Explore 14 captivating stories chosen as top entries out of over 500 entries from all over Nigeria in the Abuja Literary Festival (ALITFEST) Short Story Competition 2022. You will find stories that resonate, concrete characters, and emotions that transcend the page.

Featuring the stories of Precious Chuckson, Nana-Hauwa Sule, Hauwa Saleh Abubakar, Iheoma J. Uzomba, Haruna Solomon Binkam, Chidera Solomon Anikpe, Aziba Ekio, Abasi-maenyin Esebre, Lafua Michael Tega, Chiemeziem Everest Udochukwu, Mhembeuter Jeremiah Orhemba, Ebube Emmanuella, Janefrances Chinwe Iwuchukwu, and Adepoju.

With Forewords by Arc. Ferdinand Agu and Sir Victor Anoliefo.

The Abuja Literary Society (ALS)

Principally founded in 1998 by Victor Anoliefo and co-founders, Ike Anya, Ferdinand Agu, and Ken Ike Okere, ALS is a vibrant and delightful community uniting writers, aspiring authors, bibliophiles, intellectuals, and all who appreciate the literary arts. Its flagship event, the Abuja Literary Festival (ALITFEST) is a platform for celebrating artistic talent and nurturing literary excellence.

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BLOWS TO THE PLAGUE OTHER STORIES: AN ALS ANTHOLOGY S. Sueddie Vershima Agema [Ed.]

SEVHAGE PUBLISHERS

BLOWS TO THE PLAGUE & OTHER STORIES:

AN ABUJA LITERARY SOCIETY ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY

S. SU'EDDIE VERSHIMA AGEMA

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Dedicated with gratitude to

Arc. Ferdinand Agu

in loving memory.

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FOREWORD 1

In the delicate interplay between creativity and livelihood, there exists an irrefutably profound blend of forces and elements that transmutes passion into sustenance, imagination into opportunity, and artistry into a thriving existence. The Abuja Literary and Arts Festival (ALitFest) has, for five consecutive years, stood as a beacon illuminating the path for creatives, nurturing their growth, and championing the cause of the thriving artist.

This anthology is a celebration of the thoughtful narratives birthed from the hearts and minds of our talented community. Yet, it is only but a snippet of the richness and enchanting moments of the ALitFest22 experience. The theme, 'The Thriving Artist,' echoes like a mantra, reverberating through each carefully crafted tale and every stroke of artistic expression, reminding us of the resilience and spirit that define the creative journey.

'The Thriving Artist' follows in the footsteps of 2021's theme, 'Making Art Work,' a testament to ALitFest's commitment to the holistic development of creatives. This anthology captures the collective wisdom, shared experiences, and diverse perspectives of our artistic community, presenting

a medley of stories that not only entertain but also serve as evidence of the transformative power of the creative spirit.

Central to our mission is the firm dedication to equip creatives with the necessary tools for success. The stories within these pages are not merely narratives; they are proofs of the triumphs and tribulations of artists who have dared to dream. ALitFest22, through its Short Story Competition, supported writers in their creative hustle by providing more than just a stage; it offered a platform for voices to be heard and for stories to be shared.

Within these pages, you will find stories that resonate, characters that linger and evoke emotions that transcend the limitations of the written word. ALitFest22 has not only been a festival; it has been a convergence of minds, a celebration of resilience, and a testament to the boundless potential that lies within the creative spirit.

As you embark on this literary adventure, may you be inspired by the stories of triumph, resilience, and creativity that define 'The Thriving Artist.' May you, dear reader, find within these pages the same spark that has ignited the passion of every artist showcased in this anthology. ALitFest22 is not merely an event; it is a legacy, and this anthology is a testament to the enduring spirit and lofty mind of the thriving artist.

Enjoy the journey!!!

Ferdinand Agu
Founding Chairman, Abuja Literary Society Board of Trustees

FOREWORD 2

This anthology is a tribute to the extraordinary writers who illuminated the ALitFest22 stage with their boundless creativity and spellbinding prose. Like beacons of literary excellence, these wordsmiths captivated audiences with their masterful storytelling, lyrical language, and unforgettable characters. We received over five hundred entries for the competition and the top fifteen entries, except for Emeka David's 'A Way of Life' withdrawn for personal reasons, are published in this collection. As we delve into the highlights of their appearances, we will rediscover the magic that unfolded when they shared their craft, inspiring readers, and writers alike. Join us on this journey to relive the sparkling moments that made ALitFest22 a radiant celebration of the written word.

Congratulations to the competition's winners – Precious Chuckson, Nana-Hauwa Sule, and Saleh, Hauwa – for their outstanding contributions. Your narratives, 'Blows of The Plague,' 'Retiring,' and 'The Year of the Elephants,' respectively, not only captivated our judges but also stood out among the submissions we received. Your triumphs, measured not only in the recognition but in the cash grants awarded, symbolize ALitFest and indeed, the Abuja Literary

Society's commitment to fostering excellence and supporting the flourishing of creative endeavors.

Emeka David's 'A Way of Life' and Uzomba, Iheoma's 'Mad Man' also deserve commendation for securing spots among the top five. The diversity and richness of these narratives showcase the kaleidoscopic range of talent that ALitFest has had the privilege to nurture and celebrate.

As shining wordsmiths who enhanced ALitFest22, you will remain, in the minds of many, the spark of inspiration for future effulgence. Your radiant quills have left an indelible mark on our literary landscape, illuminating the power of words to connect, uplift, and transform. May your examples continue to guide and motivate us, fostering a community of passionate readers and writers who cherish the beauty and magic of language.

Let us continue to celebrate the radiance of words, and the writers who wield them with skill and passion, as we look forward to the next chapter in our shared literary journey.

Victor Anoliefo
President/Founder, Abuja Literary Society

BLOWS OF THE PLAGUE

Precious Chuckson

Baban was in his mid-forties. He was tall and lean with a fine muscular build. Anytime I looked at my Baban, he reminded me of Ojiko the hunter in my English reader. My neighbors said I walked like Baban, but I never believed it. How could I possibly walk like him with my yam legs? I was in primary six then, a medium-sized girl with poor dentition and yam legs, about to take my common entrance exams.

My family lived comfortably. I wouldn't call us rich, but we had slices of fish in our soup on weekdays and chicken in our stew on Sundays, even if I had to eat the gangly legs of the chicken. Oftentimes, I'd spend minutes staring at my chicken leg after I'd finished off the plate of rice, imagining and wondering all the places the unfortunate chicken could have traveled to with those legs. Sometimes, an irritating thought would pop into my head, and I'd picture the dead chicken stomping all over dog shit. I'd quickly pop the chicken leg into my mouth before I got too irritated to eat it anymore, there was no way I was missing my Sunday protein treat.

Baban wasn't exactly a cheerful man who played with his family and made jokes over dinner. As a matter of fact, the unspoken rule was to never talk while having dinner or you'll have your ears boxed so hard that you may end up losing appetite for the food. He provided well for his family and put his children in school. Once in a month, he'd give Maman something I'd heard him call allowance. I used to think 'allowance' only meant the extra material in your sewn clothing which could be adjusted for it to fit better when you grew fatter until I started hearing it being referred to as the small wad of cash Maman received from him every four weeks. Maman would smile and collect the money, bending her knees low to thank Baban.

My mother was a beautiful woman, fair-skinned and plump. Her skin always shone whenever she applied her special homemade oils after her bath, but I think her skin even shone more brightly the week after she collected her allowance. My Baban liked that very much because I used to catch him smiling at her when she wasn't looking. Sometimes it'd seem to me that he even ogled her. It left me wondering, if Baban liked Maman so much, why didn't he ever tell her she was beautiful like I always did? Well, as long as he wasn't beating me or boxing my ears or glowering at her, and we had food to eat, mine was a happy home to me.

As an only daughter, I was left on my own very often. My brothers would never let me play with them or their friends, and I wasn't allowed out. So that often left me with plenty of time on my hands. As a result, I grew very observant, and nothing escaped my attention. One major thing I noticed was

that my father found joy in having money to cater for his family.

He worked very hard every day at the local post office. His duty there was to deliver letters. Baban considered himself above his other colleagues because he was mostly assigned to deliver letters to the big men's houses. Every morning, he'd dress like he owned a company somewhere and head off on his motorcycle. Baban was never late to work. He always taught us (actually, I'm not sure if my brothers ever listened) never to keep people waiting and that big men's time could not be wasted. He loved his job very much and spent more time at it than he did at home with his family.

Sometimes, I'd wonder if my Maman missed her husband. She was a housewife (Baban's decision) and hence stayed home most of the time. She was totally dutiful, cooked and cleaned all the time. She never said an unkind word to Baban and did everything he said. She also didn't demand anything from him and was always content with whatever he gave her.

The nature of my family didn't allow for so much family time; Baban and his work, Toro and Jami, my lazy brothers always out one place or the other leveraging Baban's theory of men learning for themselves, Maman busy somewhere all the time cooking, cleaning or preparing her oils and me, me, just there watching everything. So, when the news came over the radio that we should all stay at home, it was an awkward moment. Baban didn't stay at home though; he still rode out on his motorcycle but always with a mask on. He looked ridiculous to me and as a child, I didn't really understand why it was necessary. People spoke of a 'pandemic', but I didn't

understand what that meant until my neighbor's I-too-know daughter told me the Chinese went up into the sky and poured barrels of green-colored dust on the world and that was causing everyone who inhaled it outside their homes to fall sick. That scared me and I feared for Baban, I wasn't sure the green thing wouldn't still get into his nose. When we were asked to stay back and not come to school, I was more than glad, thankful I could be safe in my home.

One afternoon, Baban came home unusually early. Maman welcomed him and served him lunch. All the while, he muttered and scowled as he ate; he was clearly angry and so, I avoided being in sight so my clumsy self would not get me into trouble. I didn't want to further rile Baban up. Whatever it was that was annoying him was clearly bad enough. That night, I didn't snuggle up to Maman, I just stayed in my room and slept early.

The next morning, I woke up to find Baban still in his wrapper and I knew that whatever had happened the day before was the reason he didn't go to work. Nobody ever told me anything, so I had to listen in on my brothers' conversation to find out what was happening. I later heard that it was because of the plague – that was what I called the pandemic, it reminded me of the Egyptians' plague – that we couldn't go to school and Baban couldn't go to work. It turned out that all the time he was going out with his mask on, Baban wasn't even supposed to be going to work at all. That afternoon, Baban had come home early because he was harassed by some soldiers who almost punished him and asked him to go back home, despite his pleas to deliver the big man's letters. I

didn't care about Baban's letters. I was just glad he was alright and safe but clearly, Baban didn't share that view with me.

He was angry every day and scowled all the time. In later years, I would understand that Baban didn't just love his job, he held on to it desperately as that was the only source of income for him to take care of his family. I would later understand that by a slight mistake, one could lose their job and it would take forever to get another one in the part of town where we lived. Hence, Baban's anger at not being able to go to work. But at the time, I didn't understand. None of it. I only knew that my Baban was turning into something I couldn't recognize and that my home was gradually becoming something from a haunted storybook, unbearably quiet and gloomy. Everyone was careful around the house with Baban at home. My brothers would go to their friends' home, which was just a house away, in the afternoons and my ma was always busy with one thing or the other. Sometimes, I'd think she was hiding from Baban who had begun yelling at her at the slightest tick.

Then doomsday came.

As usual, Maman knelt to drop Baban's evening meal on his table and as she turned to leave, he uncovered the dish. Taking one glance at it, he began to glower. All the way from the kitchen, I could hear Baban screaming and scolding Maman for putting two pieces of fish for him. I was surprised at his anger – because it was a rule in our house never to serve Baban with just one piece of fish or meat – until I heard him say, "Don't you know how hard it is to come by money now? Do you think I have money stashed away somewhere? You

wouldn't know, would you? You have no experience of making money and all you do is sit at home and waste my money!"

As Maman tried to say a word in her defense, Baban hit her in the face. I halted mid-stride gripping the curtain with shaky fingers so hard I almost brought down its suspenders. I had never seen Baban hit her before and so, that sight scared me. I pitied Maman who had fallen to the ground and held her face staring at Baban. That must have been a big surprise to her too, as she would never have imagined that would ever happen to her.

I riveted my gaze to Baban's face and the look I saw was like that of a rabbit caught in the headlights. He seemed surprised at what he had done too. He looked at his hands as though they didn't belong to his body. The look on his face was that of surprise mixed with fear, irritation and anger. I felt sad for him, he had been so angry and irritated lately and complained a lot, I just never imagined it would result in this. That night, I dreamt of Baban whipping me with a canoe paddle because I asked for more food. When I woke up, I vowed never to dare ask for more no matter how empty my stomach felt.

I thought that nightmare would pass and all would be normal again. Baban seemed apologetic to Maman and would just sit outside under the big mango tree listening to the radio, but it happened again. This time, over the water for the evening meal that was left boiling over by Maman when she went into the house to retrieve the pot of soup to warm after preparing the meal. The next time it was over the night lamp

left burning after the moon had come out. He claimed it was bright enough and there was no need to waste the lamp fuel. And again, and again with more and more flimsy mistakes. Maman became Baban's punching bag and an outlet for his frustration.

As I watched Baban hit Maman this morning, I knew I could practically kill this man who had become a monster in three months. I no longer recognized the man he was. I mustered all the courage I could find inside my little frame and reached for Baban's bat. I walked up to him from behind. Maman saw me coming and the look in her eyes told me I shouldn't do what I had in mind, but it was already too late. With my eyes almost closed, I took a swing aimed at my father's neck. Silence. That was all I could hear. Everywhere went silent and the next thing I heard was my father's body falling to the ground with a loud thump. I stood rooted to the spot shocked at what I'd just done. The only thing I heard as I ran out of the house was, "Kiggo, what have you done?!"

RETIRING

Nana-Hauwa Sule

1

You

It is her body that wakes you up. It is past two, all is quiet and still except for your heartbeat giving rhythm to your worries. It is how your hand nestled on her waist to ascertain that she is in fact still there, she is yours, all yours; this is what keeps you up in the dark.

You roll off your bed, left leg touching the cold tile first, then the right. You feel a warmth stirring in your heart, but it is quickly replaced by a cold, your many hairs; shoulder, chest, thighs all stand in worship of this cold settling in your heart. You see the red blink of your phone on the dressing table. You tell yourself it is not Ahmad. Your mind knows that you lie to yourself, you even wonder why you bother to tell these lies.

A soft sigh eases out of the sleeping Murja. You turn to take another long look at her, wrapped in your blanket, under your roof, all yours. Murja. All your dreams and thoughts, all you have wanted since you knew what it meant to want

something, to want someone. Murja. She is yours. All yours now. A beep takes your eyes from its object of worship. You glance at your phone then, and your face ages as fast as your heartbeat.

Khalid, na tura kudin- *I have sent the money*. Please let me know once you see the alert. Dan Allah- *for God's sake*, first thing tomorrow morning, do the needful.

The needful. Your job. The money is already in your account. It is your policy, no half-pay. Pay before service. Ahmad has fulfilled his part; all you need to do is your job. The needful. You shake your head and close your eyes. You picture the women before Murja, starting from Rahila, all young and beautiful and how you had done the needful and then let them go. But here you are, in a dilemma.

You hear her whisper something in her sleep, you turn to find her smiling. She reaches out, you hold your breath. You hold it because you are not sure it is you she is reaching for. But when her fingers find your chest and you see her smile like that; that crooked smile you have grown to love, right before she draws close, you know it is you she wants. Her one hand under her head, one reaching around you to rest on your back, her warmth, enveloping you again. No, you tell yourself, this is the end. But you remove yourself from her cocoon, plant a kiss on her head and make for the bathroom. There, you remember the first.

It was on one such morning, the very first one. Before then, you turned out to be what your stepmothers had predicted, a disappointment. You couldn't stay in school; it just was not what you were good at. You tried your hand at business and

succeeded in failing at that too. Your father, bless his soul, whose burial you chose not to attend, was a big farmer. Big because he had a vast land, and he had you all; too many children from several women that he changed as he pleased. You all worked there, tilling, sowing, harvesting and in between, playing with other children. You could have gone to help your mother in those times, but she had to die when you were younger. You do not remember her. They say she was a weak one, your father only had to slap her once and she fell into a faint, from where she slipped to death but, haka Allah yaso- *that is the way God wants it.* And besides, kwananta ta kare ne- *her days were over*. And so, because you were the thirtieth or so, your father would not know if you joined other children in your small village and played with them. He wouldn't have noticed if you died too, but you loved him.

It was on one of those days you escaped farm work that you would first meet Murja playing with her friends at the village field. It was also on that field that you met Hameed, far earlier than her.

2

Hameed

He was older than you, a fellow disappointment. He left your little village before you did, before the arrival of mobile phones there. It was why it surprised you that morning when your phone rang, and it was him.

"Ni ne- *it's me*, Hameed."

You would never know how he got your number. Seeing as you had mastered the art of pickpocketing and successfully

picked your newest phone from a trader in the neighboring town, you didn't want to take chances.

And although you knew the voice, you wanted to be sure. All these traders could be diabolical. They might have gone to some boka and gotten a charm to lure you out with the voice of someone familiar.

"Hameed? Waye Hameed?"

Who is Hameed?

And then he laughs. It reassures you. You laugh too.

"Maza."

Man. You hail him. He proceeds to invite you over; he says he is somewhere in Kano. You tell him you have no transport fare and *boys are hungry.* He tells you to find a way to come over and he'll reimburse you. With the thoughts of Kano playing in your mind, you tell him that you will see him soon. To keep to your words, you steal from your father. You have done it so many times it feels like he keeps the money for you anyways. The following morning you find yourself on a bus from your small village in Katsina to Kano. He was there, in a white caftan, in a crowded park when you saw him. He had grown chubbier, a bit taller too. He was your Hameed, the brother you couldn't have had, for your mother was busy dying from a slap when she could have had you a brother. Or so your father says, and your father is wise. Was.

Hameed took you to his house. You wanted to ask how he came about a three-bedroom bungalow, but you held your tongue, rolled it and shoved it down your throat, along with all the questions you wanted to ask. Hameed would tell you, you knew he would. But first, he fed you, clothed you in a

caftan too, such that when you passed by the window on your way out with him, you almost swore it was another person's reflection you caught.

Hameed had a car. You didn't know what brand it was, but you respected the car. Not him. The car, for its patience, allowing Hameed to drive it around while he showed you around the city of Kano. Somewhere in the middle of all the talk, you asked him what the job was. You had by this time thought up the worst, perhaps the job would involve killing people. You could use a cutlass, you wanted to tell him, but you could also learn to use a gun too if you were taught, you thought. That was why you had to ask Hameed to explain when he told you he brought you here to get married. Married. You.

For a moment, you both sat quietly.

Then he explained.

One Alhaji like that. He had only recently divorced his youngest wife. In his rage, he had given her an irrevocable divorce sentence, Saki Uku. But they still loved each other, so much, and so the Alhaji was willing to allow someone else to marry his wife, consummate the wedding and divorce her the day after.

And because you still could not wrap your head around it, you asked him if that was not a very big sin. If the marriage was terminated in such a manner, was it not the teachings to remarry without the objective of disrupting the present marriage to revisit the past one? Yet Hameed said it was not *really* a sin. It was helping two people in love and getting paid while at it.

You sat before a Mallam that evening in Hameed's sitting room, the bride beside you, with Hameed and the Alhaji as witnesses. You married her, with a bride price given to you by the Alhaji himself.

You had always known marriages to be loud, your father married as many as he divorced for you to know how weddings went. Your half-sisters were mostly wedded too. This one was quiet. The Mallam left as quietly as he had conducted the ceremony. You took your new wife to the room where you had kept your bag earlier. You sat, a husband who did not know what to do with his wife.

Her name was Rahila. You knew this because she told you. This was after she saw the way you were dancing inside your body. You were sweating under the fan blades and fidgeting with your cap. She asked you if you had taken a woman to bed before. You shook your head. She smiled at you kindly before she took your shaky hand and placed your palm on her breast. You sucked in air. It was small and soft. You wondered why you didn't try this out with the girls in your village. She took off your caftan and then took off her gown. She stood before you and your heart started to run forward. You were sure your heart would jump out of your chest to present itself to her in worship. That night she showed you all the wet dreams you had could come true. It was clear why the Alhaji would not let her go. She knew where hands should go, where her mouth should be and at what pace to take you. She made you a man.

At dawn, you took a bath together. You led her in prayers. You remember wondering if it was not testing God, standing

before Him, praising him for letting you live another day to complete your sins. After prayers, she held you close and thanked you. And then you told her, Na Sake ki- *I divorce you.* You said it thrice.

After Rahila, the rest came and went like flies, none perching long enough. Hameed retired early and left for Maiduguri. He wanted you to come with him, but you refused. The Kano life was good. The women kept your bed warm, you liked that you changed them like that. Your services were discreet, your customers increased, and so did your fees. You didn't return to the village after that. You had found a home in the thighs of the different women you filled. But you were empty. Very empty.

Hameed called as often as he could. He had a wife, he said on one occasion. A real wife. One he married in a loud ceremony. One where he paid with his own money. Another time, he called to say that he had a daughter. He said she was the smallest, most beautiful thing he ever saw. And because you could not bring yourself to let go of all your pieces, you refused to imagine that you could be better than all this, that you could be like Hameed. And so, you stopped picking his calls. Even when he messaged that the village where he settled was raided by gunmen once, even when the church in his area was set ablaze, even when some people were kidnapped, and others massacred. You ignored all his messages and calls. You heard on the radio that Maiduguri was not as safe as it used to be. You told yourself you would call Hameed one of these days, just to be sure he was alive and safe, but you didn't. You still haven't.

3

Murja

You remembered Ahmad from long ago. One of those men you met at a naming, or a wedding, or somewhere you cannot recall, for you kept no friends. You were only in places because you needed to be in circles that would fetch your fees. When he called, you thought that someone had directed him to you, but he said he knew you. He had sought you out, he said you helped a friend of his, and now he needed your assistance. He said he couldn't come with the wife, but that she would locate you instead. He would wire the money to your account first thing the following morning. He said he could not be seen anywhere near your house, his reputation mattered. When you thought about it, you wondered if he was not the one on campaign posters. He was trying to be a senator or something. Some senator that was, you chuckled. As you contacted your Mallam, you toyed with the idea of publishing the names of all the politicians whose wives had graced your bed. You imagined all the possible scenarios, all ending with you dead, dying in different ways.

The wife was late. The Mallam had been seated for thirty minutes or more. He tried to make conversation, but you refused to oblige him. Instead, you turned away and pretended to doze off in your sitting position. Sometimes, you placed yourself in his body; tall, lean, head wrapped in a dirty brown turban with a small Qur'an in the pocket of a faded Baban Riga. You imagined this again as you pretended to sleep, pondering how life would have been administering secret weddings that you knew were mere contracts.

The wife eventually arrived, you 'woke' up, and the ceremony started as usual, with you leaving your mind somewhere sane, where the silent ceremony could not haunt. The Mallam finished, collected his money from you, and left. You locked your door and faced your newest wife, staring at her feet as she had veiled herself from head to toe.

"Oh Allah."

You knew the voice. It was why you immediately glanced at the veiled face. You had heard that voice in your dreams only about a thousand times. The wife, she unveiled herself, and then your world as you knew it, came to sit at her feet.

"Murja."

"Ai na san Salim ne," *I knew it was Salim*, she said. She sounded happy. She walked to you and placed herself in your arms.

You thought, if this were a dream, you'd wish to never wake up.

"Salim," she whispered. "Salim."

Salim.

You wanted to tell her there was no Salim and Khalid had taken his place. That you left Salim in your little village. That Salim was the boy who watched her playing with her friends in the field. That Salim was the one who told her, even as young as he was then, that he would do anything for her. You wanted her to know that Salim died the day she left. It was almost like a cruel joke. Her uncle had come to take her away to Kano where, he claimed, he had found her a husband. What were you both then, fourteen? Fifteen? And although you had only secretly held hands and walked in the company

of Hameed, you knew that there was something there between you and her. Even Hameed, who teased you initially, came to understand that you had this joy about you when her name came up, and that when you saw her, he would stop existing in your eyes.

When she broke the news of her impending marriage, you went to your father. You told him you had found a wife, that this would make you happy. For a second you thought, as he stroked his beard and asked you who the girl was, that he loved you and wanted happiness to clothe your heart. And so, you told him about Murja, how the night stole the kohl from her eyes to beautify itself. Instead, he seemed to ignore most of what you had said and told you to put in more effort on the farm, suggesting that he might let you marry from the proceeds of the following year's harvest. Besides, he mentioned, there were several other girls. Several who would be better than Murja.

Now, in your arms, you realized that there was no one like her. There was no one. Of all the bodies that you had canvassed, hers was the one that had your heart threatening to explode. Suddenly, there was too much air in your lungs. You were choking on your breath as hot tears escaped your eyes. You took her under the light hanging from the ceiling. You undressed her there, studying every line of her skin, learning the shape and size of every curve. As you learned, you cried. She cried too. And then you both became one, under that light, until you poured all the love you could muster into her.

When your breaths returned to normal, you asked her how she came to be there. She told you she was the first of the three wives Ahmad had, and that her being here was destiny. She said destiny wanted her to have you just once at least, just this once. Despite your attempts to inquire further, she wouldn't tell you what went on with her when she left the village. You figured from her moist eyes that it was best left unsaid. Instead, you told her about yourself. How, when she left, you wanted to have so much money, to steal her back from her husband. So, you stole, everything you could steal and sell, till it became a habit. Until you couldn't stop. Until Hameed helped you stop. She didn't ask further questions about him, and you were grateful for you would not have known what to say. Then, when all the stories and reminiscing ended, you watched her sleep. Until sleep took you too and you both punctuated the air with the sound of your breaths.

This is why you have been up since two, worries running through your mind as night slowly gave way to dawn. For a moment, you drift into troubled sleep with images of Ahmad chasing you with a cutlass, of you searching blindly for safety; images of Murja running with you, chasing shelter; images of blood, of your bloodied head and Ahmad's cutlass.

When you wake up, tired from all the running in your sleep, you lead her in prayers. This time, you take your time to pray, to *actually* speak to God. You tell Him that you want her to stay, you tell Him that you would let go of all your misdeeds if only she would remain yours. You would even go back to your family house and renew kinship ties if she stayed. You

are ready to give anything. You want her to just, stay. You think of things to offer God, you want Him to know that you would give everything. Just make her stay. It does not feel like He is listening, or that He will answer, but you throw yourself at Him still.

She takes your hand as the prayers end. She looks into your eyes, searching for something. Anything.

"Stay," you whisper.

She remains quiet for a while and in that moment, you fear that she might not want to.

"Ahmad fa?" *And Ahmad?*

"We'll run away." As you say this, you know that you don't know where to go.

She lets go of your hand to pick up her veil. "Ina zaka kai mu?" *Where will you take us?*

You briefly consider calling Hameed but dismiss the thought. Your phone starts ringing again. It is still Ahmad. You decide there and then that the phone will not come with you and so you do not take it as you go to the door. Car keys in hand, you open it. You hold out your other hand.

"Please…"

She places her hand in yours. You lead her to your car and start the engine.

You do not know where you are going, but Murja is by your side. You are full.

THE YEAR OF THE ELEPHANT

Hauwa Saleh Abubakar

When Jamal's nightmares come, they start with a yellow cab.

He will dream of Malik and remember the yellow cab he inherited from his father and the dent at the back from an accident a year ago. He will remember how Malik wrapped an arm around his mother and how he grinned and said, "No need to fear Mother, your son is not ready to die yet."

"Death is not a plaything," she said, but he laughed and held on to her unaware of the remnants of fear gripping her heart. He will remember Malik's favorite blue shirt with the image of a white elephant at the front. It was hard to think of Malik without thinking of the shirt.

He will remember the smell of musk, and how the scent lingers every time Malik passes by. He will remember his black saucer-like eyes, full of mischief and secrets; they always seem to conceal so much: maybe the stress, maybe to hide what he wasn't able to conceal behind his smile.

But Jamal doesn't want to remember, because every time he does he thinks of holes.

Aisha can't remember Malik without remembering the stories carried by the wind about killings at the border. She will think of a hot summer evening, and a young man in a blue shirt who stood beside his yellow car to talk about the rumors and how there was something fishy about the explanations dished out by the President.

When she remembers Malik, the memory hits like a tsunami. She remembers music blasting from a club and the laughter from Malik and his friends as they sat playing a game of cards, talking about politics and women and the education that some of them had to stop along the way. They talked about almost everything apart from the skeletons they so fiercely protected from the sight of others. She will remember rolling her eyes at some of their conversations that found their way through the window along with the cool breeze as she tucked herself to bed, comforted by the rose-scented candle burning on her bedside table. She had once told him she hated his choice of friends, but he never listened to anyone.

Aisha doesn't want to remember, because when she does, she thinks of seven-year-old kids playing in the sand that turned into an ocean of blood.

When the neighbors think of Malik, they usually remember how they shrugged their shoulders at the news of war and how strange vibrations woke them up in the middle of the night. Some lost a hand, or a leg, or their sight, or nothing but their sanity. They will remember how their shock quickly evaporated and was replaced by a strong desire to survive the

night. They will remember how they wished the darkness will come once again to cover the city, so they can become blind to all they had lost.

They will remember the somber morning after that, and the voice of the President on a Radio Station asking them to stay safe. “It was an unfortunate and unforeseen circumstance, and we promise to do everything in our might to see that it never happens again.” Perhaps, if they had energy, they would have asked him if he had seen his daughter die in front of him; if his son had lost a leg; they would have asked him if he had to scrap his wife's blood from the floor and if the blood still stained his palms even after washing it away.

When people think of Malik, they will remember how their tears had dried from the sun or maybe the bomb or maybe their eyes just couldn't spare to lose anything again. They will remember how their hearts broke with every breath. How they had to lock the schools, how the hospital almost drowned in blood before they bombed it too.

They will remember how buildings fell as if they never once stood on their feet. They will remember waking up in fear and wondering how much more they will have to lose before it all ends. They will remember how their voices found a home in their throats and refused to leave. They will remember the sadness that crept into their bodies and wrapped itself around their bones.

They will remember Sarah, the little girl who lived a few streets away, who went out to play but had only the remnants of her body, returned to her mother. They will remember how they couldn't stop the blood from flowing freely through the

streets. They will remember how stories of war always seemed like something that happened far away; how seasons changed but did nothing about their pain. They will remember how most of them never cared about the news of death and grief. How they never stopped and thought that maybe this could have affected them too.

Perhaps they will remember how they all had something to say but forgot about the bodies immediately after their heads touched the comfort of their beds. They will remember the sweet aroma of bread baking at the bakery nearby. They will remember Hannah, the woman who used to sell delicious homemade jam. They will remember the day the jam never came and the rumors that spread. Some said she was taken away from her home, some said she died a peaceful death in her sleep. But those who knew better knew there was nothing peaceful about death anymore, either the bullets or the bombs get you before the fear does.

But now, they don't want to remember because they can't sleep through all the voices in their heads.

When Nuwairriyah thinks of Malik, she will think of the first day she saw him walk into her mother's shop to get freshly baked bread. She will think of how reluctant she was to move to a new neighborhood, just two years to graduation and how angry she was at her mother for making such a decision without considering the life she had to leave behind. She will think of a time when her emotions didn't tie her to the bed. She will think of cool weekend evenings and Malik's yellow

cab in front of her mother's shop. She will think of stolen moments of holding hands and staring into each other's eyes, convinced that the pupils there saw nothing but their bright future. She will think of random conversations about a lot of things that she couldn't discuss with anyone, especially her mother.

Each time Nuwairriyah thinks of Malik, she will remember the night she told him the truth about her father, and how she never knew him - a shameful secret she had to carry her entire life. She will remember how she bared her soul to him one night after they had seen a movie together, despite her fear that he would leave her, the daughter of no one: the bearer of her mother's shameful past; the bastard child caught in between trying to exist and hoping to die in a society that will never accept the truth of her birth. But he had been silent, and he had looked at her with an unreadable expression and he had said, "I don't know if my mother will accept that." And she remembers how her heart dropped into her stomach. How her hopes were shattered, and she realized that it was stupid of her to have hoped differently.

When Nuwairriyah remembers Malik, she will remember the last time he had looked her straight in the eye and how every time she saw him after then was a stab to her heart. She will remember his eyes a few weeks later when he came begging, telling her that he didn't know what came over him. "I am sorry," he said. "I am sorry for being such a terrible human being, for leaving you when you needed me the most." She will remember how she forced herself to turn away from his pleading eyes, she will remember how she tried to forgive

him but she couldn't, because she was afraid he would one day use that against her; like others have.

She was afraid of that unreadable expression in his eyes that had haunted her for weeks. She was afraid of what might happen if she gave him another chance, and mostly she was afraid of the possibility that maybe things will turn out well only to go wrong again.

When Nuwairriyah thinks of Malik she will remember walking away from him a week before the war-hoping that her mother will soon make a decision to move away and perhaps God answered her prayers through the sound of the bombs, through the blood and the dead bodies piled up in the middle of the town. Perhaps, God answered her prayers through a friend who went to the shop and never came back, through a body buried in the ground, the earth claiming what belongs to it and embracing it closer than anyone ever could.

She then will remember the last time she saw him. She will remember the light had begun to fade away from his eyes. She will remember that he stared at her long enough, as if he was afraid of approaching her and she will remember how he had shaken his head and got into his yellow cab and sped away. She will remember how much she cried that night and how much she had wished the bomb got her instead.

Nuwairriyah doesn't want to remember because when she does; she thinks of gunshots and blood.

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When Amal thinks of Malik, she will remember how she had weird feelings about a baby growing in her womb. She will remember the fear of failure and the inability to hold up to

her own expectations. She will remember the days after birth and how the sight of the little creature made her want to scream. She will remember the desire to destroy anything that came close to her. She will remember looking at the baby and wishing it would go back to wherever it came from.

When Amal thinks of Malik, she will remember how she hated her reflection: the reflection of a woman who loathed her child. Who couldn't stand breastfeeding that helpless thing? She will remember her husband's attempt to bring her back, she would remember the doctor he brought at the time to help her push her depression away. The secret they both had to hide to avoid ridicule from their closed community. To avoid people telling her how much she had lost trust in God enough to see a therapist, enough to admit that God wasn't strong enough to handle her affairs.

When Amal thinks of Malik, she will remember all the memories etched in her head. She will remember when he was seven and the bad cut he had from falling down a tree, how the blood had scared her to death. She will remember when she caught him kissing a girl when he was sixteen and how angry she had been that she hauled her shoe at him; she will remember the days he made her cry for refusing to do even the simplest of things; for refusing to eat a meal she had put hours into because it wasn't what he wanted. Whenever she thinks of him, she remembers the day his father passed away. She will remember the eyes of the nurse who claimed she had forgotten the drugs she was supposed to give him and had somehow administered the wrong medication. She will

remember how Malik tightly held her, protecting the young, scared nurse from her wrath.

She will remember how she had fantasized about the blood of the young woman staining the white tiles of the hospital floor. She would remember how everyone told her patience was a virtue and she should leave everything to God. She will remember the rage, the rage of agreeing to leave everything in the hands of God when she could have had justice by herself. She would remember how she missed prayers because she was angry at the God who watched things like this happen and did nothing about it. She will remember saying "If Mahmoud lived his entire life worshipping a God and he died such a horrible death; what is the point in all this?" And she will remember how she went back to her shop and let the colors of the wool help her in her healing process.

When Amal thinks of Malik, she will remember the sorrow that filled both their eyes on the day all the young men were forcefully taken away to become the tools to bring a peace they weren't sure would ever come. She will remember how her voice was locked in her body and refused to leave after the announcement. She will remember how she wished it was a false rumor and they didn't really mean that.

She will remember the fear in Malik's eyes, the pleading to hold him tight and never let go. She will remember the tears he had tried to fight since the war started. She will remember how she longed to hold him in her arms and tell him it's okay to let it all out. That maybe the war won't get them, that maybe it was a nightmare they would all one day wake up from. And

maybe the sun will rise again someday, and all the blood will dry into the soil.

She will remember how she couldn't say all those things when he was about to leave and how all she could do was hold him tight because all the words on her tongue refused to become coherent enough to be let out, refused to pass the walls of her mouth and let him know that even though she isn't there he wasn't alone and she will always pray he will come back safe. She will remember how she tried to dismiss the nagging voice at the back of her mind, telling her that perhaps this would be the last time she would see him alive.

When Amal thinks of him, she will remember how deeply she breathed in his scent as she held him close, how she had tried to memorize everything about him to keep it safe before he came back, if at all he came back. She will remember how they had stood and watched the children being hurdled into a truck like sheep for sale. How the President didn't have the decency to come himself but had sent a delegate who had given them a long speech about why their children needed to be taken away and reminded them of how helpless they were. She will remember how most of them were too lost in their grief to listen. She will remember the sleepless nights of fear. Wondering where her son was. If he was alive, if he was being fed well? If the war will ever stop or if their children will ever come back or maybe if they will ever come back the same? Will Malik still drive his father's car?

The car she had kept clean so that when he came back he wouldn't meet it covered in dust. Sometimes, even when the foodstuff isn't enough, she cooked enough for two in case he

arrived unannounced. And all she did was wait in her room, for a knock on the brown door, for the familiar footsteps on the stairs, till the day it came.

Amal doesn't want to remember, because when she does she thinks about limp hands and lavender curtains with stains that refused to disappear no matter how much they were washed.

Perhaps, when the people think of Malik, they will always remember the day the soldiers came back, most with their arms intact but there was something wrong with their eyes. The people will also remember how little they cared. For the war had ended and there was no more washing of dead bodies, there will be no more blood and no more tears.

When people think of Malik, they may remember the silence that followed the war and how fear had carved its name in every household. They will remember how high they jumped at every sound. They will remember how they never asked about the bodies or the bullets or the war or why Malik sold his father's yellow cab when he came back or why he always locked himself in the room or why his saucer-like eyes dimmed like a moonless night.

Maybe they will remember the feeling as if they were invisible elephants hanging from the sky, pushing all their weight on their shoulders. And how they had all learnt to hide under the bed and fold the screams back into their stomachs. Perhaps, when people think of Malik, they will remember all

the Maliks in every household with emotionless eyes. They will remember locked gates and absent neighbors.

They will remember the bright yellow cab and the eyes twinkling with mischief. Not the red-colored splashes on lavender curtains, not the piercing scream of a grieving mother.

Perhaps, they will wish to remember everything apart from the body sprawled out on the floor with a gun in its hand and a bullet in its brain.

MAD MAN

Iheoma J. Uzomba

…for that well-spoken man who changed my views about those we consider 'mad'

As you clear out your father's things from the bedroom, you see his face on everything he once owned, once touched and possessed. You find a shoebox of love poems on a rack – old, crinkled papers with his cursive handwriting scrawled thinly on them. He had written the poems for your mother and sent them in the days of their courting. One of the lines read: *as eternal as God is/ your name sprouts a rose on my tongue each time I pray* and another reads: *I love you/ not because love is such a thing to possess/but because, by default, has it possessed me.* You read the words over again and they take such lightness gliding down your throat. That was how simple a man he was: full of love and all else; full of light and god.

In the courtyard, several women have gathered around your mother, telling her to take heart and be strong for you. You can see her throw herself about the spacious yard while

the women run after her with stray wrappers to hide her exposed skin. It makes you cringe, makes you want to call your father up from the wooden coffin in which his body has been confined. There are the men also who have come to do nothing else but drink the Malt and chew the meat shared for the attendees of the funeral. All they do is bob their heads to the sublime music as your father's corpse is lowered into the grave. How cruel a thing death is.

Days later, you would find the brightness of morning an insult and the loud laughter bouncing off the walls of your ears, nothing short of jest. How dare the world be happy and continuous in your weariest and dreariest time of existence? How dare God sit behind all that ether and blue sky and let the sun slip away freely like a bird? For now, you only look on as the men seal the grave with red sand.

"You're a big boy now oh," a man says, patting your shoulders. "Do not let your father's house fall apart in your hands. Take care of your mother, do you hear me?"

"Yes," you answer, your consciousness stewed. Somehow you wish it was all a lie or a dream from which you would be pinched awake.

It is harder to mourn behind the silk of familiarity, way harder to accept the reality of loss.

You were not there when it happened, but the men say it was an accident. Your father's kabu kabu Peugeot had run into a trailer and tipped off the road into a ditch. They say his head had been squashed when they arrived at the scene to recover his body. They say the car had also been damaged beyond repair to have been carried home the way it was. They

say the remains of his body were too terrible a sight for you and your mother to view. So, they put it in the coffin and restrained you from taking a look in the box.

Surely, something was amiss, you thought. Something was not right.

The drive from Owerri to Nsukka took five hours, rather than the usual four. While the bus sped past other vehicles, meandering between lanes, you imagined your father in the driver's seat, his hands on the steering wheel, rolling from side to side. Suddenly, you thought of the bus flying off the road into a ditch with everyone in it squealing for help and dying nonetheless.

"God forbid!" you said, jutting once again into reality.

You would see your father's ghost in Nsukka for the first time at the bus stop. While all the passengers had alighted from the bus, making their way through the busy path ahead, you remained in the bus gathering your bags into a heap on the floor. When you stepped out of the bus at last with your luggage, you saw your father in his familiar coral blue t-shirt and wash jeans, walking down the path crammed with bodies and goods. You knew it was him from his limping feet and unsteady gait. Nothing else mattered when you flung your luggage to the floor and went after him, pushing and hovering past the bodies on the road.

"Father!" you shouted, running as fast as your legs could take you, ignoring the curses thrown at you by bystanders as you pushed some persons to make your way.

As though your father had heard your voice, he turned slightly and then hastened his footsteps until he had disappeared quickly into the sea of bodies spanning the market in front. Disappointed, you stood by the roadside screaming his name, begging him to show himself to you but he was gone.

You returned home unsettled, stirred to alertness. It was him, your father, and you knew it. Yet, a part of you insisted that you were only daydreaming, only engulfed too tightly by grief to be hallucinating. So, you chose to ease the thought and recline into the safe space of video-gaming to get him off your mind.

The second time your father's ghost surfaced again, you had just finished a lecture and were on your way back to your small student apartment at Odenigwe when you saw him stop a bike and get on it.

"Father!" You hurled the word into the air boldly, stilling the passersby unconsciously.

The bike zoomed off at once, leaving behind a swirl of smoke and dust. But you would not give up. You mounted another bike and asked the bikeman to go after your father.

"He's in front of us," you assured. "I saw him hop on a bike."

The bikeman went after your father in hot pursuit but he was gone again, and you could not make out his whereabouts nor the mysteriousness behind it.

"I no de see any bike for front again o," the bike man said accursedly, as though he somehow suspected that you were crazy. "Your money na two thousand naira."

You pulled two crisp notes from your wallet and gave them to the man without saying anything. All you could think about was your father, the man who you had seen twice. No, you were not crazy. No, it was not a dream. It was him, really.

For three days straight, you could do nothing else than picture your father's legs as they mounted on the bike and zoomed off before your eyes. Somehow, the thought of him running away from you despite all the sorrow you felt about his departure numbed your limbs and swelled anger in your insides. *How could he go without saying anything to you? How could he be so mindless and cruel?* Slowly, this image of your father departing transformed into the darkness rocking your sunrise, the shadow accompanying your dawn. You would want to ungather, to unstring all the tethers that make you human.

The day you set out to find your father from wherever he was hidden, you were not mad, the clouds were not ridden with grief. You took to the streets with your eyes keen to spot out your father, to take him home with you. Twice, you found his face on the shoulders of random men but when you looked at their legs and examined their gaits, you decided that they were nothing like your father after all. When you ran into the bush and tore your shirt into shreds, it was because you wanted everyone else to look and see the darkness which had begun to flower in your chest.

"Have you seen him?" you asked a woman selling plantains in a small shed by the road.

"Seen who?" she retorted.

"My father. He was here the other day. Right here at this spot. I saw him before he disappeared."

The woman's face contorted into a frown as she circled her head with her hands and snapped them into the air quickly to ward off whatever evil she thought you had brought to her stall.

You ignored the woman and moved on to other persons along the market line, asking after your father but they pushed you out of their sheds and called you mad. Mad man. The children threw stones and sticks at you while you made angry faces at them because they were the mad ones, their fathers and mothers were the mad ones, not you.

When the news got to your mother in Owerri that you had run mad, she dialed your number still, to hear from you.

"Kachi," her frail voice echoed into your phone speaker.

You kept silent. It was not because you did not want to speak with her but because you thought that she could never understand what you had seen, she could never believe it either.

"Kachi, I understand you."

"You do?"

"Yes." She let out a long sigh into the phone. "It's alright, *inugo*?"

You nodded, even though you knew she could not see you physically.

"Your uncle would be coming tomorrow to see you with some drugs. It is not as if we think you are sick or crazy…it is just for your own good. For your safety." The words swarmed from her lips with such surety that made you believe in her; you actually always trusted her.

"Okay," you said.

You were sprawled on the floor when the knocks came on the door. It had to be your uncle, you thought. He had brought the drugs perhaps. You unbolted the door and found your father standing there in his jumper trousers and worn-out shirt.

"Kachi," he said. "I brought the drugs."

"Why?" you asked. "Where did you get them if they said you were dead and your grave was right there in the house?"

"What is wrong with you, this boy!" he yelled. "It is me, your uncle."

"I see. And that is how you mean to sneak your way into my life again, by claiming to be my uncle?" You hissed. "Do you know what you have caused?"

"Listen…"

"Do you know what your departure did to us? To me?"

"Kachi, I'm sorry, you're mistaking…"

"Maybe you should return to your grave for good and leave my life alone!" You grabbed him by the neck, squeezing as hard as your fingers could go. Even when he struggled for breath and tried to shake you off, you stiffened your grip all the more, watching him choke and cough until he collapsed

to his knees in front of you. "Very well. Farewell at last, father."

Inside of you, something spiked. Perhaps it was sanity or the absence of it. All at once, you wanted to shudder and crawl, hide and run, scream and seek silence, bowl and bleed. At last, you would seek healing in the open streets, tossing your clothes to the wind and telling all that cared to listen that you killed your dead father. All you wanted was for the world to see that grief had cast its long shadow on you and in truth, the darkness was aching.

FILIN JANI

Haruna Solomon Binkam

Abu's father, seated on the sofa, fine-tuned the small radio on the side stool as we sprawled on the carpet.

"...the gang was apprehended along..." said the female voice on the radio.

Abu and I looked at each other and smiled, knowing that the gang was going to be shot at Filin Jini and we would go and watch the execution like we did two months past. Then, the criminals, seven of them, were tied against sand-filled iron drums and bulleted following the order of a commanding soldier. It was the way the soldiers positioned themselves and pulled the triggers that Abu and I admired the most. The alacrity of the bullets and how they wolfed into the flesh of the criminals, shattering bones and spurting blood were thrilling as well. We had hoped to become those kinds of soldiers, to be like Abu's father.

The radio woman continued "...the gang members include Ibrahim Audu, Obinna Amadi, Biodun Jacob, Bitrus Walshak, and their notorious leader, Emeka Nsofor."

My ears twitched in confusion when the last name entered. My father's name.

Abu didn't know. His father didn't either. Abu's family had moved into the military barracks in our community recently. They didn't know my family beyond my friendship with Abu. My mother had once told me the name when I cried to her that the kids in my class were laughing at me for bearing her name, a woman's name, as my surname. She had said my father died when I was not yet born, and it was improper for one to bear a dead man's name. I believed her. However, I nestled the name in my heart.

I turned and looked at Abu again. He was still grinning. He was shrouded in the anticipation of when the execution would take place. The darkness in the parlor thickened and part of it sneaked into my heart. Even when power was restored, I didn't feel any light inside me.

Abu shouted, "Up Nepa!" I didn't. I couldn't. He sprang to the wall and pressed the knob of the stabilizer with his big toe. He pushed the TV's plug into the socket and poked the remote.

Abu's father switched off his radio and fixed his eyes on the TV where the presenter was talking about the apprehended criminals. The screen showed five men sitting on the ground with soldiers standing over them. Their ruffian faces were clearly shown, with the face of the leader Emeka Nsofor lasting longer than the rest. Abu turned to me with a playful mock and said that I looked like the man. My heart jolted because he was right. The man had the same light skin, the same wide nose, the same thick lips, and the same bony

forehead. Abu's mother screamed his name from the kitchen, and he dashed out.

"How is school?" his father asked as commercials played on the TV.

"F-fine, fine Sir," I responded.

"How are your parents? Your father…is he a civil servant?"

My throat panicked in a sudden spasm that barred words from coming out. I wondered why he had to be specific about my father and his work. Did he too, like Abu, see the resemblance between the armed robber on TV and me? My lips twitched as I struggled to pull words from my mouth.

"My father... They are fine," I said, switching my answer from the question about my father to the one about my parents.

Abu scuttled back with a bowl of tuwon masara in one hand and kuka soup in the other. He dropped it on the rug as soon as he reached me and formed tight fists to show how much pain he had endured from the hot plates. His face glowed with a heroic expression. I couldn't mold a lump of the tuwo and dip it inside the delicious kuka soup that had pieces of dried fish strewn in it. It wasn't because the tuwo was hot; no, it was because my mind was wondering if the man on the TV was the same person whom my mother said had died. Abu swallowed unhindered. Abu's father, who had stood to answer the telephone on the desk by the window, dropped it and walked out of the house. Where was he going? Why didn't he continue asking me questions? I washed my hands in the side bowl, wiped them on my trousers, and told Abu goodbye.

"You didn't even eat," he said, but I was already on my way out.

I ran into the compound, breathing heavily. Smoke swirled out of the small kitchen outside.

"Mama, Mama!" I shouted. "Mama!"

The air in my nose was hot, and my lips cracked. Harmattan was at its peak. I ran to the kitchen where Kaka, my grandmother, was seated on a low stool by the fireplace. Her hands were palmed on the pot cover. She was boiling herbal tea.

"Where is Mama?"

Kaka looked up at me with the sluggishness of old age. Her red eyes teared as she peered into mine, keenly searching for the reason for the urgency in my voice.

"Any problem?" she asked and pushed in a half-burnt stick into the fire.

I blurted, "I saw Emeka Nsofor!"

Kaka stiffened, heaved, and muttered incomprehensible guttural words. She maintained a terrifying silence for a while then began to pull out the burnt sticks from the fire, one at a time, then sprinkled water on them.

"Emeka?" she asked as if she had not properly heard me.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In Abu's house, on TV."

She sagged the sides of her mouth "How do you know him?"

"Mama told me about him. I look like him, even Abu saw the resemblance."

"What did your mother say about him?"

"That he is my father, that he died before I was born."

"I don't know the man you saw on the TV but, as your mother had said, your father is dead. Any man who abandons his responsibility is no better than a dead man. How old are you? Ten or eleven? And since the Biafra war ended, in all these years, this man has not cared to come and find out how you and your mother are doing. Since he chose Biafra over you, forget about him."

I had not realized mama had been standing behind me until her warm tears fell on my neck. She whimpered into the house. I followed her.

Some days later, I went to the barracks again. I was curious about knowing what Abu knew concerning the execution, but he was more interested in watching a James Bond movie. His father wasn't at home and his mother was in the Nabor market. His two little sisters were playing outside. He slotted the cassette and said he overheard his father saying the criminals would be executed soon, very soon. He fingered the video remote at the forward button and stopped at scenes where James Bond was fighting with great skills or

wriggling in the sheets with women. I wasn't interested. My mind pondered on the execution.

"What… what time will they be shot?" I asked.

"Usual morning hours now. This set of criminals are stubborn o! I heard my father telling my mother that the Government had been chasing them for years," Abu said and dived onto the three-seater cushion, mimicking a James Bond stunt.

"Walahi, they have plenty of money. How I wish they will dash me the money before they die. Even if it's just half," Abu said and cartwheeled from the seater to the floor.

Normally I would have wished for their guns since Abu had wished for their money, but I didn't. I didn't stay long till his mother's return even after he told me that she would be cooking talia.

In the night I dreamt of thugs, guns, soldiers, and blood.

The execution morning came with a thick haze. I huddled in my blanket and shut my eyes and mind from the imagination of bullets storming into the man who I looked like. When the sun started warming up, Mama gathered my dirty clothes from the corner of the house where I had dumped them. She started washing them, singing one of Kaka's solemn tunes. Then she called for me to at least come out and brush. I climbed down from the bed and stepped into the compound with my toothbrush and a cup of water in my hands. I found

mama bent over a basin of clothes. Her teeth jittered and her body quivered in the cold.

Abu's voice trailed through our quiet compound, calling me out, ahead of his lanky frame. I was startled, as was Mama. She heaved and hissed. I rinsed my mouth and stood with reluctance. Mama only nodded when he greeted her. I wore a sweater and followed him out. Mama knew where we were going. Would she come and watch her runaway husband get fired a series of shots? Would she cry or curse him out? I wondered.

Abu strode while I struggled to keep up the pace. We soon burst onto the dusty main road leading to Filin Jini. The military van was a little ahead when we joined the multitude of people swarming along. Red-brown dust twirled behind the van. The older people among us drifted to the sides of the road and maneuvered their way through the dried grasses and shrubs. Abu, I, and the other children didn't leave the dusty road. We coughed, and our eyes watered. We fanned our faces with our hands.

At Filin Jini, our townspeople gathered as the soldiers paraded the criminals out of the van. Abu held me by my hand and we squeezed through the grown-ups to the front where we could see more clearly. The five criminals were in handcuffs and their legs were chained. I threw random looks at their notorious faces in search of Emeka Nsofor's. I was on the third face when Abu yelled in my ear, above the surrounding noises

"See… Walahi, you look like him fa," he pointed with glee.

My heart pricked as I gazed at the man in the direction of Abu's finger. His face was tough and fearless. He had the most ripped muscles among all the gang members. His arm was the size of my thigh, and a thick scar stretched across his upper arm.

"Criminals!" "Robbers!" "Evil people."

People screamed and spat curses as the soldiers tied them up against the sand-filled drums.

"Yan iska, bastards!" Abu cursed in a high-pitched voice and flashed out his five fingers in an insulting manner in their direction.

"What is it?" he asked me as he noticed my passiveness in the bustle, the event that I would normally cheer along.

"Nothing," I said, unable to articulate any curse as I tried to flash my fingers too. My opened hand hung in mid-air when Emeka's eyes met mine, or so it seemed. A sudden surge of unrest rushed through every part of me. Did he see me? Did he see the resemblance? I turned sideways, unsure of who he was looking at. My eyes met Mama's own, just beside me in the rowdy crowd. I had no idea she was there. Was he looking at her? Did he see both of us and make any connections? Mama's hands were clasped on her chest like she was pleading.

The firing squad took position with each soldier aiming at a criminal. Abu slapped my attention from Mama and back to the execution. He was pointing at his father in his usual proud manner of a soldier's son. His father squinted behind his barrel, aiming at his criminal, Emeka.

"They gave my father the most stubborn one!" he boasted

I was silent, but my chest was turbulent. At once, I wanted him to die for neglecting me and Mama. And at that instant again, I wanted him to live. I had conflicting feelings. My mind kept exuding varying emotions until I heard the commanding soldier ask the criminals to say their last wishes. My mind paused, waiting to hear what my father would say.

I watched their lips flap open and close except for my father's. He was mute and was looking in Mama's direction. Her right hand was raised in a wave-like manner and tears trickled down her face. She turned her eyes to me and then back to him. A tear ran down my face too. My father followed the direction of Mama's eyes and his eyes rested on me. Tears pooled in his eyes. His lips twitched like he wanted to say something. And just when a hint of remorse surfaced on his face, the commanding soldier announced, "Time up!"

THE GRIM CHRONICLES OF BOYS WHO ARE NOT BOYS

Chidera Solomon Anikpe

"How do you kill a boy who has died many times before?"
"Simple."
"Just kiss him goodnight."
-Feyiz

For Ziva, grief is a tenuously long and continuous thing. It is constant, alive, sentient, growing. Always metamorphosing; pain into fear into loss into laughter and back again.

But grief is a beautiful thing too. It carries the scent of rain-kissed earth, fluttering and floundering like a flower in the last vestiges of bloom, resonating like long-forgotten melodies that echo through his ears, settling into that place where bone meets flesh, melding into him, scattering over his skin like cold shivers until every part of him is tainted by it.

When this happens, Ziva takes a stroll past Ajayi Crowther street, hands tucked into his pockets, legs taking one slow, careful step after the other as though reassuring himself of the

earth beneath his feet, of the gathering of solidness, of the lance of pain that tears against the corner of his chest.

He pauses before Mama Agbani's store, the yellow fluorescent light from the quaint shop catching against his fine brown skin, illuminating him, golden and beautiful and yet so utterly breakable.

"*See your head like coconut.*"

The words are an echo of his mind, but he hears it so clearly, so vividly, it almost startles him.

Then he turns towards the main street and walks onward.

And it is a thing like farewell.

Aunty Dara always said that you were such a troublesome child. She said it exactly like it sounded, *"Ah! Feyiz, you too trouble when you small."* Her voice was packed full of awe as though she never expected a drop of calmness from you, as though your new solemnity were a thing even her pastor could not have prophesied if the Holy Spirit had come down from heaven and pushed the thought into his mind.

"*Na so so waahh! Waahh! Na im your mouth dey shout every time.*"

You found yourself mildly surprised by her words, blossoming with embarrassment, an emotion that teetered into soft shame as though you were somehow, in a way that you could not explain even if you tried, responsible for your infant truancy.

It stunned you, her tale of your infancy, caused you to feel a thing like dramatic surprise immersed in somberness, like the feeling of listening to the scintillating story of another person.

"You and trouble be five and six that time." She added, a small, assured smile sitting on her lips, flighty and quivering, ready to run away, to transform into tears.

Then as though she just remembered, she clapped her hands against her thigh urgently, startling you slightly.

"*No wonder God bring Ziva come your side. Na only am fit calm you down that time.*" The awe had returned to her voice, gentle and seamless like a thing she had expected but had still managed to be surprised by.

You sensed your interest pique at the mention of Ziva, a new anger smoldering beneath your skin, eroding your former somberness. You hated that small stuttering of your heart at the mention of his name, that stillness that entered you.

But you said nothing and so she continued to talk.

"That boy na saving grace, I swear."

When you could bear it no longer, you forced yourself to cough, and you resented yourself for the spark of worry that caused her to jump from her seat and hurry towards your bed to offer you a cup of water.

You did not drink the water and she did not say anything else. She merely held your hands and you both watched each other, listening to the *beep-beep* of your heart monitor. Silent. Waiting.

For when the flatline would come.

You were seventeen years old when you watched your parents crumble onto the floor of a doctor's office, wailing and screaming and convulsing with grief.

It had startled you, their reaction, caused you to feel a thing like a mixture of fear and panic. It was an odd feeling, the solemness that rooted you to your seat clashing against the fast beating of your heart, against the instinct to gather your legs and run and run till there was nowhere else to run to.

The doctor had looked at your parents with knowing eyes, grievous eyes, eyes that knew exactly how everything else would play out.

You had wanted to laugh that day, had wanted to scream at him and ask him to look at you instead, to grieve for you instead. But your limbs had suddenly gone numb, your lips suddenly sewn shut, a shrill thing ringing in your ears.

Then your father's eyes found your own and a floating thing like a thought settled into the folds of your stomach, gathering and solidifying and eerily permanent.

Cancer.

The word was a surprisingly easy thing to muster from the lips, unexpectedly weightless, carrying listlessly into the air, dancing around your head like the coil of smoke from a cigar, from here to there, free and light. And you wondered how such a small thing, an inconsequential thing like that, could topple your world and make you groundless in such a small instant.

You told Ziva, that day after your diagnosis, about how you watched your father cry and realized that you had never seen him cry before, not even when his mother died. How easily the doctor had said 'acute lymphoblastic leukemia' as though it were not just an ambiguous way of saying that you were going to die soon. You told him of how your mother looked at you.

"She looked at me as though I was already dead. I almost wanted to laugh sha."

You were both seated on the broken fence that encircled Iduma Primary School, legs dangling over on both sides, bodies facing each other and yet you cast your eyes to the sun that was slowly making its way past the cliffs in the distance, scattering orange and purple lights over the evening sky.

You did not look at him as you spoke. You told yourself it was because the sky looked so beautiful at that moment, you did not want to miss any moment of its metamorphosis from day to night. But one day, months later, you would look at him and see sadness etched into the onyx of his eyes and you would remember that you did not look at him that day because you feared his eyes would grieve you too.

❁❁❁

You did not remember this part of your life because, at the time, you were simply too little to hold onto memories, too little to realize and cherish the importance of simple moments, but when you were seven months old, you refused quite adamantly, to drink from your mother's breasts.

She forced her nipples into your wailing mouth, dark areolas pressed desperately against your small pink lips but you refused to suckle. If she wasn't so afraid that you would starve to death, she would have said something witty like, "You can force the horse to the river, but you cannot force it to drink" and she would have laughed solemnly in the way that awed mothers laughed at the simple, mundane actions of their infants.

She called everyone she knew, cried on a conference call with her mother and Aunty Dara, pushed your father's hands away whenever he tried to carry you and all the while forced her areolas into your mouth, crying and pleading with you to just drink.

But you remained adamant.

Aunty Dara asked her to go to the hospital for a diagnosis and her mother insisted that she apply honey on her nipples before feeding you. When they both settled into arguing with each other, she disconnected the call and carried you to the pharmacist's store at the end of the street.

"My son has refused to drink breast milk ma. What should I do?" she asked, red-eyed and desperate and trying to coax you into silence.

It did not matter to her that the pharmacist was not a licensed pediatrician, and that the woman might not have known what to do in that situation. All that mattered was that the pharmacist understood drugs and by extension, human bodies, baby bodies.

The pharmacist, however, laughed.

It was not the reaction your mother expected but for a reason, the woman's laughter soothed her.

"He must be toothing. Children can be very unpredictable when they begin to tooth. My own child, Ziva, only just grew past that stage. Ah! Look at him *sef*."

And there he was, a small cute boy in denim wobbling very slowly across the floor, face smiling and revealing two tiny teeth as he decidedly and very carefully trudged towards his mother.

It took your mother a small moment to realize that you had stopped crying, that you had instead settled into watching the small boy, your face a mirror of his own.

When you were both five, Ziva caught a snail and chased you with it. You cried as you ran, teeming with fear for the soft brown shell he held up towards you. He was delirious with laughter.

Then you tripped over a stone and fell to the floor. He was by your side in an instant, hands free of the shelled monster he had taunted you with, eyes wide with concern and remorse. He began to cry, shrill and loud and accompanied by a snotty nose and you were, for a small moment, confused about what to do.

Almost instinctively, you hugged him, and you paid no mind to the small tear on your palm from where your hands had collided with the earth.

When you were thirteen, you watched Ziva beat up another boy who had called you 'fag' with malice searing in his voice.

It was such a violent display of his anger, a thing so unlike him.

The boy who had shouted the slur at you was older than you both were, around sixteen or seventeen and brimming with overcharged masculinity that was all the more inflated by the soft muscles he had begun to develop. His name was Adah.

You knew the slur was a hypocritical thing because weeks before, that same boy had cornered you in a dark alley and kissed you with a ravenous hunger that reminded you of lions from National Geographic, his hands roaming over your skin with a wildness that thrilled and unsettled you. He had called you fag that day too, after your hands had braved enough to touch the hardness of his groin. He reeled away from you, lust melting into surprise and then into anger.

“Fag!” Then he pushed you away and ran and you found yourself teeming with arousal and amusement.

The day Ziva beat him up, you had worn a turtleneck despite the hotness of the afternoon. It was the turtleneck your father had gotten for you the week before. "For when the cold comes,” he had said as you excitedly collected the maroon sweater from his hands. You liked the way the material stuck to your body, feminine and beautiful. Almost sexy.

You wore it that day because you wanted Ziva to see you in it, wanted for his eyes to behold you, for him to pause and inhale you, see you anew.

But he did not even pay the slightest attention to your clothes and disappointment clogged your throat. You were escorting him to buy biscuits from Mama Agbani's shop when you noticed Adah lounging with a group of boys a little way away from the shop. Ziva was talking about a game he had played at a friend's house when you noticed Adah's eyes on you. The thrill returned, a sensation climbing over your spine, tingling and dispersing and filling your stomach with butterflies.

"*See as you resemble girl. Fag!*"

Silence like death settled over everything and you felt your heart stutter in your chest.

You did not remember everything else that happened just that one second, Ziva was standing next to you and the next he was on Adah, hands swinging, eyes blazing with murderous fury.

Later, as you applied mentholated spirit on his bruised knuckles and watched as he flinched, you would wonder why he had done it. Why his eyes refused to meet your own.

"I like you."

A pause.

"I like you too, bro."

The beep of a heart monitor.

"No, not like that."

Another pause. Another beep.

"I like-like you."

Silence. Another beep.

"It's like this anesthesia is strong o."

"You know it's not the sedative."

Pause.

"See, bro…"

"Stop calling me bro, Ziva. I am not your bro."

"Why are you now shouting?"

"I'm not shouting."

"You're still shouting."

Silence.

"Look, just finish with this chemo then we can talk about it."

"No. I want to talk about it now. I like you."

Silence.

"Won't you say anything?"

A pause.

"I'm dating Latifah. You know this."

"That is not an answer. Do you like me?"

Silence.

"Why are you doing this now? Today of all days. Just finish this chemo then we can talk. Please, Feyiz."

"Just tell me where I stand."

A pause.

"Why today? Why now?"

Silence.

"Because I might die tomorrow."

Another beep.

"Don't say that. You're strong and you're going to beat this. You hear me? You are going to beat this shit."

Silence.

"I won't."

A pause. A sniffle. Another beep.

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth, Zee."

A scrape of a chair. A slam of a door.

Silence.

AN AFTERNOON AT THE LIBRARY

Aziba Ekio

They prefer it this way; dark, the curtains drawn, a crack in the door to let in the faintest light. They let me keep my blouse on, but that's as far as their generosity goes. I have to keep still. He leans in.

I shut my eyes if only to shut out everything else. I feel him thrust deeper. I try to force my body to move, but he pins me down, his full weight on me. Every bone in my body cries out.

Why can't I scream?

My aunty stands outside the room, hoping her husband will be done just in time for choir practice. I watch as he zips his fly and walks out of the room without saying a word. I try to get up but I can't bundle myself off the bed. My body, stiff as a rock, dripping from *his* sweat.

My aunty will walk in any minute now. She will bark. She will grab me by the wrist. She will sit me down on the worn-out stool. She will ask the same question; do I feel any different? If she catches the slightest hint of hesitation, it would be the start of another session.

I've had these sessions three times in a month now. It does not get better, but my lies have improved, which means I've improved? I can look her directly in the eye without blinking, or twisting my fingers in a knot, or attacking the lock of hair that comes undone at the nape of my neck. It is easier to imagine lying to her than actually telling the lie. Last Thursday, after the prophet spoke over me, and we had come outside the prayer house, and she had asked the same question, I waited a moment too late before the words emerged. My voice gave out. I began to cry. The thought of having to endure this evening for the fourth time is the push I need, to run to our neighbors, to tell them what happens behind closed doors, and wail like the mad woman no one indulges.

It's funny to think that it was only three months ago when I first tried going out with boys my age. My friend, Tammy had finally convinced me, after three relentless weeks. I still remember what I wore to his place because she had chosen the skirt, mid-thigh and purple. Maybe it was the way he cornered me in that tiny room; how we lay on his too-flat mattress, the damp smell he said did not matter; the rush to be done before it had begun, that made me regret letting him put his penis inside me. I told Tammy how quick and needling it was. She only laughed. She said first times were always that way, and it would get better on the second try. I told her there would be no second try. She gave me a look, in that amused way she looked at the girls in her dormitory

who always bragged about having rich parents, spotting the lie with one glance at their stockings.

Tammy offered headline news about everything that went on in school. She had first-hand intel on everyone, including teachers, students and the twice divorced headmistress. She knew who was sleeping with whom and when it began. We were just a year apart in age, but she was a senior student, in SS 2, the fifth form; and I was a junior student, in JS3, the third form. We became friends since she threatened to punish me for the entire school year if I didn't wash her clothes, and I had blatantly refused, with a stare I was sure would get me in trouble. Most times she acted like a mother.

She would often dabble into one of her self-acclaimed lectures, explaining that there were four types of girls at school. The wild girls, who couldn't wait to fuck their boyfriends at the end of the term, so they had dormitory girlfriends to fill in the role; lesbians who were girlfriends to the wild girls; Holy Mary's who pretend they didn't like girls but stared too long in the bathrooms. When I asked where we fell into, she said we were normal, which meant we weren't curious. So, when Amaka, Tammy's roommate, had cornered me, slipped my hand into her pants, directing my fingers to her wetness, tending each curl and stroke along the walls of her vagina, I knew I couldn't mention it—for Amaka's sake. The first few times when this went on, my panic was palpable, until it became a pastime ritual. Somehow it made me feel powerful. This was *my* secret, safe from Tammy's all-knowing eyes.

Sometimes in my sleep, I hear my uncle's voice, I hear my heart race; my fingers knot. I wake up with a lump in my throat until I slowly feel the air return to my lungs.

Geraldine always sat in the same spot at the library; we sat tables apart. She was just a class ahead of me but was the best student in school. I loved Tammy's motherliness, but I was in awe of Geraldine. Quiet, but outspoken, a beautiful face, robed in caramel skin. It was almost impossible to see her alone, flocked by a herd of girls who wouldn't stop talking to save a dying man, save for the library. I never dared to talk to her. Something about a fool remaining silent rather than relinquishing all doubts.

One afternoon, she wasn't there. She always came during the break period before mandatory prep. But three days in a row, I hadn't seen her. In those three days, I scoured the halls, my eyes sifting for any glimpse of her. But nothing. I was sick with worry and asked one of her classmates if she was fine.

"Yes, she was in class this morning."

So why hadn't I seen her, even during lunch break? The classmate shrugged, absent-minded, and all I could think of at that moment was strangling this moron.

During lunch break the next day, she walked up to our table, greeted everyone but me, gave everyone fliers of the upcoming inter-school debate, but me. I felt a knot in my stomach twist. What were the chances that she had done that on purpose? Had she noticed my stares? I sank into my chair, embarrassed at the mere thought of it. Tammy saw my

discomfort and offered me her flier. I took it and gulped hard on water.

Biology was never my strongest suit. I knew I had to go to the library during the last period to study like a witch possessed for my test next week. Crumbling with confusion, I looked up to see her standing over me.

"Can I sit with you?"

Everything in me screamed *YES*! But I still had to voice it. I could feel her eyes hovering. I stared blankly at my textbook, but I could feel her amusement. Without asking, she pulled my textbook to her.

"Do you need help?"

I was forced to look away from the book and redirect my gaze. From that moment, I was sure yes would be my answer to everything she wanted of me.

Come Saturday, Geraldine brought me to her dormitory. I was glad we were rid of the herd. She didn't voice it but I suspected she needed seclusion because she sighed immediately they were out of sight. Her room was in the upper wing of the block, facing the lake that sat an eye's length from the school's premises. Whenever it rained, the wind blew in a breeze that smelled of lemongrass. It had drizzled only slightly that morning, but the room was filled with the scent.

We sat next to each other on her bed. I had never seen Geraldine so up close. It was like looking at a live painting; watching her flip the pages of my notebook and back,

putting it down, sighing, like she was tired of tutoring even before she had begun.

"Why are you always staring at me at the library?" My mouth parted to say something, but nothing came out that wasn't incoherent. "Maybe that's why you don't understand biology. Because you're busy staring instead of reading it."

I managed a silent *sorry*. She smiled and said she was playing with me. I was too nervous to smile back, uneased by how she played hopscotch with whatever I was feeling. I wasn't sure what those feelings were, but it hurt that she had it in her palms —she could do whatever she wished with it.

She began to explain hermaphroditism, an organism self-fertilizing or turning into another sex later in life. She sounded excited when she talked, more so when we dived deeper into the topic. I was worried I still wouldn't concentrate on what she was saying because I was too invested in the way her lips pressed and parted when she pronounced reproduction and how her mouth gaped a little, showing some teeth when she pronounced offspring. I couldn't understand how she could make the word; *offspring* echo inside of me.

Spring.

Spring.

Spring.

Not like the way Amaka sprung up on me, making me tremble as she touched me. After it was over, I recoiled like a spring, brought back to its true state—shrunken and small.

Spring.

Spring.

Spring.

"Are you even listening to what I'm saying?"

"Hmm?"

"I was asking if you grabbed what I just said."

I sucked in air. The sky had started to clear but the room still smelled of grass.

"I missed that last…the last part." I scratched my head like an idiot, which I am.

"What do you remember last?"

I could only remember her saying offspring a lot, and something vague about hermaphrodites.

"Nothing? Not even one?"

I saw the annoyance smeared across her face, but I could also filter the faintest amusement. If I had taken her at face value, I would have thought she would send me out packing, but she rolled her eyes and laughed. Her laugh, more than my stupidity, made me laugh too.

"Oya, this is what we'll do. We'll stop using the textbook. Let's just use my notes, ok?"

I exhaled *Thank God.* She laughed at this. A throaty, hearted laugh that would make anyone forget about a test. I watched her scour through her bunk, browsing through a stack of books, when out of nowhere she asked,

"What were you thinking about anyway?" Her eyes searched mine. It felt as though she could read what was on my mind just by looking into my eyes. That was stupid, even for me to think. I felt uncomfortable and insecure, her eyes

prodding mine, but I wasn't able to look away. She looked away instead, "Let's start from the beginning. Asexual reproduction."

He slaps my face; my lids hinge open. I watch him thrust deeper inside me and harder, his eyes shut, his mouth sizzling, till he stops. He exhales very loudly.

We hadn't talked much after that day. But I hadn't stopped staring at her from time to time. I had spotted Geraldine during lunch break with her friends, the same spot they always sat. She seemed detached from their conversation, nodding when everyone smiled, and smiling when everyone laughed. We locked eyes for a moment, but she quickly averted her gaze.

I stumbled on her later in the library to brag about how all the questions she predicted came out, and how I couldn't finish before our time ran out, but I was still confident after dropping my pen.

"You'll pass," was all she said to me, fitting a fat book on the shelf and caressing the spine. I slowly strolled back to my seat, unsure of how to feel. I hadn't expected a friendship to be sealed and sent right away, but I had felt something, and maybe she had felt it too. Maybe I'd been wrong, and I should have listened to Amaka; maybe I wasn't allowed to be curious. Whatever I felt might have only existed in my head and nowhere else.

As the week aged, I tried as much as possible to flush clean any residual thoughts of Geraldine. I laughed hard at Tammy's condescending jokes, danced to her roommates' songs without being cajoled, let Amaka touch me whenever she got the chance—but I had only managed to picture all the reasons she would have ignored me. Those pictures flooded my mind like a tidal wave, relentless, malignant, if nothing else, painful.

It was a Saturday, so the library was scanty with only three students, chatting conspiratorially. I went over to the shelves at the far end, returning a textbook between the array. I turned to see Geraldine standing at the far end of the bookshelf. Our eyes met and I felt the *spring* in my stomach. I imagined that she would walk away and pretend she didn't see me, but she motioned me over.

I walked as quickly as my brain allowed, not knowing what to expect. She greeted me with that warm smile I had seen only a few times.

"What are you doing in the library on Saturday?"

"I came to return this," I said, raising a biology textbook. She didn't respond. She returned a stare that felt as though she was trying to make sense of what I had said. I added, "I'm not the one who collected it. I'm just returning it."

"Okay," she nodded. "I haven't seen you in the library since. Do you only come when you have biology tests, hmm?"

I didn't understand why she had that smirk on her face, a curl by her lip accompanying every word, as though she hadn't been ignoring me or had her head turned away

whenever her eyes met mine in the cafeteria. The way her eyes danced around the arch of her cheekbones made me wonder if she was oblivious to everything that had happened. If she was, I wouldn't know what to make of it.

I scratched my head, mumbling something about not liking the library very much and she responded with a loud, irreverent laugh. To this day, I'm not sure what made me burst out crying. Maybe it was the way her laugh pierced deep into my soul, mocking the thought of affection I felt we shared; or how I could never be like her, free of worry and misgivings. Whatever it was, the more I felt her arms around me, the more tears flooded down my cheeks.

She had asked me what was wrong, after I had made a fool of myself, and the tears subsided. I told her the truth. I didn't know why I had cried, but I was sorry for it. We sat at the far back of the library where the lights were dim, and the school hadn't thought of replacing the bulbs. I sat with my arms to my laps, stiff as stone. She wiped the last tear off my cheek with a soft caress.

"I wasn't ignoring you," she bit her lips.

I wanted to ask how she knew what I was thinking before she told me other students thought she was a snub. She had myopia but hated wearing her glasses and couldn't bother to let people know. I felt stupid to have stopped coming to the library, assuming she didn't want anything to do with me. I told her this. She pulled in and planted a kiss on my cheek, some kind of apology. I wasn't sure if it was for the kiss or for everything I was feeling, but I kissed back. My lips quivered, my throat sore. I had begun to regret the decision.

She took the lead, skillfully slipping her tongue in my mouth. I instinctively sucked on it, drawing from Amaka's masterclasses.

She pulled away and smiled, seemingly stunned.

"Who taught you how to kiss like that?"

I bit my lip and shrugged it off with a kiss. She didn't need to know that.

We spent Saturday afternoons in the same dark spot at the library, sometimes talking about the horror of cutting grass, school, lesbians and Teen Titans; most times making out. We became close, so close she didn't care to sit with her friends during lunch break, so close Tammy became jealous and enraged; I had become the thing she disdained. Besides, heedlessly galivanting with my plaything meant a public disgrace to her image.

I began spending midnights in Geraldine's room, more comfortable than the library. By the time we had sex for the first time, she knew all the important and messed up things about me. My family, or the lack of it; my uncle and aunty taking me in the same year I started secondary school. She joked about telling her parents about us, about how she hated the 'coming out' phrase and had sworn we'd attend the same university.

"My parents will hang me," she said with some seriousness. I imagined it held the same severity as Tammy's death threats. I wasn't sure how my guardians would react—after Tammy had had enough of my newfound love, walked in on us one evening as I twirled Geraldine's nipple in my

mouth, she told the headmistress about the incident—then I knew.

Maybe that quiet afternoon at the library, I had cried because something inside of me knew—I would be the collateral damage in the pain that would ensue.

I OWE YOU HELL

Abasi-maenyin Esebre

"Never let the fire win."

This was T-boy's mantra, drilled into him by his coach, a former two-time Diamond League 200m gold medalist from Slovenia. T-boy had to imagine a flame slithering from the starting line, all the way to the finish line. This flame was his opponent. He had no other competition. His focus was to be on proper technique and execution.

Nothing else mattered but the flame.

It was August and the world held its breath in anticipation. What magic or miracle would these young men, who'd travelled from different countries in Africa to Nigeria, perform? What World records would fall? What new star would rise? Whose name would make it to the headlines and the record books? Whose name would the stadium crowd chant? Whose tear running down a puffed cheek would constitute a heartbreak, a dream shattered, a hope lost? The athletes had trained hard for months, and the pressure was

on to perform. They each had their own story. They had something to prove. Some had come from war-torn countries, others from poverty-stricken ones. Some had come from countries with no access to proper training facilities, while others had come from countries with world-class facilities and huge financial support. But all of them had come with the same dream: to be the best. To rise above the circumstances, whether bureaucratic negligence, political corruption or simply doubt from family members and friends. And no one had more to prove than T-boy whose elder brother, whom they sent to a private university overdosed on meth and was now stuck in rehab. And his younger sister, just 13, whom they compared him to, was already a math whiz and debater winning competitions around the country. T-boy, however, had something to prove to his father whom he had defied twice. First, when he refused to study civil engineering by swapping the course he applied for in JAMB at the last minute. And, against his father's wishes, pursuing athletics over a bachelor's degree in microbiology, the course T-boy opted for as a compromise.

The Under-20 100m race has always been a competitive event. At the starting line were two runners from Kenya who, due to their explosive starts, were said to be threats in the first 60m; a confident young lad from Botswana who had been rumored to run under 10 seconds during training, before the event; and T-boy, Otobong, whose personal best stood at 10.25 seconds—a world-class record, at any rate, for such a young man.

After being introduced by the announcer, the athletes crouched and mounted the starting blocks. Their stolid faces gave the impression of absolute focus and masked anxiety. T-boy dipped his index finger on both shoulders and his forehead before he kissed it.

He crouched with the other sprinters.

"On your marks…" the race announcer called out.

Pow!

The gun went off.

The young men shot out of the blocks with lightning speed.

T-boy's shredded legs blurred as his feet struck the track in a rapid, consistent rhythm. He usually had a slow start, but today, after hours upon hours of training and corrections, he got his form right. Only one of the Kenyans and the boy from Botswana got a better start than him.

T-boy spotted the flame and narrowed his gaze on it.

He emptied his mind and filled his lungs. With the grace of a greyhound, he slowly inched away from the other boys he was tallied with. His perfect stride, which the commentators praised by the second, made him a delight to watch.

He made running look as elegant as swimming—an observation which was first ascribed to the Batswana sprinter.

The faster T-boy ran, the more relaxed he seemed. From a distance, you'd assume he was jogging, an almost

deceptive paradox like how the teeth of a chainsaw in sync with strobe lights look still.

The crowd grew spirited.

Their chants grew guttural, primal.

As T-boy reached his top-end speed, the muscles on his neck became only slightly pronounced. All those hours he'd spent in the gym and on the track perfecting his skill guided his every motion. He moved like a professional completely possessed by muscle memory. T-boy's smooth mechanics forced his silver chain—which he never took off—to swing violently around his neck. His closest competition—a gangly boy from Seychelles with blonde hair, and a buff powerhouse from Kenya, both of whom flanked his right—contrasted his ease with their straining muscles and clenched fists.

The Batswana pulling away was the only athlete faster than the flame T-boy was chasing.

T-boy's matte orange hair told the audience where to look as he inched closer and closer. He could taste victory on his tongue; he could feel the medal already on his neck; the adulation, the fame. At seventeen, his birthday just two months away, he was seconds away from making history as one of the youngest under-eighteen athletes to ever medal.

This was historic.

The crowd roared; their cheers filled the stadium in sweltering, hot Warri. The commentators yelled for people to watch the clock, watch the clock. This moment would soon fizz through the internet as gossip and news, a

historical milestone and monumental achievement for such a young man from Africa, Nigeria, Calabar.

40 meters to the finish line, T-boy, digging deeper than ever, groaned in pain as his hamstring snapped.

The crowd gasped on cue.

T-boy drew to an immediate limp. His left leg stiffened. He tumbled to the ground. His heartbeat echoed in his head. His face crinkled in pain. Tears crept down his face. He cradled his injured leg as paramedics rushed to his aid. The other athletes—the Kenyan, followed by the boy from Seychelles—whizzed past him. The tarnished silver chain on his neck burned into his skin as he watched them fly by.

T-boy raised his head. He forced his eyes shut as the flame in his mind's eye slithered across the finish line.

The fire won.

Otobong swats a fly with a *Vanguard* paper. 14 years have gone by since the U-20 100m race. He has grown a beard, or rather a beard has grown on his jaw, and dyed his matte orange hair black. His earring hole has grown flesh over it. He's managed to complete—managed, as his aunty whose son is in the UK loves to stress it—his undergraduate degree in microbiology with a third class, and now mongers newspapers next to Ubong who runs a POS stand.

Every morning, when he leaves for work, he carries an oversized, torn bag while he bows his head and refers to teenagers as "sir" because they come from rich families and

sometimes offer him a lift in their mother's Cerato through the long, untarred road which connects to the highway. He smiles all the time, not like a Zen master who finds, in every little event, a microcosm of nirvana, rather he smiles as someone on the verge of insanity, someone trapped in a sitcom where every character is played by the devil. He comes across as perturbed, as though he's constantly chewing on spearmint. Poverty has eroded his self-esteem. It has eaten big chunks of his self-respect, and he is now disproportionate with how and to whom he dishes out reverence.

But, most importantly, he no longer refers to himself as T-boy. That name died the day the doctor said he would never be able to race again. For him to do so would require sophisticated medical treatment, a special diet and a recovery program which his father wasn't willing to cover. His coach had already moved on. His spirit was also broken when his father leaned in to whisper something so bone-chilling he wished his ears had a function similar to a blink where you could just choose to pause sound and will silence.

"Otobong, tell me, do you want to end up like your brother? I have tried to give you direction, but you insist on a path you are clueless about. Why can't you make me proud like your sister?" T-boy's father pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"The job I'm doing doesn't pay enough for you to misbehave. Why do you lack ambition? It is this kind of behavior that made me take your brother's name out of my will. Or should I put your sister's name there?"

T-boy could only respond with tears. He was a child. He couldn't articulate his way out of his father's narrowed thought process. In Nigeria, like in most countries in the world, some disciplines don't have institutions to enable a seamless transition for passionate interns specializing in a particular field that is neither academic, legal or medical. Most things are left to chance. And if you add political greed, which drains resources, and dogmatic parenting, which stifles creative outlets instead of challenging the political class for its incompetence, you have a system where the misfits suffer ostracization and implosion.

They never become anything but burdens.

They forever remain caterpillars.

Now T-boy introduces himself as Otobong, or Oto, for short.

On every other day, he doesn't read the papers. His favorite joke to tell is: the news should be printed on tissue paper, because the news in this country is, well, shit. Nobody laughs when he says this joke, his delivery is awful, but this doesn't deter him from telling it. He revels in the unrefined shimmer of his once-praised intellect. Then, when there's enough kai-kai in his bloodstream to fill a small generator's tank, he drowns whoever's near him in pseudo-socio-political critiques, which sound less and less convincing the more they listen in on his yammerings.

He flips open the paper to the middle so he can, as usual, drape it over his face as a sleep mask to block out komorebi. But as he flips to the middle page something catches his eyes and boils his blood.

The only thing arguably faster than darkness and light is the past. The past ambushes. It is vicious and merciless. It comes when we least expect it. It comes to muddy the present and assault the future. The past comes laced: with trauma, grief and pain. The past strikes Otobong in the neck like a viper as he reads the headline: *GOVERNOR OF CROSS RIVER NAMES NEWLY COMMISSIONED STADIUM AFTER AKAN ITA.* Below is a picture of the governor, a lean man with an unnerving smile, about to snip through a ribbon. Without context, it is an innocuous picture, but Akan Ita was Otobong's father's name.

And Otobong's father's death is the reason he sells newspapers. The longer he stares at the paper, the more he sweats. The more he sweats the more his arms begin to quiver until he drops to the floor heaving for breath.

As he lay on the floor with Ubong and a dozen faceless people towering over him, Otobong remembers his father making numerous calls, all within a short window period. He remembers the countless nights when he'd get little sleep as he'd have to stay awake until his father returned by 11 p.m. so he would microwave the food for the exhausted attorney. As if microwaving was such a chore beneath a 'provider', as if doing something so simple for himself was intolerable just because he had children.

He also remembers the slithering flame that swallowed his family whole.

In a bid to advance his career and cement himself in the public eye as a formidable opponent to political defaulters, Akan Ita, a criminal defense attorney, decided to defend Gideon Ekong, a journalist who'd been arrested after writing a scathing article which highlighted the former governor of Cross River state's money-laundering scheme. Akan Ita, already set to become a Senior Advocate of Nigeria in the coming year, sought mainstream visibility as a medium to trench his influence and colour his daughter's possible legal career with a little harmless nepotism, should she need it in the near future. Eno was already showing interest in becoming a lawyer—her critical mind and focus could do their family name some good, he reasoned. The number of debates she'd won was incentive enough for him to gamble his influence and resources on her. Her future aligned with something he understood.

After countless months, when the case had gotten national coverage—as he'd hoped—and brought his name to prominent media houses, Akan Ita won. Although journalists attached all sorts of derogatory adjectives to Otobong's father's name, it didn't matter because he'd won. "I owe you hell," they tried to twist the comment that Oto's father had made in court as a testament to his diabolical motive. He simply corrected them by saying this is what the governor's spokesman said to the journalist when they had him arrested.

Victory, after all, annuls disgruntled speculative rhetoric.

Two weeks after celebrating with a buffet, while the family was making an unprecedented trip to visit Jamal in

rehab, two 5% tinted SUVs cornered their beige Corolla. Armed masked men forced them out of the car.

Before Otobong could process what was happening, he was struck on the forehead with the end of a rifle, dragged and thrown over his sister who'd already been shoved into one of the SUVs. Otobong and his sister huddled together as the cars screeched off in a dual convoy. A red liquid ran from the back of Oto's orange head to the collar of his shirt.

Slowly, ever-so-slowly, he lost consciousness.

When Oto woke up, his mum, dad and sister had been tied to wooden chairs. Their mouths had been tied with rags. He turned his eyes around the small yellow building which caged them. There were rickety windows with half-removed posters of unremarkable drawings done by children. An abandoned school. He tried to move but couldn't. Oto staggered as he gazed into his father's eyes, bulging as though trying to communicate something to him.

As he stood to his feet, the door flung open and one of the men dragged Oto to the end of the corridor leading to the empty classroom reeking of petrol. With a gun to his head, Oto stopped flailing. He watched as one of the masked men meticulously lined fuel from his parents to where they stood, holding a gun to his head.

"Se na you be that boy way run for that competition?"

Otobong managed to nod.

"Enhe, se you sabi run well-well? Oya, see wetin go happen. Me I no be bad person. I get conscience. The thing be say I go give you chance make you save your family. I no

be bad person, you get? If you fit reach there before this fire reach your people, I go do make una go. Based on say me I no be bad person. Enhe, oya. On your marks…"

T-boy crouched. His eyes lined with his father's. It felt like he was on the track again, the stakes higher. The masked men were muffling their laughter. T-boy didn't know how to feel. His knees on the concrete ached. The corridor was wide enough for the fire not to burn him if he raced it. But why weren't the kidnappers asking for a ransom, why were they breaking due protocol? Would they let them go? Is this the reality his father was caught in?

"On your marks!"

T-boy could only focus on the flame. If this were his last moment and his family tree was going to get razed here, what choice did he have but to trust in the power of his heel and unhealed snapped hamstring? He could feel the blood rising to his head. The fizz of a match threw T-boy off his train of thought.

"Get set."

T-boy narrowed his eyes and held his breath.

"Go!"

T-boy attacked the ground, hard. His feet succeeded each other in a way most athletes only dream of. He straightened as he neared his top speed. The door was getting closer and closer. He could see hope light up his father's, mother's and sister's eyes. He kept his head up. What if they shot him from behind? What if he trips? As thoughts began to intrude, he tensed up. Before he could

blink, the flame overtook him. He could feel his insides turn as his father's eyes sank. He put one hand after the other. He strove. He yelled. He yearned. Nothing was real. He wanted the fire to be metaphorical. He wanted this moment to be a rehearsal. He closed his eyes as the flame ran up the steps.

PREMARITAL BAGGAGE

Lafua Michael Tega

"Let's do it!"

Okafor peered out the Ambassador Hotel window, admiring the forest of Port-Harcourt's glittering skyscrapers, his hands buried in the pocket of his pants.

"What?" Uju replied, irritatingly.

She shifted uneasily at the foot of the king-sized bed, her eyes glued on her phone, contemplating her next move against the omniscient chess AI. The previous game was a walk in the park as the AI breached her makeshift defense, hunting and capturing her pieces at will, before eventually checkmating her king, just under twenty-five moves. And now, playing with the white pieces, Uju felt she was in a much better position, all things considered. She was a pawn up, although her queen was boxed in, positioned in the far corner of the board, stalked by an obsessed rook.

Okafor swiveled around to face her. "Oh, cut it out — you know what I mean!"

Uju glanced at him for a second and then returned to her phone. "I do?" She retrieved her rook from the frontline and placed it right beside her queen, snuffing out any potential threat from the stalker, should the need arise.

"Babe, I want you!"

"You want me?" Uju sighed. The AI cogitated for a minute or two, and shortly afterwards the stalker rook took up a position adjacent to the white rook, threatening to capture it.

"You don't want me?"

Uju eyeballed him, muttered something to herself, and then shook her head, twice. The last thing she needed right now was to be drawn into this conversation, once again. For one thing, it was always exhausting. For another, it seldom ended well. Moreover, she was optimistic about doing a number on the invincible chess AI, for the very first time, since she'd installed the highly rated app, eighteen months before, right after she'd come up short at the prestigious Nigerian Breweries chess tournament, crashing out in the preliminaries. A crushing blow to her title defense as a two-time defending champion. And now, on the front foot, against the chess AI, she knew she had a very decent chance of actually putting the ghost of her disastrous performance from the previous tournament to rest. But then again, she also knew in chess, as well as in life too, that it's not over until the fat lady sings.

"We both know you're neither deaf nor dumb!" Okafor continued, angrily.

Uju captured the stalker with her rook. Immediately, the AI captured white's rook with a pawn.

"We both know you're neither blind nor insensitive!"

"I don't understand?"

"Hello! …Chess! …Concentration!" Uju gesticulated.

"Chess?" Okafor chuckled. "Are you kidding?"

Uju's knight retreated to the third rank. "Whatever!"

"I know you want me too," intoned Okafor, facing the window. A mob of crows, four or five in a row, with another ahead of the pack, scrambled across the clear blue sky like a fighter jet on a combat mission.

"I don't want you!"

"Wow! I'm really shocked, ashamed even, that we're still talking about this, like two naïve teenagers."

"Damn!" Uju exclaimed, kneading her forehead. The AI just captured a pawn. A move that caught her off-guard.

"And, if you must know, everyone is doing it now, even those who supposedly made vows like you," Okafor enlightened her. "Was it not Father Ignatius, the visiting priest, who was caught red-handed, shagging Sister Agnes in the brushes behind the parish quarters, few hours before Mass two Sundays ago?"

Uju nudged a pawn forward. "I'm glad I'm not Sister Agnes and neither are you … Father Ignatius!"

"But we could pretend to be them for a minute!" Okafor chortled. "What do you think?"

"Count me out!" The AI's bishop commandeered a dark square inside white's territory, a move that gave her a cause for concern.

A brooding silence impregnated the penthouse suite.

"Women!" Okafor gasped, shaking his head. "Weird creatures!"

Uju fingered and patted her lace postiche. "Just because men can't seem to understand women doesn't make women weird. Men should learn how to pay more attention to women."

Okafor wheeled around; his eyes goggling at her. He couldn't comprehend what Uju had said, or the reason why she had even said such in the first place.

"Are you kidding? Attention? Really? You never seem to amaze me!"

"Wow!" Her eyes smiled up at him. "And here I was thinking the same thing about you."

Okafor turned away in disgust, crossed his arms and gazed into the horizon. A sullen silence dangled precariously over the suite for well over five minutes.

Uju couldn't bear it a moment longer. She leaped to her feet, paused the game, plonked her phone on the nightstand, and nestled beside Okafor at the window.

"Gorgeous scenery, isn't it?"

Okafor eyeballed her pretty hard, from the tip of her postiche to her dollar-painted toenails. He walked away from her, stretched himself on the bed, and squeezed his eyes shut.

Light showers of rain tumbled down from the grey April sky, gently caressing the large windowpanes from top to bottom.

"Okafor!" Uju yelled hysterically, pointing her finger into the distance. "Look! Helicopter!"

A Genesis fast food helicopter hovered above a helipad on a nearby skyscraper. Okafor hissed through clamped teeth; he turned on his side and pulled the duvet over himself, stopping just shy of the nape of his neck. Uju stood at the window, looking dejected.

"Tsk tsk!"

The curtain poles quivered slightly. Uju watched the helicopter closely through the rain-streaked windows, awed by its sheer size and the adorable red and white stripes until it touched down on the helipad, until the blades eventually came to a dead halt.

"Do you really care about me, Okafor? Do you?" Her teary eyes trailed a female steward, who had just moments before, disembarked from the helicopter, clutching an umbrella and a handful of plastic bags.

Okafor sprang to his feet and whizzed towards her. He leaned against her and, from behind, wrapped his hands around her waist, pulling her onto himself.

"Oh, come on, babe, you know I care about you," he whispered, face against her shiny black hair. He planted a gentle kiss on her nape and with quick, deft strokes, his hands worked wonders from her belly button towards her bosom.

"Stop it!" she snapped, slapping his hands away, wriggling free from his grip. She shot him a murderous glare, retrieved her phone from the nightstand, and eased herself into the bed.

Okafor sighed and rummaged through his pockets, searching for a lighter.

"This is exactly the reason why I didn't want us to share a room," Uju moaned and unpaused her game.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever!"

Okafor trudged to the sitting area, retrieved the lighter from the oval mahogany table, and pulled a cigarette from the Marlboro pack lodged inside his waistcoat pocket. He tapped the cigarette butt against his wrist as he stomped back into the bedroom. Flicking the lighter a couple of times, the cigarette finally lit up. He puffed away furiously.

"I can't believe you're actually smoking inside the room?"

Okafor plucked the cigarette from between his lips.

"You'd better believe it."

"Suit yourself!"

"Whatever!"

Wisps of smoke zigzagged around the room, caressing the rain-streaked windows and up the Oriental wall-papered wall, slowly kissing the painted ceiling.

Uju's queen swooped down into the opponent's territory, attacking the black king.

CHECK!

The AI ruminated for well over five minutes, more than Uju had ever seen it analyze a move before, which meant

one thing and one thing only. It'd been boxed into a corner and was mulling over the whole gamut of positions in its repertoire to extricate itself from a defeat looming on the horizon.

Uju shut her eyes, and for a moment, pondered whether to leave the room for the sitting room. However, the smell of the cigarette swirling around the air-conditioned room wasn't too upsetting. For some inexplicable reason, she found it somewhat soothing. Perhaps, it was the commingling of the smoke and the lavender air freshener, she thought. Or, perhaps, it was just her state of mind playing tricks on her. Either way, the fragrance in the room was the least of her worries. Okafor was!

"Okay, Okafor, let's—" Uju sneezed thrice and then kneaded the bridge of her nose.

"Bless you!" he exclaimed, smacking his lips. "You won't regret it. I promise!"

Okafor hurriedly stubbed out the cigarette on the windowsill and dashed towards the bed, his hands fumbling with his zipper, his eyes dancing with glee.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" She scrambled to her feet, rolling her eyes at him in disgust.

"What the hell does it look like, Uju?"

Her face creased into a frown. And so did his face too.

Uju kneaded her forehead. "Don't you get it?"

"Get what? Get what, Uju?"

"What part of NO don't you understand?"

"All of it!"

"Read my lips!" Uju pointed to her lips. "I'm not going to have sex—"

"Yeah, yeah, until after the wedding," he interjected, fiddling with his zipper. "Haven't we all heard that one before?"

"No amount of guilt-tripping will weaken my resolve. No means NO! My body! My choice!"

With a blank expression on his face, Okafor dropped to his knees, his palms locked together in a prayer-like gesture. Uju was at a complete loss —frozen, mouth agape, eyes squarely on him.

"Mother Theresa, I beg of you. Please, do as you so desire," Okafor said with a deadpan expression. He stood up and sauntered to the window.

Uju keeled over on the bed, laughing out loud, as she clutched her stomach. It was moments like this that reminded her of the reason she'd fallen in love with him. His free spirit, his quirky sense of humor, his puerile mannerism. It was something out of the ordinary. It was something she'd always embraced and cherished since they started dating, three years before. It was something that made her heart go pitter-patter in more ways than one, and rightly so.

"Mother Theresa? Seriously?" Uju mopped her watery eyes against her sleeves. "Wonders shall never cease!"

Okafor looked out the window, mute and uninterested. He felt like saying something to her. In fact, it was on the tip of his tongue. However, he also knew that anything he said

right now would probably come out wrong since it would be from a place of hurt and spite.

"I'm feeling hungry," Uju rubbed her stomach, as she sat cross-legged on the bed. "Room service?"

Retrieving the half-smoked cigarette from the sill, Okafor tapped the butt on his wrist, furiously.

"I'm not hungry!"

She scooped up the receiver on the landline and rang room service as she'd done since they took residence in the suite two nights before. A female voice —pleasant, cheerful, and polite— came on the line, after three rings. It was obviously not the same girl who usually attended to them, the one with the heavy faux London accent, which Uju found somewhat weird, tiresome, and hilarious, all at once. She felt mightily relieved.

"Hello, I'd love to place an order for two plates of rice and chicken. One Jollof and the other fried. Two bowls of salad. Two glasses of fresh orange juice. And two bottles of NIMA bottled water, preferably, room temperature."

The female voice reeled off everything on Uju's order — one after the other.

"Please, would that be all?"

"Yes, please, thank you!"

Uju dropped the receiver and retrieved her phone from the nightstand. She lay on the bed and scrolled through it. A huge smile plastered her face as she realized the AI had still not made a move. *Gotcha!*

"Double portion!" Okafor lit the cigarette and took a long puff. "You must really be famished."

"Very funny!" Uju exclaimed evenly.

"If I'm not mistaken, which I know I'm not, and if you're not deaf, which I know you're not, I believe I said I wasn't hungry."

Uju volleyed a frown at him. "Suit yourself!"

"I'm not hungry means I'm not hungry! My body! My choice!" Okafor whirled around with a mischievous smile on his face.

Uju collapsed into giggles. "You never seem to amaze me!"

"Wow! And here I was thinking the same thing about you."

Uju hooted with laughter.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" Uju paused for a minute, catching her breath. "My ribs hurt!"

Okafor turned and watched with interest as the female steward boarded the helicopter. It was still drizzling, but from behind the cloud, he caught a glimpse of sunlight peeking.

"I could kill for a Genesis Supreme Pizza with whipped ricotta and caramelized shallots. Large!" he announced, dreamily, smacking his lips. "And a cup of Blue Bunny ice cream. Large!"

Uju sat bolt upright, her eyes still glued to the mobile screen. The AI just moved its king up the board. *Huh?*

"Jollof rice and chicken is your favorite," she reminded him, mulling over her next move. "I know you'll enjoy it!"

"Whatever you say, mum!" Okafor hissed.

She chuckled, shaking her head.

Rays of sunlight pierced through the scudding drizzling clouds and showered the windows, streaking the marble floor with shades of gold.

"Come sit beside me, baby," she said softly, moments after planting her queen in front of the AI's king.

CHECK!

"Why?"

"Because you love me!"

Okafor turned around and dissolved into giggles. "Manipulator!"

"Wow! You are really paying attention!" she retorted smugly. "Awesome!"

Okafor extinguished the cigarette and sat down on the bed, a hair's breadth away from her, his eyes drawn unto her cleavage like a magnet. He dropped his hand on her thigh.

"We need to talk!" The AI's king advanced again.

"Let's just do it!" Okafor whispered, sucking her earlobe, as he tried to pry her thighs apart.

"Stop it!" Uju sighed, shoving his hand away. "Please, for once, can you be serious? Can you just be serious?"

"And who says I'm not serious?" he replied angrily. "In fact, if you must know, I've never been more serious!"

"Okafor?" She wagged a finger at him. "Our wedding is in a fortnight, and all you're thinking about is sex, sex, sex."

"Okay … Virgin Mary, what do you want to talk about? And you better not tell me you're pregnant."

"Virgin Mary?" Uju choked with laughter. "You need help!"

"Help me!" He rubbed his palms together. "Please!"

Uju sighed deeply, then stood up and walked to the window. She flanked the advancing king with her bishop, forcing the AI's king to seek refuge behind a pawn.

"What if after the wedding, you discover that I can't even do it?"

"Not possible!"

"Says who?"

"Says the bulge in your pants!"

"Very funny!"

"Have you ever seen a fish that can't swim?"

Okafor crowed with delight. "But on a more serious note, what if I can't?"

"Too bad, then!" Uju charged with her knight, forking the AI's king and queen.

CHECK!

"But wouldn't you rather find out before the wedding, like right now?"

"No, thanks. I'd rather wait!"

He ambled over to the window and nestled right beside her. He shoved both hands into his pockets.

Uju turned to meet Okafor's gaze. "Today is the last day of the seminar, and I want to believe you'll also get all the materials."

"Tell me again, why do I need to get the same materials you already have?"

"Hello! You need to read it, study it, and practice."

Uju's eyes bounced all over the breathtaking scenery like a Ping-Pong ball, from the Lego-like NIIT skyscraper that stood far in the distance, to the Braithwaite Memorial Hospital building that stood close by, to the ever-busy Forces Avenue Street below, bustling with vehicles and pedestrians.

"Can't you just do that for both of us?" Okafor stared at her, perplexed. "Because if I'm not mistaken, I believe the keynote speaker mentioned the other day that the husband and wife are one."

"Hello! We are not husband and wife, at least not yet." The king retreats to the edge of the board. Uju's knight captures the queen.

CHECK!

"Yeah, yeah!"

A soft knock rang on the door.

Uju watched him from the corner of her eye, expecting Okafor to get it, or to, at least, ask who it was behind the door. When she noticed he didn't make any move, obviously pretending to be deaf and dumb, she scurried across the sitting area towards the front door.

"Who's there?"

"Room service, please."

Immediately Uju opened the door, a young slender girl wearing a ponytail, her hair tucked fetchingly behind a red, washed-out *Ambassador* cap, wheeled the trolley into the suite. Uju shut the door and offered her a helping hand in transferring the food and drinks from the trolley onto the oval table.

Okafor did not acknowledge the young lady's presence, nor did he return her warm greetings. He just stood there, gazing out the window until she exited the room, wearing a gratifying smile, courtesy of Uju's generous tip.

She desperately wanted to ask Okafor why he was so insensitive and uncouth to the girl, but she knew better than to go down that road. It was all too familiar to her that he was acting up, looking for someone or something to blame for his woes. However, she had no intention whatsoever of coming to his rescue, let alone getting caught in the crossfire. All she wanted now, more than anything else, as she sank into the overstuffed couch, was to devour the fried rice and salad staring at her, flirting with her appetite, clamoring for her undivided attention.

"Okafor, please come get your food," she pleaded, rearranging the plates, glasses, and bottles.

"I'm not hungry!"

"Liar!"

Okafor whipped around and stared at her with stony eyes, his face crinkled up in anger, wiping off the smile on her face. Immediately, she dropped the cutlery in her hands

on the silver tray and was about to apologize for her wisecrack remark when Okafor pre-empted her with a snort of laughter.

"Very funny!"

He sat beside her, placed his arm around her shoulder, and planted a gentle kiss on her cheek. "I love you!"

"I know you do!" she smiled broadly.

"It's just that I can't seem to think straight whenever I'm around you."

He stretched his arm downwards, inching towards her bosom. She gripped his hand firmly and artfully steered his hands from off her shoulders towards his cutlery on the tray.

"Wow! You almost got me there for a moment!"

"I'd always thought calculus was complicated," he sighed and grabbed a spoon. "I was dead wrong!"

"Whatever!" Uju scooped a spoonful of salad and sprinkled it over the fried rice. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Why do I have a feeling you'd still ask me even if I said no?"

"Which do you prefer, tap water or bottled water?"

"Bottled water, of course!"

"And why is that, if I may ask?"

"Come on, everyone knows it is hygienic and safe for consumption. Moreover, it is hermetically sealed."

Uju beamed with delight. "Wow! If I didn't know better, I'd say you just described the act of sex in matrimony."

Okafor hooted with laughter. "Really?"

"Of course!"

"Wait! Are you telling me drinking tap water is like engaging in premarital sex?"

"Isn't it?"

He stroked his stubbly chin. "I've never thought about it in that manner before!"

"It even gets better," she whispered.

"It does?"

She smiled coyly and dropped her cutlery on the tray, once again. She motioned to him to lean towards her, which he did in a flash, obviously anticipating a kiss.

"Sex in marriage isn't just like any bottled water. It is bottled water, under room temperature."

He exploded with laughter. "You are really weird!"

"That's about right!" she retorted, giggling as she uncorked the bottled water.

"You are amazing, babe!"

"Yes!" Uju punched the air as the AI resigned in defeat. "You can say that again!"

Outside, a rainbow beckoned on the horizon, streaking the Port-Harcourt sky with its brilliant colors.

"I love you!"

"I know you do!"

"Babe—"

Uju leaned forward and kissed Okafor, long and hard.

"Our food is getting cold."

A LIEN ON OUR MINDS AND BODIES

Chiemeziem Everest Udochukwu

I have come to plead with you to remember all that we forgot. To remember you shielded us from harm and lost light whenever we took ill. To remember you forgave and renounced the curses you placed on any of us who erred and showed remorse. To remember that each of us bear a piece of you, from the droop on Echezọla's eyelids to the nevus on both sides of Ọbụm's cheek, to the asymmetrical face and stammer of agitation Ọbịageri and I share.

You were as dauntless a daughter as you were a mother. At a time when everyone shamed ripe daughters in their father's houses, you refused to be the unwanted visitor each of your sisters became. You were immune to shame. You were immune to the claims of kinsmen to everything your father didn't leave a son to inherit. You were immune to the muscles of sons, the malice of wives, the taunts of daughters, and the fingers of cowards. We didn't know if you drew courage from charms as detractors said and still say, if truly

our father packed his bags like an outgoing bride to dwell with you. We didn't see how you both lived through the lahar of hate that erupted. But we remember that, despite you both hailing from the two biggest clans in the land, despite our father having relatives, we didn't walk around freely like everyone else, and we had no visitors except Ibuchukwu your childhood friend, whom we feared as much as the caskets he made. We liked the agelessness of his beardless face and how readily he helped us in hard tasks and excused our mischief with the misdemeanors of his and your childhoods. But we disliked the impudence of his jokes, the audacity to say even before our father that you would have had more children with him.

But when death mowed our father down and Ibuchukwu dug his grave and buried him when every hand retreated in malice, all the whys bumped into us the few times we hit the road. We were lepers to the townsfolk. Children told us they were barred from playing with us. Commodities finished in stores when it was our turn to buy. We were stronger than most of our mates, but no one called us to cultivate their fields or help them lift their loads onto their heads. But you gave us small joys, in the stories of the men that drooled and denied their wives for a taste of your prime, in the unfriendliness of your sleepless cat whenever it had a lizard in its mouth, in hiding your container of salt and making us search for it to spray on earthworms, in empowering us to stone any enemy mammal that closed down on the grains and cassava slices you dried under the sun.

You wanted to keep us around you, to see us and hear us parade and chirrup the home to life. But we grew into inquests, into knowledge, into desire, into change. We wanted more of everything you provided less. We wanted food. We wanted money. We wanted freedom. Echezọla our eldest brother sneaked into the road when you were asleep, seen off by the hooted farewells of the barn owl that stalked our house every night. Ọbịageri and I didn't know this initially because Echezọla thought women had sieves for tongues; the holes were not ideal for holding secrets. You didn't know at all because Ọbụm told us Echezọla promised to return and take him along if Ọbụm hid the departure from you. We believed and lied to your face. We believed because failing promises wasn't in the cart of Echezọla's weaknesses. We believed because we thought you'd be gladdened by the absence of the son who threw stones back at you: you spat and he spat, you barked and he barked, his head shook when yours nodded. But his absence didn't bring you relief. When you saw the wrapper blanket you gave him dumped on his mat, his items and smell gone, you lost appetite for everything.

You were there the evening he returned, the swathe of stars above him as many as the days he was away, as many as the times you craned your neck at the entrance in expectation of him. His once visible veins were submerged in flesh, his shirt and shoe no longer of okirika and rubber, but of print and leather. We knew you for welcoming good news with welfare questions and affectionate touches, but you were unexcited around him, the car he brought, the half-

hearted greetings he threw, the gifts he brought out, many for us, few for you. I felt it and didn't like that the fractured bond between mother and child had survived time and distance.

Echezọla pressured us to prepare and leave with him for the better lives he promised us before his disappearance. He sounded as desperate as someone careening out of perdition's tracks. He told you, not for approval or respect, but for mere awareness. He proposed a savvy for you, and you flared. He flared too, the crackle and smoke of his voice and dare greater than yours. You cursed him and didn't take it back.

Echezọla milked his goodwill for us when Ọbiageri and I wanted to be good daughters. We liked the taste and thickness of it and held out everything in us. But we should have done better when he shoved you that night for contesting our belongings. We shouldn't have reeled in the twists and turns of a faraway ride while you sobbed on the ground.

Echezọla slammed us into commitments but learned to involve us less in everything. We never knew his true business. We only knew his three cars and his house, a three-story building with a peculiar uniformity in its distribution of colors, white on the outside, red on the inside. It was too quiet and roomy for a bachelor. When we thought he had brought the three of us to enliven it, he transferred us to another apartment he had pre-rented and furnished.

We cannot explain how our small successes let our friends' mothers replace you, how slowly your memory

drifted into the wastelands of our minds, how it turned out that you had grown sequoias to reap eggplants. You had become the afterthought of Ibuchukwu's busy hands. You overworked yourself to wrinkles, to a heavy stoop, to rogues and house pilferers exploiting your rest, to the day you collapsed on a heap beside embers, suds in mouth, hands stretched out as if crucified on a staurogram. You could have been roasted had Ibuchukwu arrived any later.

Even the silhouette of death could not scare you out of your house. You refused to be moved out, even when you writhed in throes and flung yourself out of your mat, even when Ibuchukwu auctioned your boxes to pay for your treatment, even when your forbidden parts were breached with camwood powder, even when you repelled the doses of recovery and loneliness burnt you like distress and regret burnt your mouth in the years you called our names.

When Echezọla made us leave our rooms to gather for an immediate night trip to the village because we were needed there, we wondered. He had never been clairvoyant, had never mentioned home, had never been so keen on cooperation. We grudged against the suddenness of the call, the compulsion of it, but we owed him loyalty. Unlike us who would have asked questions without him, nothing deceived his eyes: shrubs that had grown into trees, pathways expanded into a road, routes narrowed by grass, bushes razed for buildings. It was as if he never left the terrain.

We passed Ibuchukwu's house. He had overhauled the rusted roof with shiny aluminium and painted the naked

walls a light turquoise. Children roamed there like an unshepherded herd, harvests from the continuous cropping of a fertile second wife.

Our own house was a panorama of bumps, sustained from the punches of merciless seasons. Ibuchukwu was digging a pit in the area where your cactus once flourished. The aging cactus suppurated beside the growing mound of dug-out sand, a reminder of the times we assaulted it whenever its glochids poked into our skins. Ibuchukwu lost touch with his agelessness. He did not reply my, Ọbịageri or Ọbụm's greetings. The pall of nimbostratus on his face could dim the sun.

Echezọla sold respect to save his time. He demanded that Ibuchukwu provide you. Ibuchukwu asked him to pick you up from where he thought you were stashed.

"You won't bury my mother like a nobody," Echezọla said. Ọbịageri and I shuddered.

"You people would know by the time I cover this grave," Ibuchukwu said.

Echezọla signaled to Ọbụm and Ọbụm followed him into the building. I realized why he didn't signal Ọbịageri and me: you were outside in a minute, in a casket as unrefined as our father's, held up at both ends by the straining arms of your two Tuscan columns.

Echezọla uncovered you. You wore a scowl as animatedly as your body wore the scars of your incisions. Your skin had darkened, your right arm and fingers charred, the soles of your feet yellow. When the bereaved wail, comforters

assemble, but the wails of Ọbịageri and me crabbed into nothingness and shot into the unkindness of ravens croaking across. Ọbụm sniffed. Echezọla retched. Both did not cry. Their stoical composure made us women look histrionic.

"Let us take her to the nearest mortuary," Ọbụm said.

"I've already made some calls," Echezọla said. "She will be taken to where I want."

Ibuchukwu was soiled in sweat and sand. Cut off from proceedings, his indifference was sinister. He dropped his spade on the hollowed-out soil and hiked away, face-up, the confidence of a shoo-in.

Ọbụm called him to come back and carry everything he left.

Ibuchukwu paused. "You'll be the one to feed this grave."

The Volvo 240 of the mortuary hummed in. A man with tobacco-stained teeth came down from the driver's seat and went to Echezọla. They clapped their backhands against each other three times and shook hands. They drew their ears close to each other's mouths in succession, their muted conversation ridden with nods. The man and his attendant, a young man whose upper body crushed his lower body, refused to carry you alongside the casket. They wrapped you in a black shroud with sinuous stripes of red and lugged you towards their vehicle. You slipped off their grip and landed on the ground, the thudding heavier than the joint fall of a hundred blocks. The man with tobacco-stained teeth loured at you and warned you to let them carry you in peace, or else he'd force you. It felt as if you stood somewhere,

commanding your body. They tried again and couldn't lift you. The man with tobacco-stained teeth stamped on your ankles with bone-breaking force.

"We didn't ask you to break her to pieces," Ọbụm rebuked.

"Do you want to carry her by yourself? She is dead. Not like you they broke alive," Echezọla snapped.

Ọbụm's lips quivered. It has been years since another man he hooked up with set him up for robbery, beating and kidnap. Echezọla paid a large chunk of the ransom and Ọbụm had his joints realigned. Ọbịageri and I do not hold that against him, but Echezọla gags him with it in any disagreement.

The man with tobacco-stained teeth tied your legs together with a reed. He picked and poured a vial of liquid from his pocket into his mouth and spritzed the watery and seedy mixture all over your body. It smelled like alligator peppers and schnapps. They carried you again, this time successfully. The vehicle that hummed in exited with a grating sound.

Echezọla made moves with distressing omnipotence as if they were prearranged. He invited us to an assemblage of men and women surrounding a saucepan of garden eggs and bitter kola, Seaman's schnapps and two goats. They sat at the edge of their seats, unsmiling, as if they had been forced to come.

Nwogu Ụka, the owner of the house and head of the clan, a cup-eared man with threads of distended veins on his

neck, spoke to Echezọla with a dignifying prioritization that trivialized our own presence. "Echezọla," he said. "It is you we know and must answer. We did not ostracize your family. It is just that our people distance themselves from abomination naturally."

He averred that you discarded traditional backing to masculinize yourself as a first daughter of a sonless family, bringing misery and tragedies to your family members. "We knew Igbemma enchanted our brother," he continued with haughty omnipotence. "No man of our land abandons his father's house for a woman's house."

"They should be told the conditions straight up," a heavyset man we had never met in our lives cut in. He had a harsh voice and inimical eyes. "It's either they choose to bury her as a single woman that had children in her father's house, or as a married woman in her husband's house. But they have to bury their father properly first."

It was an untrue history and ugly conditions we should have challenged, but we sat silent. We affirmed and apologized for your pile of atrocities. We would have buried you as a single woman if it wasn't a disgrace to our father. With Echezọla insisting on paying the most, we validated our father's burial before we paid for the rites of yours. We paid for all the marriage rites between you and our father because they said no kolanut was broken and no wine was carried on your head. We paid the cumulative levies our father would have paid as a married man. We paid the women the cumulative levies you would have paid as a married woman, and we agreed to the demand of burying

you in our father's house instead of your father's. Ọbụm announced a quick and well-paid house revamp. Men bridged distance to grovel for contracts.

Echezọla did not let any of us see your corpse in the few days you stayed in the mortuary. I pestered Ọbịageri for us to go without his approval, but she said she was yet to recover from the horror of seeing your corpse. We reddened the date for your burial. Your poster was inventive, your name printed in gold letters. You were not brought home from the mortuary in the company of worn cars, shrill sirens, or any of the noisy townsfolk. The reception of your remains was treated to the red carpet. Renowned artists performed and food was served in ceramic trays. You didn't belong to any denomination, but a bishop blessed your grave. Friends sprayed money like confetti. Bouncers lost control of the intrusive pickers. Echezọla's friends made the loudest noise. They came with cars too classy to be noisy, red fedoras and black uniforms, the facsimile of the shroud that accompanied you to the mortuary.

We saw you one last time in the room you were kept before you were buried. You were in a mahogany casket, death's bride in a tulle veil and immaculate socks and A-line gown with a bodice of rose corsages. Your nails were polished, skin perfumed. But your head and cosmeticized face were smaller. Your large breasts had shrunk to oranges, pushed up like a young girl's. I asked Echezọla if it was really you who lay there if he didn't cringe at the concerning alterations you had undergone. He asked me if I wanted to

eat you. I told Ọbụm and Ọbịageri. They shrugged and said nothing.

The entire townsfolk swam to the ground like a shoal, except Ibuchukwu and his family. Women wailed in elegies at your graveside and got blanched by bags of rice and heaps of Hollandis wrappers. Fat yams, heavy plates and chilled bottles comforted forlorn men. People who never knew of you had your face inscribed on their gifts and your name carved onto their lips. Young men flattened your tumulus in preparation for a headstone. People shook us for making history. It had to be so: an unlavish burial would have been a betrayal of capacity, a travesty of wealth.

Ọbụm was sacked from his workplace the same week Ọbịageri's pot of hot water spilled on her legs, the same week I called your name in the dream and the walls swallowed the sound and puked it at me, the same week Echezọla called to ask whose car left concertina marks in front of his gate, the same week we became generous and committed Christians at your thanksgiving, the same week that news came that there had been subsidence on your grave, subsidence so terrible rainwater reached and exposed your broken casket.

Since we paid those sturdy men to mend the grave, Ọbịageri and I do not understand what happens everywhere we dwell. We perfume our bodies, but everyone says we stink like an unwashed corpse. They think we haven't bathed in years. Ọbịageri no longer leaves her room. She regrets being the antithesis of you, the first daughter who chose to

make fewer enemies over putting herself at the forefront of her mother's dignity.

Since Ọbụm vomited a jelly worm, he has been pushing in the loo like a woman in labor, unable to expel even a pellet. The truck Echezọla's car collided with pulverized his windshield and the shards dug into his face, like nails driven into softwood. People have been whispering about his wealth, but we cannot get answers from a gory heap, from a mishandled mouth. I have been told the man with tobacco-stained teeth delivered a corpse with a void in her womanhood, a missing tongue, and breasts cut off and replaced with fancy. He has been arrested and has confessed to the business of making ritual mutilations. I will head to the police station as soon as I leave here.

I have consulted Ibuchukwu like the noble man he is. He spoke to me calmly and said he knew we'd come back. His silence on your instruction was to punish our discourteousness. You wanted to be buried under the cactus, without an audience, without claim, lowly and quietly, like a roadside carcass, like our father was. You wanted the opposite of everything we should have made you. It is unconscionable to have ill-treated a man like Ibuchukwu, but I have bruised my knees before him. We all will.

I have to come to you at night because my shame, the shame of the four of us, is too great to walk in the day. Love enthrones those who are alive, not those entombed in gold, so I have no mouth to say we love you, to say we deserve pardon. But your heart I know bears no rocks and your sting

doesn't kill. You once chased us out for spilling your pot of okra soup in a petty fight, yet combed everywhere later, tense, until you found us. You led us home and overfilled our plates with the replacement you had prepared.

As this lightning lights up the monochrome photo of you on this headstone, as I lay this vase of purple hyacinths beside you, as my ripped heart aches out tears from my eyes, as my feet squelch and print our collective remorse on this mud, as I retreat back into the darkness to straighten everything we crooked, may your good graces find us, our children, our children's children, and our children's children's children.

IN THIS MOON, IT BURNS

Mhembeuter Jeremiah Orhemba

How I wanted to be that sky—to hold every flying & falling at once. –Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous.*

1

My mind resumes the game as the lecturer approaches, a stiffness moving up my legs. I lean forward in my seat. Noah turns to me, his bulging eyes heavy with the question: *it's started again?* I sway my head. A chat I had with Moses, our Facebook online support group leader, realizes itself in my head:

< The only credence this has is that which you give to it. >

Noah's hand glides over mine. He squeezes, our clasp wedged in between the meeting of our thighs, shielded from the prying eyes of class.

One step, a swerve, the lecturer unveils with clarity as she approaches. The roundness of her breast clamped tight behind her dress, the flabby flesh underneath her arms, the sprinkle of hair on her legs, the chain around her ankle. Inside my head, she has come undone of this red dress. She

is revealed to me, balanced on a bed with thighs held apart, the light in her eyes and smile beckoning. A well opens up from my groin, a thrill mixed with anxiety and gushes out all over me. A flood. Of thorns. Sticking, piercing, and burning. So, I close my eyes and summon a naked man into my consciousness. His penis swings. Left, right. But my mind immediately swaps it with a zoomed view of the fleshy slit of a vagina. It says, *you wanna run your tongue over it don't you?* and the stinging in my urethra amplifies. A whirlpool of venom. It says, *think of you inside her, your penis rock hard and tearing her walls.*

My breathing cuts.

How the hell did I think…*but no, don't fight, don't fight,* says the article I read last night online. *These are just mere thoughts, intrusive thoughts. The only validity they have is that which you give to them.*

But. My. Penis. Is. Twitching!

Yesterday flashes before my eyes. Same twitching while Cecilia was talking that I had to excuse myself to someplace discreet. Under my pants, my penis was as flaccid and retracted as it could be, a huge contrast to the stirring raiding inside of it.

Noah's squeeze brings me back to the present. He squeezes, slacks, squeezes.

The lecturer turns around, clacking her way back to her lectern. My mind is a maze, a loop. The images reinstate themselves again, an echo, *tear her pussy, tear her pussy, that's*

what you should be doing not kissing another man, uggh!

2 124

Girls. Girls. Girls. Girls everywhere. All I see. Shapely breasts. Curves. The slit between pressed thighs stretching out into skirts and gowns. I fixate my eyes on the ass of the girl in front of me. Confronting this fear as it is supposed of me. All of me tremble. Vibrations pulse all over me. Urine razes my urethra, seeking release.

<Feel, but don't engage…>

<But it fucking feels so real!>

Perhaps I am straight now. Perhaps, in denial?

<No, the fact you are 'uncertain' cements this as OCD, not denial.>

Then why does it feel so fucking real? Why these attractions?

<False attractions, bro. Don't you shiver even before you see a girl? Your anxiety is what births what you are afraid is arousal. You see, the mind is a thriving entity of its own. Close your eyes. Don't think about apple. See, did you or not think about it? You'll need to learn to be comfortable with your OCD. That way it won't have power over you.>

"Hey," I pull on Noah. I raise two fingers at Cecilia, an apology of sorts.

"I need to leave. I can't stay for the next class."

"More reason we should call the girl, Uma."

"Not this before the eyes of everybody in this quadrangle, Noah."

He reaches out and holds my hands. Briefly.

"Take notes, okay?" I say.

"Yeah. But I won't be coming over after class. Timo and I need to conclude our group assignment today, but I'll come over when we are done, okay?"

"Okay."

3

My room is a dim enclosed space. I flop onto the bed immediately I shut the door. The razing has ceased, but my mind is still whirling. A sob escapes me. A soft, soft sob. Memories flare open in my mind.

Yesterday:

I have discouraged Noah from placing that *call*. Our bodies are glued to each other, my hands dancing all over his chest. I feel nothing. I never feel anything. Not even when he goes naked, mouth held under my dangling penis.

Hostel:

Penises sway behind boxers. In privacy, I pull out my penis and stroke and stroke to images of naked men on the internet, willing arousal. My hands chafe my penis than pleasure it.

How can I say I'm bi then? When it's only girls—no, I feel hellfire on earth in front of those, no, no. Straight, yeah? Didn't you just understand that line about hellfire in front of them? Asexual then. Really? What then will I say about

my sexual thoughts, the desire and flickers of thrills that run through me once in a while when my eyes fall on the muscle of a guy or a penis releasing urine?

Once in a while.

That sucks!

<Just like rain clouds concealing the sun, you are still in there. You are gay and you know that. Rise into who you know you are and stop paying attention to this. I'm a testimony. I still have OCD; if I can see through its illusions, so you can>

I whip out my phone and run to Google. But my fingers would not steady and allow me type. Tears, hot tears, sit in my eyes. My breathing isn't audible, but it pounces onto my chest nevertheless. I type: *black naked gay men*, into Google images, and a gallery of nudity unravels itself in squares.

My phone beeps.

A message. *<Roomie>I'll not be coming home tonight; I'm spending the place at Luk's.*

Yes. A galore of uninterrupted privacy!

The first picture is of my favorite porn star— a block of muscles, thick thighs, long penis—he's an embodiment of all that makes me tremble before a naked man. Not today, however. I have grown numb to the lures of this body. And the next, and next, next, next. I think of all the potential things that can bring me arousal. The results are still going to be the same, I know: it's nothing I have not known before. I'm resisting, my body is resisting, there's a stinging in my urethra, a melting sensation overpowering me—these signs are enough to highlight my situation as an illusion.

Then why are bristles of hormones caressing the skin under my penis, only this caress feels more like grazing. I concentrate on wanting away with it, it amplifies. I should stop this. Assurance is a sinking ground. Provides soothe, momentary soothe, and at the price of greater confusion. So why not give into Noah's suggestion and try a girl for sure? His place from here is a long distance. But I don't mind. I can't play this game anymore. I need to know. I need to know.

4

Shuttle park. Green buses of varying sizes stud the redfloor of this expanse besieged by grasses. Hisses fly around.

Arts!

Engineering!

Freedom Square!

A girl wriggling her way into a bus, flared pants defining her ass into a roundness, teasing to my eyes, and down to my groin. I snap out.

<Feel, but don't engage…>

<The only credence this has is that which you give to it.>

Does it matter now, any ways? I'm going to fuck a girl this night, hold this fear by its horns head-on. Not that redemption is promised, but it worked for Moses' friend. Rare, yeah. And I'm going to be amongst one of these miracles.

"Freedom Square," I say, approaching a bus guarded by a bald man. His shirt is faded, as are his pants and fraying

footwear. I pull out sixty naira and pay him. In the dimness of the car, I sight a bearded guy. I sit next to him and my stomach knots. Unable to help it, I look him over, heart beating, slowly. His hands dance over the screen of his phone. I want to hold those bony fingers. No, I wish I wanted to hold those fingers. Shit: now I'm degrading so low to anything for my miracle. The bus rattles and he jams into me. In the second that accommodates our skin touching, something twitches in my stomach. And memories flood me—breathless Noah fiddling with my penis, my head thrown back finding ecstasy. Noah bites my nipple and my body rings—rare moments offering me assurance and peace, and for once, I feel like myself. Then, it eludes me. Anxiety and dismay skitter over me. I part my lips and breathe.

I set my eyes on the windshield of the bus. Even within the shelter of a bus, the dust on this road billows its way into my eyes. There's an ache in the left side of my brain. I can't wait for this ride to end.

5

Thrice. That's how many times I knock. I am still trembling and the music throbbing from the last door on the extreme right of this floor keeps hitting at me from every side. I unearth my phone. It's past five. I knock again, weakly. For Chrissakes can this human turn down his music? Jeez, why did I forget my keys! Our online HOCD support group has brought me stories of people having terrible anxiety, but it had all been like exaggerated stories to me. Now, it doesn't. Fear has never been this overwhelming I feel like I

am going to explode. Inside a vagina? Am I really considering this? Yes, yes. I just have to try—

The door opens. Phew, finally.

But then I see a figure turning around instead of facing me.

"Come in already bitch. Let's get this party started."

Door expands and I see the figure falling onto another and when they turn their faces towards me, my heart caves in. Noah, eyes wide, remorse already creasing his features. The figure, Timo—wait, Timo is queer?—well, his eyes are shut.

I turn around, all of me throbbing.

"Umangu! Umangu!"

Noah grabs my arm. I snatch it out of his grip.

"Get off me! I didn't know our department had started taking courses and assigning projects on threesomes!"

"Can we at least talk?"

"Talk? What exactly do want to say? Justify your betrayal? Or try to insinuate that my OCD has twisted my mind, and I am seeing wrong? You know what…"

But then I can't complete my sentence. For some reason, saliva keeps catching in my throat. My heart pounds so fast the whole world is reverberating. I am gliding away and, from here shapes are a misty blur. The only decipherable figure is a wobbling face that hints at Timothy's. His mouth is a slim rectangular box. Laughter bubbles inside me.

A firm warmness engulfs me. And then, nothing.

6

I wake up to a sharp pain in my head. In my ears is the sound of splashing water. Everything bleeds into each other, a jumble of colours and shapes. But then light begins to pierce through and everything takes form. I rub my eyes. A towel-clad man stands before me. Beads and rivulets of water glisten on his skin.

Everything pieces together.

And my soul caves in, yesternight flushing into my mind. I scoff, shaking my head. I peel the blanket off my body.

"Uma, come on. Come on. At least hear me out."

I pause. Look around. My mind is a coalesced mold.

"What exactly, Noah?' My voice is hoarse, breaking.

"I can't do this anymore, Uma."

"Excuse me?"

"This is not how I wanted you to know this, trust me. Anyways. Ever since this OCD of a thing struck in, I've felt like I don't know you anymore. I try so hard, but I don't think I can anymore. I don't think I want to be in a relationship with someone who is confused but won't give chances a try. If there's anything our relationship feels like, right now, it is a cage. I am so, so sorry." His eyes are a gleaming transparency. He shrugs. "I am so sorry, Uma."

"Wow," I say, and then I am laughing. And then there's the clicking in my throat. A move of lips. But then, nothing. I bury my face in my palms.

"I am so sorry," Noah repeats.

He lowers himself by my side and reaches a hand over my neck.

"I don't understand, Noah. Is it the sex? And how dare you say I don't try?"

"I just can't help how I feel."

"If it's not the sex, then what, Noah? Isn't that the reason we are in this betrayal of a situation currently?"

"I feel for Timo and Sharon."

"Excuse me, what?" I rise up.

"The three of us like each other. And they provide me with all I need. We would love to give *us* a chance."

" A *trouple* is what you want?"

"It's not like that, and stop sounding judgmental."

"Judging?"

Fist closed, Noah shoots up in front of me.

"I love Timothy and Sharon and that is final!"

"You are shouting at me now?"

His head falls. "I…I am sorry. Didn't mean to."

"How about me then?"

He begins to walk away.

"How about me, Noah?"

"Stop making this harder than it already is."

I break into tears. I want to shout. I want to hold something and poke it in its face. In the end, I hold a hand over my mouth. Sobs spilling through the slits of my fingers. I turn around and leave.

7

On a graveled floor this high, the world offers up itself to me. The sky is a refreshing blue. There are the shaggy, peeling blocks of buildings that are the male hostels. This way a paved path teeming with students. And below, staring back at me in its redness at such a distance. For the first time in two, three years, my mind ceases thought, and it feels alright. It does not warp on itself, unspooling question after question. It's just a thing, alive yet dead. I stare into space. Realizing how cold the world feels–this is a stray from nothingness–so I push back on it. But thoughts sometimes can be stubborn, and this is not foreign to me. I swipe away at Noah's face. At all the memories swaying in, at the dent they are etching into my soul. I fill it up with breaths. Something—the breeze? my mind? OCD?—says, call a friend. I shiver at the thought, this breach. I cling to the peace. Until it is thinning away and there's nothing more to hold. Until the word hits me, *stuck*, and I suddenly want to write a poem. Until my legs are lead.

I descend the steps of this spectator stand. I sit. I fish out my phone and open WhatsApp and into Noah's DM. He is online.

I do not know what to type. Except sorry keeps ringing in my head. Except everything is liquid. A shattering peace. So, I log into Badoo. Swipe, swipe, swipe, until there is a girl, big breasted with one leg in front of the other.

Hey, sister? Wanna free yourself tonight?

A boy and a girl are approaching. And this time she is not unraveling herself to me. She is just a girl. Just another human.

I smile. This second—respite, all bars of unhappiness fallen. I—stunned, free.

And she becomes Noah walking in—one and a half years ago—with me by his side. Then she is her again, in my head, breasts, curves and thighs, peeling away at her clothes. She pushes my head into her vagina.

And all my bars slam back into place.

BLURRY EYES

Ebube Emmanuella

You were five when you knew that food wasn't enough for everyone at home. You would pray for all the stickers you'd sell after classes from the school Brother Eze held under the mango tree, which was just opposite the St. Peter's Catholic Church. Then you'd sprinkle holy water your mum kept under the bed on them exactly how you always saw her sprinkle it on you and your siblings every morning. "*N'afa nna, na nke Okpara, na nke mmuonso, amen.*"After that, you'd help your sister, Imaobong, to bring out two bags of sachet 'pure' water which she would sell. Her dad always brought bags of pure water anytime he visited your mother. You'd always hear muffled sounds and the rickety bug-infested bed squeaking each night he came by. Your mum would thank him while calling Jesus until only the heavy panting of their breathing could be heard. You always wondered if anyone loved Jesus as your mum did. Initially, you thought Imaobong's dad was Jesus, but he didn't look like the face on the chaplet a sister from the church gave to you.

Your routine was clear each day. You'd go to school under the tree and read out the alphabet and learn new words, without a book or bag like the kids you'd see running to school every morning with their lunch packs and white socks. Until a woman came by with her blind son one day, with bags of books, pens, and other stationery and asked the other kids to surround her son and pray for him. That day, you got your first eighty-leaves exercise book with an Avanti pen and 2b pencil. It was shared unequally but you didn't mind, because that was your first writing material. So, every morning, you'd cut a center page from your exercise book, sharpen your pencil with the glass shard your mum used to cut yours and your siblings' hair so she could put nchanwu in it to stop the ringworm growth, and you'd skip in a big yellow shirt with "Adieu Papa" written on it to the tree to learn under Brother Eze's tutelage. After that, you'd go with the other kids to beg people on the road.

This happened till one day, someone told your mum that she wouldn't give her money because beggars are lazy. You knew Mum wasn't lazy; she was just always pregnant and tired. After the particularly brusque words thrown at her by the woman who sold watermelon in the evening market, she cried herself to sleep, speaking in that thick Abakaliki dialect, asking Jesus why he abandoned her. The next day she asked Imaobong's dad to supply her with water for sale. After a week of your brothers crying every night due to hunger because Mum instructed you all not to ever beg again, you would gather watermelon peels from the people

who sold them and bring them home for everyone to suckle on and chew.

The next week, Imaobong's dad would come with two bags of water in the bacha you lived in, grinning from ear to ear while telling Mum of how a man driving a trailer carrying loads of pure water hit someone and ran, so they raided his trailer, and he was able to gather enough pure water for sale and brought the remaining for her. She had danced that day, and the bed was extra squeaky that night.

The next morning, she would take the water out in your family's garri bowl and borrow twenty naira from you to buy ice blocks. She sold all the bags of water and that night everyone had a hearty meal of a thin soup with cassava. After that night, she would then realize that she spent all her profit on food and she would only buy one bag of water, make a profit and resell again for the whole day. When she came back that night and slept, she was fully soaked with the blood of her miscarried baby due to the stress of the previous day. Imaobong would call the sister who lived in the church to come help, she would then clean her up and help her to the free medical center to get some drugs. She had mourned the death of that baby, saying how he could have been the next Bill Gates, but you sat there wondering if she hadn't given birth to enough Bill Gates and Jay Jay Okocha to last a lifetime.

The next day, she would task Imaobong with selling a bag of water and she would buy stickers of footballers for you to sell too. You held those stickers to your heart, almost refusing to sell them. That's when you decided to start

praying for them so anyone who bought them would love them as you had. Each day, after you'd sell the stickers (some days you'd barely sell anything), you'd pass the toy store where they sold balls and stick soldier toys and stare at them longingly. This motivated you to count your profit and put it in a tin box for safekeeping before giving Mum the remaining money.

Your best friend, Nonso, had kwashiorkor, and an always runny nose. He didn't sell stickers; he just lay at the roadside with huge eyes and begs. He was way richer, and he had toys. One day, he told you about the man who came by and asked his mum to always give him the money she got from begging random strangers and in turn, he would bring provisions of food and toys for his family. It was quite a deal which she took because even when she only got 50 naira from begging, she would exchange it for sumptuous meals and new clothes. You once asked Mum why your family couldn't get a deal like Nonso's, but she spat and said "*Tufiakwa.*"

One day, after a rigorous exercise of chasing kekes, asking people to buy your stickers, and praying for them to get millions and billions of money, you caught up with a man who wore a shirt written "Tecno." He held you and Nonso back and asked, "Ị ma ka esi agba egwu? Do you know how to dance?" Of course, you knew how to dance. Months of watching Zlatan's legwork and Zanku on the Brother who sold copyrighted DVDs did pay off. You both nodded in affirmation then you were taken to the front of fine brothers where they had already set up a bouncy castle and speakers.

They asked you two to dance and put on the popular "I'm Coming" by Naira Marley, and you danced to your heart's content. The songs would change, and you would dance; more attention was given to Nonso because of how funny he looked, but you didn't care, you were having fun. After hours of dancing, the uncle gave you and Nonso a thousand naira each, and you held it like flags and ran home, happily.

When you got home, no one was there; all your brothers were at the church, under the sisters' care till your mum would pick them up, and Imaobong was still selling pure water on the road. You were five, but you had already thought about the meal your family would enjoy that night with the one thousand you got. After a while, Nonso came to call you out. He carried a new shiny ball, and your mouth watered from the sight. "I have money now," you said to yourself, then you took all your savings and went to the trader who sold toys. You bought a small ball, little toy soldiers for your brothers, and a whistle for Imaobong. Satisfied, you played with your ball with Nonso.

That day had to be the happiest day of your life, not counting Christmas and Easter when the sisters would share food with fried meat and juice with all the kids on the road, and the posh kids from the orphanage would give out their old books and clothes.

After dusk, you went home to Mum who frowned at the ball and asked where you got the money from. After you explained it to her, you took a deep breath, held it in, and your lips tore into a grin. She slapped you hard for not telling her before buying anything that would waste money, then

snatched the change from your hand. She instructed you to sell the ball the next day and buy your stickers for sale.

"If anyone gives you money, make sure you tell me before doing anything," she said.

With tears in your eyes, you thought it so unfair, but after seeing the laughter on your brothers' faces after they saw the toys, you were instantly glad. Your family ate bread and sugar in water that day, a luxurious food while waiting for Imaobong to come back.

The next morning, your mum would go to look for Imaobong in her father's workplace on the road, but she wasn't there, and neither was her dad. She would be distraught and try to call him with the sister's phone, but the line wouldn't go through. Everyone felt heavy that day. The next day, it was the same story, it was as if they had disappeared into thin air. Out of desperation, you engaged the help of Nonso and went to the agbero who worked with Imaobong's dad and always called you "Fine Boy" to ask if he could do anything to help. He said he could find anyone he wanted to on the surface of the earth. He had told you to come out by night to the Peace Park building, but you shouldn't let anyone know. You knew it would be difficult because there were five of you, and Mum was extra careful with you and your siblings then.

So, you sneaked out that night on an empty belly and ran all the way to Peace Park. There, the agbero was waiting for you and he led you to a building. You wondered why he'd taken you there, but you didn't ask questions. He then brought out a sachet of water and asked you to remove your

pants. You became extra scared and tried to run, but he caught you in his huge arms and turned you. You were so tiny in his arms, but he forcefully removed your pants. Rubbed water in your anus and put something like a stick inside you. You would scream till you saw black. You heard him make the sounds Imaobong's dad made at night when he came but you were numb with pain.

After he was done, he dropped you while you shat yourself. You'd lie in that prone position, weak and limp. He called you 'Fine Boy' once more and put something in your hands. It felt like money but all you could feel was pain. He warned you not to tell anyone or you would meet a fate worse than death. He then proceeded to tell you how soon you would live in a beautiful house and go to a proper school, and you should stop crying like a baby before he sauntered off.

You gathered your strength to stand up by dawn. You collected the money, held it and limped home. When you got home you cleaned yourself with the pure water Mum would sell the next day. Blood and feces mixed together washing off and you went to bed crying because you couldn't understand what had just happened.

The next morning, you remained in bed, feverish and tender and you started hallucinating. Mum called a sister, and they rushed you to the hospital where the doctor confirmed that you were raped. Mum fainted and, shaking, you asked the doctor if you'd die, because you feared Mum losing another Bill Gates. You'd see the pity in the doctor's

eye while he shook his head telling you that you would be fine soon.

Weeks went by and you still wouldn't tell on the agbero who raped you because you were scared of the threats. Nonso came by together with other kids who gave you nice stickers. A man who has lost his child at that same hospital passed your bed one day and prayed for you while squeezing five thousand naira into your hands. You happily gave it to Mum, telling her to feed the family with fried meat that day.

The next day, you went to the hospital's reception, rolling your drip stand with a cannula (the doctor told you what it was and in awe, you promised him that you were going to be a doctor one day). You asked the nurse if she could change the channel showing on the TV to a cartoon, but she shushed you, then said to her colleague, "Everyone wants to be rich these days, can you imagine this man that they caught with the head of a child whom he wanted to use for money rituals?"

You looked at the TV in boredom and pointed out that you knew the man and he was Imaobong's dad. The nurse looked at you and asked if you knew what you were saying and you nodded. She shook her head in disbelief. But in the evening when Mum came by, the nurse told her what had transpired. Mum was stunned and asked if she could see the picture. The nurse brought out her phone and browsed through the day's news. Then she showed Mum the picture. You heard a loud thud; Mum had fainted again.

The funeral was not much at all. Mum was still weeping; they had managed to recover Imaobong's body with the help of the Reverend Father. Lots of people came with gifts. We were always on TV, and someone always came by with a microphone.

They buried Imaobong in the church cemetery and put a wooden cross on her grave. Her dad was put on trial and we didn't know his fate.

I was five, but I was overwhelmed by the events that had taken place and confessed to the priest all that had happened the day I was defiled. I told him word for word everything the agbero spoke to me about. Immediately the police were called and Nonso told me that the agbero was caught. He later confessed that he and Imaobong's dad were part of an organ trafficking cum ritual gang, and he was going to use Imaobong for money rituals. We already knew what rituals were because our mums used to tell us stories to warn us against following strangers to strange places.

I was five, but I knew about the cruelty of the world. Even after there was enough to eat at home now because Imaobong's death brought the media's attention to us, eliciting favors and promises, some of which were fulfilled. I still carried a hole in my heart and a whistle on my neck. I wouldn't let anyone touch me, even the slightest. I would blow my whistle so hard if a stranger approached me. I would never touch holy water again because I felt I was unholy. I slowly crept into the shadows where the boogeyman lived, where I would remain waiting for light to fill my eyes again.

EMPTY

Janefrances Chinwe Iwuchukwu

The pitter-patter splattering of rain on the roof brought Rube's sleep to a halt. It poured vigorously as though heaven was bleeding. Her body yearned for more sleep but that meant choosing between sleep and her job at Access Bank. She yawned and climbed down from the bed to do some sit-ups. A violent breeze blew in rain showers from the windows to her yoga mat. She quickly jumped up and moved to shut them. The curtains were already damp. It wasn't bright outside as the downpour had blurred the clouds. The early morning rain on weekdays always put her off balance.

As she stood in the bathroom under the shower head, the water descended in cold showers that spread a film of goose bumps across her skin. She shuddered and wished she had heated it. As she lathered her body, she thought of Ikem. He had told her of his intention to take her to Aguleri in Anambra to see his parents over the weekend. She knew her love for him was superficial but didn't have an interest in starting afresh with another man. She believed love grew

and that being more intentional about loving him would deepen their bond. They had been dating for two years and Ikem's desire to start a family with her had accumulated like pus in a boil.

Rube loved to wear her grey jacket on Tuesdays, but unfortunately, it was rumpled. She checked the time, and it was 6:58am. She quickly swapped it with a blue gown and zipped up the back. All Rube needed to begin her day was a breakfast of toast and boiled egg accompanied by a cup of tea. She ate in a rush. In her haste, the mug slipped from her hands and shattered as she moved to place it in the kitchen sink.

''My goodness!'' She took an unconscious step backwards to examine the mess. It was 7:10am and she didn't want to waste time cleaning. She made a mental note to tidy up after work and hurried outside, her keys clanking as she locked the door.

Outside, she was greeted by light rain showers. She unfurled her umbrella and gingerly walked outside the gate in her stiletto heels, where she waited for a tricycle. After a few minutes, her forehead began to crease with impatience. She wondered why it was always difficult to find commercial transport on rainy days. The clock was ticking, and Tuesday was not a good day to be late for work.

A minibus soon came along, and she climbed in.

"Unknown gunmen are shooting people at Amagu. They invaded the village at midnight and shot some able-bodied young men," a young man seated on the bus said.

"Honestly, things have gone haywire. The security situation keeps degenerating," another replied.

Rube detested getting involved in such conversations on commercial buses because she didn't know who was on board. The last thing she wanted was to endanger her life. She had learnt to be always security conscious. From them, she learned that a popular grocery store had been robbed in the wee hours of the morning. The robbers had broken in through the ceiling and made off with valuables.

"Ife n' eme! Things are happening!'' someone exclaimed.

''It is terrible,'' another responded from the rear.

Rube listened without chipping in a word until she arrived at her destination.

The day started and continued with a busy rhythm but thankfully, there were no glitches. Rube sat at her spot in the customer service row, her eyes peering into the desktop. A hand slid some naira notes onto her keyboard. She looked up and smiled at the middle-aged man who had just received money from the teller.

"Thank you, Mr. Rotimi. Good afternoon," she smiled.

"You people are not doing well in this Access Bank; I just told your manager," he said, looking towards the hallway leading to the manager's office.

"How did we offend you, sir?" a surprised Rube asked.

"How else? You didn't see me for one month and nobody asked of me, not even you Ruby." He loved to call her Ruby even though she had repeatedly corrected him that her name

was Rube. The full name was Rubeluchukwuisi, which loosely translates as 'obey God.'

She smiled and said, "I apologize on behalf of Access Bank."

"I refuse to accept unless you agree to have dinner with me tonight," he said and winked.

A customer came along and inquired about the process of activating a dormant account. Rube was grateful for the interruption. She didn't understand why the old man had blatantly refused to let her be. His incessant dinner offers were beginning to bore her.

"I will give you a phone call later. I can see you're very busy now," he said walking away.

Rube pretended she didn't hear him and continued explaining to the customer who had asked her a question. She had never given in-depth explanations to customers in the past, but that day called for it.

Later in the cool evening at home, she had just finished preparing dinner and was lounging in the living room when her phone rang. It was her mother.

''Ken has been abducted, the kidnappers are requesting a ransom of ten million naira before Friday, else they'll kill him,'' her mother blurted out.

"What!"

"They want to kill my son, my only son!" she continued in-between sobs.

"How? When did this happen?" Her hands were shaking.

"This morning, while he was at his farm." Her mother paused to stifle tears. "Nne ka o di, we'll talk later."

Rube dropped the phone and collapsed on the floor. "God why?" Tears welled up in her eyes. "Why did you let this happen to my brother!"

Memories of the kidnapping spree going on in the country flashed through her mind. She had been reading about it and hearing about it but now it had come to her doorstep; her only sibling was caught in the web. She wondered how her parents would raise the money. Both were retired teachers and she had only been employed for five months.

"Jesus, please save Ken. Don't let them kill my only brother, I can't take it, my mother can't. If you rescue him, I will serve you forever, please do this for me."

Rube lay still on the kitchen floor for an hour, sobbing. Her phone rang. It was Ikem. She tried to compose herself before taking the call but just as she pressed the answer key, it changed to a missed call notification. She stood up and headed to the sitting room. He called again and she picked it up on the first ring.

"Hey," she croaked.

"Babe, are you okay? You haven't responded to my messages on WhatsApp. That's strange."

"I have been offline," she said, trying to suppress her tears. "My brother was kidnapped this morning."

"What!"

Rube broke into fresh sobs, her composure crumbling like a shelled building.

Ken was a farmer and graduate of Crop Science from the University of Benin. He had been offered the course after his screening score didn't meet the cut-off for his preferred course, Medicine and Surgery. His parents had advised him to change to a medical course after his first year, but he had grown to love the new course and ignored them.

When he completed his five-year course, he was posted to Benue State for the compulsory one year of service to the nation as a member of the country's National Youth Service Corps. On getting there, he realized why the state was called the 'Food Basket of the Nation' and decided to settle there. In the previous year, his yam farm yielded enormous output. He sent over fifty tubers to his parents and sold the rest.

The week before the kidnap, Rube had called to thank him for the foodstuff he sent her, and he told her of his growth plans for his farming business, including venturing into fish farming, in the following year.

"But you are not trained in fish farming."

"Always see possibilities, Rube," he had said. "I'm not entirely a novice in the field. I do have an idea. I will take off from there and God will help me."

Rube remembered how that conversation had deepened her admiration of Ken's confidence, and she relished the sense of security that confidence provided her. Sprawled on the floor in a pool of tears, all she needed at that moment was news of her brother's safety.

Within thirty minutes of their call, Ikem was at her apartment. She leapt into his arms as he opened the door.

"They have kidnapped my only brother," she said in-between sobs. "My only sibling."

Ikem gently wiped the tears trickling down her cheeks. "He will be fine and will come back safely, I promise. Please don't cry, my love."

"Amen," she muttered.

He rubbed her back as silence swallowed his words. He didn't want to say anything that would trigger more tears.

''How are your parents?''

''Restless.''

He hugged her tightly.

Rube called her father, Mazi Ibeh, that night before going to bed. She wanted to know what progress had been made in securing her brother's release. It was raining at Umunachi.

"That piece of land at Mgbuke is all we have. We are currently looking for a buyer," he said, his voice laced with pain. "My father will spin in his grave, but my hands are tied. My son's life is at stake considering his health condition."

The land was an ancestral treasure, housing the remains of her grandparents and ancestors. Ken had recurring pneumonia, which he had been battling with since childhood. Although he had learnt how to manage the condition fairly well as an adult and rarely had crises, it was still a huge cause of concern. Her father reeled off more information to her. Her uncles and aunties would raise one

million naira, and the land would be sold for eight million naira.

"We will need an extra million naira to complete the ransom," his father concluded, the unspoken request fully dawning on Rube.

She didn't have the money and spent the night restlessly working out how to raise the sum. By midnight, she had used the restroom thrice. The lights were on. She liked sleeping with the bulbs casting a dense glow on her face. Ikem lay in bed wearing the matching pajamas she had bought for them. She noticed that he had woken up also and was watching her as she walked back into the room. He had stayed back to keep her company. Her cream-coloured silky nightgown glistened in the light. Ikem admired her swaying bosom, hooded by the sleeveless nightgown. She picked up her phone and stood still for a while, unsure of what to do.

The light rays resting on her shiny black skin tickled something in Ikem. It reminded him of the first day he had met her. He had walked into Eve's Bites, where she was having lunch, and caught sight of her sitting by the window, her beautiful dark chocolate skin radiating under the halo of the sun rays that streaked through the window.

"Hello, brown-skin lady," he had said.

"Black, please. I'm black as you can see." Her asymmetric pink blouse exposed a good part of her chest and neck. The sleeping hairs on her arms and hands tickled his fancy. He stared into her eyes and instantly fell in love.

Through time, she had grown more beautiful in his sight. As he lay in bed reminiscing over those memories, his eyes

swept over her body and the silky hairs that gracefully adorned her arms and legs. Desire welled up in him as the adrenaline rush intensified. He got up and moved closer to her and softly kissed her back, startling her as she stared at her brother's picture on her phone.

He moved to her neck and bit her gently. She gave out an involuntary shudder yet remained silent. Ikem's hands roved, animating Rube's passion, but she remained still. His hands found their way into the silky nightgown and cupped her breasts. They were soft. His frame clung to hers, his breath heightened by the desire that was building up inside him. As he made to slide down the strap of her nightwear, Rube pulled away abruptly.

"How insensitive of you, Ikem! So, this is the reason you stayed back."

Ikem was shocked at her unexpected reaction.

"My brother is probably being starved and beaten in the kidnappers' den and this is all you care about. I should have known better." She pulled the duvet off the bed and headed to the living room.

"Babe, I'm sorry," Ikem called as he made to take her hand and stop her, but she evaded it and continued walking. He followed her to the living room. Once she saw him there, she hissed and left for the bedroom. Ikem sat on the sofa for a while, confused and worried.

When he entered the bedroom several minutes later, Rube had wrapped herself in the duvet and turned her face towards the wall. Both slept in silence. Ikem left for his office the next morning after several apologies and serving

her breakfast in bed. Rube finally accepted his apology before he left. She felt uneasy going to work, so she sent an email to her boss complaining of severe cramps.

The ransom was raised in two days. The land, valued at ten million naira, was sold for six million. Her father's club members loaned him two million naira, and her mother's siblings raised one million naira.

On Thursday after Rube had resumed work, Ikem stopped by to pick her up from the office. He had given her seven hundred thousand naira, which she added to the three hundred thousand she had and sent to her father to complete the ransom money.

"Where are we going to?" he asked. "Yours or mine?"

"Yours," she replied weakly, staring at him. He still had those looks that made her head spin.

"Thank you, darling. You saved me, you saved my brother."

He rubbed her shoulder gently. "There's nothing I won't do for you." He kissed her forehead. "I just want to have my baby back. Since this new development, a part of you left with your brother."

By this time, they had reached his house. Rube stared at the plush rug in the living room and dug her toenails into it, savoring its softness. She knew he was telling the truth.

"Please come back. I understand how difficult it is for you but remember us," Ikem paused and continued. "I am here to bear this burden with you. Never forget that. Okay?"

She pulled him to herself, and he hugged her tightly as if she might disappear.

The silence hanging in Ibeh's family deepened two weeks after the ransom was paid. Ken had not been released, and the kidnappers never called again. There was no means of contacting them because the caller's identity was hidden while the communication lasted.

Days rolled into weeks, and weeks into months until December came. Rube arrived at Umunachi three nights before Christmas. The bike man had charged her double because it was Yuletide.

"Mama, I'm home!'' she announced excitedly as she entered the sitting room.

''Welcome,'' her mother said coldly, hands on her jaw, staring at the blank television. Her father emerged from the corridor.

''Papa, good evening.''

''Nne, nnoo. Welcome," he said quietly.

"Any news?" she asked as she sat down.

''None. I feel they have killed my son,'' her mother sobbed.

This set the tone for her stay in the village. Rube felt like a stranger as her parents totally ignored her presence. The hollow created by Ken's absence continued to grow as her mother's crying increased daily. On Christmas eve, Rube came to the sitting room to see her crying as she stared at his portrait on the wall.

''They have taken away everything I have. I think they have killed my son.'' She rubbed her hands on his face in the portrait. "What is now the essence of living?"

"Mama…" Rube called. "Am I not your child? Does my existence mean nothing to you and papa?"

"You are a lady. You will get married and move into your husband's house. Who will retain our family name? Chai! Be m echi go! My lineage has no continuity!" She placed her hands on her head. "It will never be well with those who kidnapped my son."

Rube walked back to her room quietly, replaying her mother's words in her mind over and over until her head began to pound. Ikem called in the evening.

"Hey, babe. How is village life?"

"Boring."

"Why? When you're enjoying care and affection from your parents.''

"Which parents? They believe they are childless o. Their son who adds meaning to their lives is nowhere to be found. So, they have no one else."

Ikem felt the sarcastic undercurrents as her pain got to him.

"But I forgive them," she continued. "This is Africa where a male child often has more worth. I won the staff of the year award with my father's name, yet it meant nothing to them."

"Don't worry about them," Ikem said calmly. His baritone voice soothed her nerves. She loved to bask in it.

"There's someone here who would do anything in the world to make you happy."

She blushed. There was a power outage at that moment, but she didn't notice. She loved every word sprouting from his lips.

"They make me feel like I don't belong here," she said, waiting for more reassurance and flattery.

"They don't, but if they do, it's their loss. You are my treasure and forever will be."

By the time the call ended, she had a big grin on her face. That night, as she tossed from one corner of the bed to the other, fond thoughts of Ikem crisscrossed her heart. She thought of how she had initially kept turning him down time after time when he asked her out. His persistence won her eventually.

"I'll make every day of your life memorable," he had promised as he kissed her hand.

He'd kept his promise. Her mind recreated their dinner dates, picnics, and outings. After a while, she imagined being dressed in a beautiful ball wedding gown while her father walked her to the altar to meet Ikem. Sleep waves soon washed her to dreamland. She was in the kitchen boiling stew in a short dress when Ikem walked in. He hugged her tightly and kissed her neck while she giggled. He turned off the cooker, lifted her in his arms like a baby, and headed to the bedroom.

Rube woke up on Christmas day, but it didn't seem like it. Silence hung in the sitting room where her parents were

seated, staring glumly at Ken's wall portrait which now acted as an anchor for pain. The last time the kidnappers had allowed them to hear his voice, they had heard his teeth clattering from the cold. He told them he was cold, as he had slept in the bush and had not eaten for two days. The kidnappers had asked for more money, and Rube had promised her brother she would get it to them so he would be released the following day. She had tried her best and kept her promise, but the kidnappers had reneged on their words.

Rube resolved to play the role of daughter and son to her parents until her brother returned. She was convinced he would. She believed his tribal name, Chinazom—*God protects me*—would speak for him. She had the conviction that God would protect him. As she sat on the bed pondering this, the aroma of a delicious meal wafted from the next compound and spread all over her room. It was followed by the sound of Christmas songs which filled the atmosphere. Rube loved Yuletide and despite the situation of their family, she resolved to not only enjoy every bit of it but to also spur her parents to make the most of it.

SHECHEM

Isaiah Adepoju

He fucked her in the nuns' home. Later, with the teeth of her womb softened, he towered above her and stared as though his life had been taken from him. Teresa grew restless; after the restlessness came a slow assuredness. It took her four minutes to decide, a quarter of that to bring the paring knife to his throat. When she was done and over with, she decided to sob a little. She did not move. She was sharing in her man's dying moments. During which the fan whirled, the walls churned, and in the pen, the last of the swine clucked its canines.

She turned on the vinyl as she washed herself in the bathroom. She took extra care admiring her slender fingers in the mirror. Then she walked into the verandah. The nuns were in the parlor. They would be ready.

The city of Shechem spread over a hectare of land, undulating eastern terrains where the sun, viscid and red, crossed the horizon. In the hours its passing would take, the city's incontinence would suffer clarity: the cactuses by Orimokun Road stretched their backs, the minaret tops raised their fingers, and the shadows of the grey-colored

houses of 42nd Street fell on the copper pod trees. Nobody knew how long the trees had been in the city, but it was an endearing tale that the SW Brothers, who founded the city in 1921, encountered an already-spawning copper pods beside what is now the nun's bungalow.

Soon, the nuns cut down the copper pods and planted crochets of herbs that would feed their family for fifty-nine years (1956-2015). But in 1956, Mother Jael commanded they be cut down, enduring alongside the memory of that site in the people's minds. It became, first, an adulation of that site—that is, the nun's home. Decades after Mother's death, the adulation turned into a terrible loathing. Something mysterious happened to the nuns until, one by one, they left. And it remained only twelve; Mother Margaret, Mother Jael's niece, aged eighty-four; and Teresa and her sisters.

"What shall I do now?" asked Teresa. She took a trowel to the pooled gutter beside the pen and forked it as though to verify how deep it was. She turned to Mother Margaret and continued: "Soon, I fear the swine shall die of tsetse flies or something worse."

Two piglets had died a week before. Teresa noted they had been dull that morning, and by evening, they had died.

"What shall I do, Mother?"

The old nun said, "Shall we call a plumber in the city?"

"But you know that nobody shall answer us."

"Perhaps Sharon might ha…"

"She told me yesterday, 'Sister, we better leave those swine alone.'" —Teresa had dropped the trowel, and was holding the old nun with an ungloved hand— "She wants them dead, I'm sure. She abhors the sight of them. She wants them perishe…"

"By God, don't say that." Mother Margaret removed her hand and started into the veranda. "Follow me and I shall write you the address of a responsible plumber that I know."

House 47 was a century-old house at the centre of St. Peters. Teresa had no hard time finding it. Its verandah, caked with dust, sank her feet a little as she walked. Stools propped from curtains and seated squarely on them were tenants of the house. They gave Teresa no mind. In fact, what went through her mind was that any minute they would attack her. But she had to save her swine from imminent death. So she followed a staircase which led her to a little girl's room. It was she who led Teresa to No. 234, the plumber's door, and then she skipped back to her room before she could be seen.

Edwidge's room, like his life, was in disarray. Shredded wood jutted from corners, the air solid with sawdust. On the chair's arm Krumbles cereals were scattered, half-upturned on the chair, a bowl of grits, and through the small window, she saw the small city, she saw the small horizon.

About the time Teresa called out "Hello," a machine started to whir. She had followed that girl tepidly, aware of herself, and now in this room with her own silence and trepidation, her alertness quadrupled.

She found her way into the plumber's workroom. The plumber, a thirty-six-year-old man, said at the top of his voice: "Whattu doing here, Ma'am?"

"Are you Mr. Edwidge?"

Edwidge stopped the machine suddenly. "Ma'am," he said, leading her out. "You gone get goin' now-now, Ma'am. What you got into the building for? The boys might touch you."

"But I need your…"

Edwidge had stopped listening and was opening his door wide for the nun: "Please, leave."

"Shall you come by today? We shall pay you double."

Edwidge heard the boys climbing to his door. "Lawd," he said and shut the door. "The boys are here." He took her to his workroom, but she returned to the parlor holding her nose.

"I shalln't stay there," she said.

The boys banged on the door now. Beads of sweat broke on Edwidge's door. He had started to pace, muttering. He considered throwing the nun through the long window. *She should survive*, but he could not risk it.

"Out with the nun!" screamed the boys.

"She gone right outta the stair," he answered.

Teresa had tightened her fist, and now muttered under her breath, "Let them come, I shalln't be afraid. Just let them come."

She knew what coming to this side of Shechem meant. The nuns had been apprehensive, and Margaret had asked,

just to be sure, if the swine were really worth it. Margaret, however, had allowed her because the connecting pipes in the house, if not repaired quickly, could as well just burst, tipping the house over.

"What's you doin' this for, eh?" Edwidge cried. "Tol' you she gone out the backway."

"We know she in there man," they said. "We got to gut one o' them hussies to-day."

Teresa said, "Let them come, open the door. My Mamma ne'er taught me to be afraid."

Edwidge grabbed her hand savagely. "Don't be stupid, Ma'am. They'll maim you if they see you, real quick. You ever seen them gut a chicken or summat, their blade over the throat, real quick the chicken flutter 'round for awhile." He did not leave her hand when he turned to say, "Can't lie to you, you my skin-folk. The nun gone out back."

"We gone check 'round the condo, man," they said. "If she ain't gone, we gone be back. You dig?"

They left. He held her hand still between his fat, black hands like an exacerbation. He breathed with the full of his mouth. Sweat breaking down his temples, he looked so ugly his ugliness repulsed Teresa. With his cinnamon-like-sweat so thick it felt like touching black mascarpone cheese. On a stool a slick of tar sopped the dandelion in the plant pot. She studied it silently before she removed her hand from his with force.

Teresa watched Edwidge work for the next few weeks in the house. He was the only male to have stepped into the house since 1921. Although the presence of a male did not particularly disturb the nuns, it certainly worried Teresa. When her abhorrence reached its nadir, it had no choice but to surge upward. Then she realized Edwidge was a man of integrity. He worked undistractedly and was polite, as though the barriers between their races had not tainted the stuff of his soul.

He gradually became consecrated to Teresa. After his work was done, Teresa found ways to see him and hear him speak about his life, his work, and especially his deceased wife.

"My folks carried her that day," he said. "She was still and cold and I was still and cold and I did not know whether I was dead or not and my folks, men, women, chillun, all came into my tiny condo and swept and cleaned and cooked and the third day they bought a coffin, scented the coffin with alabaster, and the women laid the insides with bluebells the chillun had picked, and the women, who done dressed Maria in beautiful silk they sewed the night before, these women, they tol' me to be strong as I watch my Maria lay there, still, in the coffin."

Sometimes he said: "My folks loan me many things, see. Clothes, shoes, Krumbles cereals cereals Krumbles you name it, chisels, many things."

And when Teresa laughed and said: "My mamma, before she let up, gave me to my grandma, Margaret," his reply was:

"Great God! Nobody ain't ever know you her daughter," Edwidge said. "You nuns look 'like nobody gone know you different. My folks think you nuns are queer."

Or he'd say: "My folks think you nuns never braid your hair, never do sex, just keep yourselves to your lord virgin."

Or: "My folks think you nuns never like nobody, certainly not nobody black as me."

Or: "You know, Teresa, my folks think I'm a traitor for bedding with you."

"You told them?"

"They my folks," Edwidge said. "They gone know, ain't they?" Then: "I think they like you nuns, anyhow. When they hear we kicking, my folks think they can see you, talk with you or something like that."

"But Margaret won't acquiesce." Teresa rolled 'acquiesce' on her tongue such that Edwidge misinterpreted it to mean rot.

"I dun care," Edwidge said. "My folks think you mighty pretty anyhow. They think your black a-different. That you nuns are like us blacks leastways. I know you black, too, sooty, buh my folks be racist somehow. God mightily did something with you, T. An' that's a fact, T. Lawd know you mighty pretty."

Teresa blushed. Knowing his people adored her, she wanted to see them. She thought they were beautiful, and thought she loved them, and thought they were the prettiest thing the kind God ever mold.

"But what about Margaret?" she asked.

"Margaret ain't gone hol' our loves back, T," Edwidge replied plainly. "I think she ain't gone kno' anyhow. You ol' Teresa, lemme tell you. You come to St. Peters, and I sweartagawd, my folks be nice when they see someone prett' as you."

Teresa worried over the next few days. It would be inappropriate to associate with the black men now. The 1878 Pacification Treaty ensured the two races remained stoic, maintaining peace. Following 1878, the black men's campaign for the nuns' extinction was gradual. They were gradually erasing the nuns with time. All forms of democracy, one learns in life are, in fact, a subtler prejudice. Independence then could be a consistent struggle. But what should be the role of love, what should be the role of naivety? "The death of the nuns," Teresa immediately thought. In the same instant, she decided, "I'll go first."

St. Peters received Teresa with open arms. They fed her corn stew and broccoli and scented her hair. They told her stories and joked with her. The girl, Harriet, tugged at Teresa's skirt and stayed beside her all through.

"We mightily knew," someone said, "months ago that you with Eddy in that room. We knew you folk would get on so well."

Another said: "Tell us, Teresa, how you nuns look like one mamma puke you open."

Another said: "We been meaning to ask you this, how you love our boy? How you folks get kickk…kking?"

Another said: "Eddy alway been a good nigger." And then: "Like his father."

The reception pleased Teresa, an unnatural solidity that skeptic hope. A solidity that in the coming months transitioned into recriminations. It however flourished in the preceding months. Then Teresa had met Eddy often. They walked holding hands in the middle of St. Peters. Teresa realized in those times how beautiful Eddy was. Not handsome, but beautiful.

Eddy taught her how to plant carnations and to know the time by her shadow's length. "My Papa hol' me then beside him, Harlem yunno, and he telling me to watch he black shadow 'nder the snowing sun." Sometimes he's a-standing beside her, sometimes he's a-standing inside her. Sometimes, she swore, she felt him susurrating in her. Such that his voice was preconceived first in her mind, her heart, her ears, before it traveled to his mouth. And the message embedded in the voice was not only shared but enjoyed.

"Don't tell me, Teresa," Margaret said one evening, "That you got in bed with the enemy."

"I didn't do no such thing, Grandma."

"Don't be silly, Teresa. I weaned you Teresa, and you was gon' lie to me now?"

"Awwn Grandmamma," Teresa said. She collected the colander from Margaret, dropped it on the worktop, and held her grandma's hands. Pressing it warmly, extracting the juice of marital sympathy. Assured Margaret was sunbathed, she said, "Buh Grandmamma, them blacks do love me

Grandmamma. And Grandmamma, don't say because they'll harm me or something, or that I'm blind. They DO love me. Not the color of my skin," she said, "not the creaminess of my eyes. But me, Grandmamma. *Me*."

Margaret collected her hands and put a swiveling palm across Teresa's cheek. "You'll do no such thing to your sisters!" Hot tears fell from her eyes. Teresa remained dazed. "Now I'm old, Teresa, but I'm no boo-boo the fool. Consider your sisters. Consider your mother. Viola gone be mightly sad now. For Godsake, stop that frivolity with that son of a monkey!"

When Teresa told Edwidge that Margaret had slapped her, he collected his machete from under the worktable.

"Naw, don't you go harm my grandmamma," Teresa warned.

"She did that to you," he said. "Swears ahma put my machete in her skin, bring out fresh red blood, an' that's a fact… my folks ain't gone stop me neither."

Teresa's cheeks were extraordinarily swollen. She did not tell the tenants of House 47 that Margaret had caused it. She feared a monstrosity hid deep down the hearts of these men. However absolved they are, the monster is there, stirring. In Edwidge, it hibernated for too long. Now it was out. Now she saw it. His eyes harbored no warmth. The solidity of her love, which promised racial pacifications melted before her very eyes. Nothing really, she thought, she could do about it. Since now, transitioned into recriminations, only its effect sustained her, holding Edwidge down.

"Let me go naw T, I'm telling you T," he said.

"Don't you go hurt my grandmamma am warning you."

Edwidge collected his hands. Stunned by the newness of his violence, Teresa began to cry. She convulsed and gasped. Eddy stopped and held her, yet she did not stop. Her world had been shaken, and Eddy had not the slightest clue about her salvation.

Two strange things happened after that day. The first, which was Margaret's whacking depression, would not have become prominent without the second strange thing.

Margaret sobbed often with her head bowed. She refused to eat and cussed about the house, picking up fights with nobody and everybody. Her agony, Teresa and her sisters reasoned, was deep-seated. A truth Teresa and even all her ten sisters knew was that Margaret's anger, when released, suffered lasting impact. They thus cared for her like one would a child, at least until she was well. Save that Teresa's silliness had incited a grief of Viola Margaret thought she had rid herself of. A decision sprung from that solicitude or the lack of it.

"The remaining nuns of Shechem town better left to Nairobi," Margaret said. "Before them sons of a monkey come hurt them."

This led to Teresa's discovery—the second strange thing.

Or it might not.

The tenants of House 47 were going to kill Edwidge Townsend.

Thirteen years later, Teresa told Edwidge's and her boy: "They gone kill your father, his folk." That Margaret announced their impending leaving did not help. For in a moment, Teresa skipped on the auburn roads and appeared at Edwidge Townsend's door.

Edwidge scoffed when Teresa told him.

"Come sit, T," said he.

"Edwidge, I swear, they finnin to kill you. Your folks. They goin' to."

"Now that's funny T," he said, smiling. "They my folks, T. Lived with them all my life. Why would they kill me now, and not then?"

"I swear, they gone kill you."

Edwidge's incredulity irritated her. "I swear!" she repeated.

Edwidge held her andtried to calm her but she wouldn't stop swearing and crying. Frustrated, Edwidge took her to the neighbor next door. He banged away.

"Wait," Teresa said.

"Naw! Let me!"

A bare-chested man peered out few seconds later. "Yo man, whatsup?"

"When we know, man, many years now?"

"Gone long way back, man, I reckon," he replied. "Known you al' my life, man. Since kindergarten when my mamma brought me in, I reckon."

He took her to another door.

The woman said: "Known you all my life. You my brother, my kin."

Another door, the man said: "Knew your father man. Died when I was fourteen, man, why you asking this for?"

One man Teresa was sure was part of the plotters said: "Known you all my life, Eddy. You my brother."

Later he took her to his own room and said, laughing: "Why they gone kill me, T? You think 'bout that? Don't make no sense."

"They think you got in bed with me, a nun."

"But they love you, T," he said. "They adore you. They want us together, T. You wasn't scared then, why be scared now." Then: "They my folks, T. They never gone harm me. They my folks, T."

Because Teresa knew his folk was going to kill him anyway, the Tuesday she visited Edwidge, she told him they were leaving, all the nuns.

"I reckon you jokin' T?" he said. "You jus' gone up and leave, for what, T?"

"Told you your kin gone kill you. You just won't believe me."

"But they my kin for chrissakes, what they gone singe me for?"

Teresa knew Edwidge was going to be adamant and was going to let himself be killed.

"Will you follow me home, Edwidge?"

"To your mamma's auz?" he said, laughing. "Swears you nuns are gone singe me 'live 'fo my folks do."

"No, they won't," she said. "I won't let them."

Nobody saw Teresa lead the black man into the nun's home. She shut the door and unhooked her bra. Edwidge stood, stunned, before her. Tears clouded his eyes. He realized, now that Teresa stripped before him, that it was true, that she was leaving. Was she ever gone come back? No? What about me, T? You gone leave me here, T? I gone be dead without you, T. I swear, T, I gone die for real.

Teresa undressed him slowly like a ritual. He sobbed like a little lamb. When they were nude, their faces had changed brilliant. In the parlor, the clock clicked, and the nuns kept time. The last of the swine kept time, too, nosing a mound of parsley.

"They real gone kill me, T," said Edwidge Townsend, "my folks, they gone kill me cuz I got in bed with you? Naw, don' lie to me, T. Won't fret or nothing."

In silence, Teresa pinned him into her. Edwidge cried "God!" and tears wet his face. He knew the answers through her eyes. Warmed with pleasure, she cut his throat with the paring knife, and then she put on the vinyl. The antique white of the bedding filled with semen and blood. The dead man would be swiftly buried by his people, just like his father.

Outside, the nuns would be waiting. They were keeping time.

THE CONTRIBUTORS

Precious Chuckson, also known as 'The Sublime', is a writer who believes that life is an endless catalogue of stories worth telling. Her love for writing dates back to childhood, when she had a natural flair for it. In 2017, she started writing professionally, and since then, she has been captivating readers with her creative fiction, poetry, and children's books. In December 2021, Precious Chuckson published her first book titled "21 Days to Becoming a Proper Child," a children's book focused on teaching values in a creative, fun, and engaging way. Her passion for children's literature is evident, and she aspires to continue creating works that will inspire and educate young minds. As a writer, Precious draws inspiration from authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Mariama Ba, whose writing styles have greatly influenced her craft. When she is not writing, Precious enjoys reading and listening to poetry, and experiencing other forms of art. With a dedication to storytelling and a desire to make an impact in the literary world, Precious Chuckson is a writer to watch out for.

Nana-Hauwa Sule is a writer, journalist and communications person. She works with Liberation Alliance Africa as a Communications Associate. She was also a reporter and the former lead Social Media Manager for Daily Trust. She writes fiction and creative non-fiction and

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Hauwa Saleh Abubakar is a writer and poet. Her works have appeared in *The Weight of Years: An Afroanthology of Creative Nonfiction, Ake Review, Lolwe,* and more. She is also the author of *How to Practice Forgetting*, a poetry collection that explores the world through the body on Okada Books. Hauwa is the founder of an organic tea brand 'Maimah's Cup of Wonders,' and is currently a journalist with HumAngle Media. She considers herself an accidental lawyer and aims to make people feel 'something' with her work.

Iheoma J. Uzomba is a graduate of the University of Nigeria Nsukka. She was Editor-in-Chief of *The Muse* Journal No. 50 (a Journal of Creative and Critical Writing, UNN). She is a winner of the Lagos-London Poetry Prize, a longlistee of the Poetically-Written Prose Contest and a fellow at the Undertow program. Her poems have been published in *Palette Poetry, Rattle Magazine, Chestnut Review, The Shore Poetry, Akè Review, The Rising Phoenix Review, Kissing Dynamite* and elsewhere. She tweets @iheomauzomba.

Haruna Solomon Binkam is a writer and medical doctor whose works have appeared in *Iskanchi* Press and magazine,

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Chidera Solomon Anikpe is a twenty-one-year-old, queer, Nigerian storyteller and a student of Literature in English at the University of Jos in Nigeria. He is a lover of contemporary literatures, abstract arts, pop music and mythologies. When he is not writing or reading, Chidera can be found binge-watching an unhealthy ton of Korean dramas.

Aziba Ekio is a Nigerian writer, poet, producer, and spoken-word artist living in Abuja, Nigeria. Her poetry examines themes such as climate change, religion, and the human condition. She has participated in and won poetry slams in Abuja and Port Harcourt respectively. When she isn't writing, she enjoys learning new languages and finding new experiences to write about.

Abasi-maenyin Esebre is an Oron storyteller who centers Calabar in his writings. His essay 'Grief: Its Invisible Gerund' was shortlisted for the continental non-fiction competition organised by Agbowo Magazine and won the 2023 SEVHAGE/Maria AjimaPrize for Non-Fiction. His essay 'Call Me By My Name' has been published in

AFREADA. Curious to a fault, he enjoys research in his free time and is enthralled by both film and literary criticism.
Lafua Michael Tega is a voracious reader and learner of anything that makes life worthwhile. He loves reading the Holy Bible, novels, writing short stories, coding, jogging, playing chess, scrabble, and football, among other interests.

Chiemeziem Everest Udochukwu's work appears in Lolwe, Jellyfish Review, Peatsmoke Journal, Second Chance Lit and elsewhere. He won the EC Michaels' Short Story Prize and was a finalist for The Black Warrior Review Contest, The Quramo Writers Prize, The Nigerian NewsDirect Poetry Prize and The Dawn Project Competition. He tweets @everdoch.

Mhembeuter Jeremiah Orhemba is Tiv, Nigerian and first runner-up for the 2021 Kreative Diadem Flash Fiction Contest. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lowle, PRIDE: An Anthology of Diverse Speculative Fiction, The Shallow Tales Review, FictionWrit, Arts Lounge, Eboquills, The Muse Journal, Agapanthus Collective, ARTmosterrific, Fiction Niche* and elsewhere. In 2021, he was an artist-in-residence at ARTmosterrific. He wishes to attain the serenity of water, enjoys watching TK and Carlos kiss, and still loves AURORA and Christina Perri. For more of his works, read https://linktr.ee/mj_orhemba He tweets as @son_of_faya.

Ebube Emmanuella is a medical radiographer and product designer. When she isn't out saving lives, she spends her time reading, watching movies, listening to music and building castles in the sky. Emmanuella enjoys reading, listening to music and daydreaming. She has a belief in the limitlessness of her imagination, and her power to bring to life ideas while creating magic with words. She loves the simple and sweet things of life and enjoys serenity.

Janefrances Chinwe Iwuchukwu is a writer and budding author currently living in Enugu State, Nigeria. With a background in Literature from the University of Benin, storytelling is her forte. Janefrances has been able to hone her writing skills over the years, writing several articles, poems and short stories. She focuses on the happenings in the society where she lives, unveiling layers of degeneration while portraying prevalent niceties. Her works are usually imbued with African tone and setting, and she loves to explore themes revolving around love, nature, culture and politics. When she is not writing, Janefrances allots ample time to reading, traveling and cooking. Her first-ever submitted short story, 'Empty' made it to the top 15 of the ALITFEST short story competition. Janefrances is on social media on Twitter @ChinweIwuchukwu, Facebook @Jane Chinwe Iwuchukwu, Instagram @Janefrances_Chinwe and YouTube @EnglishwithJanefrances.

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THE ABUJA LITERARY SOCIETY [ALS]

Principally founded in 1998 by Victor Anoliefo and co-founders, Ike Anya, Ferdinand Agu and Ken Ike Okere, the Abuja Literary Society is an initiative that brings together writers, aspiring authors, bibliophiles, intellectuals, and generally anyone with an interest in the literary arts and looking to relax in a creative atmosphere. ALS currently consists of weekly meetings held every Friday of any given month, in which a variety of activities take place. These activities include open mic poetry sessions, book readings, book discussions, and literary workshops among others. Apart from the weekly meetings, ALS organizes periodic events that contribute to its overarching goal of building and sustaining a thriving literary space in Abuja.

The Abuja Literary Society has set for itself the task of generating and sustaining a literary culture and the creation of alternative literary-based entertainment in Nigeria's nascent Federal Capital City. ALS attracts resident and visiting writers, literary enthusiasts, as well as visual and performance artists. ALS welcomes all literary enthusiasts to be part of its community.