



AN ANTHOLOGY OF STORIES

A MOSAIC
OF TORN
PLACES

A Mosaic of Torn Places

An Anthology of Stories

Compiler:

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“...no one can guarantee exactly what you will like. But it will be difficult to go through these pages without finding some new grace and beauty.”

—*Immanuel James.*

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DEDICATION

To you, dear reader.

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FOREWORD

During one of my first classes in secondary school, my mathematics teacher explained the Tally system to a class of kids who would rather be at the food stand. I sat, side pressed against the unpainted wall, taking in every word. A door was suddenly visible, open before me. I walked into the B.C.

I saw the early men. Saw them weary, bent. Saw them struggle to keep record, count. I saw them make notches on sticks: I, II, III, IV.

As much as these predecessors used the Tally for arithmetic, they were marks indeed; marks that have survived countless tsunamis, hurricanes, and two world wars. Marks that have lived through centuries to be doled out to generations on charcoaled walls, white boards; steamed and spiced in the mouths of mathematicians that tell the story of men who didn't know that they were making history. Men who have no say in how their story is being told.

Our stories are being told: By two lovers in a room, her head on his chest, exchanging laughter and stories. By angry mothers to nonconforming children, spinning tales into a moral compass. By men who have chosen the path of letters. The ones we call writers.

A writer tells a story - fiction or not - through certain vessels - characters. In his stories, you will find particles of the writer sandwiched between lines, scattered amidst paragraphs; just as the early men pervade the Tally.

I wonder if my mathematics teacher knew that in those moments when he stood before the class and genuflected, he was a storyteller.

Emitomo Tobi Nimisire, 2017.

INTRODUCTION

I gave two young ladies a ride one rainy afternoon in Lagos. What do you do for a living? they asked. I'm a writer. Their doubt was a long, throaty laughter. A writer would not be driving this kind of car. Then came the scorn: Sit down and write things, like seriously? How can anyone do that...for a living? I tried explaining the profession, tried showing them how ignorant it is to dismiss the significance of literature. A waste of time.

They were not entirely wrong in their thinking.

Even in developed societies, writing has not totally escaped that notorious capitalist contempt. "Nigerian writers are often poor and wretched. Wearing faded, dull colours, like they are always on their way to a burial," wrote one Nigerian writer. It is what it is.

Youth is often drawn to material exuberance. To gloss. Sold to the urgency of reward, rather than to a thankless persistence that can even eventually yield nothing palpable. Perhaps a flawed philosophy, yet it serves its own authentic worldly purpose.

Yet that youth which strives for abstract, sometimes altruistic pursuits – one which places the general good above personal reward – such indeed helps the world to find needed balance. Storytelling is urgent, both in its cultural and psychological mandates. It is essentially a volunteer work tasked with instruction, education, and entertainment. To find the performance of this onerous office in the hands of youth is beyond exciting.

Reading the beautiful stories here, I was assailed by a certain sense of waste. I readily confess my capitalist bent and rejection of free literary offerings. I confess my lack of generosity in these matters and, therefore, salute the expansiveness of fellow youth in teaching me another way to love the reader. The term "freedom of expression" may yet have another application.

Then again I recognize that creativity is often resourceful, if not restless, in seeking expression. These are voices asking to be heard, voices so pleasant I had to economize the reading—or if you like, the listening—just so I could delay the exhaustion of goodness.

I am happy and honoured to be part of this. I congratulate the writers on pulling this off despite the hurdles. And for you, dear reader, no one can guarantee exactly what you will like. But it will be difficult to go through these pages without finding some new grace and beauty.

Immanuel James,

Author of Under Bridge,

Winner of the 2014 ANA Prize for Prose.

CARTWRIGHT AVENUE

Munachim Amah

A stranger is an unfamiliar spirit that leaps at you for observation, fascination, disdain, or, sometimes, nothing. Mother says to keep your senses open when you encounter one. Keep them open for expressions, mannerism, and attitude. Put everything you sense on a scale and weigh, and then decide where the person falls on the familiarity scale.

It was a cold morning in July. The early morning rain had stopped, leaving defiant grey clouds to litter the sky. I was late for my JAMB lessons again, and thought if care was not taken I would fail my third JAMB exam and miss a shot at getting a university admission.

I doubled my pace, and had neared the junction that ushered our street into Allen Avenue (where my lesson centre was located) when a hand tapped my shoulder. I whirled and saw a man. An unsmiling, tall, charcoal-black man in a white polo that hugged his chest and faded jeans trousers.

“Hello,” he said.

The corners of his eyes were glued by crusts, and he looked like he could do with a two-hour sleep. Seeing he was on bathroom slippers made me wonder who still wore bathroom slippers on the streets of Lagos. I don’t know why but as he stood there, his gaze fixed on me, an image of Mr. Ben, my English teacher at the lesson, standing in front of the class in his oversized suit, *Compiled English Past Questions* in his left hand, breezed through my mind. I imagined Mr Ben in front of the class, teaching and writing on the white board, his fat bum-bum shaking and triggering quiet laughter in the class.

“Good morning sir,” I replied clumsily, betraying the urge not to smile.

A few yards from us, a bread seller kept shouting, *Agege buttered bread! Agege bread!* dragging the *e* between the two *gs* so that it sounded as if she was singing. I glanced at the girl gripping the rim of a huge tray balanced on her head, and I could see different sizes of bread sticking out from a transparent nylon.

"I'm looking for Cartwright Avenue," the man said, his voice drawing my attention. "Do you know how I can get there?"

"Cartwright Avenue, Cartwright Avenue," I repeated, squinting and scratching my head. I hadn't heard that before, but I tried to sound helpful. I wanted to be helpful. Unfortunately, I had recently moved to Lagos to live with my uncle and prepare for JAMB. And all I knew was my uncle's house on 25 Ladipo Kasumu Street, my JAMB lesson centre on Allen Avenue, and the shop where my uncle's wife sent me to buy fresh bread sometimes. Much of Lagos was still unfamiliar territory.

"I'm not sure. I haven't really heard that before," I said.

"I need to get to Cartwright Avenue," the man said again, his voice trailing away. "Can you please help me get there? I am new to Nigeria." He glared at me, supplication etched in his eyes.

"I really don't know," I said, shaking my head again. "I wish I can help."

Kindness is a subjective thing. But mother says to try your best to be kind to everyone. Be kind to strangers. Be kind to friends. Be kind to enemies. But never be a fool, she would say. I wonder how she expects you to be kind to everyone and at the same time be wary of being a fool. How do you find that boundary between kindness and folly?

I like to think of kindness as a questionable virtue—something to be calculated. You can take it, measure it in a test tube, examine it to satisfaction and propound theories on it. But its dispensation—the decision around how and when to dispense it—rests on conditions. Like where you are and what you have. Depends on your judgment of the circumstances prevailing in a particular situation. Depends on your assessment of the beneficiary of your kindness. Especially in a complicated city like Lagos where life is not only confusing but sometimes difficult.

I walked away. I had no idea where Cartwright Avenue was. I couldn't help the stranger. I felt bad.

I had only walked five steps from him when another man stopped me. This man had on a grey t-shirt, jeans trousers, and a white canvas. He was dark, but unlike the first man. His lips were full and curved out in a funny way, like kpomo. They held my attention.

"What is he saying?" this man asked, pointing at the other man who was still standing where I left him, turning this way and that as if expecting someone. "What did he say to you?"

I was now a little impatient. "I think he's lost," I said. "He was asking of a certain Cartwright Avenue. I don't even know where that is."

The man observed me for a while before he said, "Yeah, that's the same thing he asked me," and then paused. "We should help him. I think we should help him."

I was silent for a while, standing still and staring at his lips.

"He has a lot of money," he added. "We should help him."

And slowly, I nodded, surprising myself.

Sanity is an elusive ghost. It can vanish. Or rather, it can be made to vanish. Mother says Bonjour, the mad man in our village who walks about with his penis dangling in front of him like a church bell, ran mad from too much reading. He stretched his brain too much and it just shut down, she says. She would tighten her lips into a frown each time she recounts this and then warn me: Be careful Ifenna. Be careful before you end up like Bonjour.

I'm not sure how these things work, but they say some people use jazz (which some people call juju). They get charms they use on you so that once they open their mouths and talk to you, and you respond in words or actions, you'll lose sanity. I still wonder where they put these charms – on their tongues, their foreheads, in their eyes, or do they clasp it in their hands as they talk to you? People say the secret is to avoid replying once they talk to you. Strangers o, beggars o, wanderers o, do not even answer. Do not talk back, else, the jazz will catch you. Because talking is like saying, "oya, I am here, do with me whatever you like." Because talking is

predisposing yourself to the spirit of the jazz. How else can the spirit possess you if you do not predispose yourself?

I followed them—the lost one and the kpomo-lipped one. I had no idea what was going on, or where we were headed. I just followed, planting one footstep after the other. Occasionally, they would turn to make sure I hadn't turned back; and they would flash me a brief awkward smile. When we got to a particular street, lost-man turned to me to say he needed to get some of his things from a particular place and that was where we were headed. His eyes darted about, and I remember people peeking at us.

They stopped in front of a small shack by the end of the street. Built from rough plywood and blue tarpaulin, the shack looked like a micro *mama-put*. The inside was dark and empty, except for two empty crates of beer on which lost-man and I sat, facing each other, while the other man stood. The tiny window above my head remained shut. Directly on top of lost-man's head was an inscription: THE GODS ARE NOT SMILING.

I took a deep breath, but the air inside was tight and stuffy, and I could smell camphor. It was as though I was there, but not really there: like I was watching myself in an unfolding play.

"I need to smoke," lost-man said. "Do you have some money?"

Confused, I stuttered and asked if he was talking to me. He nodded. I found a N200 naira note in my pocket and handed it to him. He squeezed it into the other man's hands and motioned his head in the direction of the door.

The kpomo-lipped man left and returned with a packet of cigarettes, and after lost-man flicked it open, he asked if I wanted a stick. No, I said. I had never smoked. His stare lingered on me for a while before he lighted a stick and smoked it. It was like a ritual, his smoking. I could sense that from the casual way he pulled and blew out smoke. I almost choked.

Next, they brought out a blue bowl of clean water and a small sachet of detergent.

"What's your name?" lost-man asked.

"Ife – Ifenna."

“Ife,” he said, looking at me and tearing the detergent open at the same time. “You will be rich today. We will be rich. Stinking rich.” He was smiling, likewise the other man.

I don’t recall if I nodded or not, but I kept watching as he emptied the white detergent into the bowl of water and waved a clean sheet of small white paper before me. He dipped it in the detergent water for some seconds and brought it out. To my greatest shock, the paper had turned into a N1000 naira note.

I moped while he grinned, revealing his gap teeth.

“All we need now is money,” he said, “so we can get more of these white papers. And we will be stinking rich.”

I had forgotten myself completely by this time. Forgotten I had come to Lagos only four months ago and was living with my father’s only brother who had a beautiful wife and a four-year old daughter, and who lived in a three-bedroom on Ladipo Kasumu Street, off Allen Avenue. Forgotten I was a JAMBITE who had tried JAMB exam twice, and had earlier that morning been on my way to JAMB lesson. Forgotten about my parents—my civil servant father and my very prayerful headmistress mother—who were in the village, struggling with my five other siblings. Forgotten I had dreams, shapeless longings for a future that seemed so distant and near at the same time.

My mind wandered in a room filled with clean mint notes of N1000 and what those notes could do to someone’s life. How those notes possessed the absolute power to completely transform someone’s life.

“Ife my man,” lost-man started again. “You need to bring some money, you know.”

My heartbeat became laboured, and I could barely breathe. “But I don’t have any money,” I replied, stuttering.

“Oh dear, you have money. You have lots and lots of money. You just don’t know you have it.”

Home. Google says it is a place where one lives permanently, especially as a member of a family or household. I say no, it is not a place. It is a feeling. It is your tender heart and where it finds peace which can really be anywhere in the world. Home has to register in the heart before it becomes a physical space. You feel home; you do not construct home and force it upon the heart.

Mother says there is no place like home—home for her means the green bungalow in the village where she, father, and my siblings live, and where I grew up. Never forget where you come from, she would say. Never forget your home. I don't know, but I think home is also the softness I feel in my heart when I am in my room at my uncle's place, listening to Frank Edwards, or when I am in the sitting room with my uncle's daughter, Kosi, watching Sofia The First, and exchanging knowing smiles.

The plan was simple and straightforward: I had to steal from my uncle and his wife. Carry their home theatre systems and television. Make away with my aunt's jewels, my uncle's car keys. Search the drawers in my uncle's room for wads of money. Carry the generator. It should be simple. Very simple, lost-man said.

At first I was quiet. Then I started to cry, shedding large lumps of tears and shaking my head. "I can't do that to my uncle, I can't do that."

The two men stared at me. The kpomo-lipped man tried to convince me with words I did not hear. Eventually, they got tired and I thought I saw lost-man struggle to conceal fear in his eyes. He arranged for the three of us to take an oath. He made us place our hands upon our chests and swear: *Anyone who dared disclose anything that happened here will die.* And he sealed the oath with *In Jesus Name* to which we responded *Amen.*

Suddenly, my stomach grumbled and I wanted to go home.

But home wasn't anywhere close to where I found myself after that moment. I woke up lying by the roadside, in the wake of Lagos life, cars honking and people shuffling past, covering their noses and turning to stare.

I would later be told, by my uncle, that I had gone missing for two days.

STABS & ROSES

Collins Prime

"When your wings are strong, be sure to carry someone special on them." My father's succinct advice on settling down invariably rings in my head. He's a man of few words: words that carry so much meaning, that tug at the hem of reason, which grips the mind like a pincer. A man so rich in wisdom – riches he shares in capsules of epigrammatic wisdom that has shaped me into a responsible and hardworking young man.

I wouldn't exactly say I am well-off, but I lead a comfortable life with a good apartment and a car I get to proudly call mine. After graduating with high honours in B.Sc. and M.Sc. in Public Relations at Yale University, and returning to Nigeria, my dad and I decided it was best if I got out there and made the most of life. So I left Lekki and set sail to Abuja.

"Everything I have is yours, but you have to acquire your own things," he would say. If I were wood, he would be the flame that sets me on fire. Laziness stemming from overdependence on family fortune was the last thing he desired for his first son.

*

Three years from that time, for all intents and purposes, and I am doing reasonably all right. My PR firm has been leaping in giant strides, flourishing – from braving the murky waters of Nigerian politics and lobbying for politicians to grappling with the fickle demands of multinationals and heavy-weight nationals, down to painting the perfect come-out picture for the newly rich. The experiences are

endless. In two words, I'll describe myself as 'considerably fortunate'... in business though, for in relationships it seems as if I am jinxed. Tricia was after my money alone. Enitan was a good girl but was too young. She thought and behaved like the teenager she was, infernally demanding to be doted upon always. Caroline was lovely, but she had a defect—enuresis. She messed up the sheets every time she stayed the night. And although we all endeavour to contain people's weaknesses and see the best in them, everyone has a limit. Winifred will soon lie that she's carrying my baby when she realises that besides having fifty per cent shares in my company, I am legatee to a family fortune. But thanks to science and technology.

However, the pressure to become a complete man from family and friends wouldn't wane. "You're a man now, your wings are strong; you need to take someone special on them to forever cherish and hold. You need a woman, a wife to help manage and plan your life. Think about it," my father had advised the last time I went visiting.

"You are 32 years old, Richard; when will you get married and give me my grandchildren?" My mother would soon weary me out with her plaintive demands.

"Brother, you're a big man now, when are you going to show us the lucky girl?" My siblings wouldn't be left out of the drama.

Sometimes I wish I could divulge my hapless attempts at figuring out the right woman for me.

*

It happened so fast, my relationship with Kemy. Chuks, my good friend, and I were hanging out one cool evening when his fiancée came around and, after a few banter, promised to hook me up with someone interesting. I was sceptical, considering my previous experiences, but she made good on her promise. I met Kemy at Flora's birthday bash. She was indeed adorable with a winning physique and a lodestone of a mind. The charms Flora said she possessed were far from spurious. She intrigued me, and I believe I intrigued her too, for in no time we were conversing like we had known each other previously.

Kemy was the girl. There was no wrong in her. Fresh off the tertiary academic environment, she was already talking like a seasoned entrepreneur. She helped me a great deal with ideas and proffered solid entrepreneurial advices. Life with Kemy was bliss. She reiterated her love for me every day, but I loved her more. If she had any failing, I did not notice. She was a goddess over my emotions, the queen of my heart whose smiles made my sadness evanescent.

I told my parents I had the right woman for me. My father was proud; my mother did a victory dance. I spoke of her in glowing terms and my family were eager to meet her. *Soon I'll become a complete man...* The thought of becoming one with the lady-after-my-heart left me giddy with so much delight I couldn't wait to slip a diamond rock onto her ring finger. Love is the one thing that can never go wrong.

Immediately she comes back from Ibadan to see her parents, I will propose to her. I settled that in my mind, smiling to myself every now and again at the thought of the little stunt I planned to pull before proposing to her. Kemy had gone to see her parents, but we had agreed that the next time she would be going I would accompany her.

I had a business meeting with one of my top clients that took me to Port Harcourt: overall director of logistics at Shell Nigeria, Port Harcourt branch. There had been an oil spill affecting the riverine area of Egbesu five days earlier, and my firm had been called in to manage the incident.

Mr. Okute was a loud and randy man. He had been the Head of Logistics for six years, been at Shell for twenty-one. We had met several times and hung out on a couple of occasions; and at no time did we ever hang out without a band of girls – good-looking mercantile girls he always made arrangements for.

Kemy was on my mind, and there was no way I was taking one of his spoils (so he called the girls) this time around.

*

On arriving, the secretary courteously directed me to an ornate couch where I sat down, taking on the lushly looking reception, while she sinuously walked the way leading to his office to inform him of my arrival.

The loud man—I could pick catches of his voice from where I was seated—was talking to a girl over the phone and raucously laughing at intervals. Not even the oil spill could stymie his decadence. “Tonight will be awesome, darling... do you realise how much I missed you? I’m coming over to kiss you... Lie down...” I couldn’t wait to be done with him so I could fly back to Abuja. Tomorrow was my day.

His secretary came out and, with a smile on her face, ushered me towards his office. I heaved myself from the couch, nodded at the lady and strode towards his office.

I stopped dead in my tracks: on opening the door, I found out Mr Okute had company. He wasn’t talking over the phone. And as soon as the feminine figure lying on her back on his loveseat saw me, she gasped in horror.

Mr. Okute wore a surprised look seeing our expressions, but comported himself and smiled at me—a welcoming smile. He unclasped his hands around the lady and stood up, swaggering towards me. “Richard! My boy! Come right in.” He motioned towards me. I stood rooted to the spot. “You know her?” he asked, seeing my expression. “This one works with me down at the office. Hahaha.”

I felt crushed, heartbroken. She was rattled; her face crumpled like a heap of turd. Kemy was supposed to be in Ibadan, but I had found her now on the settee of a randy fifty-seven-year-old man.

“I’ll just go ahead and excuse you, sir,” I said and walked out, not wanting to break a tear in their presence.

*

In the bar, my phone beeped with a message alert. I flicked out the phone and read the text. *I just came to see him for the last time. I knew him long before I met you. He’s been of immense support to me. I still love you. Will you ever forgive me?*

TUCKED TALE

Emitomo Tobi Nimisire

Baba, my grandfather, was a constant in my childhood. His was the first name I pronounced when my mouth began to carve words: Baaa...ba.

During holidays, as I grew up, I would stand on the two-seater sofa and hug the window bars to watch our neighbour's children, their faces creased with smile, carry backpacks about the compound and wave at me till their goodbyes were quieted by the instruction to *get inside the car*. The revving of car engines shrouded the final farewells when their parents zoomed out of the compound.

Parents driving kids to their grandparents'.

The kids often returned with tales that chronicled their experiences at their grandparents'; they never faulted in talking out of turn. Rattles of '*Grandma bought me this! Grandpa taught me that! We went fishing! I killed a lizard!*' filled my ears whenever we played together. To suppress envy, I would hiss and brag about all Baba told me, and what he had bought (but never did) for me. A fight often broke out during these moments and I would cry home. Baba would console me, make funny faces, and, when neither proved sufficient, ask what I wanted: "Anything Yewande my wife, tell me. I'll ask Chioma to get it for you." That line often did the trick—halting the tears.

When I asked my mother where my other grandparents were, and why I didn't spend my holidays with them like the other kids, she told me how she had lost her parents to the Sosoliso plane crash when she was in Nursing School, and how a year before I was born my paternal grandmother took ill and died.

It was this day that the reality of death opened my eyes to how it leaves cracks in our lives – cracks too deep to be patched.

That night, as I curled in my mum's embrace, I developed a dread for anything that flew. I thought, perhaps, they would also fall the way my mother had gesticulated: her hands cupping together, flying one second above my head, and the next plunging downward, toward the bed. Silently.

Plane, whoof! Grandparents gone.

*

Unlike the other kids' grandparents, Baba lived with us. Baba never went out except on Thursdays when my father took him to the hospital.

Baba was sick, had always been sick. He never walked. When moving was necessary, he would call Chioma to push his *big bicycle*.

When I was five I asked Chioma if Baba's legs stopped working or men simply sat on the *big bicycle* once they were old like him, waiting to be pushed about. Chioma rolled her eyes, shook her head, and returned to doing the dishes.

I always wondered why she did that whenever I sought her help to unfold the mysteries that could only be explained by someone older: the ones I wasn't sure could be discussed with Baba—like when I asked her if Baba rubbed dusting powder on his hair after his bath to make it white, and if she sat on red ink the day I saw a red stain on her skirt.

"Aunty Chioma," I called.

"Wetin!" she snapped and closed the tap after rinsing my food flask.

"Answer now," I pouted.

"So Madam can call me amebo abi?"

"No, Mummy won't call you amebo. I won't tell anyone that you told me," I begged.

"Like you no tell her sey na me tell you Oga be workaholic ehn? Thank God sey you no sabi talk am well, wakakali," she replied with a smile concealed in her lips.

"Aunty Chioma please I will not do that again. Please Aunty Chioma."

Chioma ignored me till I gave up and dragged myself out of the kitchen, but not until I mumbled an insult and threatened not to let her touch my biscuits and juice again.

I would later learn from our gossipy neighbours that Baba's *big bicycle* was a wheelchair and that Baba had a stroke after Grandma's death.

One cold day in July, my father came to pick me from school. I thought he came to pay for my Common Entrance Exam fees because the only time he came around, parked his red car beside Uncle Ade's motorcycle, which was always beside the fence, was when there was a fee to be paid.

He showed up in my class wearing a sad look and said, "Wande, get your bag and follow me."

All through the silent drive home I wondered what could be so bothersome that he had ignored my class teacher's pleasantries.

When we got home the sitting room was filled with a crowd of relations I saw only at family events and Christmas. The women's conversations waned into whispers as I entered. I knelt down to greet everyone but their response was cold, unlike the usual nose-pinching, cheeks-pulling and height-checking attempts to proclaim how fast I was growing.

I was convinced that something had happened - a bad thing. It was at this moment that I caught the glimpse of Baba's big bicycle and found it empty. My jaws dropped; the *big bicycle* was never empty.

"Iyawo Baba, come sit here," my aunt said, shifting sideways on her chair to create some space for me. .

"Omolade, I have told you not to call my daughter that forbidden name again!" my father shouted, his face red. My aunt mumbled an apology, and then my father turned to me and said: "Wande, follow me."

When I got to his room I met my mum on the bed dabbing her face with a handkerchief as tears rode down her face. At this point I became frightened.

"Where is Baba?" I summoned the courage to speak.

"Wande, Baba is gone." My father's voice was suddenly low and heavy with rue.

"Where has he gone?" my voice shook.

"Heaven dear. Baba is now in heaven, Wande"

In Sunday school, we were taught that when people died, they ended up in heaven or hell, depending on how they had lived. If Baba had gone to heaven, then Baba was dead. That means I wouldn't wake up to him taking pap in a stainless cup which he prided to be decades older than me. No more frightening night tales that sometimes snuck into my dreams and turned them into nightmares. The stories that always ended with nemesis turning people into animals or witches ending up trapped on palm trees were Baba's favourite means of scaring me off bad deeds.

That night I went to bed unsure of how I would live through the next day without Baba. Everyone stopped calling me Baba's wife that day. I thought Death must be an agent of change.

*

Today, garbed in a turquoise wedding gown, I stand before the wooden lectern shielding the priest's trunk from view in my parents' Anglican church, anticipating the moment when Lanre and I will be pronounced husband and wife.

"I, Ilelabola Lanre, take you, Abioye Yewande, to be my wedded Wife, to have and hold...."

Lanre smiles as he reads his vow from the wedding program. Hidden behind his smile is the impatience to get this *necessary ceremony* over with. The priest's solemn voice fills the auditorium, urging me to read my vow. Lanre is done. I realise that I barely heard half his vow.

"I, Abioye Yewande...," I read slowly as my voice, soused with affectation, booms from the loud speakers. I am barely conscious of the significance of the vow I am making to the man whose fate is to become entwined with mine *till death do us part*.

I am reading this for the ninth, tenth time? since the Agent dropped the wedding programs at my father's house five days ago. The place for rehearsal had been my room,

with my voice vibrating through the walls as I visualized this moment, grinning at intervals at my craziness.

"If anyone can show why this couple cannot lawfully be joined together in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace," the priest says after I read my vow, his eyes scouring the congregation like a detective in search of hidden evidence. A numbing quiet diffuses through the hall, and hairs stand taut on my skin.

My heart pings faster and it takes some effort to resist glancing backwards to see if anyone would *try anything funny*. Perhaps a jealous ex-girlfriend or some obsessed secret admirer.

If I look back now I know I'll see Baba in the alley, wearing the grey agbada he always wore in my dreams, a knowing smile playing on his wrinkled face. One of his stories crawls into my mind; this one has a happy ending. It is about a man who is scared of nothing. The gods protect him because his deeds are good.

"Only the wicked are restless, good people have nothing to fear," Baba had told me after the story ended.

Slowly, I inhale and exhale, and pray inwardly that the cleric's voice comes alive again. Lanre looks at me and smiles; he knows I'm agitated. "We've come this far, don't be afraid," his smile whispers.

It's been four years and one love, and soon the priest shall pronounce us one body. No more making out in secret places, no more praying for forgiveness after going *too far*. I smile back.

"Amen!" the congregation sing in unison. I realise no one stood up to *try anything funny*, and that the Priest must have said something like "... and he shall be quiet till Christ returns."

After exchanging rings, I wait for the coming declaration with a huge grin.

Here we go...

"In the presence of God and before this congregation, Lanre Ilelabola and Abioye Yewande have given their consent and made their marriage vows to each other by

joining hands and by the giving and receiving of rings. I therefore proclaim them husband and wife."

Baaa...ba, I'm *wife* again.

BROKEN

Dhee Sylvester

Crack! came the sound as he jumped out of bed, his fear spinning around the thought of the house being burgled. *Crack!* it came again, issuing from the kitchen as he sidled across the sitting room. He had reached the kitchen door when he realised he hadn't bothered to check if his wife, Mabel, was in bed when he flung the sheets aside. He had been too frightened to certify if she was safe and sound asleep.

Crack! the sound rang out again, just as he smashed the kitchen doors apart, his hands wrapped firmly around the cricket bat that had forced them open.

Crack! the sound issued on. About twenty plates lay broken atop the chequered carpet, causing a nasty screech as he pushed toward the one whom he had considered a burglar: his wife, Mabel. Her rage against the plates continued as if he wasn't there to warrant her notice. He felt irrelevant as she persisted, a china plate crashing against the wall whenever her back came turned.

What? she barked when he called at her, her voice wild like the roar of a thousand hawks.

What is this you're doing?

You think if I know what I'm doing, I will be doing it? she retorted, her face burning with all the emotions he preferred to avoid.

It's been twelve years, Joseph, twelve long years since I've been praying to the good lord to reward you with an Oscar for acting so well that you love me.

Her words knocked his mind senseless as he stood unsure whether to laugh or applaud the sarcasm. Though in hindsight, he would come to think he probably should

have laughed, for he saw the joke more than he did the wit. He might have thought of her as incapable in the kitchen and in bed, but when it came to insults and abuse, she was as capable as any woman he had ever known.

I've no idea what you're talking about, he replied dismissively. You can't pretend to love a bad meal for twelve years can you?

If your name is Joseph Uche, oh, yes, you can! You don't touch me, you don't look at me, and even when you talk to me, it's to complain about my cooking and how fat I am getting!

He saw her swing three plates at the wall as she spoke, and was about to let another fly when he cut in:

Before you make useless all the plates in the house, can I ask what this is about?

This is about you caring only for yourself—only caring about your career?

Writing? You've got a problem with me being a writer?

I've got a problem with you thinking it's more important than me!

But writing is my life!

And where does that put me? Third? Because if writing is your life, I'd think I don't matter more than your miserable life either then?

Writing is a part of me just as much as you're a part of my life.

Oh! How wonderfully romantic! That sounds really, really so beautiful. Even though we both know it's a lie!

He has had enough of her—the mood she was in. He would have to transcend himself to quell her fury. He was about returning to the bedroom when she hurried toward him. Her hands fell on her waist as she struck a defiant pose in front of him.

You think running is the best way to end this?

I'm not going to stand here and wait till you swing a plate into my face.

That doesn't answer the question.

Look, you're obviously mad, and if my words can't help bring you back to your senses, I guess it is best I let you be.

You want to let me be? No, that's not what you're doing. You're just trying to abandon me—like you always do!

I've given you everything a man can possibly give his wife, and all you've ever given me is a hell of a home!

Sometimes you say stupid things, Joseph. I mean, really, really stupid things. Other times, you show yourself no different from the kind of things you say.

Are you saying I'm stupid?

No. I'm saying you're worse.

He made a move to hit her but she threw herself at him, slapping and daring him to go ahead with it if he was deserving of his balls. But he couldn't hit her. Like the previous occasions he had tried to, his hands only stayed raised. When a boy watches his father batter his mother to death like his did, hitting a woman becomes a rather foolish and pointless show of strength.

You want to end the conversation, Joseph? Why not end it like real men do? Go ahead! Beat me! she taunted, pressing herself to him, her tone terrifyingly desperate.

You're such an evil, evil, evil woman! he cried, bitterness colluding with grief to choke his heart.

And you're not even a man! she fired back. A man gives his wife children. You're just a boy in a useless man's body!

His mood plummeted and turned sore as the words hit home. And as if calculated, she mocked him further by asking: What is it Joseph? Did I drop a bomb?

Children? Is that what this is about then?

Shouldn't it?

Shouldn't it? he repeated, nonplussed. You know, the moment I saw you going up and down like the crazy woman you are I knew this wasn't about me, my writing, or even us. This was about you and yourself alone.

Of course it is about me because you obviously don't care. Oh, or you think if I had children I would give a damn about you writing away your worthless life? You really

think I care so much about you enough to be mad that those dirty hands of yours aren't touching me? You really think you're that important?

Whether or not I'm important to you, get it into your head that I'm not the reason we don't have children.

Am I the reason? Or aren't you the one who goes about sleeping with other women when you should be sleeping with me?

I've slept with you for twelve years and we've no proof I ever did. I slept with two women, and I was barely back in my pants when they started ringing my phone that they were pregnant!

Just as his did a while back, her mood took the plunge and turned sore; and he equally made the most of the moment when he asked in similar vein:

What is it Mabel? Did I drop a bomb?

Is it true, or are you just messing with me?

I'll show you the pictures, their birth certificates, heck! I'll show you the DNA results if you want!

Then it must be me who has the problem....

I don't know. You're the one who went to medical school, you should know more about women who can't have children. After all, I'm just a boy in the body of a useless man who's busy writing away his life!

She dropped to the floor, her hand sitting on where she believed her heart lay. Soon tears began to tumble as his words replayed in her mind. Joseph wished he could hold her, caress her, and tell her he was sorry and that everything would be alright. But he couldn't, because he knew deep within himself that everything was never going to be alright. Too much lay broken for everything to ever be alright.

The time was racing past seven in the morning when he felt the need to take his bath. He limped out of the kitchen into the bath, and sat beneath the showers for many hours, to cool his head and gather whatever was left of his thoughts. By the time he came out of the bathroom he only felt clean on the outside.

He went into the bedroom to rest a while, not because he wanted to, but because he couldn't stand being in the same room with a woman who thought him less of a man. He tried to sleep, but his eyes wouldn't keep shut. He tried to read, but the knowledge wouldn't stick. Music had lost its magic; he wasn't much of a fan of movies, and he hated playing games alone, so he just didn't bother with any of them.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon when Joseph decided that rather than stay confined to the one place he would rather not be at this time of day, it was best he rode out and, perhaps, hang around at the coffee shop down the street.

The apartment was eerily silent as he shut the door to the bedroom. Mabel couldn't possibly be around the place and everywhere would be as quiet as it was, he thought. She was either gone never to return, or was just out to return whenever she felt she could tolerate a man she no longer loved—if she ever did. Whichever held truth, Joseph couldn't care less because life wouldn't have been as bad as it was with her.

As he stepped into the sitting room, his car key lost the grip of his fingers. He couldn't hear the sound as the key came against the broken ceramic pieces still asleep on top of the carpet because his attention was set on the figure hanging down the ceiling. Mabel was dead. He could tell that she was. And probably for a few hours, too. She had a note in her hand, and although he could hardly feel his knees, he motioned himself toward her and made claim of the piece of paper caught loosely between her frozen fingers.

He unfolded the note. White as it was, the message contained the words: *A woman unable to have children is worse than a boy in a useless man's body.*

Joseph didn't agree with the sentiment, neither did he agree with her course of action. The grief—or was it the guilt—would also keep him from being present on the day the sands came over her face. His writing would suffer greatly afterwards, and he would only come to ever write one more story: the very one you've just come to its end.

THE NEW VOICES

Aito Osemegbe Joseph

Don't speak to barrack boys, just nod your head and move along. Diana! So you have joined a dance group? Is that why the good lord died for you? All your skirts below the knee. No slits. No cuts. Don't wear the same clothes twice; it makes you smell as bad as you look. Don't follow boys. Don't walk that way; you're not even old enough. Don't tell anybody about your monthly visitor, not even your father – it's a woman thing.

These homilies, with the sharp sting only her mother's mouth could create, replayed in Diana's head as she sat drawing circles on the sand gathered on the cheap cement grave that housed her mother's remains for the past eight months. Ochuko, her brother, waited for her outside the graveyard. But she was in no hurry. She allowed her mind wander months back, when her friends laughed as she entertained them by mimicking her mother. She remembered that the same friends still didn't consider her their equal; that they saw her delinquency as a palliated one because she had parents who cared: a mother who forced her to go to church, and a calm father who hardly whipped her.

Maybe her father's calm was what led him to the bar in an attempt to alleviate the sorrow of losing a wife. She knew her father's dedication to the bottle had turned religious, for he was hardly sober at home, and cared less that his teenage daughter's belly kept growing. But he had come home one day earlier than usual, sober and reflective. This, Diana saw as her chance. She knelt respectfully before him, and with teary eyes informed him the baby in her belly was seven months and she was at loss for what to do. That was the first time she heard the bottle speak through him.

“Diana, two months have passed under your mother’s fallen bridge, and you still keep that thing in your belly. You’re sick in the head, and should be seeing that stupid counsellor more often than your baby brother.” This he managed to say with words slurring, before his eyelids fell and his snore filled the room.

He expected her to abort the baby! Diana thought. Hadn’t he heard of Officer Kelechi's daughter, Nkechi, who had an abortion at one of the many second-rate clinics and bled to death? Even after she was buried, for some nights, people heard Nkechi's aborted baby cry—that long drawn-out howl of a baby's wail. The bush babies, as her father called the howlers, were souls of aborted fetuses stuck between heaven and hell. There were other theories: some believed the howling was a call to meeting of witches, since the cries were only heard at midnight; a few others said dogs were communicating with spirits. But Diana was sure her father’s was the right one: the cries were those of aborted babies at heaven’s gate, begging to be let in. These babies hadn’t committed any sin to deserve hell. Neither could they be let through heaven's gate, because, amongst other reasons, the white flowing robes of ‘heaven people’ would be too large for them. Nkechi's baby was now a bush baby at the mercy of common gate angels, yet her father expected her to abort the pregnancy? The thought of it would make her mother *turn in the grave*. Diana had concluded.

And what had her father meant by *two months have passed*? Had the bottle made him lose his ability to count? Diana had counted every single day, week, and month. It has been eight months since her mother died. Eight months she lived without that nagging and badgering voice that restrained her wild spirit; without the sturdy cord that held their home together. Slowly and painfully, she had come to accept that her mother had gone forever, and all she had left was an unconcerned and perpetually drunk father, and a brother who was running mad.

Yes, her brother, Ochuko, was running mad. She had noticed this two months ago when he started visiting the counsellor. The same one her father referred to as 'stupid,' and her mother, before her death, referred to as a 'bickering old-layer fowl.' Diana knew that her mother would be *turning in her grave* because of Ochuko, and it had nothing to

do with the dead woman being old-fashioned. For goodness' sake how could a fourteen-year-old boy sit all day and masturbate his feelings, spilling family problems to a stranger?

A month ago when Ochuko had tried to convince Diana to visit the counsellor in order to 'get over their mother,' she had blessed him with a couple of slaps. Being stronger, he was able to nudge her aside. She saw the tears in his eyes slide down his face before he ran off. Tears that would have been a good thing if the sting from her slaps had caused them; but those glossy wells held no pain in them. They had betrayed something more intense, that made her shudder. She stepped through the door and saw him run along the corridor, past a shit-filled potty belonging to one of the neighbour's children, two he-goats tied together by the feet, the goat shit, and down the dilapidated spiral staircase at the end of the corridor. She wondered why he kept running when she wasn't chasing him. She wasn't bothered about teaching him the lesson of his life for insulting his *big* sister. Not today. She rested her back on the wide open door, crossed her arms over her chest and tried to answer the new questions that plodded through her mind: where had his cynical grin (his only resemblance to their mother) disappeared to, and where did the pity in his eyes come from? Was it because of her pregnancy? Did he also pity their father for his drunkenness and himself for his booming madness?

Ironically, she ended up visiting the counsellor. However, it wasn't for counsel or psychoanalysis. The old woman doubled as the barrack's midwife, and Diana had gone to seek antenatal care. After scores of rhetoric questions like, 'Whose baby is it?' and 'Why is a "wrapper" sticking out from underneath your shirt?' the old woman had given her a keg of colourless pre-natal medicine. She took 'half-a-cup-a-day' as prescribed, and because it tasted like water unlike the typical concoction for malaria, she adhered to the dosage. The medicine was almost empty now, and she made a mental note to ask Ochuko to get more of the medicine for her on his next session with the counsellor. It was at this moment she remembered that Ochuko was waiting for her

outside the graveyard while she mused over her mother's death and played with the smooth sand on top of her grave.

Even though he had been excited about walking her there, he had refused to step through the gates. The sun had begun to set, and the cool evening breeze sent shivers up her legs. She should join Ochuko as it was time to go home—this was why she needed his company in the first place. How else was she to walk from the graveyard, past the civilian quarters, the clinic, the playing field, up to the seventh block where she lived without the barrack children, who came out every evening in their numbers to play on the field and around every corner, jeering and mocking her? She was tired of it all but didn't blame them. After all, less than a year ago, she had been one of them, laughing and making fun of difficult parents, funny-looking old people, disabled ones, and pregnant teenagers. It was the life of a barrack child and, sadly, she was presently at the receiving end. She hoped that with Ochuko by her side they wouldn't dare to jeer, and if they did Ochuko would defend her.

She hoped wrong. They had walked past the civilian quarters and had just passed the clinic where the counsellor worked when the children flocked around her. As they approached the sidewalk that flanked the field, more children joined them gleefully. But Ochuko didn't threaten to break their head, neither did he shout at them. Instead, he turned to her, whispered and practised what the counsellor had taught him.

"Diana Dimaro, it's all in your head: the pain, the jeering, the laughter and the mockery. Just breathe deep, count slowly to ten and let go, just let go. Overcome in your mind," he said and kept repeating.

The combination of the disgust she felt towards Ochuko and the shame the children caused her was overwhelming. She ran home, placing both hands below her fat belly, hoping to outrun the insanity. But the taunting children followed in pursuit, leaving *mad* Ochuko behind.

Diana got home and dashed straight into the bedroom she shared with the rest of the family. She didn't lie on the mat in her corner. Instead, she crawled onto her parent's bed and fit herself into the depression her mother's body had made over the

years. She thanked the saints in heaven for barring the children from following her up the stairs; although, inside her head she could hear their tiny and devilish voices as they giggled, sang, and clapped after her.

“Diana don getti belle... Hosanna... she don getti belle... Hosanna... Now, clap for Diana... KpaaKpaa... Clap for Diana... KpaaKpaa....”

She sniffed to hold back her tears and to get a whiff of her mother’s scent, but the tears wouldn’t stop, and her mother’s distinctive smell of raw cassava was no more. She wished she had let her mother’s words taunt her the way the children from the field did. Maybe those words would have kept her in check. She closed her eyes and tried to find happy memories, but instead she saw her mother standing at the door of the room, staring at her, disappointed. The right side of her upper lip curved upward, her eyes narrowed, while her right feet slowly tapped the floor.

“Foolish child. Go look for your real mother in the whorehouse in Mokola. You let that malnourished daughter of a witch call you a prostitute and you cannot grab her with your hands and break her in two? Instead you’re here crying like a spoilt brat. Look at you, prostitute! Didn’t I warn you not to join that dance group? Didn’t I tell you not to play those caricature video games with boys? No, you wouldn’t hear word. Now you’re lying on the bed when you should be screaming for your father and the midwife. Are you blind? Or can’t you feel something running down your thighs? Can’t you see your water has broken?”

At first, the words ‘water has broken’ held no meaning for Diana, but as she felt the wetness along her thighs, understanding leaped at her, and she screamed. The scream pushed the finger-pointing figure of her mother out of her head and tore through her hurt. Ochuko, who had arrived home at this time, ran to meet her and stood perplexed, motionless, until Diana yelled at him to summon the Counsellor-cum-Midwife. Then the pain came, wave after wave, washing over her, flipping and turning her insides. And she knew the pain would kill her.

When she eventually raised her head, the Counsellor and Ochuko were in the room, flanking both sides of the door and staring at her instead of doing something. The usual obnoxious look of omniscience had totally vanished from the old woman’s face,

and her hands trembled slightly. This was the barrack Midwife. And how many teenage pregnancies had she delivered in her career—a hundred? Five hundred? But here she was, trembling like a school girl. Diana turned to Ochuko, caught that familiar look of pity on his face, accentuated by the deltas of tears that now rolled down his cheeks, and she knew something was terribly wrong. She didn't have enough time to figure it out because the door flew open and her father stormed in.

Diana had never seen that look on her father's face—the red eyes, the pulsing jaws, the jittering lips. The door flew open again. Three other police officers hurried in and, without saying a word, went past her father, towards her. She smelt cheap beer on them before they got to her and knew that whatever was about to happen wasn't standard delivery procedure.

She felt firm hands hold her arms and spread her legs apart, while her father positioned himself before her. He unhooked his belt, pulled it off his waist and sent it crashing down on her. As she fought the pain of leather against her face and shoulder, the voices of the children from the field resumed. And no, it wasn't only replaying in her head, it seemed as if the children had found their way into the sitting room. The claps, laughter, and singing floated through the bedroom door. Everywhere was so noisy she could only manage to grasp a few random phrases of what her father mumbled. He spoke something about 'Diana being a family disgrace' and 'Beating the madness out of Diana.' In the midst of the pain, confusion from all the noise, and her father who stood between her spread legs, her mother's voice rang anew.

"No, your woman-wrapper father can't rape you—at least, not in the old-layer's presence. Your baby is set to come and he is here to help you. You shouldn't even have such dirty thoughts just because your legs are spread apart and your drunken father is in front of them."

Her father leaned closer to her and suddenly, without warning, was inside her—rough and large. She closed her eyes and stopped screaming. It was no use. The smell of cheap beer oozed out as he spoke, choking her. She could hear every raucous word he was saying now—meaningless words of a drunk, incestuous rapist:

“Diana. Are you the first girl to lose a mother? You’re going about carrying this nonsense in your belly, saying you’re pregnant and you think you’re alright? Go and see the counsellor, you will not go. Remove the things under your cloth, you will not remove. Ehn, is this not your mother’s green wrapper? Does it look like a baby to you?”

As her father slid out, she raised her head forward and looked. She watched his right hand slide out slowly, brandishing her mother’s long lost wrapper. Her father dropped the wrapper on the ground, went in again, and this time around came out with her mother’s sweater. She didn’t understand how it was that his hand went in and came out with a piece of her mother’s clothing. She didn’t understand the anger on his face as he did so; neither did she understand how her belly was suddenly flat when her father was done. Her eyes fell on the heap of her mother’s clothes on the floor of the room, but she was searching for something else. Her belly was flat but her baby was nowhere around. What had her father done to her baby? What had they done to her child?

She screamed, struggled, and demanded for her child, and the responses she got were pitiful headshakes and shrilling screams from the children. She fought and her wrists flew free from the policemen who held her down—but this freedom didn’t last. The children that had only taunted her from the sitting room ran through the door and headed for her, singing and clapping louder. While some sang in her ears, others dug their fingernails and teeth into her skin, pinching and biting. One pulled fiercely at her ears while another climbed the bed and jumped on her belly. One of the last things she saw before blackness descended was her father’s face. The anger had disappeared, and something more terrifying replaced it. Fear. Even if her father was afraid, couldn’t he manage to yell the children off? Slowly, it dawned on her that maybe her father couldn’t see the children, and that Ochuko might have been right about it being all in her head. Nonetheless, the pain she felt was real—the pinching, the biting, and the jabs from the children. Her own baby had to be real too. She had carried it for more than eight months, and she was certain about it. She looked around again, her eyes resting on the heap that was her mother’s clothes instead of her crying baby, and she let out a

deep and sad howl. As grey clouds saturated her senses, cold, silver drops streaked down slowly. And then the blackness came.

When Diana opened her eyes, she saw white: white ceiling boards, white walls, people in white gowns that stopped at their knees. She heard familiar voices that seemed to come from inside the walls. Her thoughts were of bush babies, saints, and heaven as she drifted into unconsciousness, again.

ROLLER COASTER

Faderera Olaretan

My wife wasn't really the submissive type. And I didn't need her to be. It was therefore jarring when she knelt before me in the dark of our living room, a bible clutched in her left hand, and her face glistening with tears. I was about to ask her what was wrong when she shoved the Bible towards me.

"Swear," she demanded. I stared blankly for a few seconds, too shocked to speak.

"Deoye, take this Bible from me and swear," she repeated in between sobs, pain evident in each word.

"Swear what?" I asked, finally finding my voice. "I don't understand. What is all this about?"

"Please!" She paused for a sharp intake of breath. I made to speak but got interrupted by her pleas. "Please, please, Deoye. Please, swear to me you're not cheating on me. Tell me you're not repaying my love with infidelity. Tell me, you're ..."

"That's enough!" I fired. "Enough of this rubbish. Where's all this coming from? Why this all of a sudden?" I stood up, making a show of anger.

"Deoye, do you still love me?" she asked, still tearful, ignoring the questions I had fired her.

The question stopped my heart momentarily, although I didn't delay in getting my response across.

“Lara, you’re my wife. Of course I still love you,” I assured her calmly.

“No you don’t!” she growled, and this caused something to snap within me.

I knew it was a lie. One even I couldn’t get over. The fact that I had lied to my wife without remorse brought things into perspective, and alongside other questions. Had my demeanour changed so much recently that my wife already knew? How did I sink this low? How did it all begin?

I had stopped loving my wife for reasons that seemed to elude me. There had been no fight, no sudden discovery, or major event that was bringing our marriage to a slow but certain death. I had simply stopped loving her. She was like a parcel that I had found intriguing but got bored of with time. It had been fifteen years, yet our marriage, our love, seemed like a blur, as if it never was, as if it had all been a memory I conjured in my head. It was as if I had, for the last fifteen years, been in a trance I suddenly snapped out of into the jarring realization that I did not love my wife.

I did not find her pouty, thick lips tempting. Neither did I find her smooth and fair skin alluring like I used to. The richness of her laughter did not cause my heart to melt anymore. Where there was once love was now filled with a cold and detached feeling and a growing resentment, which begged the question: Did I ever truly love her?

Later that week, when I told my best friend Lanre about my dilemma, he threw back his head in a guffaw.

“Mr man,” he said loudly, ignoring the unimpressed, staring faces, “You should have just walked away. That’s what I would have done.” I nodded my response.

“It’s not even that she asked. It’s about the fact that I don’t love her anymore. I’m no longer happy with her, and I’m not sure what to do.”

Lanre stared at me attentively as I spoke. When I was done, he shook his head then said, “Mehn, this is real trouble. Maybe you just give it time.”

“That’s what I’m doing. But if it doesn’t get better, maybe I’ll just divorce her.”

His eyes widened in disbelief. He stared at me like I had just said something abominable.

“No, no, no,” he repeated, shaking his head furiously. “You can’t do that.”

“Why not?” I quizzed.

“You can’t,” he insisted. “Because you’re not happy with your wife doesn’t mean you should divorce her. Find happiness somewhere else. You’re a man, a man!” he repeated as if I had somehow been unaware of my gender. “Moreover, God doesn’t like divorce,” he added.

I was going to point out that God didn’t like adultery either but stopped when I realised how hypocritical it sounded. I was already seeing someone else at the time; someone I found interesting, that I was happy with, and who had taken my wife’s place in my heart.

Folake was a round-faced beauty with black, bulging eyes that sat under perfectly thick eyebrows. She was dimple-cheeked, plump with spotless, fair skin that glowed. It did not take much for her to stand out amongst all the women who worked in my company; and once we began talking, her wit and intelligence made it that a dalliance was quick to develop between us.

I returned home, much to my awe and amusement, to meet a setting that seemed like it was ripped straight out of a romantic movie. The living room was lit with candles, and rose petals were scattered all over the floor. Written on the walls were the words “I LOVE YOU,” followed by an arrow that pointed in the direction of the bedroom. I opened the door of the room to see Lara clad in her lingerie. She was lying on the bed. She flashed a seductive smile when our eyes met. I felt almost nothing at this gesture, no longing whatsoever. She began to tap the side of the bed. I obliged her. I yielded when she pushed me onto the bed, so that I was lying on my back before bringing her lips close to mine for a tender kiss as she unbuttoned my shirt. It would be the first time I would lie with her in weeks. That night, as I thrust into her, I shut my eyes and imagined it was Folake I was thrusting into, that it was her long fingernails that dug into my back, and it was her full, round breasts that pressed against my bare chest. I let her voice block out Lara's soft moans.

The next morning Lara doted on me relentlessly. She smiled at everything I said, and asked about my night too many times. During breakfast, she offered four different

times to pick me up at work for lunch, even after I had declined the first three times. The trend continued all morning till it began to infuriate me and I almost snapped at her to let me be. It took a lot of restraint for me to calmly tell her that I was running late for work even though I owned the company and could resume work whenever I wanted.

“Alright, I will be waiting eagerly for your return,” she replied with a smile.

I did not return home that night or the night after. And on the third night, as I lay naked on the bed with Folake, my phone began to ring, again; my wife’s face which I had begun to dread showed for the millionth time in three days.

“Pick the call,” Folake said gruffly.

“I don’t want to.”

“I said pick the call. The poor woman must be worried sick about you.”

“I don’t want to,” I repeated defiantly.

“Why?”

“You know why. She’ll want me to come home, and I don’t want to go back home. I want to be here with you.” I turned to stare at her, but she wasn’t looking at me. Her face was almost expressionless as she stared at the ceiling

“It’s not fair to her,” she said after a heartbeat.

“Neither is cheating on her. Yet here we are.”

“It’s not the same thing.”

“How?”

“She doesn’t know about this, but she knows you’re ignoring her calls.”

I sighed. “I think she suspects I’m cheating on her.”

“Suspecting and knowing are two different things.”

I smiled then nodded in agreement. I loved the way Folake always had a reply for everything.

I returned home the next day, partly because Folake forced me, and partly because I needed a change of clothes. Lara was there in the living room when I came in. She rose from her seat upon seeing me. Her face was swollen and her eyes red from crying. I

waited for her to lash out at me, but when she simply gave me a forced smile and said a wry “hey,” I felt overwhelmed with guilt.

“Hi,” I replied.

“I was worried about you.”

“I’m fine,” I paused before adding, “Lara, we need to talk.”

“About what?” I could hear the fear in her voice.

“I can’t do this anymore. I can’t be in this marriage anymore,” I said as I dropped my bag.

I felt a sense of peace at my admission, as though I had been relieved of a heavy burden. Staying in the marriage was unfair to me as it was unfair to her. I needed my freedom, and she deserved someone that loved her, someone who would treat her better.

“I can’t do this anymore,” I said again. “I want a divorce, Lara. I just can’t...” I stopped talking when I saw her crash onto the floor and begin to sob, gradually till it progressed into bawling.

“Why? When? How?” She sobbed out the questions amidst tears.

I could not speak. It was as though her meltdown had shut my mouth. I fell on the chair, watching my snivelling wife, unable to answer her questions.

“I don’t love you anymore, Lara,” I managed to say after an extended period of silence. “It’s not fair to either of us to be stuck in this marriage.”

“Is there someone else?” she asked, still tearful. The pain in her voice rent my heart to shreds.

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“A few months.”

“Has it happened here?”

“What?”

“Have you fucked her here? In our room? On our bed?”

The sudden rawness of her words took me by surprise.

“No, never. I would never do that. I’d never disrespect you that way,” I emphasised every word of my denial as if not cheating on her in our home made things better.

She said nothing else, and resumed crying.

“Please, don’t make this any more difficult than it already is,” I said in the most cajoling tone I could come up with. I remained rooted to a spot, unsure of whether to approach her or not. “I’m deeply sorry. I truly am,” I eventually added.

The following day, when I told Folake that I was divorcing my wife, she frowned at me and asked why.

“Because I don’t want to be with her anymore. I can’t be with someone I don’t love.”

We stared silently at each other as I carefully thought out my next words.

“Be with me, Folake.”

She cocked her head at me in response, a look of disbelief played on her face as though she had misheard me.

“I’m not sure I understand you,” she said.

“I’m asking you to marry me, to be my wife. Once I’m done with my wife, I want us to be together officially. I love you so much.”

Folake let out a long, sardonic laughter that has stayed with me ever since. “So you can get bored of me like you got bored of your wife?” she asked then laughed again.

She was still laughing—albeit mildly—as she hopped off the bed and began to walk away, her butt jiggling. I remained on the bed, too disappointed for words. I opened my mouth to speak but nothing came out. Folake did not even look back once as she exited the bedroom.

When I think back to it, the irony of the situation mocks me to my face. My wife’s love remained unrequited because I had fallen in love with another woman who didn’t feel the same. I made the same mistake Lara did—I fell in love.

HOME COMING

Dami Lare

*As a rock on the seashore he standeth firm,
and the dashing of the sea waves disturbeth him not.
He raises his head like a tower on a hill,
and the arrows of fortune drop at his feet.
In the instance of death
the courage of his heart sustaineth him;
and the steadiness of his mind beareth him out...*

– Akhenaton.

Seafaring is a sour enterprise. For him, it always has: the pervasive foreboding, the storm and the waves colluding to smash him to bits, the frosty nights calling dibs on his soul, the flaming mornings he trickles into existence to watch parts of him turn fugitives and escape his onerous attempt at survival. His life is the postscript of an argument, pointless absent context. Yet, he doesn't unhinge. His passion never dwindles, for his demons are subjects, and he is master of himself. At first light, about the time the sea gathers its remorse into a mild rage, with eyes constricted, hands parallel and firm, back ramrod straight, and mind set on the discipline of self, one push at a time, he ascends into perfection. This way he emulates Juvenal: *mens sana in corpore sano*.

Regrets become distractions, likewise fantasies. *Nothing can kill me*, he mumbles silently as his eyes set on a liquid horizon and hands, like wings, surf the tepid wind... so far he continues to escape, even if gradually. This surety steels him. And for this

reason, he never hurls phlegm into the face of the sea. Unlike the others, irked by what is adjudged nature's maleficence. Not because he can't, but because he won't. He knows the futility of seeing the sea as a foe, and its tempests as transgressions. And what choice does he have? After how many years? The sea is his ally now; although not in the way Coleridge would perceive or write about it. Wherewithal has its way of tempering fact—this, experience had taught him. But, perhaps, Milton. Yes. John Milton. That allure of incapacity, of resignation to what is, that only Milton would know.

He is the six-foot-tall deck-hand, attending to the excesses of sea-travel and the inadequacies of men. Picking up the slack and running impossible errands. *Yes boss* to the captain, and sneering at the stowaway. But he is also a favourite, beneficiary of timely benefits, like a moment's peace, away from the bother of raising masts and furling hurls, of crass commercialism and mindless ruptures. Times like this he thinks of fate and its trappings. The others call it foolhardy — retrospection. And perhaps it is. But in a place where routine is an enterprise and its worth his brothers; where solace is the abscess of forgetting that is their minds; where at night the boatswain, the quartermaster, and the crew gather into a circus of counterfeits preposterously similar in their responses to tales of the past—tales of escapades with the Arabian, Caribbean and Asian whores—it would be dastardly to consign to a life of (thoughtless) objectivity. So he doesn't, staging the sort of rebellion his brothers consider wasteful, and obtaining through it the gifts of existence: curiosity, Art, poetry.

He'd found Milton through the first of these gifts, abandoned and left to rot beside an old broken pipe during one of their onshore undertakings. Each of them had heaved salt bags from the *El Mariachi*, their ship—burly sacks that ripped their skins and spat on their souls, stinging their resolve and sinking their knees in servitude—to deliver to an Arabian salt merchant in Cape Verde. It was as gruelling as it was arduous. After a few rounds that had him spew profanities through gritted teeth, he navigated a bend to ease himself and saw the petit and dog-eared Milton: a fist-sized sand-coloured paperback huddled against a column of grime. Inanimate, yet full of life.

He had run chapped fingers across its mottled skin, wiped its filth, and snapped its spine into place till the pages fluttered in relief. And when he was done, the two became inseparable—Milton in his heart, he in Milton's lyrics. A treasured union. He did try to engage his brothers in this love of Milton, to assuage their souls through its treasured volumes, but none had patience for what was considered trivial. Miguel, whose sobriquet is the Caribbean grizzly bear, had called him *punta* in an offhanded way. Kalifa merely snored his way through the renditions. Others fell between: Ross, the English; Umslopoogas, the Zimbabwean cheetah; Gale, the Cantonese; Danbaba, and the one ominously referred to as Babayaga, the eater of flesh.

It isn't anyone's fault, he knows. Life at sea is one of compromise. And all they can to survive they must do, even if they are disremembered litanies traipsing on the fringes of fraught tongues. Reality to them is the finish of infinite rituals, a paradox each inadvertently furthers, and which induces illimitable eccentricities. He had thought Musaka queer for screaming obscenities at inanimate things; thought Kalifa troubled when he began to refer to himself in the third person. Babayaga he avoids, as one does a leech. Who slices bits of himself into his meal, boastful of an ancestry where men ate themselves? Yet, it is these oddities that sustain them, expunging their iniquitous existence and keeping them further from perdition.

How did he get here? What sustains him? These are irrelevancies, for tonight he is unsure, and Milton isn't helping much. The sea quietly rumbles in the background, bobbing, stretching, and reaching for whatever seaman it can. Once they had had a small jamboree and Dafar, the boatswain, in his characteristic self, had drunk enough and had tipped over with an inaudible *thunk* into the sea. By morning they had drifted too far to realise the old Massai was missing. After minutes of frantic search, Kalifah had fess up that, "*Kalifa hears one time the old fool say he will swim home.*" This silliness others had laughed off, clutching their midriffs and smacking one another in a playful yet implicit recognition of their precarious existence. Such is the absurdity of their lives—and deaths. Like pawns they are dispensable; vulnerable like Kings en route checkmate. But on this night there is a little hope in form of a letter. His fingers quiver

as he squints hard under the blast of moonshine to make out the few characters rough-handling and sea-travel hadn't eroded.

You have a daughter now. Her name is Hassana. Things have changed Buba. Come home.

Love,

Jamilah.

His heart is heavy, weighed down not with the burden of unexpected fatherhood, but with the lack thereof. It could have been, four years ago, when it was dated to him. But this nomadic existence of which he is a victim rather than culprit has him too past-tense to take registry of any immediate passion like joy. He sighs.

"That is Jamilah, me correct?" Miguel snuggles close.

"Yes," he responds.

There isn't much to be said, the men exist as though through telepathy, like a colony of antiquated shamans, each completing the others' thought.

"Hmmm. Your woman, she love you, no?"

This draws his lips into a grin, although it could pass for concealed disgust. This intrusion slightly annoys him. He grunts a reply.

"Me no hear from me woman long time." Sighs. "She forget me. Me forget her too!" the Caribbean replies. He knows this story, has heard it a thousand and one times. A tale set in progress by the quintessential husband expending sinews and blood, serving man and god to love his family, and terminated by a promiscuous wife, a tomato merchant, nature, and the horrors of the post-colony.

There is a picture attached to the back of the letter. The picture is stuck to it. It wouldn't yield to his prodding as it is now glued to the letter. He fondles, careful not to detach it wrongly lest the memory goes to ruin; yet he is anxious enough to rip it apart. A sickening sequence ensues: prod and withdraw, prod and withdraw. His fingers thread cautiously like a curator assessing a relic. They pillage along the edges of the union of paper and matt. Jamilah, ever wise, didn't use gloss; she must have considered the possibility of delay – this draws a silent laugh from him as it comforts him his place

in her heart remains secured. The converse holds true for Miguel, who sensing the deckhand's clumsiness snatches the letter from him.

He is arrested by the taunts of fate: should he attempt to recover the letter, he could risk shredding it in the tussle; yet, resigning to the Caribbean's deftness is equally risking same, if not more. He watches the Caribbean for the slightest of errors, ready to intercede. His heart palpitates in response. After an eternity of torment the union comes undone. And like a new father he is handed a child to love and care for. He tucks the picture between the greasy pages of Milton.

"Your daughter. She pretty. Me like she smile."

"I know."

"You go back to Nigeria now?"

To this he replies not. Doesn't need to. They are kin after all, knitted at the soul by a bond deeper than blood. He looks up to the remaining seamen emerging from wherever obscurity had wheeled them; watches them pull on their boots, wear their socks and gloves, and don their hats; watches them slumber into wakefulness and, like a procession of acolytes, stagger to their posts. It is a beautiful sight, this solidarity. And a beautiful night, even if absent of stars or constellations. As if in defiance of their will the Earth plots against them. The wind is almost still, dispensing grace with unconcern. Yet they manage to change course, for beneath the stark curtain that is the sky and the gentle huff that is the wind is a resolve that refuses to break, the synergy of personas, and men zapping about in the dark, stumbling and steadying, striving against every odd, against the sea itself, to bring a brother home.

Milton would love this, he thinks.

*

The country is different from when he had left, or was made to: more structures, less humanity. Souls litter everywhere, dribbling from conked out pipes onto intolerant dirt roads. High rises are shadows of boundless lusts and middle-class privation. Architectures are denominators of setbacks and progress. But the Niger is still the same—banking indigence and coursing with abandoned hopes. His walk is unsteady

yet brisk, for he fears recognition. He leaps over the guardrail separating past and present, saunters between the agglomeration of parasols and retail commodities adorning the seaport, and struts into the Port Authority Office. Once there he takes a number, queues up, watches faces dissolve into haphazard plots, and states his name and destination upon his turn.

"You are Nigerian? Abu-ba-kar Sa-la-m?" a woman, whose oily and pimpled face is terrorized by the jumbo-sized green beret draped over her head, with the tag *officer* pinned into an over-starched button-down shirt, queries from behind the shelter of a glass cubicle.

"Yes," he replies.

"Returning home?" she queries again, this time looking up to match a face to the name.

"Yes."

"The killing has been over for years now. You didn't hear?" she steadies her head to capture the moment.

"No. I was at sea." This clause he doesn't get right. He'd practiced how it would sound—how it must—for the last two days. He had wanted it heavy, soused in emotions for the girl who would ask where he had been. But it sounded flat and vicious, each syllable plagued with reluctance.

"Just watch yourself, Aboki, the country hasn't forgotten." The woman casually dismisses him. There is a mocking intent to this farewell.

He claims his ticket, boards a bus, and searches for a seat beside the window. His mind is blank, his body listless. A woman trapped in a buttoned-down dress and a safari makes her way towards the bus; dangling from her hip is a baby. She dumps herself in the seat beside him, and yanks out her left breast in an amusingly negligent fashion. He winces as she stuffs the baby's mouth with a teat. Like the choreography of indigence, the baby in turn grapples with greed, her small hands balled and fastened around the meal. This is where the decay begins, he thinks—this passionate and primal hunger for self-preservation. He is instantly reminded of Jamilah and his daughter; and

for the first time he is seized by a distinct impression of fatherhood – to protect. He stares into the green valleys and brown peaks spiralling backwards like ribbons. The past is now the sea as the bus trudges westwards.

The ride home is protracted with longing as he anticipates reunion and fatherhood. Overwhelmed with emotion, and in want of companionship, he winks at the baby beside him. The baby coos back and reaches for him. He is terrified but takes the chance as a practice toward fatherhood; being a seaman leaves room for innovation. The mother hands her child over. He hums ‘Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,’ the only song he knows from back when life was lush savannah and grazing cattle, before his danuwa assassinated the President and the country plummeted into ethnic cleansing. Every Hausa away from the north was culprit. Jamilah had been saved by her mixed origins, while he fled to the sea amidst a trail of headless bodies and bloodletting.

Callused hands, hoarse voice, tender heart, he quietly rocks the baby as the association fills the void within him with warmth. The mother inquires of the picture he constantly checks. Tales are exchanged. Hassana is a sweet name, she says. He would be a good father, she says. He cherishes this company. There are no expectations or trophies – not like with the onshore girls. He even risks sharing Milton, but sleep stays his hand. Silence falls. The bus drags.

Hours later he alights in downtown Lagos. Another bus would take him to Ojuelegba, his home. Suddenly someone lets out a loud wail. He whirls backward and sees the woman dart out of the vehicle and crash to the ground, her baby held judiciously despite the madness. A throng gathers. The woman, still hysterical, points to him then at her now lifeless baby, who is fast turning pale, in a continuous fashion and with a conclusive intent. Her cries are piercing shrills now, punctuated by the booms of the surrounding industrial complexes. It seems a dreadful coincidence, this instance of death. But a mob sees things differently – if it sees anything at all. They seize and begin to pummel accusations into him. It takes a painfully short while, but the verdict is swift. Then everything else happens in rapid succession, and soon he finds himself bound with tires and doused with gasoline.

With hands flailing in the air, he claims innocence, gabbling Hassana's name in the same breath. He tries to brandish her picture, but chokes on gasoline and blood. A cudgel knocks Milton from his hands, and with it, wafting into the orange sky, is the daughter that was never his to know. The taunting, pleading, and bashing carry on for minutes till the mob disremembers the charges. He then becomes *that bloody Hausa*. Terrorist, others claim.

The mob weary of its mercies strikes a match. The fire starts solemnly, a dull glow, almost inconspicuous, carousing on skin and fabric, feeding fat, turning heavy yellow tongues, and ravaging with passion. He tries to entreat it, to beat it out of himself, but fire knows not prejudice, neither does misfortune. Thus, he is entangled in a rebellious dance, a prisoner of fate thrashing and failing, kicking and racing, backward, to the sea, to the moment of recognition, of Hassana, of burning mornings and frosty nights, of savage crowds, of fire. Of being fated to a thing so destructively passionate. So personal. So final that only Milton would understand. So he thinks of a line, a perfect line, substituting blindness with death.

It is not miserable to die; it is miserable to be incapable of enduring death.

WITHOUT LOVETH

Ife Olujuigbe

You dash toward a pink-coated classroom, sweat tumbling down your back and thighs, leaving wide patches on your clothes as souvenirs from an angry Ibadan sun. It's 3:34 on your watch. You had forgotten to remind Ojo about picking up George, and had had to storm out of the office in the middle of work. Panting, you had scuttled toward the green gate of Olive Fountain Science School, thankful that the gateman wasn't being insufferable by asking who you wanted to see and all that. He must know your face by now. It's been four months.

You meet with two women who sit across each other, staring at you, and your son seated on the laps of one of them. A smile creeps onto your face, but none of them seems tolerant of pleasantries. One of the women walks toward you. *The head teacher!* you mutter silently as recognition dawns.

"So nice of you to come Mr. Iredia."

You should detect sarcasm in that, but all you perceive is anger. Pent-up anger.

"Thanks Miss Jennifer. I didn't come too late, did I?"

She doesn't stop walking until she is a few inches ahead. "We need to have a talk Mr. Iredia," she says slowly, her voice barely above a whisper.

You feel yourself shrink into a school kid who has refused to turn in his homework. What have you done this time? you ask yourself.

You follow her outside the class, imagining the worst. Your son is not dead – you had seen his eyes as he sat still, staring as if you were covered in black ink. He isn't

injured too, or he would be in a hospital. He couldn't have killed someone either. The absurdity of the thought draws a laugh.

"Mr. Iredia, George is not doing well," Jennifer says, and you feel your heartstrings snap.

"Did he do something wrong?"

"Many things actually," she says, recounting details of the things he had done within the past few days you had been too busy to fetch him from school, and had sent your neighbour instead. Ojo always called to tell you George's teachers requested you to visit, but you had thought it only as serious as the Open Day invitations or Parents-Teachers meetings.

Now as you watch her mouth open and close in accusatory movements, you wonder how terrible a father you have become. Aggression? Where is George picking all these from? These questions race through your mind. *Definitely not me*, you assure yourself. If anything, you pride yourself as one of the most peace-loving people in the world. It's the reason you could never stand wrestling or combative video games growing up. And to think your brothers thought you were gay.

"Is that it sir?"

Your mind returns to this place with the walls marred with shoddy, multi-colored children's paintings. You realised you just missed her question.

"You said?" you reply.

Now her eyes judge you, proclaiming you the worst father that ever walked the earth. They suggest you hang yourself, as you are unfit to live.

"I said do you have friends who come around with children to your home; children that are maybe older than George?" Jennifer repeats.

"Oh, no. Not at all."

Ojo has a teenage son. No, he doesn't count. He hasn't been to your house in a long time, and since Loveth's death, you have barely had time to socialize.

"Do you watch any violent PG movies in his presence?"

"I don't watch movies. I don't have the time."

She pauses before she asks the next question.

“Do you beat him?”

What? Is he not your son, to be corrected by whatever means you dim fit? Another passing thought.

“Does that matter?” you ask.

“It does, Mr. Iredia.” This is a retort, forceful and defensive. But you think it unnecessary to argue.

“No.”

A sigh ensues. Then resignation.

“Please, keep an eye on him, Mr. Iredia. He is a brilliant kid, promising too, but these recent habits won’t take him very far.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Fifteen minutes later and George is at the back seat of your car, tucked in and held in position by grey seatbelts. He is quiet, cradling his Mickey Mouse schoolbag and looking out the window. You debate the right time to bring up the ‘situation.’ He is seven, and you honestly don’t know what approach to use. Loveth would have known.

“Hey, big man!” you say to his reflection in the mirror. He looks at yours then looks away. You would have to try again. You make a turning into your street and nod at the man sitting in front of the pharmacy. He is most times surly, but today he waves. It isn’t such a bad day after all.

George bounds into the house when you get home. He hasn’t said much to you in a week, month...the last four months even, you suddenly realize. It has only been a series of ‘Good Mornings’ and ‘Good Nights,’ but you have been too immersed in thoughts and activities to notice. Bola, the help, is at the door, mouthing her ‘Welcome sah’ with a slight bow before reaching for the suitcase and George’s bag in your hands. You raise a hand that says *Don’t bother*, and walk straight to your room, deep in thought. How did you get so bad at this?

Lunch is amala and groundnut soup, Bola says from the base of the stairs. The chicken is all you are able to eat as worries make home in the pit of your stomach. You retire to your room to allow your thoughts stray to her, again. To Loveth.

“You’ll figure it out,” she had answered your how-do-I-live-without-you question four months ago. It was hard letting her go, even though you had known months before that she had booked an appointment with death. You would come home to her warmth and wisdom, wishing and praying death away. You had even begun to attend church services often, and fast, and make vows. A car. Or maybe your land at Iseyin. How about pay check for a year? Anything to appease God to save Loveth. But she had died, and it had hurt like a hole in the heart. How much more your son, who was never prepared for her death? Who thought his mum had a cold and would return home soon? That was what you had made him believe.

“We can’t tell him I’m not coming back. He is too young to process cancer,” Loveth had cautioned.

Now she was gone, leaving you alone to help him process death, process distance that stretched farther with every setting sun. And this you were failing miserably.

“Loveth!” you scream into your pillow, tears dribbling into them. The door creaks open behind you, but you are too engulfed in grief to care. Bola probably heard your scream and wants to know if Oga is okay, you think. She would find that Oga needs not to be disturbed and would see herself out.

The tears flow freely now, like a pipe cracked open. You had tried to be strong, to be the spine that supports and consoles everyone. You had tried to carry on, took a week’s break then returned to work. Church had become past tense, of course: if your most sincere prayers had not been heard, you might as well stay at home and watch television. You had given your boy everything he demanded, or everything you thought he might demand, as a way to make up for the absence of his mother.

But today, this very moment, you crumble under the weight of it all, together with your muscles and six-foot bigness. You do not know how to be without Loveth. You do not know how to relate to the maid, or tell her that you cannot stand soup made with

periwinkles and crayfish. You do not know how to talk to Ojo's wife when she endeavours to be nice and brings catfish pepper soup every other Saturday. She sits in the living room and you do too, but you are ignorant of what conversations to start or what jokes to crack. You had never been good at these things, but Loveth had been the reason the world called you a nice man. Her eyes told you the time to sit, or offer wine. Her signals were your cues; your jokes were her comedies; to her you were superman. With her around, you and George spoke the same language. She was your completeness, your essence.

"I can't do this, Loveth!" you cry out to the darkness mapped against the pillow by your shut eyes. "How can I understand our son without your interpretations? How do I go on?"

The last time you cried was twenty-three years ago beside the freshly dug grave of your mother. You are that little boy all over again. That boy fascinated by the bespectacled lady on his street who dared turn down his amorous advances despite his university admission and well-tailored beard. You are that young man she finally said yes to, after which his heart stopped for a millisecond, and he leapt for joy and tripped, and had her laughing hysterically. You are that twenty-two year old who spent all his savings to get his girlfriend a birthday gift so he could catch a glimpse of the sun in her smile. No, you don't want to be a grown man tonight; you just want to cry in peace.

Minutes run into hours and you feel something press toward you on the bed. This is startling because were it to be Bola, she would be on her way to her hometown in Sagamu first thing in the morning. You lift your head and find a small figure curled up beside you, asleep. George?

The part of the bed beneath his face is lined by tears forming a trail that runs from his eyes to the tip of his nose and then disappears. Your heart reaches for him, so much so that you wrap your arm around his tiny frame and rock him gently till you fall asleep too.

You wake up in the morning with your son still asleep in your arms. Nothing has ever felt so reassuring, and you know that from now on no angry-faced teacher would

have anything bad to report. You feel it deep in the pit of your belly that your heart and your son's have said all that needs to be said. You look up to the ceiling; it is stupid, but you imagine your wife's face ingrained in it, smiling at you with pride in her eyes, one that says you can take on the world. You gaze at your sleeping son and tap him to get him ready for another school day. It will be a good day.

A MOSAIC OF TORN PLACES

Adams Adeosun

What scares you?

Fear.

Fear?

Yes, fear.

How?

*

Pa was a pastor at an orthodox church in Ibadan. We lived in the church's mission house until Pa died and had to be buried in The Hathaway. During his burial and at his graveside, there were a lot of mourners: elders and deacons, philanthropists, beggars, sluts, thieves, hypocrites, and all the compositions of an orthodox congregation. They thought their troubles had ended.

The church's building was patterned after colonial architecture, with large Corinthian columns upbraiding a steep roof bordered by a parapet. A bell tower sat alone at the centre of the vast compound that housed the church. The mission house, old and weak, stood to the right of the church. It contained sixteen rooms, shared between upper and lower floors. We lived on the upper floor. To the left of the church, right after the woods, was the cemetery. It had a fence ringed with wire gauze that had rusted with time. The graves in the cemetery were arranged rows-and-columns style until the cemetery filled up with tombstones and corpses had to be buried haphazardly—sometimes over old ones, other times inside the same coffin. The

cemetery was named The Hathaway after the first person buried there – the founder, Reverend Hathaway.

The Hathaway remained what it was, a quiet burial ground, till the church bell began to ring itself at midnight. The first night it did Pa and Ma huddled into my room, which was the last on our wing, adjoined to theirs by a door within. They joined hands, stretched them over me, and began to wage war against invisible principalities till their voices turned hoarse.

In the morning there were several versions of the bell story. The gateman said he saw a hooded figure that must have been the devil by the bell tower. Brother Bode, the sanctuary keeper, who lived in a room attached to the church's rear, heard strange footsteps. Pa's story was different. He said he saw the truth in a dream, that Reverend Hathaway, who rumour had it was murdered by unknown men and dumped at the foot of the bell tower, had returned to purge the church of its sins. Sinners would be struck dead in their sleep.

This terrified people. And before long, our house filled up with penitent church members. Pa received them late into the night. While some of them stalked him into the church, crying as they confessed their sins, others – usually the rich – made themselves our guests during dinner, pretending to be visiting. After meals, I would creep into my room to press my ear to the door adjoining both rooms and listen in on their conversations. There was always a confession – thievery, adultery, fornication, occasional murder, and then pulpit robbery – after which the prayers and benedictions would ensue. The Hathaway Ghost brought people to their knees, to Pa, then God.

This, I think, was when I began to theorize fear.

*

Fear is an odd entity. A malignant organism that multiplies geometrically once it finds a host.

Like a virus?

Like virus.

But isn't it weird to think about fear this way, as a living thing? Isn't fear an emotion?

Is it?

*

The bell tolled harder every night. Pa and Ma would rush into my room to repel the evil. They would pray for my siblings, Isaac and his family in Lagos, Mary and her husband in Onitsha, and Joseph who was on an MFA scholarship in Nottingham. But as this failed to stop the tolling, other families that lived in the mission house joined my parents' night crusade. We would be clustered together in our living room like a merry band of roosters, praying our fears away till the muezzins called reluctant brethren to prayers.

The Sunday after the night the bell first tolled, the church filled up. There were no seats for those who came a minute late, neither were the early arrivals spared a moment of reprieve as they were badgered by an onslaught of testimonies from those who were visited by The Hathaway Ghost but were spared because of some kind act they had done in the past, or the mercy of the Creator, or certain timely prayers, or something as appealing as reciting Psalm 23. Then the Hathaway Ghost claimed its first victim: a goat from the church's herd.

I found the goat in the woods; its blood trailed back to The Hathaway. I had staggered sleepily into the woods to escape morning devotion when I happened upon the goat without its head or any of its limbs. My mind numbed as my feet rooted to a spot. Then out of panic I screamed.

Later that morning the woods flooded with prayer warriors who immersed everything from the leaves to the roots in *the blood of Jesus*. Throughout that day I kept to my room, curled up in a corner, horrified, scared and jittery, and alarmed by any sudden movement. Then the Hathaway Ghost began to manifest itself everywhere to me: it was the black and white of the Reverend's portrait beside the image of Christ the Shepherd on the altar of the church; it marched out of a wall, cradling the head of a goat in its arm. He was everywhere.

"He is in the drum," I cried one day when Ma asked me to get her water. We were in the kitchen and she was making dinner. She had shot me an angry look in return.

"What is in the drum? I said you should get me some water," Ma yelled.

"The ghost is in the drum," I cried harder.

The prayer warriors gathered again, this time brandishing big bibles and tambourines. I knelt in their middle with a bottle of holy water trapped in my palms. By the end of the deliverance session, after the holy water had been sprinkled on me, I knew I wouldn't see The Hathaway Ghost anymore.

*

Death. What about death?

Death is a constant. It is only a matter of time before we sleep and never wake up, or get run down by a truck on our way to work, or crash in an airplane from Lagos to Abuja, or drown at the beach on a Christmas day.

Then isn't this supposed to be the ultimate fear? This vulnerability?

Vulnerability is a beautiful thing. To know that you could die the next minute and yet live as though you wouldn't.

*

Then, one evening, the Hathaway Ghost left a note for Pa. And all hell broke loose. The note was folded into an origami. *Beware! The bell beckons*, it read. It was signed, *H*.

The gossip began, from the church, and then conspiracy theories—from the outright ridiculous to the boring ones—filled the minds of everyone. The elders gathered at the mission house to talk to Pa. They accosted, stalked, and argued with him. You must confess your sins, they screamed into his face.

But Pa was an upright man. Always selfless. When the elders first turned up in our old house to tell Pa that the Lord had chosen him to lead the church, he had rebelled. "Why me?" he asked tearfully. Eventually, despite admonitions by his colleagues not to, he resigned from his job and forfeited the house and car that came with his job. We moved into the mission house afterwards.

The note halved the congregation into warring factions. If The Hathaway Ghost had come for the head, it could spite the body for good measure, they reasoned. Some

of them sent Pa epistles on how the church was cursed and how they wouldn't return until Pa stopped being the Reverend. Others just stopped coming.

Brother Bode, the sanctuary keeper, kept his faith in Pa. He was the one Ma would call when Pa wept bitterly as he prayed in his room; when he faulted God and queried him; when he refused to break his fast. Brother Bode would drop his red tattered hardcover journal, which he was always writing in, and hurry after me. He knew how to calm Pa's storms.

It was said that before Brother Bode came to reside in the church, he was a prisoner. His father, a perpetual drunk, had teetered home one evening after the burial of Brother Bode's mother and sister, man-handled him and bundled him down to a police station where he abandoned him, because to him the young Bode had murdered his family. No one could convince him otherwise. It was in prison that Pa met Brother Bode, who by then had taken a fancy to papers and tissues and pencils.

A story, he had said when Pa asked what it was he was always writing.

"The first thing Bode asked for after I prayed him out of remand was a journal. He wanted to write a great novel," Pa would say whenever he told the story. Brother Bode was a symbol of Pa's faith.

*

Really, isn't it a fallacy to say 'I fear fear'?

The English Professor may dismiss it as redundancy. He may be right. But language itself is handicapped. This inadequacy is the same reason the Doctor does not understand when I tell him 'we're fine.' Yet we're here, you and me in this room of white walls.

John, you're rambling.

I'm not rambling, Judas. You're just too dumb.

*

But then the bell didn't stop tolling. So one night, Pa barged out of the living room, his bible fixed under his armpit, a crazed look on his face.

"It is still midnight. You shouldn't go out." Ma kept squinting to keep her eyes from watering. The lantern on the centre-table illuminated his fluttering garment as he thundered out of the living room.

We found Pa at the foot of the bell tower the next morning, bloated and stiff. His body attracted flies and sanctimonious persons and hisses and, very much later, some tears. The Hathaway Ghost had bashed his head in with a stone, they said. The stone lay beside him, a part of it darkened with coagulated blood. When the police came, the gateman grumbled how he hadn't seen anything, likewise others around. But Brother Bode had heard guttural voices.

"If you want to help, find The Hathaway Ghost," an elder had screamed at the policemen.

Colour white – this is how I remember Pa. Ma picked his favourite white garment, his nostrils were stuffed with white wool, and his skin was white too. This image of him stuck to me throughout the years. After Pa's burial in The Hathaway, we moved out of the mission house into another house in a poor part of town. Even when Isaac returned to Lagos, Mary to Onitsha, and Joseph stopped calling to comfort Mama, Pa stayed with me.

He would steal into my room, squat beside me, and tell me how The Hathaway Ghost snuck up behind him and rammed a large stone against his head. This story horrified me as I always ended up screaming into the night, or sweating till daybreak. I would ask him to stop but he wouldn't. "Boy, don't you want to know?" he would ask. I would scream in reply. Another deliverance session would commence and I would be better for a while.

I willed Pa's ghost back sometimes, out of nostalgia. But like The Hathaway Ghost, he became obscure with time. Years would pass before he returned in a tattered red hardcover manuscript that arrived in my university dormitory. *Beware! The bell beckons*, the title read. The author was *Bode, pseudonym, The Hathaway Ghost*. And it was dedicated *To John*. To me.

The story of The Hathaway ghost unravelled itself again, except the ghost was Brother Bode, a psychopathic narrator. I found out Brother Bode had staged The Hathaway Ghost drama as a plot experiment for the book. In the epilogue, long after he had killed Pa: *he posted the manuscript to John and hung himself by the bell tower in the middle of the church compound.*

I burnt the red book in a fit of anger and left school, but only after my mind had been pounded to dust after wandering for months by the knowledge of what Brother Bode did. It shrank and folded in on itself, so much so that everyone looked like him – tattered, horrifying, and ghostlike. I began to hit at him, at anyone who came too close to me, who looked like him, who I thought tried to hurt me like him. Ma, Isaac, Mary, Joseph, Brother Bode. All different but the same person.

After a while, they abandoned me in this room where I converse with Judas who speaks without words, and talks from within. They don't understand that I see Judas. And what does it matter if I really do not see Judas? The world is a scary place anyway.

They are just scared of him, as I am of them, of Brother Bode.

*

Judas, I'm scared.

What scares you?

Fear.

BLOOD & BONES

Caleb Somtochukwu Okereke

(For Joseph Gabriel and the countless others departed)

We used to stand in tidy lines, our palms pressed together, our heads held up high as if propped by something. We would sing along with the commander—the bespectacled man with superficial indifference to everything but his duty.

He did not make small talk with the soldiers who assisted him, or joke about one of us who stuttered as he sang. He just rode in on days he was needed in the grey Nissan driven by a young soldier, conducted our parades and left likewise. It was as if his life had a blue print—walk in, walk out—nothing contrary; rigid, too, as if he had been slashed out from an Indomie carton.

He was the same commander who had whipped Saliu when he stole a slice of bread until his head ached; the same commander who made him walk on broken beer bottles until his feet could bleed no more.

Amongst ourselves, we called him “Margaret Thatcher” because he seemed to have the petty impiety present in most difficult women. His penalties seemed borne on the knob of weakness. The kind of retribution emanating from someone who felt he was too weak, the kind that was extreme, too extreme as if to conceal the feeble mind underneath.

We were not exactly terrified of him at first; rigidity was synonymous to the military. It was taught mechanically in the way our commanders ignored civilians, the satisfied air with which they carried themselves, not speaking even when they were spoken to as if they were somewhat demigods.

And so we had expected the Commander to be rigid; we read with our mind's lips the J.T CHINUALUMOGU on his nametag, which had sounded too rigid the first day of his arrival. We had followed with our darting eyes his fluid movements, the way one leg seemed to be a separate moiety from the other, and tried to sniff out his persona from the way he saluted in front of the Nigerian flag and the way he squinted his crimson eyes when the sun's rays were too fierce.

It was when he threw his young driver out of a moving Nissan one evening after parade for buying fuel at twenty naira more than the price that we understood the kind of man he was. The news had reached our rooms, knocked at our doors and drowned in the profundity of our blankets never again to be heard by the outside world.

The sun would dance lazily over our heads, like a maiden in love with one but forced to dance or be wedded by another. Its brutal rays would grasp at our skins, hug it close, rid us of water as one did a wet cloth and then make singing an effort.

Ochre specks of dust from the violent stomps of our boots would hover around us like minute angels, cover the ample edges of our boots and threaten to blind our eyes. Yet we still would sing:

*Mama no dey o, Papa no dey o,
If you want to killi me, kill me make I die,
I would never follow you to that station!*

Ofodile was the one who sung the loudest, the Eastern boy whose skin was the plastic colour of boiled maize. He would say the words with the Igbo quality of his voice, ignorant of the fact that we all laughed over it during lunch. He would say *follow* as *forrow* and *mma* when he meant to say *mama* and yet he would sing the loudest.

Sometimes the spirit of the songs would surround him so gravely that he would lose consciousness and start to dance. Other times, he would just sing so loud that the commander would flash him a wintry stare as if he too ostracized his raucous singing.

Saliu said he did not remember the day Ofodile had been caught with a pack of condoms and the wide-eyed soldier had asked him who he intended to sleep with in a boys-only camp. It meant the soldier saw the two women who were with us in camp as men. Everyone was a man in the military.

I wondered how Saliu could forget. Perhaps he did remember and chose to forget because it was easier. It was easier not to remember Ofodile paraded naked around camp, easier not to remember the limp penis dangling between his legs, not to remember the way the boys kept away from him the next day because they perceived he was a homosexual.

There were many things Saliu said he did not remember; he said he did not remember the week we had snuck out of camp to go for a party in the city – the same week he had started to receive letters from female admirers. He said he did not remember being in the Alpha Company at first, that he did not remember making them lose all the competitions because he had always wanted to try something different. There were many things Saliu lied that he did not remember.

Those were the good old days. The days where Ofodile told us anecdotes about his hometown, Aba, as we ascended the wintry mountain. When Okon, his roommate who loved to talk about obese women, joked about how loudly he snored at night. The days we hid behind the Shea tree to drink Small Stout, which we had bought from our first allowance and had smuggled in through the eastern instructor; the days our mouths watered after the swaying hips of the Hausa women who sold garri and kuli kuli to us.

They were the days before the network news began to teem with men in veiled faces chanting WESTERN EDUCATION IS A SIN; the days before we were clueless as to whom to expect on the training ground because most of our instructors had fled the north. Okon had called them Boko Haram the day training had ended. He had said it with fear, uncertain, and I thought I had seen tears in his palm nut-shaped eyes.

That day, too, the commander had summoned me to his office; it was the first time he had ever spoken to me. "What is your name?" he had asked me as if he could not read the words on my nametag.

"Mustapha," I replied and he nodded before saying, "Mustapha, do you see what your brothers are doing to people?" It was a rhetorical question; I knew because we all saw, because we all heard the terrified voice of the newscaster streaming from the jarred frequencies about another bomb attack in a school or in a church. Because we all heard the women who sold kuli kuli detail experiences; we heard them talk about a friend or a sibling who had been killed in the recent attacks; we heard them mutter silent prayers to Allah for their protection, we heard them say, "*Allah ya rabu da mu*, God has forsaken us."

I never saw the Commander again. And many years later, I would be watching the network news when his obituary would pop up on my television screen. Prostate cancer, they said, and I would imagine cancer, frail as it is, boring crevices in the cells of the rigid man.

Ofofodile handed me a small note stained with palm oil when we left camp that day. He said he had been trying his hands on poetry. Saliu laughed loudly as he read the words but I didn't.

*We came in modest numbers,
Draped in the covers of uncertainty.
The iniquity of darkened skies
Flanked the green-white-green.
But, blood and bones we gave to wear the uniform
And keep our country safe,
Blood and bones....*

Although we had all been deployed to Edo State, we had somewhat known we would never really see each other again. And so on the squally bus ride to Edo State, we took time to savour the fleeting scent of our environment.

We stared at the red earth interspersed with tapering blades of grass like a red dress with green patterns, at the particles of dust that tottered after our bus tires as if one of us owed them money. We watched them reach out to us, watched them cover the NIGERIAN MILITARY emblazoned on the bus in a film of brown and then make slender beads on its windows.

We cheered when we drove past the mountain on which we had once spent a night. We cheered because we all remembered the ascent. How our tongues forming words became a labour, how we breathed in wisps of wintry air that we resorted to not breathing at all. Three of us had died, the cold became too unbearable, and Okon had almost gone round the bend.

We were still exchanging memories when we got to Benin City and I marvelled at how different it was from Zaria. In Benin, the sun did not dance lazily. It came out with much gusto when it wanted to and waned even faster. The evening sun was lenient, almost welcoming, like a father who just had his first son, and there was rain. Silver slants streaming down the sky, hitting windowpanes and tin roofs as if in a haste to get somewhere. It washed away the dust and frustration of the day; it made the air breathed fresh as if tinged with an extra amount of oxygen than the air in Zaria.

I saw Saliu occasionally during my first few weeks in Benin. He brought cartons of Small Stout to my flat in the suburbs and we would drink bottles of his favourite brand as we watched football or played chess.

He loved Arsenal, I had always wondered why. It was difficult to comprehend. I had told him about my conceptions many times, but he simply waved them away as if they were unimportant. Yet he wore an Arsenal jersey underneath his camouflage, with WALCOTT 14 printed on its back.

We talked those weeks, about many things. He told me about the Military hospital he worked, about the female nurses who yearned to gain his attention. I could understand why: Saliu was attractive.

He had the kind of attractiveness that was subtle, the kind that did not broadcast itself. He did not have margarine-coloured skin and a slender nose, but his beauty was the sort that revealed itself after careful observation.

The evening Saliu received his letter of deployment to Jos; he rode his bike to my flat to show me.

“This people won’t let me enjoy at least one of those nurses,” he said and then laughed loudly.

I wanted to tell him that pleasant things did not happen in Jos, that Jos was the same place where they killed many Christians, where Okon had once said it rained salty innocent blood instead of water. However, Saliu knew, I knew he knew and it was why I did not tell him.

He wrote many letters from Jos. He told me about a climate that was more convivial than anything I had ever known, about how it sometimes seemed to snow. In his letters, he referred to Jos as The Azure because he said everything felt so blue. He told me also about the Christian girl he had fallen in love with, about how she had taken him to meet her family and how her clergyman father had stared at him wide-eyed when he said he was a Muslim. He had buttressed his point with a “*You know I find it hard to love, Lol*” and then drawn meaningless smileys.

I replied his letters in single words, sometimes two. A *good* when he said something progressive, a *be careful* when it was the reverse. I did not think he ever read my replies; I had no story to tell of Benin, no female admirers in the office I worked or anybody I fell in love with, nothing he did not already know.

The longest letter I had ever written him was on the Friday I learnt of Ofodile’s death. It had rained heavily and Okon had braved the rain to be in my flat.

“Did you hear?” he had asked before I could even open the wooden door. “Ofodile is dead.”

I would have asked how but he kept on talking.

“He was deployed to Borno last month,” Okon said, the rain drowning the sound of his voice. “They beheaded him, Mustapha, those people, your brothers, they slit his throat and then beheaded him.”

I imagined that night scarlet blood gushing out Ofodile’s slit throat like a water pipe cut open. I imagined him amongst the insurgents, his maize coloured head rolling in the dust. Perhaps he had sung as they slit his throat, or he had stayed still numbed by the events around him.

I joined the others on the condolence visit to Aba and Saliu had come too. We saw the orange tree Ofodile had always spoken about in his anecdotes of home, the wilted leaves drifting about the front yard like travellers who lost their way.

Theirs was the conventional middle class Nigerian family who ate bread and tea most mornings and rice on Sunday afternoons. His Mother, a petite young woman, welcomed us; she served us rice and fried plantains and pressured us to eat.

“You say you are his friends from the military?” she asked and continued when Saliu nodded. “Ofodile never wanted to join the military.” She smiled from the fondness of the memory, I thought I saw tears stream down her dusk-coloured face. “It was his Uncle who does business in china who made him join, the Uncle whom he adored. He was his father’s brother and he talked to Ofodile about recruiting. What aches my heart is that no one knows he died, that he is one of the many others who have died, he is just one, one of them, *nwam*, my child.”

At that moment she pleaded that we sing “Only Remembered by What We Have Done,” and as we did, I could swear I saw Ofodile singing raucously along.

“She was right,” Saliu, said when we got to Benin. He was spending the night in my flat. “Ofodile is just one of them, just one of them from the news,” he sighed and then sipped from his Small Stout.

“May such misfortune never befall us,” he said and I wasn’t sure whom he prayed to, if it was the Allah we knew or the God of the girl he had fallen in love with, yet I nodded my head in concord, in belief of greater forces.

I got my Lagos posting two days after Ofodile's funeral. Although they had not found his body, his family had insisted on a proper funeral and so they had buried an empty casket with his army uniform and other precious articles.

The letter was like the others, brief and requiring my urgent deployment. And I started to pack my few things the same day.

"You are lucky," Okon said. He had come to help me pack. "Do you know how many people are looking for Lagos posting, especially in times like this?"

He stared at the portrait of the President on the wall as if he expected the portrait to speak, to concur on how lucky I was.

"I heard of a man who refused to go when he was deployed to the North, he chose rather to be forcefully retired." He shook his head. "Those people are bad people, very bad people, if I ever get deployed there, me I won't go."

I thought of his words when he left my house that evening. I thought of them even as I boarded the bus to Lagos, even when our bus almost rammed into a lorry with one of those cheap insights written on it.

The lorry we almost ran into had NO ONE KNOWS TOMORROW written on it in red and yellow ink and as our driver argued about who was at fault and who was not, I thought about how strangely true the words were.

In Lagos, my flat was different. It had flowers in its lobby and grey blinds on its windows.

Saliu said he did not like Lagos. It was in his reply to my first letter, the letter in which I had told him of the chaos called Lagos. In which I told him how everyone seemed to be rushing somewhere as if it was their last day on earth, in which I told him about the young girls in the base I worked, who became sex workers at night to supplement their pay.

He told me of his Damaturu posting in one of his letters, of how the soldier who had come to deliver the letter had felt pity for him. *But I do not feel pity for myself, it is just Damaturu*, he had said in his letter, and then added, *I think I am even excited*.

He told me also that he one day ran into Okon who had recently been deployed to Jos. *Ezinma is sad, she says she would miss me.* He had written about his Christian girlfriend and then drawn distorted hearts.

I met Nana on the day Saliu moved to Damaturu. It was in Surulere mall. I was looking at different sneakers, confused about which to select when she spoke to me.

“They say the white ones last longer,” she said and then laughed. “Contrary to popular belief.”

I was used to Lagos where girls did not speak unless they were spoken to. And so aside her slender face with the right sizes of its features, it was what attracted me to her.

“I am not a sneakers person,” I said, “I just want to try.”

“You should take my advice then,” she said and then she pointed at one, white with grey rims. “Suits your face.”

I saw Nana every day after our first meeting. She was a journalist for a local television station on the mainland and so she would come to the mall during our lunch hours and we would talk over a plate of food. She always ordered yam porridge even though a waiter had snickered at her once and then said it was Un-womanly. Perhaps, he was used to the many Lagos girls who did things simply because others did them and so he could not understand Nana.

I too could not understand Nana. She loved Onyeka Onwenu’s music. “Although I do not understand the words,” she said. She also loved journalism, and was passionate about the killings in the north. Her eyes had turned crimson when I told her about Ofodile.

Together, we watched *I Need To Know* at 9 p.m. in my Lagos apartment every night and *Everyday People* on Tuesdays.

I told Saliu about her in my next letter and he replied few days later. He told me how he was adjusting to Damaturu, how he saw the bones of children like chicken in a pot of stew lying about the streets.

He told me about the blood, about the blood that seemed to be on everyone, on schoolchildren, on a poor merchant, on soldiers. About the dampness of the environs,

how the sun seemed unable to shine anymore because of the much evil, how the clouds like static wisps of dense gray smoke rained reluctant tears.

He told me also about his first encounter with the insurgents, how the trigger of his gun had ceased and he had fled into the forest. *Thank God, you have found a girlfriend o, I was starting to think you were gay,* he had written at the end and then as always drawn meaningless smileys.

Nana asked about my family once. She said I had never spoken about them. It was during one of our lunch dates and I had stared at her for long before I finally answered.

“My father has six wives and I am the only son of my mother, she died the year before I joined the army,” I said. “There is nothing for me at home any longer.”

She smiled and then nodded as if she understood.

I heard of the Damaturu school attack on the network news at 10 p.m. two days after Saliu’s last letter.

Nana was spending the night in my flat for the first time, we had just watched *I Need To Know* and she froze when the newscaster said the words.

I heard her mention names, names of the dead – *John Ugwu, Tope Fisayo* – names of the missing. Perhaps I had known she would mention Saliu amongst the missing and it was why I had shown no emotion when she did, even when Nana had shaken me violently to be sure I was still conscious.

“It’s your friend, Mustapha, your friend,” she said, trepidation in her voice.

I knew it was Saliu, I knew. And so that was why I joined the protesters at Dodan Barracks the next day. Why I carried a placard that read SOLDIERS HAVE FAMILIES, TOO. It was why also I could not sleep that night, why I could not sleep even many nights after that. Why Nana bought sleeping pills from the pharmacy and put them in my evening tea.

“Mustapha, they would find him,” she said as she forced the cold Milo down my throat. “My friend in the North said they haven’t found any bodies since the initial, perhaps the insurgents took him away. Allah *na tsare*. It is for Allah to protect.”

I nodded. I did not tell her that every night after the broadcast, I had drunk Small Stout at a bar down the street; that dust, a lazy dancing sun and the crimson eyes of a squinting commander filled every dream since the broadcast.

“You are taking this too hard on yourself, Mustapha, your friend is still alive somewhere,” she said one evening, two weeks after the attack, when I refused breakfast and lunch.

“You do not understand, Nana, you do not,” I said.

“Then make me,” she answered, “Make me, *Ni gaji*, I am tired.”

I walked to the pocket of my uniform and produced a note, which I pressed into her palms. The exact poem Ofodile had pushed into my hands on the last day of camp, the small note stained with palm oil.

From outside, the Lagos sun shone on her midnight coloured face and it reflected it away like the back of an oily frying pan.

I heard her read the words of the last verse.

Blood and bones we spilled to make

The nation worth living.

Despite sabotage and conspiracy,

We kept strong, we lost brothers,

But we kept on.

The crimson blood and the sinewy bones

Of our many unsung heroes.

I heard her read the words I had read every night after the broadcast. And I knew then that she understood.

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