me up and carried me on her lap.



Whenever it was time for Nasara to leave, I cried a lot. I would go to the back of the house, sit on the concrete platform surrounding the house, and cry. When I heard the sound of a motorbike, I knew she was about to leave. Upon hearing the heavy footsteps of Mama coming towards me, looking for me to say bye to Nasara, I would hastily wipe away tears with the back of my hand, take her hand and go see Nasara off. Nasara would crouch, hold me by the shoulder and say, "I want you to be a good boy. Uhm, don't disturb Mama." She would then pinch my cheek softly. I don't know why Nasara looked at me keenly on such days.

When I would lift my head to say something, Mama would smile broadly, stroke my kinky hair with her palm and say, "You never know how I love him. He is such a good boy."

On one specific day, Nasara asked me to walk her to the roadside. Mama objected to the assertion that I would be knocked down by a motorcycle, but Nasara insisted. When it was time for her to leave, tears filled my eyes and spilt down my face. I held her skirt tightly, looked at her and begged, "I want to go with you. Don't leave me. Don't leave me with Mama." Nasara carried me for a while, and I calmed down after a short time. She looked into my eyes before turning to glance at Mama, who was busy on her mobile phone.

"Mama, let me give you some money to buy him some sweets. Ensure he takes a packet of milk every day. During the evenings, make sure he wears a sweater or a jacket. I'm sure the money I have given you is enough. I will send you more for his school bag and sandals," Nasara said, gesturing with her hand. I turned to Nasara, smiled and asked: "Will Mama do that for me?" "Yes, she is a very good person. She won't forget anything, okay?" Nasara replied calmly. I wanted to tell Nasara something, but Mama fastened her eyes on me. The strange look in her eyes drained my courage. "Yes, I will buy him the sweets," Mama insisted. "Give me the money before you forget. I don't want you to get late." Nasara left after embracing me tightly.

We walked home in silence, Mama holding my hand; I had an urge to pull my little hand away. Instead of going to the kiosk, we headed straight home.

As we approached the compound, she let go of my hand, and I felt as if I'd been holding my breath the whole time.

"Mama, you haven't bought the sweets," I reminded her, tapping her hand. "Sweets? What sweets?" she replied, her tone sharp, as if I had made the gravest mistake. "Do you know how much I'm spending on your food?" she asked, her hands on her waist and her whole body towering over me. "Do you know how long you have tied me here?"

I knew I had not tied Mama with any rope.

"I'm here taking care of you while your father is..." She stopped abruptly and grabbed my ear, venting her anger through her grip.

"Mama, you are hurting me! Please, let me go. Please, let me go," I cried, pleading with her, but she would hear none of that. I knew that if I pulled myself out of her tenacious grip, it would be more painful, so I endured the pain. Then I heard someone calling out for her. A herdsman from the neighbourhood stood by the fence. He wore an oversized shirt. In his hand, he carried a big stick for chasing cattle.

"Oh! It's you," Mama said, releasing my ear while pushing me behind her big body. I was bleeding. I craned my neck to look at the herdsman. "I have been calling you for centuries. Where have you taken your ears?" he inquired, small lines appearing on his forehead.

I lifted my head to look at Mama to check whether her ears were still there.

"Forgive me. I didn't hear you. As you can see, I was talking to the child," Mama apologized, adjusting her headscarf.

After taking a few steps, she turned back and asked, "Are you going to stand there like a statue? Go fetch water." I walked away, wiping flecks of blood from my ear. "This boy likes playing a lot, and now, his ear got injured," Mama told the herdsman. I picked a plastic container that lay outside and took the path that led to *mmwalo*². As I walked slowly along the dusty footpath, Mama's words echoed in my mind. She had said something about my father. *Where is my father? Where did he live?* I dug into my imagination and tried to picture what my father looked like. *Was he short, like the herdsman? Was he big like Mama?* I was still in my

flight of imagination when I walked into a dark young woman carrying a large container on her head. “Don’t you have eyes?” She shouted, pointing at me with a finger. I jumped into a bush along the path to avoid her slap that sliced through the air just above my head.

“Get out of here. Look at this fatherless boy!” she said, her voice loud and scornful.

At the stream, women and children crowded around, most of them taller than me. My friend called me over, his face beaming with joy. He was barefoot, patches of fresh mud visible from his knees downward, and he was sucking his thumb. *Why has his mother not asked him to stop sucking his thumb? Might it be that it produces some milk?*

I remembered one of the many days Mama caned me. I rushed to the back of the house, crying in pain. I don’t know how my thumb found itself in my mouth. A few minutes later, I heard the swish of a cane slicing in the air, then pain ripped my back from my shoulders. “If I catch you suckling that finger, I will chop it off. Do you hear me?” Mama sounded a warning, droplets of saliva gushing out her wide mouth like raindrops. I hesitated, but then the urge to play overpowered me. I don’t know why I liked playing. My teacher had warned me to stop being too playful. Putting the container in the long water queue, I ran towards my friend.

Two boys joined us and we started chasing one another. Whenever I fell in the soft soil, I would get on my feet and continue with the game. I plucked a leaf of an arrowroot and put it in the flowing water. It was fun.

In an attempt to pluck a leaf, my friend slipped and fell into the mud. Before long, his mother ran to our side. She lifted him up quickly, like a paper, and gave him a thorough beating on his back. I ran to where I had left my container and waited till it was my turn.

Before I reached home, it started drizzling. Although I was very tired and hungry, I walked on. By the time I reached home, it was pouring from the sky. Mama didn’t notice my presence. She was collecting five empty packets of milk from the table. She brought her hand close to her mouth and closed her eyes

for a few seconds. When she turned to look at me, she smiled and motioned for me to move close to her.

It was then that I sensed something was amiss. While trying to retreat, I skidded and fell on my back. With her powerful hands, she grabbed me like an eagle snatching a chick and dragged me to her seat.

“What have you been doing at the stream? Ehh, so you think this is your father’s house where you can do anything, uh? Answer me!” she roared, her eyes popping out. Tears were already dripping from my eyes before making a river on my cheeks. She stepped on my back, and her sharp nails dug into my ears.

“Forgive me, Mama. I’m sorry,” I cried as she reached for a cane she hid under the chair. I can’t remember the canes that landed on my body. She caned me until I could no longer feel pain. Then she stripped off my clothes, which had wet blood patches on them, and pushed me outside. It was still raining. Swiftly, like a hawk, she grabbed a bucket of rainwater and splashed it over me.

I turned my head sideways to catch my breath and called out for my friend’s father to rescue me. He was walking close to our house, but my cries were swallowed by the heavy rain pounding on the roof. When I couldn’t take it anymore, I held her hand and gazed into her scary eyes.

“I’m sorry, Mama. I’m sorry, Mama,” I pleaded. The rain was subsiding when I saw the herdsboy coming over. He had covered his head with a maize sack.

“Ahh, are you going to kill this poor boy? I know his mother wouldn’t torture him this much,” he said, his deep voice firm. “Do...do... you want to fight me now? Uhm?” Mama stammered, one hand on her waist while the other one holding a cane. “I have said you cease torturing him,” he said, pointing at Mama with his right hand.

I saw her drop the cane and coil inside when he walked away. I was shaking vigorously, my teeth clattering. She threw at me a pair of shorts with a hole at the back and a T-shirt that only reached my navel. During supper, I was about to take a seat at the table when she stopped me.

“Don’t sit there!” Mama banged on the table, breathing heavily. Pointing to the floor, she added, “Sit at the usual place. Nasara never assists me in washing those

seat covers.” Using her leg, she pushed a metallic plate towards me. I ate the little food in silence under the flickering light of a white candle. For some reason I can’t explain, I sympathised with the burning candle. It was burning, reducing with time while giving us light. I was thinking about the pain the candle was going through when Mama coughed.

Getting on my painful feet, I stretched my hand to get water from a tumbler. She slapped my hand off and said, “Go to bed.” Being afraid of her next move, I walked to the door where I had slept with Nasara the previous night. The door creaked open under my push.

“Where do you think you are going?” she inquired, her thunderous voice echoing throughout the house.

“I am going to sleep, Mama,” I replied in a low voice, feeling groggy.

I walked back to the sitting room, my hands crossed. She stood up, belched then gathered a mountain of bones. She had devoured the whole duck that Nasara brought.

“So you’ve known your usual sleeping place, uhm?” She asked, towering over me. “Get out of my sight before I crush your big head.”

I walked to the back room, groping on the wall. It was a small room, which I shared with old sacks and farm tools. My bedding was in the middle. They consist of two tattered cushions and a piece of an old stinking blanket. Before Nasara left, she had taken out the old blanket to burn, but Mama sneaked it back, saying it would be used as a duster. Sometimes, I would feel things walking over my body at night, but sleep would take me, and I forget all about them. I had never told Mama about it.

I lay on my bedding and put my hands between my legs to keep warm. Mama hadn’t given me a sweater or jacket after splashing cold water on me. Moreover, she had denied me a spot near the fireplace while cooking. I remembered Nasara telling her to keep me warm in the evenings and mornings. When I was with Nasara in her bedroom, we had counted up to ten jackets. She helped me count beyond the tenth, but I couldn’t remember the exact number.

My body was still aching. Since sleep had not got hold of me, I overheard Mama's conversation over her mobile phone. "Did you arrive safely? Yes, we are fine here. Yes, I bought it for him. You know I wouldn't forget that."

I could hear her heavy footfalls as she walked about. I found myself sitting upright on my bedding, listening keenly. "The new jacket? Yes, I had him put it on. Hmm, it fits well."

There was a long pause, I think Nasara was explaining something to her.

"The new jacket you brought? Yes. I had him put it on. Yes, it fits him very well."

I guessed she was talking to Nasara.

"Imagine the duck you brought was eaten by a mongoose. I wish I was around. I would have killed it."

Was Mama a mongoose? There was another long pause. "You mean you want to speak to him right now? With this blackout, he must be asleep...Fine, let me take the phone to him." Something stirred in my chest, and I pulled the blanket closer. I heard her footsteps approaching, the floorboards shaking under her weight. She pushed the door open and yanked the blanket off me, holding a candle in one hand.

"Are you asleep? Nasara wants to greet you," she said, sitting on a sack of beans. But the expression in her eyes said something totally different. She made me sit. "Hello," I whispered into the phone, which she held near my injured ear. I wanted to hold the phone, but the look in her eyes killed my courage. "Hello, Daddy? Are you okay? Did you get the sweets?" Nasara's sweet voice came through. "Hello, I... I..." Mama swiftly pulled the phone away from my ear. "I told you he is fine. He is very sleepy," she said, laughing until tears came from her eyes.



The following day, Mama woke me up very early in the morning. A few days before, she had been busy arranging the house. I guessed we were going to have visitors. For the first time, she swept the room where I slept. I

couldn't remember the last time she swept it. She called my friend's mother, who assisted her in cooking *chapati*, doughnuts, and slaughtering a turkey. I had never tasted turkey meat before and so I had sharpened my appetite. Two crates of soda had also been bought for the occasion. I helped Mama pick leaves in the compound. After sweeping, she asked me to carry the trash to the garden, saying it would help the crops grow. I didn't understand how, but I didn't ask her either. I had not wet the beddings, but she ordered me to carry them out and spread them behind the house. "My visitors are coming today. As soon as you greet them, go out and play. Am I clear?" she asked, pointing her big finger at me. "Which visitors are coming, Mama?" I asked her. "Don't ask me many questions. Go take your tea and drink it from outside." Having said that, she disappeared outside. I walked into the sitting room. She had spread new table mats. The sitting room looked beautiful. At the far end of the floor, I saw my mug and a metallic plate. The last time Nasara was around, Mama had served me food on that plate, although Nasara was against it.

"Mama, please don't give him food on that plate. Throw it away. I want him to learn how to use glass plates. Don't we have dozens of glass plates in this house? When they get broken, I will buy new ones," Nasara said firmly.

I expected to fill my stomach, as food was plenty. But when I reached the plate, I only saw two charred, black doughnuts. I sat on one of the chairs, but Mama's voice startled me from behind.

"Those chairs are for visitors. Don't you know where you eat from?" she asked and walked into the kitchen.

"Mama, I need another doughnut," I said when I finished eating the two, holding my half-empty mug.

"Stop bringing me your foolishness. Get out," she said, turning pieces of meat in a large pot without looking at me.

I looked around to check if I was carrying any foolishness. I gulped down the remaining contents and ran out to play *tabo*³ with my friend. The big torch was in the middle of the sky when I told my friend I was going to take water. I was almost running into the house when I stopped at the door. The sweet aroma

from the kitchen wafted into my nostrils. The women were talking while eating. Others were taking sodas.

Upon seeing me, a woman seated near the door passed me a plate of chapati and meat stew. Mama looked at me with piercing eyes and said, "Don't mind him; he has already eaten. He won't eat any more food." I wiped away tears that were almost blurring my vision. My stomach rumbled as I yawned. I saw them produce carrier bags and then empty all the plates on the table. No food remained in the big bowls. One of them, as plump as Mama, emptied a dish of chapati into her bag. My stomach churned, and I opened my mouth as if to swallow the food they were packing away.

Pointing at me, Mama ordered, "Go wash the spoons while I talk to my visitors. I'll clean the glass plates myself." She picked up her shawl, tied it around her waist and walked out.

As I carried empty dishes to the kitchen. I felt dizzy and was about to topple over, but I leaned against the wall. As I washed the spoons, I sobbed quietly. *How I wish Nasara were here. She would have given me food,* I thought, wiping the tears falling down my face with the back of my hand. Memories of my father also flooded my mind. *When will he come to live with us? Does he also go hungry sometimes, like me? What about Nasara?*

Just then, a sweet scent wafted into my nostrils. The aroma felt familiar. Moments later, I heard the shuffling footsteps of someone entering the house.

"Daddy, where are you? Where are you?" Nasara stood at the kitchen door, staring at me. I wiped away tears and got on my feet. She asked where Mama was, and I told her everything—the hunger, the cold, and the cruel treatment. I showed her where I slept and how I never wore the clothes she bought me. Nasara wiped her face with a white handkerchief, her shoulders trembling.

"Nasara, why are you crying?" I inquired, looking into her face.

Nasara took me to her bedroom. She looked at my bed and realised it was the same way she had made it before she left. "So you have never slept here since I left?" she asked, wiping her face with a handkerchief.

"No," I replied softly. "Nasara, let me go and wash spoons," I implored her.

“No, stay here with me.”

“Mama will punish me if I don’t finish washing,” I said honestly, looking around.

Knowing well that Mama would be back shortly, I quickly ate the chips Nasara had brought me. After eating to my fill, I looked at her and pleaded, “Nasara, please don’t leave me here. I don’t want to live with Mama.” “It’s okay, nothing bad will happen to you again,” she replied, embracing me as she held my hand. Nasara reached for her mobile phone and started talking to someone. I was going out to pee when I saw Mama talking to herself outside. I ran back into the house.

“You, what did I tell you to do?” Mama shouted before she walked into the house. “Ahh, Nasara! When did you come?” she asked, beaming with a smile. “Aunty, I’m leaving now with my child!” Nasara said firmly. “Why don’t you eat something?” Mama asked calmly, scratching her head. “I’m not hungry,” Nasara replied, her hand on her forehead. Before long, I heard the sound of motorcycles outside. One rider tied three big bags and my new mattress on his motorcycle.

“Nasara, let me ask you something,” Mama said, her voice hoarse.

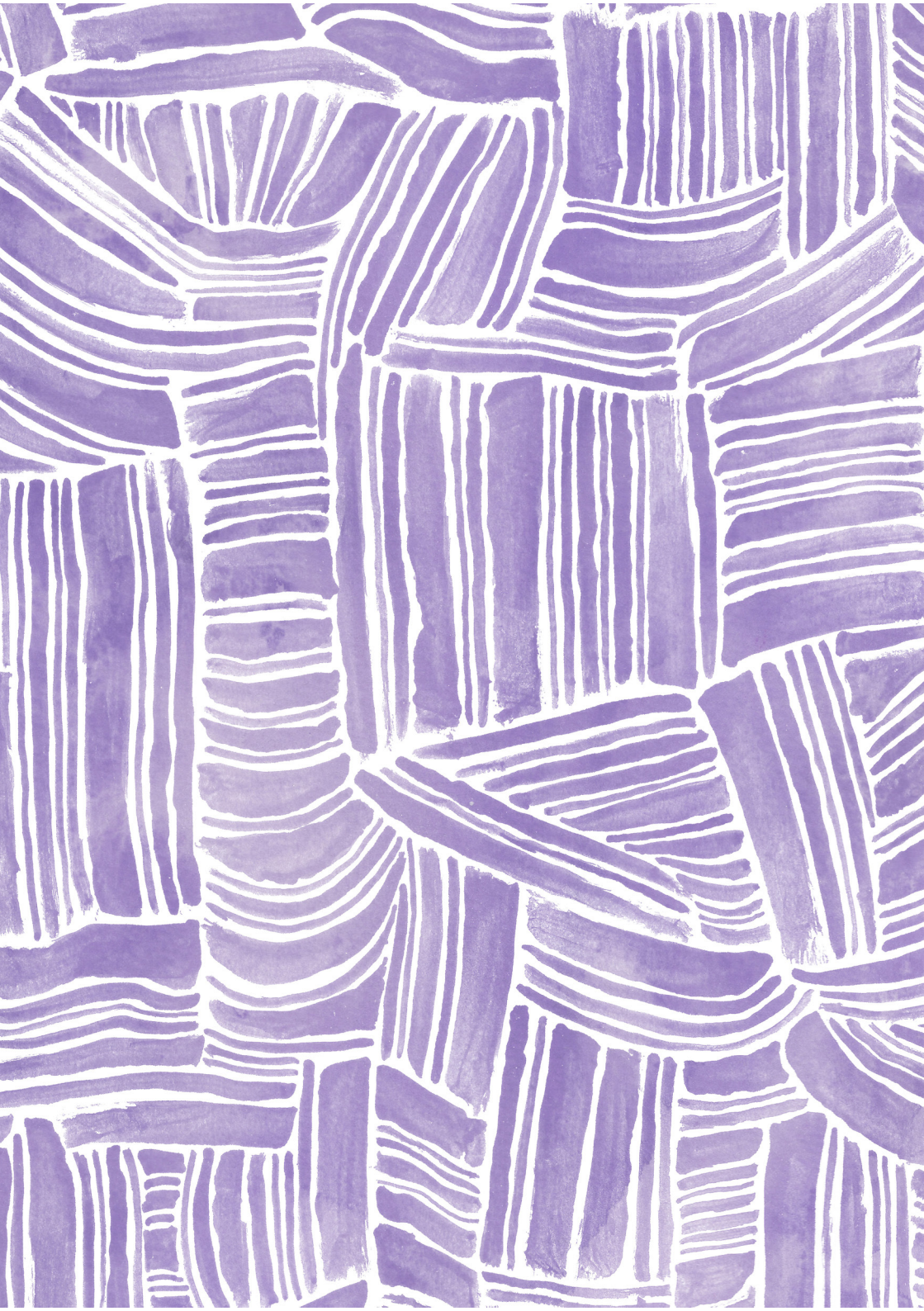
“Thank you for watching over my son,” Nasara took me and sat on the other motorcycle.

As we rode away, I heard Mama calling my name. I wanted to shout that I didn’t love her, but I swallowed my words.

“I’m here, and I won’t leave you again,” Nasara said gently as she ran her fingers through my hair. I wanted to tell her about my friend, but sleep overcame me as I watched the trees blur past.

GLOSSARY

1. *patipati*: sandals
2. *mmwalo*: a small river where people get water for domestic use
3. *tabo*: a game of hide and seek played by children



The Lost Inheritance

Ndubuisi Nwankwo

Umunda Village was quaking with the howls of benumbed mourners. Men, women, and children, all frenzied in the frosty gust of death, the most dreadful anyone had seen in recent times. Somewhere in the bush, a great man lay lifeless, drowned in his blood. He was naked, like the very day he was born—no wrap-per on, nothing, just a bare giant breathless body buried in blood. Most awfully, his manhood was almost severed. Just a tiny artery held it from being set apart entirely. *Who did this to you, Uduma?* Everyone who beheld the body wondered. None could believe it was one of the great men in Umunda Village who ended up just like a fowl.

As an industrious farmer who tied not less than twenty long columns of yam in his vast barn every harvest season, Uduma had killed two horses for his late father, one for his late mother, and one for his grandfather. He had also slaughtered numerous cows and goats to cleanse the blood of each horse he killed, as Umunda traditions demanded. By ushering large herds of cows and goats into his barn to eat his yams until there was no space left in their stomachs to take more, he attained *Oza*, the highest title in the entire clan. He met all the conditions to be called a great man in Umunda. He was full of life and strength, and

to crown his manliness, he married five wives and was even ready to take more before his awful end.

After watching the scene for some minutes with goosebumps all over his body, Ikenga heaved a sigh and forced his feet homeward. As soon as he arrived home, he took a flute made from a bamboo trunk and began to pipe some mournful tunes, sending shivers down the spines of the already stupefied villagers.

Ikenga was not just a town crier but a war rouser who could raise dead warriors from their graves with his flute. He had, on different battlefields, charged men of Umunda to madly lust for blood, which ended in the extermination of five troublesome villages. Perhaps he would be taking his flute through a bloody path once again since Amofia had chosen to dare the lions.

Soon, the Umunda Village square was filled to the brim, with everyone wearing a furious face.

“We must send messengers to Idanga before we strike them tomorrow,” one of the elders addressed the crowd. Every hair on his body was grey. “And if he denies involvement, as I am sure he would, then our men must go there tomorrow and cut twelve heads...”

Idanga, the ruler of Amofia had threatened to attack Umunda over a girl from his village who was found dead on the soil of Umunda two weeks ago. Umunda denied having anything to do with the girl’s death and then dismissed the threat as a weightless talk from a coward.

The old man was still speaking when two young men ran into the square, panting. Their faces showed that all was not well. The crowd was still, everyone waiting impatiently to hear what they had to say.

“Did you find who killed him?” The old man quickly turned to them.

“No. But we’ve found something that will help us find the killer?” Dimba, one of the young men, responded.

Everyone was alerted. They longed to know what it was. Profound silence reigned.

“What did you discover?” another elderly man rose. “Where did you find that?”

His voice was as strong as a rock. He pointed at Dimba in a manner of warning. "Your father, Uduma, was a lion; you cannot appear to us as a lamb. Speak like a man."

"We discovered something at the spot where my father's body was found."

Instantly, some able-bodied men and some elders who were still strong were instructed to follow the two young men to the place. Dimba and his friend had discovered the exact person that killed Uduma, but they wanted the elders to be the ones to mention the name. They led the people to the spot. Dimba kept his eyes on the ground as though searching for something he had lost.

Leading the crowd to the very spot where his father was found, Dimba brought his face down. "You can't see it clearly in this bush. Follow me," he said. He led the crowd a little distance away from the spot. "Look down very well; this is the direction he followed until he fell."

The crowd was enthused seeing a trail of blood on the ground, indicating the direction Uduma followed until he finally collapsed and died. Breaking track and zigzagging here and there, the trail ran ahead, eastward. They continued to move like dogs sniffing for games. Eventually, they came to the front of a compound with two huts standing in it.

"It runs through there," Dimba said, pointing into the compound.

Already, the crowd could see the red mark stretching ahead into the compound. Immediately, they knew who killed Uduma. The elders threw under-standing glances at one another. With an aura of certainty, they surged into the compound. The trail had vanished at this point. No trace of it anywhere. But that was no longer useful. They had seen enough to know the exact person that killed Uduma.

"Come out, Nnedi!" Voices began to roar in the crowd. "Where are you? Come out here!"

To be sure no one escaped from the place, some men encircled the hut on the left. The roof of the hut was down to the earth. It was made by battening bundles of spear grass on long bamboo frameworks. The walls were made of red earth with human fingers drawn all over it.

While the crowd, mostly the young men among them, raged, attempting to pull down the hut, a beautiful woman in her youthful elegance came out; a wrapper trussed just above her breasts and flowed down to her knees.

“Evil woman!” a voice barked. “How can you be so heartless to kill Uduma?!”

Without trying to hear her side, a rain of blows began to fall on her. They dragged her out of the compound. Death was the punishment for her crime. She cried, begging the people to hear her out.

Just two months ago, Obika, Nnedi’s husband, was buried by the villagers after he suffered from a strange illness. Despite being bedridden for four months and seven market days, he hid the cause of his illness until his last day. Before he breathed his last, he mumbled that he had gone to Uduma’s farm and stole some tubers of yam to feed his newly married wife. It was a day after the stealing that every part of his body began to swell. Obika had to confess when it became clear to him that he would still die, even if he sealed up his lips. He gave up the ghost after the confession.

Like many other great farmers in Umunda, Uduma had called Njaka, a great medicine man, to install *Ukpala* in his farm so that anyone who stole from it would die. The deadly talisman was put in a bottle veneered in feathers and hoisted on a wooden pole on one of the heaps on the farm. For those who had big farms, that was the easiest and most effective way to secure it from poor, lazy thieves in the village, and everyone knew it. Whether or not Obika believed in its potency, many believed he deserved what he got.

Having traced Uduma’s blood to the compound, it was natural for the people to say that Nnedi killed him to avenge her husband’s death. She cried and kicked to break free as she was being dragged away to the village square, but her effort was nothing other than the cry of a chick taken from her mother by a kite.

Ibekwe hurried to the village square with burning rage. He was sweating profusely. He had left for Amugo before the break of dawn to sell his palm wine. He was not expecting to hear that Nnedi was in trouble, let alone being taken away to be tortured and slaughtered like a cheap animal.

“Evil men!” he barked. “How dare you tie her here like a condemned thief? Is it because she turned down your amorous advances?” He addressed the elders

who were interrogating Nnedi. She was tied vertically to a tree in the middle of the square. "If you don't untie her now, something terrible will happen!"

Ever since the day his brother, Obika, died, Ibekwe had been having sleepless nights over Nnedi. He felt disturbed seeing how almost every man in the village was visiting the compound day and night, everyone trying to get her attention. Though he had warned them to stay away from her, it all fell on barren ears.

Nnedi became Ibekwe's wife upon Obika's death, though he had to allow her to mourn Obika for six months as required by tradition. Only after then could he fully claim her as a wife. Every passing day seemed longer than a year to Ibekwe as he waited. The waiting period apparently became a time for every man in Umunda to have their bites of her. But she was turning down their passes. Their accusation and plan to kill her looked vengeful. Ibekwe knew his ancestors would curse him if he allowed his inheritance to be destroyed by jealous, wicked people.

"She killed our kinsman. She cut off his manhood. We all know—" one of the elders tried to explain.

"You all are evil!" He stopped the speaker midway. "Tell me, how did you know that she was the one that cut off his manhood? Is she the only woman in this village, if it's true Uduma's irresponsible manhood was attacked by a woman?" His forthright voice disrupted the proceedings.

Living almost only on the proceeds of his palm wine, Ibekwe was a man of little substance as to insult and malign the titled men in the Council of Elders in the manner he was doing. Everyone wondered what was propelling his rash audacity. *Was it just about Nnedi?*

"Watch your tongue, you madman!" a deep voice countered Ibekwe after what seemed like forever. A huge man towering above seven feet was striding belligerently toward Ibekwe with a face that looked like that of a hungry wolf. Ibekwe began to retreat, like an offending child on sighting his father approaching with a cane.

It was Onyanka. His hugeness aside, it was believed that Onyanka had a single bone in each of his elephantine arms. He could send a person to the grave with a blow if angered. He would forever be famed for using his bare hands to severe

the head of a daring man, who after delivering a message of war from his village, decided to explain the extent of the doom that was coming upon Umunda by removing the crown from the head of Igwe Nmbalu Nibali and throwing it on the ground.

“His blood was traced into your compound!” Onyanka yelled, still walking towards Ibekwe, who kept retreating. “Tell us, was it your other wife that did it? If you do not allow us to judge this matter in line with our custom and tradition, I will single-handedly take her to the evil forest right away and cut off her head...”

Fear seized Ibekwe after he was able to escape Onyanka’s wrath. He remained quiet, only staring at his Nnedi as if trying to glimpse her beautiful face for the last time.

“You told us that Uduma didn’t come to your house in the night?” The presiding elder went on with the proceedings. “It is better you say the truth here because if you continue to lie, we shall take you to *Ukaji* before whom you will swear with the *ikoro*...”

Ibekwe watched as Nnedi’s lips began to tremble like one struck with a terrible fever at the man’s mention of *Ukaji*. *Ukaji* was the god of justice. No one dared lie to him, especially while holding the *ikoro*, the ancient sword of justice. None of those who dared lie in the past ever returned home. *Ukaji* would strike them dead instantly, and their corpses would be abandoned on his altar as his food.

“We’re waiting for your answer,” the man reminded Nnedi, seeing how nervous she was.

“He...he came to my house,” she mumbled, stealing a glance at Ibekwe and then bringing her face down.

“What did he come to do in your house?”

“He came to rape me.”

“So you cut his manhood?”

“No.”

“You didn’t cut his manhood? What did you do to him?”

"This is what cut his manhood," she tried to reach for her wrapper, but she couldn't as her hands were tied to the tree.

"It's in your wrapper?"

"Yes."

Two men reached for the wrapper and loosed the spot where two edges were looped together. When they finally untied the knotted left edge, everyone's jaw dropped. *She cut his manhood with aguba!* A metal blade, sharp and glistening, used for haircuts.

"You mean this *aguba* cut his manhood?"

She nodded her affirmation.

"How?"

A momentary silence descended on the square as Nnedi began to narrate what happened between her and Uduma in the night. Ibekwe's heart was beating so loudly that one could hear it.

In the thick darkness that eclipsed the earth, a human-like image was ducking along as if hiding from the moonlight that was just wafting from the sky. Tip-toeing to the front of a hut, it halted as if studying the surroundings. After a short while, it shrank and then disappeared into a dark corner behind the hut.

Inside the hut, a woman lay on a bamboo bed, face up, her legs stretched. A piece of wrapper was girded over her breasts, stretching out to her thighs. Her girlish face shimmered on the naked flame, glowing from a kerosene lantern that stood on the wooden stool beside the bed. She had almost drifted away to sleep.

While she lay, a huge man whose head almost touched the roof appeared. Wearing nothing but a wrapper around his waist, he tiptoed, ensuring his bare feet made no sound on the red earth floor. Now, he stood over her, stared at her lustily, and beamed a wide smile. He then bent low and blew out the light, enthroning thick, blinding darkness.

"No! Please, leave me... Why do you all want to kill me because my husband is dead?" the woman was shouting and struggling in the darkness. The bamboo

bed creaked in protest, but it was too late for her.

As soon as he started, the man let out a loud scream. He jumped up, screaming and hopping about in the darkness. He ran out and continued shouting until his voice faded into the darkness.

Nnedi barely finished narrating the incident when the square was thrown into uproar again. Suddenly, the crowd descended on her, beating her and spitting at her. Some said she was a demon to have set a blade in her private part. She continued to proclaim her innocence, telling them how some men had been sneaking into her hut to force themselves on her since the death of her husband. She told them the countless times she had gone to their wives to ask them to warn their husbands, but instead of doing so, their wives would pour scorn on her, calling her a public toilet.

Instead of verifying her claims, the people scorned and abused her more and more. All they knew was that she took the life of a great man.

After the beating and scolding by the crowd, the elders ordered a group of boys to seize and lock her up until the next day, when Igwe Nmbalu Nibali would've returned from the burial of his in-law at Obelu.

Ibekwe went home feeling worthless and weak. Not only because he was about to lose his precious inheritance but also because Nnedi hadn't told him about the harassment she had been enduring from the men of Umunda. He felt things were that way between the two of them because he hadn't had any intimacy with her. If he could have his way, he would vent his anger on the tradition which prohibited him from sleeping with her until the expiration of the customary six-month period but permitted outsiders to do so. The first time he thought about the unfairness of the tradition to him, he wanted to defy it, but thought about the ultimate price for it and how the spirit of Obika and that of his forefathers would haunt him.

Ibekwe was a few steps into his compound when an idea struck him. A glimmer of hope flickered in his mind for the first time since Nnedi was found guilty. *Nnedi might still be saved.* He turned about and hurried away for urgent action.



Ibekwe decided to seek counsel from Odenga, another elder in the village. He was breathing heavily and sweating as he waited for the man to emerge from his hut. He wondered once again why Nnedi was not disposed to sharing things with him, even something like men sneaking into her hut to make passes at her or even to rape her. He considered how deep his love for her truly was and sighed.

Despite how protective and loving Ibekwe tried to be to Nnedi, she wept bitterly each time she remembered she would soon become his wife. Though he was a handsome man with enormous physical strength, she hated him for the manner in which he manhandled his other wife. A day would hardly pass without him beating Enika. Most often, he would strip her naked in the compound. Every woman has a private part, but Ibekwe made Enika's a public part. Everyone in the neighbourhood had seen her nakedness. Nnedi couldn't imagine spending the rest of her life like Enika, always crying and lamenting. That was why she did not tell him that the men were invading her privacy. If Ibekwe knew about it, he would have forced her to relocate to his hut.

In Umunda, the bride price paid on the head of a woman was her purchase price. Thus, when the husband of a woman died, she would still be the property of her late husband's family and could be taken to be a wife by any of his blood brothers in order of seniority. If the husband had no blood brother, a stepbrother would inherit her. She could only have the freedom to decide whether or not to marry her deceased husband's relative if she had a child for him, in which case, the child or children would be taken as the complete repayment of the bride price.

In Nnedi's case, she neither had a child for her late husband nor was she pregnant. He died a few months after their marriage. She wished her family could return the bride price paid on her head just to set her free, but that was not going to happen, as nothing was left of the bride price. The cow and the seven goats had been used to pay the bride price on her brother's wife. Her brother could not pay that after five years of taking a wife. By tradition, until he paid the bride price, all the children he had with his wife belonged to the wife's family or to whoever was the first to pay her bride price.

Odenga eventually came out to meet Ibekwe. He went back into his hut after

they exchanged pleasantries. The grass on the roof had decayed, causing rain to drop directly inside. The hut had been in that bad state for the last three years after his wife packed to her father's house with all her children.

Odenga came out again with two lobes of kola nut in his hand. He threw one lobe into his mouth and gave the other to Ibekwe, who held it and went on to tell him about Nnedi and the villagers.

"Why did you come to me?"

"You already know why I am here. I want you to help me save her life. If you will do this for me, I will give you anything you want. Just ask for anything."

Though he was not a well-to-do man, Odenga was one of the wisest of all the men in Umunda. He was famous for accurately predicting things to happen in the village, even many years ahead. The richest of men, including Uduma, came to seek counsel from him. He scarcely made himself available in public gatherings.

"If I heard you well, Ibekwe, you said you shall give me anything I ask for?"

What his visitor came for was a serious business. Every term of the agreement had to be confirmed.

Aside from the small farms he owned, defending people accused of serious crimes was how Odenga earned his living. He had never agreed to defend anyone and lost the case. That earned him the nickname *Ikpeama*, the undefeatable advocate, though he refused to bear the name, saying it portrayed arrogance.

"Yes. Just mention whatever you want." Ibekwe believed that the highest he would ask for would be a cow. That had been the highest price he charged in most serious cases like this one. Certainly, a cow wouldn't be a hard thing for Ibekwe to get. He had three cows. Two were his share out of his late father's flock after his burial rites had been fully performed. The other one was Obika's share, but it became his at Obika's death. Even if Odenga asked for two cows, he was ready to give them to him.

No one in Umunda lacked confidence in Odenga after seeing how he was able to save a young man on the very last day he was to be condemned to death for stealing a cow. The young man's father happily gave him the five goats and

a cow he had charged for the case without wasting time. That was two years ago. As soon as the cow and the goats were given to him, Odenga took them to his in-laws as the bride price for his wife. His in-laws had come and taken his wife together with all his children because Odenga hadn't paid her bride price. Though his wife refused to come back to him with the children after he had made the full payment, he was happy the children were his.

"When next are the elders sitting to judge the case?"

"They have just found her guilty," Ibekwe struggled to make his voice stable. "They will kill her tomorrow once Igwe returns from Obulu to pronounce sentence on her."

"Oh, they have already found her guilty?" Odenga asked with an air of surprise.

"Yes, at the village square. I told you, that's where I am coming from." Seeing Odenga's perturbed face, Ibekwe was greatly worried. He wished he had met Odenga earlier. His mind convinced him that it would be difficult for Odenga to do anything at that point.

"I can't tell you to give me this or that at this point, Ibekwe," Odenga heaved a sigh. "Let's see if I can save her first. If I succeed, I will then tell you what to give me. You are an honest man, and I hold you by your words."

Ibekwe became more worried than he was before coming to Odenga. Sweat began to stream down his forehead again. His hopelessness was now worse than when he had not thought of Odenga. For Odenga to have refused to mention his price, he believed all hope was lost.



The sun had just risen. The Umunda Village Square was brimming with people, adults, and children. Stripped completely naked, Nnedi was tied to a tree before the elders, each of whom wore their wrapper across one shoulder, leaving the other shoulder bare. The tall Igwe Nibali was in their midst. Ibekwe was deeply dejected and hardly able to fix a gaze on Nnedi, who was now the most disgusting thing to behold.

Igwe Nibali interrogated Nnedi to equip himself with first-hand information as the matter was opened by one of the elders. While the elders were rising one after the other to speak of how despicable Nnedi's action was and the ultimate punishment, Ibekwe was expecting Odenga to stand up and defend her. But he never did. Instead, he sat silently, resting his jaw on his left palm as if he was already mourning the beautiful woman who would be sent to her ancestors in a few minutes from that moment.

Igwe Nibali rose and saluted his people, "Umunda Kwenu!"

"Eeeeh!" the people echoed in unison.

"Kwezuenu!"

"Eeeeeeeeh!"

"I wasn't here yesterday when the Council of Elders judged this case and found her guilty of killing our great kinsman," Igwe Nibali began, "but from the answers she gave to the few questions I have asked, I can now declare that your position was not taken in error. It is in accordance with the customs our forefathers handed down to us..."

Ibekwe pressed his face into his open palm in a bid to hold back his nagging tears. He stared at Odenga, who had not said a word either in defence of or against Nnedi. He concluded that there was no hope that he would ever say a thing again. After all, it was already too late for anyone to say something, as the Igwe was now passing his judgment.

"She put an *aguba* in her body so that anyone who tried to sleep with her would be injured and bleed to death. Just as she wanted, Uduma bled to death. She knowingly killed him..." He looked from one side of the square to the other as the people chorused their support. "Her only defence was that Uduma and many other persons whose names she has refused to mention had been molesting her every night. That can never be enough reason to kill someone in Umunda. We have a Council of Elders that resolves disputes and punishes the offending party. She did not at any point report them to the Council of Elders..." He looked at Nnedi and turned to the people. "She has desecrated our land, and it must be cleansed if only we want our ancestors to spare our

lives... The punishment for her crime is death, and as the representative of our ancestors in this village, I pronounce that she must die.”

”Iseseeeeh!” the crowd echoed in unison.

Odenga rose and cleared his throat. It was so loud that all the elders turned to look at him. He hit his walking stick noisily on the ground twice and began to walk away. Everyone stared at him in astonishment. By the time he had walked out of the midst of the elders, he stopped and turned to them. “We have agreed to kill her today; we shall kill all those who have *Ukpala* in their farms tomorrow.” He turned once again and walked home without looking back.

As soon as his words dissolved into the air, silence descended on the crowd. The elders stared at one another. Almost all of them, including the Igwe, had *Ukpala* in their farms, which killed anyone who stole from them. None of them had ever been questioned about it. Nnedi’s husband was killed by the *Ukpala* that Uduma hoisted on his farm.

After locking eyes with one another momentarily, the elders began to walk away, one by one, until Igwe Nibali was the only elder left in the midst of the crowd. He raised his face to the woman tied to the tree and then lowered it. “Untie her and let her go,” he ordered the young men standing in readiness for her execution. He stood up and walked away with a heart gutted by shame. It was his first time withdrawing his pronouncement since he ascended the throne.



Ibekwe arranged a visit to Odenga with wild excitement. He was accompanied by Nnedi and Orikpa, an old man from his kindred. They carried with them two kegs of palm wine, tobacco, and some kola nuts. They met Odenga, who was obviously waiting for them. There were three other elders in Odenga’s compound when they arrived.

After exchanging pleasantries, Ibekwe presented the gifts to Odenga. “I am so happy for what you did,” he began. “Words are not enough to thank you. I have come for you to mention your price as we agreed.”

Odenga cleared his throat and thanked him for living true to his words. "You told me to ask for anything, and you shall give it to me. But looking at the critical nature of the case, I was more concerned with how to save her. Now she is here alive and well, and if I am asking for a reward, I would be happy to do so."

Everyone nodded to acknowledge the value of Odenga's intervention and how considerate he was in the face of Ibekwe's desperate situation. Nnedi's face was expressionless. She merely watched and listened.

"You did well, Odenga," said Orikpa. "Our people say that a person whose house is burning does not go hunting rats. We are grateful to you."

"Let's start sharing the wine now that it is still hot," Odenga said, then went into his hut. He came out with a horn. "Share the drink," he said, shifting the kegs to Mbata, one of the men who were with him to receive his guests.

Mbata took up one of the kegs onto his left thigh and began to serve from it with the horn. The first pour went to Ibekwe, who must be the first to taste his own wine. The second went to Okugo, one of the men who was with Odenga to receive the guests, the oldest man among them. When Ibekwe was handed his second round of the wine, he sipped a little and then offered it to Nnedi, but she calmly turned it down.

When Mbata had emptied the first keg and offered Odenga the first horn from the second keg, Odenga held it and began to speak. "Ibekwe, now I will tell you my reward for saving the life of Nnedi."

"You are the one holding us, Odenga. Just mention your price. My kinsmen will assist me if it is something I cannot afford on my own."

"It isn't something much. I want you to give me Nnedi for a wife."

"What?" Ibekwe sprang to his feet, staring furiously at Odenga.

"You heard me, and I think everyone here heard me, too. Give me Nnedi as a wife. I am not asking for a cow or a horse. I am asking for what will not cost you anything."

"You are asking for what is not possible! How can you look me in the face and ask me to give you my wife?"

"Your late brother's wife, Ibekwe. Not your wife."

"She will be my wife three months from now, according to our customs."

"Remember, we had an agreement. You came here crying and told me you would give me anything I asked for. I held you by your words. Why do you now find it hard to keep your promise?"

Ibekwe began to understand why Odenga refused to mention his price earlier. If he had mentioned it, not only would he have rejected the deal, he would have fought Odenga physically.

"Where has it ever been heard that a man gifted his wife to another man?"

"You are not gifting her to me!" Odenga yelled. "And like I said, she is not your wife. If she can give back the goats and the cow your brother paid as her bride price, she will be free to marry any man she likes..."

While the two men wrangled unendingly, the four men intervened, each tending to support Odenga's position. Ibekwe had made an undertaking that he would give Odenga whatever he asked for.

While the elders were taking turns to speak on the matter, Odenga was strategizing on how to handle a worst-case scenario. He thought about asking for two cows—perhaps more—along with goats and other items needed to repay Nnedi's bride price, intending to use them for the payment himself. He had summed up the story Ibekwe told him and concluded that the woman didn't love Ibekwe.

Though Odenga was poorer, deep in her heart, Nnedi preferred him to Ibekwe. She wished the dispute would be resolved in Odenga's favour. She wouldn't imagine her life with Ibekwe, a man whose greatest pleasure was in kicking and punching his wife. A life with such a man would send her to the grave before her time.

The argument continued to escalate to the point that some people in the neighbourhood began to gather. Nnedi moved as though she was going to ease herself. A few moments later, she returned with her belongings. Ibekwe gaped at her in confusion. Odenga and the elders looked more confused as they stared at her.

“I have come to live with Elder Odenga,” she said quietly. I can’t marry you.” She looked at Odenga. “Pay back my bride price to them, and let me live with you instead.”

Ibekwe sauntered out of their midst. They wondered where he was going. Odenga was sure that Ibekwe would not take the matter up to the Council of Elders, for he had insulted them and accused them of trying to kill Nnedi because of lust and jealousy. After waiting in vain for Ibekwe’s return, Orikpa decided to leave. The other men continued to wait, but Ibekwe never came back. They could only wonder what he planned to do next.

The Political Covenant

Titus Odhiambo Otila

The sweltering heat of 1963 felt in Korimba Republic, erroneously called Korimba Colony during its occupation by the British, heralded her independence as a new nation. As opposed to immediately curing years of endemic repression suffered by its populace, Korimba's freedom marked an ambiguous start when citizens realised how hard self-rule is. Even when it became an independent state, the ghosts of colonialism haunted Korimba's corridors of power. The Korimba people used to own their land, but the British colonisers then dominated them. Their land was very fertile, and it yielded good crops, but colonisers took everything they worked for and shipped it to their countries. The British colonisers oppressed the indigenous people by sowing discord among them, which made them fear and obey them.

Ramogi was among the leading figures in Korimba Colony. His territory was Nyancha Village. Ramogi had some influence because he was a chief. This power protected him from the greatest harm associated with colonial exploitation.

However, his son Dinga chose a different way since the light that came with going to school inspired him. Dinga's quest for knowledge set him apart from his fellow tribesmen and gave him something invaluable—an ability to both read and write. It was from this point onwards that he became more conscious of the wrongs that were committed against his community. After his father stepped down, he did not want to just sit and watch anymore once he became headman. He resolved to challenge the status quo and decided to resist the shackles of colonial oppression.

Ramogi was deeply rooted in acquiescence traditions. He looked at his son's defiance with contempt. He viewed education as an instrument for upward mobility in the context of the colonial hierarchy rather than as a force of change. He advised Dinga to avoid rocking the boat and asked him to accept any privileges that came their way from the colonial administration. Nonetheless, Dinga paid no heed to his father's warning and proceeded. He formed alliances with kindred spirits across villages. From Gucha to Kamba, Membu to Kakema, chiefs united in defiance, pooling their resources and rallying their people for the impending struggle.

The British colonisers were cornered by pressing issues to call a conference of sorts. They wanted to stamp out defiance as quickly as possible in the meeting that followed. Despite this, Dinga and other rebel chiefs shunned the call, preferring instead to resist rather than bow. Their failure to appear at the conclave resulted in a fatal altercation within Nyancha Village. The father and his child, each with his own ideology, had different opinions on the way forward, disagreeing. Ramogi, who represented traditional practices, urged Dinga to stop following reckless behaviour. He also told him to be aware of the consequences due to colonisation. Nevertheless, Dinga felt a deep bitterness within him but refused to give up. He promised to push on until victory was achieved.

One evening, Dinga and his father found themselves quarrelling. During this argument, Ramogi, laden with frustration and fear, made utterances that amounted to condemnation. He cast a spell on his own blood. "I curse you, Dinga," he declared, his voice trembling with anger and sorrow. "You shall never wear the mantle of *Ruoth*, not in this lifetime nor the next. The fruits of leadership shall wither in your grasp, denied by the very blood that flows through your veins."

In spite of his father's curse, Dinga did not give up on his quest for justice. Little did he know destiny was already in motion. And that night in Nyancha village, darkness enveloped everything, then tragedy struck mercilessly. British boots echoed through the calm of the night, it was like a storm that brought violence and bloodshed. Ramogi stood as a lone sentinel against the tide of colonial aggression, and he was finally defeated. He became a casualty of his own convictions. Dinga had not slept at home that night. It was only the next morning that he learned of his father's death. He was stricken by grief and consumed by guilt. Dinga vowed to atone for his failure to protect the ones he loved. Ramogi's death set the stage for a journey fraught with peril and redemption.



Chief Ramogi's death news quickly spread like fire around Korimba Republic, causing fury and a strong will in the oppressed to fight back for their land and their own selves' pride. The warriors from Gucha, Kamba, Membu and Kake-ma joined Nyancha fighters. The spirit of defiance consumed them all. Hence, the previously scattered resistance group turned out to be a great power that moved together to achieve a given goal. The Korimba fighters used guerrilla tactics, making them phantoms at night. They terrorised their colonisers while hiding in thick forests and dark bushes. They were thus invisible and invincible at the same time. However, their enemies responded to their menace with more sophisticated weapons. In spite of all these efforts, many fighters were arrested and detained, while others met a grim fate, falling to the colonisers' bullets.

Dinga, now the de facto leader after Jomo's arrest, spearheaded the rebellion with unwavering resolve. His leadership served as both a ray of hope and an invocation to those who felt oppressed. The fight was arduous and costly, but they remained strong in spirit. The colonisers were eventually expelled after years of fighting, a victory for which Dinga deserves all the credit. The new Korumba Republic was a product of the struggle against oppressors. After the dust settled and euphoria subsided, the people of Korumba flocked to Dinga so that he could help them. They wanted Dinga to take the mantle of *Ruoth*, but he was unsure. The words of his father's curse lingered in his mind, a haunting

reminder of the past. Instead, Dinga chose to wait for Jomo and other detained leaders to be released before making any decisions about leadership.

Dinga made a surprising announcement to the people of Korumba as they eagerly awaited the coronation of their hero in a grand ceremony. He handed over to Jomo, the very man who had shared the struggle for liberation, the instruments of power. This act of selflessness would bewilder many people, though Dinga, weighed down by the curse and the promise he had made to his father, had his reasons. In a secret meeting, Dinga and Jomo entered into a political covenant, a pact inseparable from mystery. According to the terms, Jomo would have the title of *Ruoth*, but fifty per cent of the advantages and honour accompanying the position would go to Dinga. In return, Dinga made a solemn promise that none of his children or lineage would ever contend for that seat or compete against Jomo's progeny. It was a deal that could never be reversed; it was signed with blood and could not be broken at any cost.

Dinga's son, Tinga, was incensed by this agreement. He considered his father's decision as a betrayal of the very ideals they had fought for. He saw it as an act of cowardice, a surrender to the chains of subservience. Father and son tensions mounted, much resembling the generational conflict that once tore Dinga and Ramogi asunder.

"You are a weak man, Father," Tinga spat with contempt evident in his speech tone. "You humble yourself before Jomo like a dog for his leftover powers scraps. What a shame to our family name!"

Dinga's eyes had lost their former fierce look. They now looked tired and despondent. "You don't get it Tinga, this is our only chance for peace and unity, even if that means putting our pride aside," he said sadly.

Tinga, his disappointment evident, retorted, "No peace can exist without human dignity." His eyes burned with frustration. "I will prove you wrong. I will become the *Ruoth* of Korumba Republic and break this chain of cowardice you have created in our family."

Though pained by his son's words, Dinga remained resolute. "You may try, Tinga. But remember this—no one in our lineage will hold that title. The curse of Ramogi and the covenant with Jomo bind us. You will fail, just as I have."

Tinga's eyes blazed with determination. "We shall see, Father. We shall see!"

It was on this day that the seeds of a new conflict were sown as Tinga set out to defy his father's curse and the shadowy covenant that loomed over his family's destiny. The struggle for power became an issue as the legacy of Dinga and the spirit of Ramogi clashed in a battle of wills and destinies.



The citizens of Korumba Republic watched over and preserved the vibrant spirit of their land. However, there was a cloud of darkness hanging above the land. Dinga finally died, having bequeathed a heritage of rebelliousness and unaccomplished dreams. The leadership had now moved to his son Tinga, who assumed the chieftainship in Nyancha Village. Two years later, Korumba residents were preparing to choose a new *Ruoth* in a crucial election. Tinga wanted this much-coveted position, which is why he decided to contest for it. As a novice in matters of politics, he encountered many problems.

The Nyancha people embraced him as their leader, and he had the courage to withstand the difficulties of the election contest. Tinga's courage was increased by the fact that his fellow villagers of Nyancha referred to him as their 'kingpin.' They believed he would deliver them from their distressing situation; even at that time, he was unflinchingly loyal to them.

"Tinga, you can't give up," pleaded *Okil Kamaloka* Orege, Tinga's closest advisor. "Nyancha people believe in you. You are their beacon in these dark days."

"I know that too well, Orege," Tinga replied, his voice tinged with determination.

Mzee Koi imposed restrictions that were making it hard for them to move forward with their plans. Orege, who had wisdom shining from his eyes, responded, "Perseverance!" "The more obstacles we overcome, the more resolute we become. We must outsmart him by coming up with different approaches to reach out to the population."

The political arena was harsh and unforgiving. The existing *Ruoth*, Mzee Koi, restricted politically related matters so much that Tinga could hardly make any

progress. The reigning oppressive regime used any means to retain its authority. Tinga and his supporters had lots of challenges to deal with as they tried to keep forging ahead, but their plans were always being looked into, although they managed to do so successfully at times.

On one particular night, Tinga, with his fellow men, found themselves seated inside a poorly illuminated chamber discussing what they would be doing next when suddenly someone kicked the door. Soldiers stormed in, arresting Tinga once again. As they pulled him outside, he shouted to his colleagues: "Keep up the fight! Never let them put us down!" In less than two weeks, Tinga learnt about his mother's death, which made him feel dejected. He couldn't attend her funeral. Tinga sat in the prison cell where he was being held captive, pain etched across his face. "They won't even let me bury my own mother," he whispered to himself, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Eventually, Election Day dawned against all odds, and the residents of Korumba turned out in large numbers to participate. The mood was tense with hope and expectation, but it was a great disappointment for Tinga and his supporters when he lost the elections. The election results sent shock waves across Nyancha Village.

"I can't believe it," Tinga muttered, staring at the results in disbelief. "After everything we've endured, they still chose Koi," he said, looking at Orege, who was disappointed too. However, he decided to be strong for the sake of his friend.

"Tinga, we fought bravely," Orege consoled him. "This is not the end. It's merely a setback. We will organise ourselves and come back stronger."

Tinga was seriously affected by the loss; it saddened his soul and darkened his dream. It was big, and it forced him to quit politics for some time. He sought comfort from his family and spent quality time with Dina, his young wife, and their children. The break was important for Tinga as he used it to recover and reflect on his journey.

One evening, as Tinga watched his children play, Dina approached him. "You did your best, Tinga," she said softly, placing a hand on his shoulder. "But the fight isn't over. Our people still need you," Dina said, looking him straight in his eyes.

“I know, Dina,” Tinga replied, his voice heavy with determination. “I won’t let my father’s curse or the covenant hold me back. I will find a way to break free and lead our people to a brighter future.”

In the quiet moments, surrounded by the warmth of his family, Tinga began to formulate a new plan. He knew that he still had a long way to go. He made up his mind to let go of the political pact and his father’s curse, which kept him in bondage. In the process of watching his children play, a renewed sense of purpose filled his heart. Tinga resolved that the past should not determine his future. With a heart full of hope and a mind sharpened by experience, he decided it was time to get back into politics. He was ready to make his own way; he was determined to break free from the chains of the past and bring Korumba Republic to a brighter future. He was ready to take residents of Korumba Republic to the Promised Land: ‘Cannan.’



Tinga was deeply affected by the defeat of his first bid, and it ended up hanging over him like a shadow. As a result, he decided not to vie for a seat in the next election and instead supported Mzee Baki. Mzee Baki was highly successful in winning this election because of his popularity that was based on Tinga as well as his own personal charm. During his five-year tenure as *Ruoth*, he ensured that Korumba Republic was pointing in the right direction in spite of the challenges it faced.

The end of the five-year term marked newfound motivation in Tinga, who made up his mind to run for the same position he had previously contested against Mzee Baki, the man he had once supported. Having had ten years to think about it, Tinga was more than ready. Unlike before, his followers were now spread across different villages, not just Nyancha. He also had the support of his friend *Okil Kamaloka* Orege, who usually gave important ideas and all the legal assistance he required.

Tinga’s campaign had picked up pace powered by the spirit and optimism of its people while Election Day was drawing closer. Anticipation overshadowed the atmosphere.

“This is our moment, Tinga. We’ve prepared well. The people are with us,” Orege said, hope shining in his eyes.

“I can feel it, Orege,” Tinga replied, gripping his friend’s shoulder. “We will not falter this time.”

The long-awaited day finally arrived, and the citizens of Korumba Republic turned out in huge numbers to vote. The air was charged with tension, full of hope, chants, and songs for change. At first, when votes were counted, it seemed like Tinga would win. On hearing this, one of his assistants cried out excitedly, “We’re winning!” but there was fear in his voice.

“We have to be careful,” warned Orege, “anything is possible.”

The tranquillity of the dusk vanished, and there was a hidden malevolence. In the middle of the night, when everyone was deep in sleep, people were awakened by the noise of the election results announcement. The margin was narrow, hence making it a surprising win for an old man, Mzee Baki.

“This is unacceptable!” Tinga roared, his frustration palpable. “They’ve tampered with the results. We can’t let this stand.” Tinga’s supporters echoed his sentiments, deeming the last-minute activities as malicious and unfair. Widespread unrest began after the announcement. Clashes between villages that supported different candidates escalated into chaos and bloodshed. “Peace must prevail. We will seek justice,” Tinga declared to his supporters.

The clashes escalated, resulting in numerous deaths and the destruction of property. Many individuals left their homes to escape from the violence. It got worse until the other republics in Rika Union had to step in for solidarity. An intervention with a mediator’s approach in addressing the dispute involving Mzee Baki and Tinga was carried out. Representatives from the Rika Union facilitated the discussions, aiming to restore peace in Korumba Republic. “Both of you must compromise for the sake of your people,” one of the mediators urged. “Korumba needs unity, not division.” After intense negotiations, it was agreed that no one had won the election. Instead, a fifty-fifty power-sharing arrangement was established.

Mzee Baki retained the title of *Ruoth*, while Tinga was appointed as *Jasir-Ruoth*. The agreement settled the feud that existed in Korumba Republic, ushering in a peace era thereafter.

“Let’s take this country together,” Tinga said, shaking hands with Mzee Baki, “For the good of our people.”

Mzee Baki solidly gripped Tinga’s hand. “For Korumba Republic.”

The joint leadership of the two became the most admired one in Korumba. The people thrived due to a myriad of initiatives like free primary education while developments took centre stage. The future of Korumba Republic shone brightly under their united leadership, a testament to the power of compromise and cooperation.

Tinga glanced at the burgeoning republic and felt a sense of satisfaction. “We’ve done it, Orege,” he said with a smile. “This has proven that neither ordeals can defeat persistence and unity,” he added.

“For sure, Tinga,” Orege responded, with an obvious pride in his voice. “This marks only the inception of a promising tomorrow for Korumba Republic.”

The legacy of their partnership would be remembered for generations, a beacon of hope and resilience in the heart of Korumba’s history.



Tinga was a highly motivated man. He still hoped to become a *Ruoth*, regardless of the fact that his first two trials were unsuccessful. However, the loss only rekindled his determination, and he was not saddened by the third and fourth trials as well. The word of Nyatta, son of Jomo, who was the current *Ruoth*, gave him hope as he prepared for his final, fifth trial. His former protégé, Rono, who he had once mentored was this time his primary challenger. Tinga was well aware of what his former protégé was capable of. All over the corners of Korumba Republic, you could hear him saying, “It is my last bullet.” A clear indication that he was determined and desperate to clinch this opportunity at all costs.

“The endorsement by Nyatta is worth much, however, we must not overlook Rono,” Orege emphasized as they met to discuss strategies. “We have to be alert,” he added.

"I hear you Orege," Tinga responded while his eyes bore an intense gaze. "This is our moment, and we shall search every nook and cranny to make it happen". He had the whole countryside behind him.

The political campaign period was tough, marked by countless rallies, speeches, and heart-searching pleas for votes. As election day approached, suspicions grew amid unsettling incidents.

"Have you heard about those election materials that were found with some foreigners?" reported Wanjiku, the campaign assistant.

"Yes, it's quite concerning," responded Tinga. "We need to secure the credibility of this election." Rumours swirled about foreign interference.

In spite of the hurdles, the election went on as scheduled. Tinga emerged victorious after the votes were counted. However, before making the results public, protocol dictated that Nyatta be the first person to know. Upon realising the outcome, Nyatta summoned Tinga to his office.

"Tinga, you made it, congratulations. But we need to talk," Nyatta started, his tone heavy and serious. Tinga sensed it was a very serious talk.

"Nyatta, what's the problem?" Tinga asked worriedly because he could read something was wrong.

"Korumba Republic is in deep economic trouble," Nyatta revealed. "It will take at least five years before it stabilizes. Should you grab the position right away, you will have stiff challenges that might make you the worst *Ruoth* ever."

Tinga thought quietly about what he had been told. Nyatta went on in a kind voice, "In my view, you'd better forget it this time. It wouldn't be worth it for this position to spoil your reputation."

Tinga then felt relieved of something terrible because of what Nyatta had said. "I am grateful for your candour, Nyatta," he said.

Tinga and Nyatta planned to negotiate with Rono, who badly wanted the position. During a closed-door meeting, Tinga approached Rono with the proposal.

"Rono, I have something to tell you," Tinga began.

“What is it?” Rono inquired cautiously and with interest.

“You will be declared the winner,” said Tinga. “However, you must pay me a considerable sum every month.”

To maintain appearances, Tinga planned to contest the results in court, but the case would ultimately be dismissed, and Rono would be officially declared the winner. Rono’s eyes lit up with ambition.

“Agreed,” he replied.

The entire process was handled so tactfully that even Tinga’s closest supporters remained unaware of the arrangement.

The deal was sealed. On the day of the announcement, Rono was declared the winner. Tinga’s supporters were outraged, but Tinga played his part, contesting the results in court.

“Why are you doing this, Tinga?” Orege asked, puzzled by his friend’s actions.

“It’s for the greater good,” Tinga replied. “We need stability more than ever.”

The court dismissed the case, citing insufficient evidence. Disappointed as they were, Tinga’s supporters slowly accepted the outcome. They eventually came to see the truth in the ancient whispers of a curse upon Tinga’s bloodline.

“Could it be true?” wondered one villager. “Perhaps Tinga was not destined for the position of *Ruoth*.”

And life in Korumba Republic went on. Tinga, though not holding the title, found solace in knowing he had acted in the best interest of his supporters. He did not want to fail, especially after all those attempts. Tinga’s journey was far from over, but for now, he embraced the role he had chosen and found peace in the sacrifices made for the greater good.



Tinga’s decision to step down from Korumba politics elicited mixed reactions. Some faulted him for isolating himself from the Korumba Republic, while others hailed his choice as being the best due to what they termed a lack of recog-

dition by the people. The move that was seen to be risky caught the attention of many, not only in Korumba but also in the Rika Union.

“Have you heard?” Orege said, rushing into Tinga’s home one afternoon. “Your name has been proposed for the position of chairperson of the Rika Union.”

Tinga looked up from his writing, surprised. “The Rika Union? But why me?”

“Your leadership qualities are known far and wide,” Orege replied with a grin. “It’s a significant opportunity, Tinga.”

The proposal necessitated Tinga’s resignation from Korumba Republic’s politics. The rules of the Rika Union were clear: no member could engage in their home republic’s politics while serving the union. As Tinga prepared to leave, Rono’s government began to unravel. Within two years, dissatisfaction grew among the residents due to the high cost of living and rampant mismanagement of funds. Protests erupted, led by the energetic Generation Z. “We can’t keep silent anymore,” shouted a young protester. “We need change now!” The protests were relentless, and their impact was undeniable. Government officials, once arrogant, were forced to confront the reality of their failures. Throughout this turmoil, Tinga remained silent, bound by the rules of the Rika Union.

The election for the Chairperson of the Rika Union took place after eight months. Representatives from fifty-five republics gathered, and there was excitement all around. “We need a leader who can unite us,” one delegate said. “And that leader is Tinga.” The election ended with Tinga winning by a big margin. As he was sworn in, the weight of his new role settled on his shoulders. “I, Tinga, solemnly swear to uphold the principles of the Rika Union and to serve its people with integrity and dedication.” The position of Chairperson of the Rika Union was akin to being the leader of all the *Ruothi* across the member republics. Tinga approached his new role with the same fervour and dedication he had shown throughout his life.

Through his strong leadership, Tinga greatly developed Rika, building extensive infrastructure across the republics, implementing educational reforms, and stabilizing economic policies in the region.

“Tinga, your vision is transforming Rika,” an aide remarked during a meeting.

“It’s not just my vision,” Tinga replied. “It’s the collective will of our people.”

Years later, as his term came to an end, Tinga reflected on his journey. From the struggles in Korumba to the heights of the Rika Union, he had remained steadfast in his commitment to service.

“You’ve done well, Tinga,” Orege said during a visit. “Korumba Republic and the entire Rika Union owe you a debt of gratitude.”

“It’s been an honour,” Tinga responded. “To serve, to lead, and to witness the resilience of our people.”

As he stepped down, Tinga left behind a legacy of unity, development, and unwavering dedication. His journey, marked by trials and triumphs, had carved a path for future generations to follow. Therefore, the story of Tinga, the resilient leader who never gave up, became a beacon of hope and perseverance for all who dared to dream and strive for a better tomorrow. He managed to take his people to the Promised Land: ‘Canaan.’



The Street Artist

Hanifah Kaka

It was just another day, neither beautiful nor ugly, but the same old routine. I woke up to the sound of a rooster crowing, stirred in my sleep, and accidentally pulled off the clothing hanging over the window in lieu of a curtain, which we couldn't afford. The sunlight reflected through the glass louvres, some of which were already missing from my younger brother's frolicking. I squinted my eyes as I got up and replaced the clothing. I kicked my little brother to wake him up, and he responded with his usual phrase, "Ow! Fish head." Then I rolled him off the mat before folding it and putting it in place. We both went to fetch water from the nearby tank, where all the neighbours queued to fetch from the four taps linked to the tank.

I brought my sketchpad with me and sat in my position in the queue, legs folded into each other. I began doing what I loved the most—drawing. It was the one thing I was mostly good at, but my mother didn't allow me to do it because she thought it wasn't yielding any results. We were a poor family of

four—my brother and our parents. Sometimes, Grandma came to live with us from her village, adding more mouths to feed. A few years ago, I announced my love for art. I had been doing it stealthily in the previous years because I wasn't confident. I needed money to go to art school to hone my skills, but my parents declined due to our current hardship. Bola and I would help my mother hawk her cooking after school to make some extra money.

"Eiii, Biola is at it again!" One woman standing behind me glanced in awe as I drew the surrounding area. I was a proficient artist who made drawings seem like photographs.

"This talent must not go to waste, o; tell your parents now," the man in the queue in front of me said. "They must send you to that school; you'll just be a big artist."

Those words stung my heart. My dream was to become a renowned artist and be remembered for my works even after I died. I had handwritten letters drafted to a famous painter my generation had never met—Leonardo Da Vinci. In these letters, I shared my dreams and aspirations, attaching some of my drawings. Afterwards, I buried them deep into the ground, hoping he would somehow acknowledge me and push me toward stardom from above.

SLAP! I stumbled from my rocking position on the floor, but I clutched my sketchpad to avoid any dirt on it. Using my other hand, I clutched my already crimsoned cheek and looked up to see the livid face of my mother. "You dim-wit! Look at the time. Shouldn't you be getting to school by now?" She hissed, not caring about the people watching. She would slap me at the same time every day for being late because of my art when, in fact, I was just waiting my turn.

"Mama Biola, small, small now," a foolish woman said, earning me a glare from my mother, which meant she would deal with me later. Soon, it was my turn, and I fetched all six buckets we brought along. Tucking my sketchpad into my wrapper, I carried two buckets while my mother and brother carried the rest as we walked home.



Even though my mother said my drawings were futile, I still found ways to make money from them. During school hours, students (mostly girls) would crowd around my desk requesting drawings of themselves, and I would charge each one 500 naira. If I had to be precise with the drawing, I charged an extra 1000 naira. Valentine's Day was usually fun for me because boys would chase me to draw portraits of their girlfriends. I would exploit them a little and make about 5000 naira from each work.

My mother knew about this, but she still refused to acknowledge it because it brought meagre sums. Yet, I was the first person she would come to for money when they needed it at home.

"What's going on here?" The authoritative voice of our teacher sent everyone scrambling back to their seats. After the murmurs died and everything was back in place, he gestured towards the door, making us wonder. "Come in."

A young, petite girl walked in, and had I been a boy, I would have fallen in love instantly. She had dark blue eyes; one could have mistaken her for a water goddess, and she was fair in complexion—the ultimate attraction for any guy.

"This is Yejide," our teacher said. "She is a transfer student. Please be kind."

Lucky for me, he showed her to one of the empty seats in class, which was next to me. I stifled a squeal, an iota of excitement I would have shown for having a new specimen to draw. After the teacher left the class, I kept stealing glances at the girl who busied herself with her books. With each glance I stole, I drew her stealthily on my sketchpad, which I hid away in a textbook.

"It's okay." Her voice melted what was holding me back from falling in love. It was melodious: I could almost taste it. "You can continue."

"W-what?" I squirmed in my seat, trying to decipher what she meant—as if I wasn't drooling over her seconds ago. She smiled and steadied herself gallantly as if she felt pride knowing I liked her. *Hello. I'm not that much of a fan!*

"You can continue drawing me." She looked up at me, giving me time to look deep into her eyes. It was endearing.

"I...em...thank you," I muttered, turned my chair to face her, and retrieved my sketchpad from its hiding place. She turned her chair to face me, giving me a

proper view of all her features. I gulped loudly, and a small chuckle escaped from her.

Everything after that went silent as I focused on the task at hand—recreating the goddess sitting right across from me. I wanted to impress her, and I wanted her to love it. But somehow, along the line, I got distracted by looking at her that I made a mistake, which made me almost want to tear up the entire page.

“I can’t wait to see what you got.” Yejide grinned, and I couldn’t help but wonder how her teeth were so shiny and white.

“Don’t you eat chocolates?” I asked curiously.

“What do you mean?”

I flashed my teeth, displaying the half-yellow hue they had. I closed my mouth immediately after seeing what looked like an exasperated expression on her face.

“Oh.” She smiled, but something about it felt fake. “No, I don’t.”

After minutes of silence, she said, “Are you done? Can I see?”

I couldn’t help but wonder why she was being cold. *Am I now a dirty girl to her?*

Hesitantly, I tore her sketch from the pad and handed it to her. Normally, I would have charged her like I did the other students, but the memory of my ‘dirty’ teeth still had me too embarrassed to say a word — just in case she thought I had bad breath.

“Hmm” was all I heard her muttering before tucking away the sketch in her bag. She wasn’t impressed with my drawing and no thanks to the stupid mistake I made. Just then, a teacher walked into the class, and we all rose to greet him. Indeed, I was going to have a long, bad day.

The following day at school turned out to be a life-changing one for me. Yejide informed me that her dad and uncle wanted to meet me after school, leaving me quite surprised. I couldn’t help but wonder why they wanted to see me. A part of me hoped that it was because Yejide had liked me and wanted to introduce me to her family. However, another part of me was sceptical and thought it might be about the bad drawing I had made.

Throughout the day, I felt nervous and couldn’t concentrate as I eagerly antic-

ipated the end of the school day. During one of our classes, Yejide noticed my unease and reached out to squeeze my knee, sending a jolt of electricity through my body. She reassured me that there was nothing to worry about.



My heart raced with fear when Yejide led me to the back of the school compound after class, where a lone jeep was parked. I wondered if I was about to be kidnapped. Instinctively, I tore a piece of my uniform and threw it on the floor where anyone could find it.

We approached the car, and Yejide opened the door for me to sit in the back seat where a grumpy man sat. She sat in the passenger's seat and fist-bumped the man in the driver's seat.

"Hello, Uncle," she said.

"How are you, princess?" he replied.

She nodded and turned to look at us in the back. "Hello, Dad."

The grumpy man gave her a fist bump and a smile, which disappeared when he turned to me. "So, you're Biola?" he asked.

"Y-yes, sir."

Yejide's uncle let out a low chuckle. "Don't be nervous. We don't bite."

Her dad reached into his suit, and I swallowed, afraid he might pull out a gun. But my breath steadied when he produced a folded paper that looked like a piece of my sketchbook. Unfolding it, I realised it was the sketch I made of Yejide. "I suppose you drew this?" he asked.

"Y-yes, sir," I replied quickly, bracing myself for criticism.

Yejide's uncle spoke up. "I am a very talented artist and have a gallery of my own. We were in the middle of a recruitment process when Yeji showed us this drawing."

"Fantastic," Yejide's dad said, surprising me. "We love your drawing."

"Sir?" I blinked twice to be sure I wasn't deaf.

“We’re interested in hiring you,” Yejide’s uncle said. “We’ll sponsor you to art school, where you’ll hone your skills and make portraits that will earn you big money.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. “YES!” I squealed, earning a guffaw from the men.

“But you’ll have to prove your worth first,” Yejide’s dad said, his jaw squared.

“I...I don’t understand.” Scepticism crept into my voice.

“They believe this is just a sketch and want to be sure you can draw,” Yejide clarified.

“Will you be free to come by this weekend to make a drawing?” Uncle Kayode asked. “Yejide will send you the address.”

“Yes, sir,” I said, although I was sceptical about my abilities.

“No!” my mother bawled when I told her the news.

“But, Mummy...”

“Did I not tell you to focus on school and stop with this your *yeje* drawings? Do you know how many times your teacher called me? Have you seen your report cards for the last two terms?”

“But Mama, I came in third position. It’s still fair,” I said in my defence.

“If you dropped the art, you could have come in first,” my father said, adding fuel to the fire.

“Abi, o. First position dey bring hundred thousand naira home. You’re bringing what?” My mother hissed.

“Twenty thousand!” Bola chipped in, earning a glare from me.

“Shebi, I bring about fifty thousand monthly from my street drawings. Shebi that will add to the twenty thousand?” I cried. I did everything right in the house. Did chores, did quite well in school, and all I wanted was to pursue my dream, which I still tried hard to do but was withheld by my parents.

“Tell me why you want to work with them?” my father said quite rationally.

“You don’t even know them.”

“Then you can follow me the day I’m going,” I sighed. “So, you’ll get to know them.”

The conversation ended in silence, but I hoped to get a chance to bring my family out of the trenches with my passion for art.



The following Saturday afternoon, my father accompanied me to the Badmus’ house after my mother expressed her anger towards my love for art. Despite my pleading, she believed I should be doing something more useful. However, my father promised to deal with me if anything went wrong, as I had previously fallen victim to fake recruiters.

Upon arrival, the Badmus family offered us refreshments as my father tried to get to know them. He whispered to me, “God saved you,” which helped ease my nerves.

Uncle Kayode then brought out a large drawing pad, pencils, and other materials and set up a stool for me. Mr. Badmus, Yejide’s father, sat in front of me, and I knew I had a tough task ahead of me.

“He is your muse and very hard to impress,” Uncle Kayode stated. “Draw him.”

My father gave me a patas I began to draw. I took a large gulp of the sweet orange juice they offered me and focused on the task at hand.

As I began to draw, I was dubious, but over time, I developed a love for the process, and I believe my father did too. His face creased an expression I had never seen before—regret, perhaps because it was his first time seeing me do what I loved. Mr. Badmus did not smile during the drawing process, and I was scared I would not impress him, but the way he hugged me tightly after, made my stomach flutter with excitement.

“Kayode, this is a talent that you will not regret hiring,” he said, looking at a stunned Uncle Kayode, who probably wished he was my inspiration.

“I’ll prepare a contract for you,” Uncle Kayode said. “Please keep in mind that

you won't be making millions just yet until after years of..."

"We agree!" my father shouted with excitement, earning a chuckle from the man.

"Okay then," Uncle Kayode said, extending his hand, which I shook. "Congratulations!"



My mother dramatically knelt on the floor and began rolling on it after my father broke the news. "Biola has delivered us from poverty," she said.

She got up and hugged me tightly, and I struggled to get out of her grasp. "You know we always believed in you," she said, kissing my cheeks, earning herself an eye roll.

I smiled and hugged my little brother, who looked at me silently, his eyes shimmering with pride. The contract was still being drafted and would be sent in the coming week, but we were elated. From drawing on the streets to being trained and employed as a professional artist, it was a life-changing experience for me and my family.

King Mashuu and the Magic Water

Peter Okumu

In the beautiful Tonka Kingdom, there ruled a king named Mashuu. King Mashuu had everything a king could wish for—a beautiful wife, Queen Tama; a beautiful daughter, Princess Naka; a grand palace; loyal subjects; and vast lands. He had plenty of gold, silver and all the treasures a king would want to have.

Despite all these riches and blessings, the king was never happy with himself. One thing troubled him deeply: he was very short, almost like a dwarf. That was the reason he had broken every mirror in his palace. Every time he saw himself in the mirror, he despised himself more. King Mashuu hated how people looked at him, as if he was too small to be seen. *Do these people even respect me?* he often asked himself. He longed to be tall and imposing, someone who could command respect just by his presence. He tried to instil fear and respect in the people of Tonka Kingdom, but his efforts were in vain. People did not fear him as they should fear a king. In his frustration, he banned all printing presses in his kingdom from publishing his full picture. However, every morning, he would

see images of dwarfs in the newspapers. *Who else are these people portraying if not me?* He thought bitterly. When he watched the television, he would see four dwarfs being chased by one tall man.

What kind of ridicule is this? He fumed.

What made matters worse and enraged the king even more was a popular singer named Okutuyi. He had composed a mocking song called *A Dwarf Blames God, A Fat Man Praises His Wife*. The song became an instant hit, and it seemed everyone in the kingdom was singing it even after putting Okutuyi in prison. This public humiliation was too much for King Mashuu to bear. The king decided enough was enough. The king resolved to do whatever it took to restore his glory and command the respect he believed he deserved.

One day, he summoned his most trusted servants to his chambers. "I can no longer live with my short stature," he declared. "I want you to find me a magician who can make me tall. I am willing to pay any price."

"But my king, is that possible?" asked one servant.

"That is why I have told you to look for a magician, not a carpenter!" he said.

The servants bowed before the king and promised to find the most powerful magician in the land. The next day, the servants set out on a journey to find the best magician in the land. The servants searched far and wide, through forests and mountains, across rivers and valleys. They searched and searched and searched. After several days of relentless searching, they found Azara, the great magician from the neighbouring kingdom.

"Is the king willing to pay the price?" Azara asked the servants of the king.

"Name any price. The king is willing to pay," they replied eagerly.

"Good," said Azara with a sly smile. "Go tell the king I want his crown."

The servants returned to King Mashuu and conveyed the magician's demand.

"Where does this magician come from?" the king asked.

"He is from Ikoro Kingdom," they answered.

"Was there no magician found in my kingdom?" he asked again.

“Yes, our king, there was none who could perform what you seek!” they answered.

“Go and tell the magician I want to become a tall king, not a tall commoner. I will give him anything he wants, but not my crown,” the king replied firmly.

The servants returned to the magician with the king’s response.

“Well, I see the king is not willing to pay the price,” said Azara. “Tell me, dear servants of the king, what does the king love most, apart from his crown? What does he adore the most?”

The servants looked at each other, unsure of what to say. Finally, one of them spoke up. “His daughter, Princess Naka.”

“Well said,” Azara declared. “Tell the king I demand Princess Naka as my wife.”

The servants returned to King Mashuu with heavy hearts. They found Princess Naka singing before the king in the palace. Princess Naka loved singing so much that a day would never pass without singing before the king.

“What is his new demand?” the king asked.

“He wants the princess to be made his wife,” the servants said. When the king heard the magician’s new demand, he was deeply troubled. He loved his daughter more than anything in the world. But the desire to be tall, feared and respected overwhelmed him.

“What is more important to a king than his stature and dignity?” he pondered. “I will give him my daughter,” he finally said, though in sorrow.

The following day, Azara appeared before the king.

“Oh, King of Tonka, I bring you what you seek—the magic to make you tall. Here is the blue water. This magic follows the three rules of life. King Mashuu, what colour of cloth were you born in?” asked the magician.

“I was born naked,” answered the king.

“You were born naked, and so, before you use this water, you must be naked. This is rule number one. Then, king, tell me, do you have a twin brother or a twin sister?” the magician asked again.

"I was born alone," answered the king.

"You were born alone. Before using this water, go into an enclosed chamber; you must be alone. This is rule number two. Then tell me, why are nights shorter than daytime?"

"I think they are both equal. All have twelve hours," the king answered.

"Wisely answered, my king. That is rule number three: Take only what you requested, not more, not less," the magician said as he handed the bottle to the king.

"Remember the three rules: you must be naked and alone in an enclosed room. After that, you will say, 'Water of life, make me tall,' take a sip, and with the remaining water, sprinkle it on your head. Do this just once, not twice, not thrice. Do not request more or less than what you have asked for," the magician instructed.

King Mashuu was overjoyed. He took the bottle of blue water and went into his inner chamber and closed the door behind him. With great excitement, he held the bottle in his hands.

"Now I will be tall, and people will fear me. Other kings will respect me," he said to himself. He hastily undressed and took the bottle. "Water of life, make me tall," he chanted and took a sip. He then carefully sprinkled the remaining water on his head.

To his delight, he began to grow. He grew and grew and became tall like other men in Tonka kingdom. He was very happy. But when he looked into the bottle, some magic water remained. Greed began to fill his heart.

"I want to become even bigger so that I can conquer other kingdoms and rule them. People will fear and respect me more! Hail King Mashuu, haha!" he laughed. "Water of life, make me tall!" he chanted and drank the entire contents of the bottle.

Instantly, King Mashuu grew so tall that he reached the roof of the palace. But the growth didn't stop there. He kept growing, and soon, the palace collapsed under his enormous size. The people of Tonka looked up in terror as their king's head rose above the clouds. He was all naked from top to bottom. He

tried to hide his nakedness, but nothing could cover him up.

Seeing this enormous giant, the villagers panicked and fled. They thought it was a terrifying monster. Some villagers stood there, laughing at him, and others hurling stones at the king. Queen Tama was shaking in fear. Her maids held her. In shame and regret, King Mashuu tried to call out to them, but his voice boomed like thunder, causing even more fear. He tried to walk; his feet were so heavy he could not lift them.

As King Mashuu stood there, towering over his kingdom, he realised the terrible mistake he had made. His greed and desire for respect had turned him into something monstrous, something his people feared rather than admired. *What if I fall? How fatal would it be? And how long would it take for me to stand on my feet again?* he thought. He realised there was nothing so special about being tall.

Azara, the magician, watched from a distance. The king's servants approached him and begged him to do something.

"Please, help our king. Reverse that magic!" they pleaded.

"Your king is very greedy and selfish. He took more than what he requested. He broke the rule of magic! There is nothing I can do!" Azara answered.

"Please, my husband, help my father, I beg you!" Princes Naka implored. She was covered in a black veil just to avoid seeing her father's nakedness.

Azara looked at her admiringly, then spoke, "I demand his crown now before I reverse the magic!"

After a minute of consultation, the king's servants decided to give Azara the king's crown.

"Take the crown; we want our king back!" they said.

"There is no king without a crown. When I reverse the magic, he will be a normal citizen, not a king!" Azara replied.

The servants of the king did not know what to do. To save the king or the kingdom!

"Do it!" They gave Azara a go-ahead.

Azara approached the giant king and said, “Oh, King Mashuu, your greed has taught you a valuable lesson. True respect and admiration come not from your stature but from your actions and your heart.”

With that, Azara waved his hand, and King Mashuu began to shrink back to his original size. The palace was magically restored, and the people cautiously returned, still in awe of what they had witnessed.

King Mashuu, now back to his normal size, summoned his subjects and apologized for his greedy and selfish nature.

“I have learned a great lesson today,” he told his people. “Respect and dignity do not come from how tall we stand but from how we treat others. I vow to be a king who earns your respect through kindness and wisdom, not fear and stature.”

Azara stood there, observing the dwarf king with admiration for his composure and humility. He nodded, satisfied.

“Because you have given me your daughter, and she has loved me wholeheartedly, I return your crown. Be a good king.” Azara said, and then he vanished together with Princess Naka.

From that day on, King Mashuu ruled with newfound wisdom. He was loved and respected not because of his height but because of his fairness, generosity, and the love he showed to his people.

And so, the kingdom of Tonka thrived under the rule of a king who had learned the true meaning of greatness.

Writing about Writing

Onchoka Ongoro

When the hour ticks, the demon comes visiting. It doesn't give a fuck where you are: in the church, in the toilet, in the train, in the café. It walks in slowly and takes control. It comes with a lot of skill, mastery and seduction you can't resist. The urge kicks in; the demon takes your thoughts for a walk. The demon knows no time or rules. It just visits as it wishes. Sometimes, it visits in the silence of the night. It slowly wakes you up and leads you to your table. It poses every nerve of your body. You hold the pen, but you are not the one writing. The demon does it. It is commanding, and it writes until it is satisfied that everything it wants written is written. It doesn't matter how busy your day is; if the story is long, you will write, write and write.

When you lift your head, you are welcomed by the beautiful rays of sunlight that come in through the window. You are late for work and you haven't slept. You rush to work. You can't help but look like a battered avocado. You tell your co-workers about the demon, but they don't believe you. They tell your boss it

seems you are on hard drugs lately. The boss summons you, listens to the demon narrative and brushes it off. She believes the spirits of your ancestors don't want to set you free. She calls the man of God. The man of God walks in with such gusto and demeanour than the son of God himself could. On his right hand, he has the usual white handkerchief that wipes off the sweat that usually tickles down his cheeks by style than nature. On his left hand, he tightly clutches a gigantic bible that only God knows when it is read. He is well prepared and determined to drive out the demon from you.

The man of God places his right hand on your head, mumble jumbles as spits of saliva escape his mouth and land on your face. He pushes you as if you are the demon he is fighting. He finishes praying after what seems like an eternity. You feel relieved, not because the demon has been cast out of you, but because the man of God has finished the longest prayer on earth. You promise yourself not to allow such shenanigans next time. After all, you say, you can pray for yourself.

When you get home, the demon invites you to look at what you wrote yesterday. You read the first page. It's f*cking amazing. The demon opens a floodgate of thoughts. You continue writing the story. Today, you write without blinking. You are writing while playing soft music. Later, you realise the music stopped playing hours ago. During the four hours it played, you did not hear a single word because the demon is selfish; it wants you whole for itself.

You realise that the music stopped playing because the demon just deserted you. You are now staring at the screen with no idea what to write. You have typed 7,000 words. You can't believe it. You smile, close the laptop, go to bed, and cover yourself, but the alarm rings before you close your eyes. You take a shower, dress up and go to work. You curse adulthood.

Today, you strive to play it cool because you don't want problems with your boss, but it is written all over your face. You look like a man who has given up on life. Your boss warns you. She strongly believes the nuts that hold things together in your head are getting loose.

That night, the demon visits again. As usual, it holds your hand and writes. It leads you to new places. Strange places. Places you have never been to before. You are enjoying it so far. You are a few pages away from concluding your book.

You realise it is 6 in the morning. You go to work. Your boss is not happy at all. You are now torn between your work and your creative expression. The demon comes. It whispers in your ear, "An artist needs to be courageous." Your boss gives you a second warning.

That evening, you go back home. The demon doesn't visit.

It is now a year since the demon last visited. Your boss believes you are healed because the prayers of the man of God worked.

One year goes by. Then another six months. Then two years.

You have never completed the book. You had buried the book in the graves of memory. One day, you decide to rummage through your laptop. You accidentally stumble upon that file. You have it well secured with passwords. You hope the password you have in mind is correct. Otherwise, you will lose your creative property. You try the first password, but it fails. The second one, the file opens. You breathe a sigh of relief as you read the book. You can't stop reading. You wonder what kind of genius you are. You see yourself as the next Ngugi or Achebe. You see the millions you will make. You wonder what you have been doing all these years instead of finishing writing the book. You could be a millionaire by now.

That night, the old friend visits, but this *mazafaka* does not help you finish writing the book. It begins with another one, and because it won't set you free, you abandon the first book and grapple with the new book before the demon leaves. It takes you a month to write the new book. The demon leaves again. The book is complete except for chapter two. The demon gave you more of how the book ends than it begins. So you started with the last chapters, finished, wrote the first chapter, and got stuck when you wanted to connect the first chapter with the rest of the book. It is sad. You can't imagine that the demon left when you wanted it most.

You try to finish the second chapter, but you can't. The demon is nowhere. Just then, you remember you have another book a few pages away from the end. You abandon the second book and go back to the first. You read it. You are shocked at the kind of yokel you are. The book is not interesting at all. It is plain. It has no taste nor sense of direction. It is just a mass of words brought

together to form a book. You wonder if you are an artist at all. You feel that you have been committing an artistic sin. The book is devoid of artistic creativity. You conclude that artists are born, not made, and you are not either. You see your creative star dying. All the dreams you had vanish. You abandon both books for a year.

One day, as usual, while using your laptop, you stumble upon the files and decide to have a look. This time, the first book is interesting. You wonder why it was boring the last time you read it. You tell yourself, "If Charles Dickens gave up when his books were rejected, he couldn't have been one of the greatest." That night, you finish writing the first book. You can't believe it; you have never. Your grandfather, friends of friends, and enemies know that soon you will be a published author because your mouth can't keep quiet.

You start editing the book. The words therein wake up the demon. It completely changes the plot of one chapter and adds three more. It also changes the names of some characters. You even have a new title. You can't believe how the editing has helped develop the book into a masterpiece. You now fall in love with the book more than your sweet-other.

A week later, you submit the book for publishing. The publisher shares the cover of the book. You love it. You can't believe that is your name on the cover page. You share the cover with all your friends and family. They promise they will buy the book once it is out.

After three months, the book is out. You post it on all your social media platforms. The responses are overwhelming. Even your failed relationship congratulates you. You are happy. You go back home. You finish writing the second book because you need to tell people that you are not only an author of one published book, but two.

One month after publication, you realise you have made no sales. Only your mother and a few friends bought the book. Your sweet-other doesn't buy the book since you live in the same house. Your mother bought the book not because she loves reading, but because she wants to save you from depression. She doesn't tell you, but she believes the book might not give you a dime. She says people don't read. You wish to tell her she is wrong, but you have never won a single argument against her, so you save your words for a better cause. Your

brothers, sisters, cousins and most of your friends are no longer interested in the book. Their silence is deafening.

You decide to prepare a mega launch. Something that has never been seen before. From the noise on Facebook, you are sure a good number will attend. But again, you don't have enough money. You resolve to hold a simple one that only your friends and some strangers attend. The launch was supposed to begin at noon but it starts at 4 p.m. because, at noon, only you, the photographer and the emcee had arrived. You call all your friends who had promised to attend but they are now occupied with "unavoidable circumstances." At 4 p.m., because you have to launch the book, you lure the hotel staff with some snacks so that they can attend. The people are now 20: four friends, four strangers, the photographer, the emcee and the hotel staff.

The launch is boring. You feel like running away, but you can't. It is time to autograph the book, but no one is moving forward. All the four strangers buy the book. You take pictures that you will use later to hype how big the event was. All your friends and people you lured to attend the launch don't buy the book. They are just waiting for you to finish your speech so that they can take their snacks and leave. But because you don't like the embarrassment, you send a message to your friends Clare, Caro, Karen and Ken to come and pretend they are buying the book to save the moment. They take the photos with you. You all have that plastic smile plastered on your faces. You don't autograph the books because you need them back after the event.

The launch comes to an end. Your friends don't return the books, and because you can't demand the books in front of everyone, they leave with the books. You curse them, you curse their fathers, you curse their mothers, siblings, their grandparents and their entire generation. You curse the day they were born. You curse the day you knew them. You book a taxi to carry your 12 cartons home. During the ride, the taxi driver cannot turn his head towards your direction or start a conversation because you have been clicking since you stepped in. He can't help but drive fast so that he can dump you at your destination.

You get home. You can't talk to anyone. You can't mask the disappointment. Your mother asks you what is wrong. You insist you are okay. Deep down, you are burning. You are stressed because you procured a loan to print the books

and you don't see the possibility of ever getting a coin from the books. Your dreams are shattered. For once, you think your mother was right about people not reading books, but the thought of where the books in the bookshops go never leaves your mind. You remember the sleepless nights you spent writing. You conclude that farming is better than writing; writing is a luxury, not a business.

Days later, you decide to publish the second book. You just concluded that even if people won't buy your books, at least your children will read the books. At least you will have some books with your name on them. Just like the first book, it makes few sales, but at least you sell more copies than the first book. You ditch writing.

Three years later, when walking in town, a stranger rushes to you. "Are you JJ Nyamakima?" she asks

"Yes," you say. "Why?"

She tells you she has read both your books, and she is a great fan. She requests a selfie. You consent. You are happy. You feel maybe many people out there might be knowing you more than you think. That night, your spirit is ignited.

A week later, the demon is back. In the months that follow, you write your third, fourth and fifth book. One day, you realise the demon no longer leaves. The demon has taken permanent residence in you. You have become the demon, and the demon has become you. You are the demon. You write seamlessly. You are now well-known as an author. You make sales for the next fifty years, but you are far more than you had anticipated at the beginning.

You die at 92 years. Your friends who never read your books post you and your books. They say how much they loved you and your writing. They say what a talented author they have lost. You trend on Twitter, although people keep asking, "Who is this guy?" The book nerds comment and retweet widely. You are now on the news. There is an uncertain spark. People want to know you and what you used to write about.

Your books start selling. They are actually out of print. People wonder why they never knew you all along. You are now selling like crazy. Publishers are

asking for permission to republish your books. Some of your books are adopted as course books.

Ken, one of your friends from the launch, was not aware you died. He sees you on TV, goes to his store, mysteriously finds the book he has been looking for, dusts it and reads it for the first time. He finishes reading the 201-page novel in a day. There is a smile on his face. He can't imagine how great you were. He only wishes he read the book earlier.



Aisha

Chukwuemeka Victoria Chiamaka

“Beautiful!” I say, staring at the gold necklace Ramata got for me in the Porscheton dresser mirror. The door cracks open, and I turn to see Mama walking towards me.

“Aisha, the Governor is here. He wants to see you before the occasion kicks off,” she says with a grimace.

“*Tafi* – go, I’ll be right behind you,” I say, and Mama leaves.

I let out a loud sigh, pulling out my phone and tapping on the radio app. “*We all know what today’s event is all about. It’s only the person that gives up, fucks up,*” the speaker says from my phone.

That is exactly what Papa could have said, too. “Papa, you fucked up!” I sob and rest my head on the mirror stand, my mind wandering back to the past.



I was fifteen when Papa died in 2015. Papa had left for an age-grade meeting and was brought dead home. It was said that his drink was poisoned. I still remember how Mama clung desperately to Papa’s corpse, chanting, “*Don Allah,*

Hassan, don't die. Wake up," like a mad woman till she passed out. Mama was rushed to the hospital that night and was diagnosed with a stroke. I realised instantly that we were doomed. Mama's illness became severe. My younger sister, Ramata, was only seven and there was no money to continue with school, so I quit. I ventured into the hairdressing business and was paid the little money that sustained Mama, Ramata and me.

When I turned seventeen, Mama's sickness was at its peak, and she could barely walk on her own. The doctor said she had only three years to live if left untreated. I was devastated. We had only one person to turn to: Uncle Yusuf, Mama's brother, who lived in Lagos. Mama urged me to leave Jos and go to him since there was no money left in the village. The thought of leaving Mama with Ramata, who had just turned nine two days earlier, terrified me. She couldn't fend for herself, let alone take care of Mama. But I couldn't just sit back and watch Mama die. I had to do something to save her. So, I made up my mind to go.

In June 2018, I left Jos for Lagos. I didn't go with much load except for a Ghana-must-go bag I used to pack my clothes and the camera Papa had given to me on my thirteenth birthday. The journey stole the largest part of the day such that I became very tired and yearned to go back home. I never smiled throughout the journey. I only made weird faces at hungry policemen asking for a bribe, licked my lips when we passed food sellers by the roadside, and yawned at the hungry breeze that licked my skin. When we got to a signboard that read: 'Welcome to Lagos!' I smiled in anticipation. The atmosphere smelled different—it was bizarre. I didn't know what it had in stock for me, but I was just happy about one thing—Mama would be saved.

I arrived at Uncle Yusuf's place at around 9 p.m. I was offered a bucket of water. Uncle Yusuf had it filled up, and I was scared to use all the water because we were always told by Mama not to bathe with more than four cups of water.

"It's a waste of water," Mama would tell us.

Uncle Yusuf laughed and said, "Welcome to Lagos! That's because people at home are poor; here we're rich. So bathe all the water, joor!" I sighed and used all of it.

That night, Uncle Yusuf gave me a corner in his parlour to use for the night as he lived in a two-room apartment. After dinner of *akamu and akara*, Uncle Yusuf called for me in his room.

“Ehn, Aisha, what do you intend to do here? What do you love doing most?” he asked dryly.

“I love photography so much! Papa got me a camera when I was thirteen, and I can take good pictures, uncle. I can even take you one tomorrow!” I exclaimed with burgeoning excitement.

I thought there was a glimpse of hope, not until he grinned like a Cheshire cat and said, “Oh! Photography? You’re not serious. You don’t even have any reasonable certificate, and you’re talking about something like that. You can’t attain such a thing in this place; it is only sales girls’ work that you can see here, and the pay is six thousand Naira. I’ll get you one by tomorrow.”

And with that, he called off the meeting. I mumbled a “Thank you” and went to bed. I was ready to do anything to save Mama’s life, even if it was to pack faeces from the gutter. The following day, Uncle Yusuf came home announcing my new job at Madam Chop and Bail’s restaurant. The type of joy that filled my heart the moment he spilled it was incomparable.

The following week, I resumed at Madam Chop and Bail’s restaurant.

“Ahn! This is the type of girl I want. You’re beautiful,” she said the minute she set her eyes on me and fondled my cheeks.

She is a fat woman with a protruding belly and cheeks that look like peeling red paint, as if worn down by relentless rain. Her deep, commanding voice sent a shiver through me, and I doubted I would last long in that place.

I met Tope and Ayomide—two of her workers. They were Madam Chop and Bail’s favourites because they had never, by long chalk, flouted her orders.

After toiling away for a fortnight, I received the bombshell. I was attending to one of Madam Chop and Bail’s favourite customers when Tope came and said, “Madam Chop and Bail is calling you.”

“Why?” I wondered as I left the customer in the hands of Tope and dumped away. I checked her office, but I was told that she was in her special room. I got to the room and met Madam Chop and Bail lying on the bed with a smile plastered on her face.

“My love. Our Yoruba wife,” she praised with false cheerfulness. I only smiled like a moron, unsure why she was showering me with praise.

“You called me,” I said instead.

“Yes. Don’t you want to be our wife, eh? Fine girl, do you know what your type is called in the Yoruba Tribe?” she asked, and I shook my head sideways.

“*Omodebirin arewa*,” she said and smirked mischievously as she dropped the bombshell.

“I want you to go and serve our customer wella-wella, so...”

“He has been served already, Madam,” I quickly interrupted her.

She frowned at me and said, “If you were the one served that way, would you like it?”

I wanted to say “Yes” but stopped when she glared at me with such malice that I stammered, “No.”

“Ehn! Now, go and serve him very well, you hear?”

I nodded, but I didn’t understand what she meant by ‘wella-wella.’ And as if she read my confusion, she said, “Just bring him to this room. I’ll be out after now so you can do the necessary thing.”

“Necessary thing, Madam? I don’t understand.”

“Yes. Sleep with him. Or are you not a girl anymore? What is this for?” She moved closer to me and touched my private part through my chiffon gown. I couldn’t move. It was as if something had glued my legs to the ground. I regained my senses and fell on my knees immediately.

“Madam, please I can’t do it. I haven’t done it before, I swear to Allah,” I cried. I clasped my hands together and begged her like I was talking to my heavenly father. But it didn’t budge her.

"You must do it, or you leave. Stupid!" She kicked me out of her way and left, slamming the door behind her.

I sat on the floor and wept until my eyes welled like balloons.

"God, you're not being fair to me! I hate you! Just let me die!" I shrieked and rolled myself on the floor. I hit my head continuously on the floor and cried. A knock came on the door and I hurriedly leapt to my feet and rushed to the door. Oga customer stood right there smiling at me.

"How are you?" he greeted me in a baritone voice.

I hated him. I hated his voice. It sounded evil, just like Madam Chop and Bail's. I snubbed him and made to close the door, but he pushed me aside and barged in.

"You're indeed a hard nut as Madam Chop and Bail had told me," he said and walked to the bed. He removed his clothes and threw them at me.

"Why are you still standing there? Come here already," he beckoned at me to come.

"Sir, please. I am just a poor girl who lost her father and has a sick mother at home. I don't have any job—that is why I am here, not because I ..."

"And who is here to listen to your rubbish tales? Get on the bed now!" he bawled, his voice almost brought down the entire building.

I tiptoed to the bed and sat on the edge. I didn't know what I was doing or what I intended to do. I just did anything that worked at the moment. I stared intently at him, licking my lower lip. I tried my best to look as seductive as possible. Using my middle finger, I signalled him to come closer, which he did in haste.

"You're the prettiest girl in the world, you know, right?" he whispered into my ears. He hungrily licked my neck like the dog he is and made to pull my zip when I bit his ears and ran out of the room.

Later in the day, Madam Chop and Bail sent for me. When I got to her office, I met Oga customer standing in front of her with his left hand covering his ear.

“So you are Jackie Chan or is it John Cena, eh? Agba fighter, your end in this place has come!” she yelled and cast me an evil glare.

“Madam, I, I –” I bite my tongue.

“Are you still here? I said you’re fired!” she banged her fist on the plate rack, making all the plates shatter on the floor.

I ran out in fright and that was how I lost my job at Madam Chop and Bail’s restaurant.

I rambled like a mad woman on the street of Lagos, till somehow, I got to Uncle Yusuf’s place. That night, I narrated what happened at Madam Chop and Bail’s restaurant to Uncle Yusuf with the hope that he would get me a new job. His reaction was unexpected—he unleashed his torrent of anger on me, shattering my hopes.

“This girl, you’re a fool o. Who do you think will feed you here? It’s barely two weeks and you’ve already lost your job because of your selfishness and stupidity. That job is one of the highest paying jobs for an illiterate like you!” he barked and drove me out of his house despite all my pleas.

I was left stranded. I located the market square and slept inside an unfinished building. Suddenly, a splash of cold water jolted me awake. I opened my eyes, blinking away the droplets, only to find myself surrounded by angry men and women, their fierce gazes bearing down on me like a swarm of hawks.

“So you’re the one who has been stealing and defecating in this place, right? We have caught you today, *ole*—thief,” they said.

The air was thick with tension as I opened my mouth to speak, but before I could say a word, a flurry of brutal beating rained down on me until darkness enveloped me as I continuously cried, “I’ve done nothing, I’ve done nothing!”



“She will be fine,” a tiny voice said. I couldn’t see her face well. My vision was blurry. I heard the voices of two women discussing keenly. One woman sounded worried.

“Hmmmmmm. I pray so, but she’s not even opening her eyes, Aunt Nurse.”

Aunt Nurse? I thought. I tried to open my eyes, but it seemed like a hammer had landed on my head.

“Ah!” I cried out and held my head gently. The two women ran to me and removed my hands from my head.

“Can you see us?” the one with the tiny voice asked, slowly waving her hands. I closed my eyes for two minutes and opened them again. Two black eyes stared down at me.

“She’s awake! Thank you, Jesus!” the worried woman said and helped me to sit up. She’s a short, fair woman with big breasts and a tiny body. Two tribal marks ran through her face like a river carving its path through a rough mountain. She gave me a weary smile that showed off her yellowish set of teeth. She looked tired and her eyes were red, as if she’d had no sleep for a long time.

“How are you feeling, my child?” she asked and touched my forehead.

“I’m fine, ma. What happened?” I asked, still trying to make sense of how I ended up there.

She peered into my face for some time as if trying to figure out something before she said, “Hmm. It is God that saved you,” she said, clapping her hands like she was telling me gossip. “Those men almost killed you at the market. I took pity on you and brought you here,” she added and made irritating faces.

I stared intently at her so that I could detect if she was lying. I couldn’t trust her—not anyone.

“Wait. Oh! You don’t remember? Are you not the girl that was caught sleeping in the market square, or do you want to pretend now?” She gawped at me.

“Yes,” I acknowledged.

Her face beamed with smiles as she stood up and walked to the bedside cabinet, opened the drawer, and brought two nylon bags. I watched as her big breasts danced to the rhythm of her footsteps.

“Here. This is a delicious *Moimoi* I prepared for you. Eat it so you can take your drugs,” she proffered. “And this belongs to you also...” she trailed off and

handed me my camera. I let out a loud giggle as I collected it from her. I was glad that at least I still had my camera with me. She gazed at me in awe for a long time as I played with my camera.

“From the North? Hausa Tribe?” she queried.

I jerked my head to look at her and shifted uncomfortably on the bed—many people don’t like the Northerners.

“Ye – y- es,” I stuttered nervously.

“Oh! I thought as much. You’re very beautiful like your people,” she complimented. “And this camera of yours, you’ll use it to take photos of me and my children when we get home.” She adjusted her headscarf and added, “By the way, I am Iya Modupe, what’s your name?”



I was discharged later that day and went home with Iya Modupe. She lived in a ‘face-me-I-face-you’ yard, a compound shared by twelve families, including two bachelors. Her room was the first, near the gate. Iya Modupe’s husband had died years ago, leaving her to raise four children: two girls, Modupe and Ireti, and twin boys, Abayomi and Kunle. Modupe, the eldest, was two years older than me and worked as a seamstress. Ireti was my age, while the twins were the same age as my sister Ramata. Despite our differences in age and religion, none of them treated me like an outsider or feared me for being from the North, as others often did.

That night, I shared my struggles with Iya Modupe and told her about my dream of becoming a photographer. Unlike Uncle Yusuf, who had mocked me, she didn’t judge or dismiss my plans. Instead, she suggested that, for now, I could join her at her shop, where she sold tomatoes and peppers, to earn money to send to Mama for her treatment. I nearly burst with joy and thanked her profusely. Since Papa’s death, I hadn’t had a decent meal or a good night’s sleep. But that night at Iya Modupe’s, I ate *evedu* with *amala* and slept peacefully on a cool foam mattress, my arms stretched wide.

Since then, Iya Modupe's family has become like a second family to me. I ate with them, played with them, and joined them on trips to the farm. As Iya Modupe had encouraged, I took plenty of cheerful and funny pictures of them. She enrolled me in the same government school as Ireti, and we'd walk to and from school together, chatting the whole way. They shared everything with me, from food to the clothes they wore. I fell into a routine of going with Iya Modupe to her shop every day, running errands for her around town. I wrote to Mama irregularly whenever I could. Once, Ramata wrote back, saying Mama's illness had worsened and there was no money to take her to the hospital. I grew anxious, unsure how to bring it up with Iya Modupe. She had already spent more on me than she had on any of her own children. Mama's health weighed heavily on my mind, and I struggled to find a way to start that conversation. That day, Iya Modupe had gone to the village market and returned with a sombre expression.

"Welcome, Ma," I greeted, my voice shaking. I'd never felt this nervous around her before, and she could tell.

"Stop that. What's wrong, Aisha?" she asked flatly, heading toward the packing store.

"My mother is sick. She needs to go to the hospital, or she might die," I blurted out, the words tumbling over each other.

Iya Modupe sighed heavily and began counting the remaining baskets of tomatoes. Her behaviour puzzled me—it wasn't like her usual cheerful self.

"She'll die, Ma," I repeated, my voice small and panicked.

"God forbid! Don't say that again," she snapped, hissing sharply. Then she paused, thinking. "Okay, let's try this. You can hawk the rest of these tomato baskets and send the money to her. I'm not sure if it'll be enough, though," she said.

I agreed to do it and picked up the first basket. To my surprise, I sold it all in less than an hour. Iya Modupe was impressed by my knack for selling and let me hawk the remaining baskets. That's how I started hawking tomatoes. At first, I went out alone, but later, Ireti joined me, and we hawked together.

On September 6, 2020, I met Bro Dave, and it marked a turning point in my life. I was hawking along a street near our school when a heavy rain began to pour. Unsure what to do, I darted into a phone repair shop to wait it out. By the time it was past five, the rain had eased to a drizzle. I was about to leave when Bro Dave walked in and asked the shop owner if he knew anyone who could apprentice at his photo studio.

“I’m here, sir!” I blurted out, sounding foolish. Both Bro Dave and the shop owner turned to stare at me. Bro Dave’s expression seemed to ask, ‘Are you okay?’

“Sir, please! My father died two years ago, and my mother is very sick—she might die without help. Please, assist me!” I pleaded, clasping my hands together, hoping for pity.

And so began my journey with Bro Dave, a new chapter in my life. I left Iya Modupe’s home and moved into a spare room at his photo studio. After a one-year apprenticeship, I became his employee. He paid me well, but I was too busy to write to Mama, and I had few visitors—only Iya Modupe and her children checked on me occasionally.

By early 2021, I rented a flat and brought Mama and Ramata to Lagos. I tackled my priorities: I bought an Android phone and laptop, enrolled Ramata in school, and registered Mama at a renowned hospital for treatment. I couldn’t repay Iya Modupe fully, but I vowed to care for her and her family—a promise I’ve kept. When she saw Mama and Ramata, Iya Modupe screamed in delight. It turned out Mama was her old friend from the North; they’d met as traders in the Ijebu-Ode market. Mama wept, thanking her for looking after me and sending money for her treatment. Iya Modupe laughed, saying, “I knew it from the start—she’s my daughter. Aisha even has my big breasts!” We all burst into laughter. It was a reunion.

Eventually, I left Bro Dave to start my own business. I opened ‘Hasstima Studios,’ named after Mama and Papa. The studio thrived with customers and contracts—I even photographed Bro Dave’s wedding and Abayomi and Kunle’s graduation. My work became the talk of the town, but Mama’s recovery was what truly brought me joy.

On Christmas Eve, as I ate dinner with my family, Bro Dave called.

“Excuse me, Mama,” I said, stepping into my room.

“Bro Dave!” I greeted, beaming.

“How are you?” he asked.

“Fine, o! You’re enjoying married life, right?” I teased, keeping it light.

He chuckled briefly. “Aisha, the local government chairman needs a personal photographer. Interested? I’ll send you the link to apply.”

“Yes, brother, I am,” I replied. He hung up, and I quickly applied through the link he sent.

In January 2022, I received an email saying my application was rejected but to visit the chairman. Disheartened, I went to his office and found him with the governor’s aide.

“Congratulations, Miss Aisha Hassan! The governor saw your photos and wants you as his personal photographer!” the chairman said, extending his hand. Stunned, I shook it, barely processing the news. Overwhelmed, I rushed home to tell Mama. That night, I slept deeply, legs sprawled, a wide smile on my face.

By March, my induction as the governor’s photographer was scheduled. The news spread like wildfire, creating an unstoppable buzz. Iya Modupe worked tirelessly to prepare enough food for the house party while sewing a stunning dress for me.



“Aisha?” Mama’s voice interrupts my thoughts.

I turn to see Mama glaring at me.

“Everyone is waiting for you!” she yells, and I almost laugh.

“Let’s go,” I say.

We leave as I jam the door behind us.

