

Nesting on the Rocks:

AN ANTHOLOGY OF
NEW WRITING 2023



A Publication of the Association of Nigerian Authors
(ANA) Plateau State Chapter, Volume 1, New Series.

**NESTING ON THE ROCKS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF
NEW WRITING 2023**

**A Publication of the Association of Nigerian Authors,
Plateau State
New Series Volume 1**

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anaplateau1@gmail.com
+2348065788940

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Davou Kpam
Logari Art Studio, Jos,
Plateau State, Nigeria.
logaridesign@gmail.com
+234 809 565 1076

*to the now and future generation of writers on the
Plateau, be inspired!*

Acknowledgments

The Editorial Board acknowledges the support of Plateau ANA Executive Committee in initiating and funding the idea of an anthology, which seeks to collate existing authors and introduce new writers with promise in the country, and not just Plateau state. Entries were received from a diversity of backgrounds and genres and are featured here in order to celebrate and present the known and the unknown voices through their writing.

The Editors would like to thank Executive Committee of ANA Plateau led by Victor Meshak for providing the encouragement and logistics towards his publication.

We also thank all those writers who contributed their poems and short stories, and we hope that this would stimulate them to greater creativity and productivity.

For: Editorial Board.

'Diran Ademiju-Bepo

Chairman/Editor-in-Chief

'Diran Ademiju-Bepo

The Tableau

Refreshing and Pulsating Nesting on the Rocks!

Literature is a very interesting subject that deals with human experiences and behaviours, breaks the barrier of time, and cultural and geographical situations and boundaries. These experiences are usually cast in stories, poems, and dramatic pieces to disseminate the author's message and 'worldview' to the reader or listener quietly or subtly, and or even violently! The various genres captured here -- poetry, prose, drama, and a new coinage, 'naturEssay', a hybrid of prose and essay, - gleefully represent and demonstrate the robust fecundity on the Plateau from the array of subject matters, themes, forms, diction, imageries, symbolisms, rhetorical and other literary devices, accentuated by the diverse backgrounds of the authors that we have in this Anthology. The narrative points of view, dramatic and language techniques, plots, characterization and settings, as applicable, and the overall intention and motive of each writer show a visible reaching for individual representation, - or presentation, - of life in its wider ramifications. Characters, events and phenomena come ALIVE through the deft handling of the authors until we hear the refreshing and pulsating melodies of/from the rocks!

I believe every reader or listener of this collection of poems, short stories, essays around nature and enactment pieces (on stage and radio), will enjoy the skill and creativity employed by the authors in passing across their

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anaplateau1@gmail.com
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*Singing
Rivulets
Ravenous Ruby
Leash Your Soul*

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Neglected Tropical Diseases and Our Locals

Drama

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ELASA Party (a playlet)

Victor Meshak Jatau
New Mata (a radio drama)

Eric Ganan Pam
The Press Conference (a short play)

Notes on Contributors

JOS PLATEAU

Jos Plateau, you are the sacred garden of wonders
 that lures angels and mermaids to converge
 at the beautiful harem of your green bosom
 to fraternize with flickers of bloom
 and titivate their glittering skin
 in the waters of cascades
 belonging to your posing hills and rocks.

Jos Plateau, the sojourning wind of this season
 has arrived my domain with sagely rhymes and melodious
 flute singing serenade of your charming beauty
 humming tunes of your homely Serengeti.

It tells of the predators who buried their canines in your
 entrancing flesh sipping your green corpuscles, and
 seeking in vain to sow the seeds of death in your blooming
 soul.

It tells of your tears of joy (Kura Falls; and Assop Falls)
 that bewitch the eyelids of visiting birds.
 It sings of charming nipples of your sprawling verdure;
 of the stunning face of Shere Hills; the striking eyes of
 Wase Rock;
 the photogenic hips of Riyom Rock; the vivacious face of
 Jos Wildlife Park;
 the serenity of the Miango Rest House; the elegant
 meadows of Rayfield Resort.

A. Poetry

It sings of the enchanting granites that craft delightful massifs; the dazzling volcanic cones bounded by basaltic flows; It chants of the inimitable Nok sculpture crafted from your hip bones; of the temperate demeanour that garland your ravishing face, and the lullaby of your engaging backside

Jos Plateau; you are the motherly queendom that birthed to the world stars that bless our earth with sweet rays; whose fingers dig graves to bury the darkness of our world of night stars whose warmth dry the tears of our wailing earth.

**TALONS OF BREATH HAWK
(For Mrs Halimat Audu-Aleshe)**

Wordlessly
you took the exit door
and vanished into the clouds
without weaning me from the teats of
your motherly care

I
a sapling
that relished the taste of chlorophyll
from your benevolent sun

I was a rustling metal
burnished by the fires of
your goldsmithing presence
in my budding times

When my dawning sipped sagely rays from your ball of light
when your tongue crafted melodies to feed the ears of my
tender heart

But now
the talons of breath hawk
stole you to veil me from your fervour
and reduce me to a sauntering bee
searching for nectar from a withered flower

I have been battered to the earth of
a drenched chick
purlined of feathers
and bereft of motherly warmth
in a world of freezing coldness.

Muhammad Ali

ELEGY OF CAPTIVITY

(for Chibok girls, and their parents)

Our dawn
has been bereft of its virgin rays

The crescent
has been eclipsed from the wide-flung dome of night

Rising stars
have been plundered from the inverted bowl of Chibok
with rays foisted to kiss the putrefying lips of Sambisa

Beauteous mothers of days to come
brutally robbed of days to come

Flowers with foremost beauty
I've long been fettered to craving
for the remnants of alluring bloom
in your rosy blackness
your battered blackness
long immersed in vase of aridity
vase of profanity

My heart is a tender mass with AXE
dipped in it to bloodied ruins;
SWORD, thrust in it to gory cleft

I've been reduced to sobbing cactus
with hands high up in a desert

offering prayers in vast wilderness
for I'm thirsty for the waters of your presence
to cleanse me of
throes of your absence
etched in my depth

O beauteous mothers of days to come
brutally robbed of days to come.

FISH, SHACKLED IN PELICAN'S BEAK

My homeland is a gasping fish
gored and shackled in pelican's beak
Those of us aiming to save her, cry
because we are handicapped and can't fly
to reach for the height of the water bird

Our wings have long been clipped, burnt
before the rising of our setting sun
in the dark nights of our checkered history
birthed at the place of pelican's mystery
history, crafted by claws of the water bird

In vain, we've been the gunpowder
shot to bring down the pelican's reign and power
but our weapons are bereaved of force and teeth
and now, endlessly, we only pray in need
of miracles to cause the fall of the water bird

To free my homeland, a gasping fish
gored and shackled in pelican's beak.

WAITING JOY

My homeland
I want to sing for you a song
in a voice
sweet, soft and strange
as that of the forest birds, at night

I want to go frolic
in a dance
as I see you rising
against the burden
weighting down your soul

I want to scream
for you, O my land!
in the voices of
a thousand madmen
with sources of joy, unknown

I long
to laugh
at your foes
seeking to cause
the eclipse of your sun

How my heart bleeds
for as long as you are down
but my love
on you I still hope
to cause the dawning of my heart.

Exiled

Who
is
he
that is crying helplessly over there?

Who
is
she
that sheds bitter tears and would not be consoled?

Who are they that loiter the ravaged village?
Lost and lonely children waiting for mother.
Tear-stained faces, bare buttocks,
lost in daylight,
lost to reason.

Everyone is exiled to the pain in their heart.
Night draws near; it approaches with certainty.
The sun is setting.
Fear is rising in my wrenched heart.
How can I sleep tonight, knowing that bandits lurk about?
They're armed with inhumanity; eager to squelch my
innocence.

I shall go. But, to where?
I'm exiled to this dust.

Another Inauguration

I thought the morning broke.
Faint was the sun rising, slowly, behind the plateau.
We had camped in the forest,
We had hope of rest.

Years have gone by,
many days have flown past;
with their lavish promises
of milk and honey
...and nothing.

The religious basked in deceptions.
No different from they which did not know better.
So were the led made to lose the only heart left
from many years of ghostly hopes.

Who can tell when we shall go from this forest?
Who knows the road to freedom?
Go and enquire more
while I make my bed.

We thought the promised days had come.
We saw the dawn of the rise of man.
When with great joy we leapt,
we sang our songs of victory
until my joy was rigged.

Now, I know, the cock crowed at night.

One Earth

They say there are barriers among us –
of religion, politics, and tribe.
I say there's only a weaving of follies.

Good amenities,
do not know the difference between tribes,
nor is a good school able to separate our essences.
Our languages only colour the beauty of our divergences.

Folly is not the absence of mind.
Who hasn't heard of songs, dances, and drums?
Who doesn't know the spirit, soul, and body?

They say there are barriers among us.
I ask, what do the stars, and moon, and sun teach us?
Ours is one earth -
big enough to hold us together.

On whom do the stars not sparkle?
On whom does the moon not beam her mild luminance?
On whom does the sun not shine?
Who is barricaded from the air that fills the lungs?

Humanity's scuffles are needless.
Should any make complaints?
Earth. Let her go into fits!
Let all men know, like earth, we are one.

Hanging of Hope

Two geese cackle and flap.
They run into each other's embrace.
Two turkeys serenade them.
A dog runs to them wagging in admiration.

I can't see the woman I love;
They said we could not cackle together.
They said we could not flap together.
They said turkeys could not serenade us.

I'm denied the warmth in my heart.
The glow that caressed the veins in my heart is hidden
from me.
I can't see the woman I love. Yet,
I feel her with every lub-dub of my heart.

Troops guard the gate to your house,
but my love transcends physical barriers.
You're hemmed into my heart like the nape of a sleeve
Truly, I don't deserve you any more than a coral its reef

Outside those towering fences of stone crowned with
barbs,
serrated like the sharp teeth of sharks. I'll wait.
There's a place, my love, for you and me to cackle and
flap.
If you can hear the faint voice in your heart,
look through the trellis, beyond the climbing plants.

Disentangled

Many thoughts,
light as butterflies,
flood your mind.
They flit, flit, flit
around in the sunshine
and you think yourself an eagle flapping giant wings.

The professor said, "You're a brave soul."
He was not right.
You were brave indeed,
but, you had no soul anymore.

Times and seasons with their vicissitudes
took so long. Ah, they were painful.
Set time came,
freedom came with her.

A tear. Drip. Drop. Drip.
A tear. He is gone for good,
and I, myself regained.

THE SILENT ROAD

Let me walk this path with you.
This part of quiet.
That I may savour every moment and make imprints of
The time we have left is short.
I can feel your frail hand slowly slipping out of mine
And see your feet begin to drift towards the path of
silence.

I don't want this to end.

I wish I could ask mother earth to grant me more years
with you.

I would trade all my jewels and pearls for a blistering run
with you

But I know that in these last seconds I shall cherish and
enjoy.

And when your time here is up, I will say I made the most
of it.

We made the most of it.

I wake up screaming in tears, but I know it changes
nothing.

So I will stand, smile and brace myself.

Because this is the time I need to be strong for us.

I wish heaven had a phone booth for you to stand in
every day.

Anything to hear that voice.

What would I do with this laughter?

How do I survive this harsh earth without that gentle touch
of encouragement?

But I know I can't break because it will break you.

Oh death!

What have I done to deserve such cruelty?

Why stretch out your cold hands to take that which is most
precious?

Don't you have any regard and respect for pure love?

I hurt. I cry all in silence because I know you have it
worse.

You smile even in your pain, so who am I to cry?

You have dreams cut short, prompts to be downcast

The days I have left, I choose to spend laughing with
you.

These days I have left, I choose to spend dancing with
you.

These days I have left, I'll spend loving you.

VOYAGE

Deep blue sea of dark nights
thick as heavy rains, sweat and blood coalesce
Muffled cried, strained wails.
Home sick captives in restless waves
All these made for sleeplessness and hopelessness.

The distance covered, had never crossed our minds.
We fear the unknown and shiver from the memory of the
known.

Too many discarded in seconds and referred to as waste.
There were our fathers, friends and neighbors.
Now they are lost to history.

Leaving behind people who won't be able to mourn them.
Such animalistic culture.
Those left behind to mourn even while they breathe
Deep dark eyes covered with the tears of hopelessness.
Sad songs filled with death.

No one looks up to the skies in faith.
Not one joyful sound is chimed
Bound by the strange ghost-gods we once stood in awe of.
Wondering when the switch happened.
Trashed like children who didn't do their chores.

Surrounded by a land and language we do not understand.
Yet we were alive.

Fed with hard crust, just enough to keep flesh, bone and spirit together.

Labeled like items for sale.

And yes, we were sold to those who found us worthy of such privileges.

Oh!

Can any good come out of this?

No one lives anymore.

We can all see the looks in their eyes.

They knew in their hearts that we were beneath them, as their skin shone and ours dulled.

They knew in their minds, they had done what other species couldn't do, tame their own!

BLISS

I live in my head
Where the world I want exists
In my mind, I can lay the foundations for my buildings
and mix the clay for my creatures.
I would pick up my brush and paint and bring to life a
colourful world.
All bright and giddy.
This is my pure haven or maybe heaven.

Here I would mould my animals and make them kind
and gentle pets.
So humans and animals can live without violence.
I would create people who only have love.
This world is perfect.
But it only exists in my head.
I wish I could bring it to life.

In this world, I can have my childlike joy and pure
peace.
I can live and not just exist.
I can be and become.
I can have and be had.
I can love and be loved.

I would love to take my friends to this perfect world.
But would I do a better job than the creator?
Does He see something that we don't see and understand?
Is it possible to have a perfect world?

What is a perfect world?
A world without pain and suffering?
Or a world where the pain and joy are evenly served?

Can we all live and not die?
Can we love and be loved right?
Can we all laugh and never cease?
Can this joy never end?

I long for this world
I dream of it every sleeping moment.
Even in my waking hours, I close my eyes and that is all I
can see.
Bliss!

MASK

Oh to speak and be listened to!
To speak and be heard.
But what do I say?
How can I say?
Who should I tell?
What should I say?
How can I explain that which I do not comprehend?
How do I tell you that behind the smiles, I mourn my own
demise?
How do I explain that behind the laughter, ships sink in
my tears?
How do I make you see that I fight battles that most times
I lose?
How do I show you the hate in my heart?
How do I let you see all these things without you judging
me, even though you face them too?
How do I explain that I am plagued by a disease not
common to this parts?
How do I tell you that I lie on my back and take all this
like a whore?
How do I tell you I live in a shell
Embryoed in pain and guilt?
How do I tell you that I live in a castle governed by
indecision?
How do I tell you that the flavour of gluttony dances on
my tongue?
How do I tell you that I unintentionally feed the dark wolf
every day?

How do I explain to you that I feel my suite is in a box 6ft deep?

How do I explain to you how much I crave the solace in solitude and I am repelled by the company of my kind?

Oh!

How do I tell you that, that which leads mortals into great comfort, shatters every bone in me?

How do I explain that I wasn't born into a family?

How do I make you realise that I am not alone but I am lonely?

How do I show you the extent of my weakness behind this veil of bravado?

How do I make you see that I need help?

How much louder should I scream so I can be heard?

How much longer can I keep grasping for air even as I keep sinking in this ocean?

How? How? How?

What does the sage say when the mysteries of the world sit by his burdened feet.

And the answers of the universe evade him?

And he sits staring into oblivion, seeking answers in the stars.

PANDEMIC

The outbreak came suddenly

It was like a dream for us:

The ones who knew nothing.

Seeing the chronically contagious smiles

That marred their proud faces

Their hands clutching tightly together, holding proudly to each other.

To mark their territory.

Outfits that mirrored the other,

To signify their belonging

We did not wholly understand,

On the sidelines we walked;

Though we moved in large numbers;

We felt utterly alone

Were we not meant to be paired?

Why did the pieces that came our way,

A triangle, a square, a cone shaped affection,

Not fit into the shapes of our heart?

Even those, young in age, younger in exercise seem to find their perfect pieces.

Then again, why not us?

It was a pandemic, beyond the controls of our mortal hands,

A master puppeteer that made us willing puppets.

These symptoms that surfaced gave rise to the falsest of hopes.

And like fog, they quickly disappeared.

Leaving us without an inkling of a cure

Oh, c'mon, why do we now look like the unhealthy ones
even though we are the only ones left

Who have somehow effortlessly escaped the claws of this
pandemic?

Shielded by our "uniqueness" we remained healthy.

Still dazzled by the unannounced arrival and rapid spread
of this disease.

So why do the unhealthy seek our contamination like it is
a gift?

Why the stares when we walk into the building without a
special fit?

Why can't we go back to the years when no one knew the
difference in human anatomy?

Why can't we return to when there was no pressure from
the pandemic?

SHEPHERD AND LEOPARDS

With their stomachs of an ant
And their appetite of an elephant
Our shepherds
Are leopards.

With their transparency of a lake
And their sleekness of a snake
Our umpires
Are vampires.

With their lust for power
And their cravings for more hour
Our chiefs
Are thieves.

STATE OF THE NATION

A bleeding nation
Through many surgical operations:
Lafia Dole
Cat Race
Crocodile Tears
Python Dance
Sharan Daji
Still Water

Tell me who will survive
Such unhygienic habit of corruption?

A dying nation
Through many unnatural disasters:
Public fund embezzlement
Power addiction
Tribalism
Unemployment
Poverty
Hunger

Tell me who will survive
Such magnitude of heartquake.

TIME

I looked at time;
Second born into minute
Minute crawls into hour
Hour toddles into day
Day walks into week
Week limps into month
Month wobbles into year.

I looked at man
All in rush;
Running and flying behind time.

SERVICE OF THE DEAD

I went to the graveyard
To ask if my brother has risen
And the undertaker asked
'Is there a departed who ever wished to return?'
In all my years of the service of the dead I have never seen
nor heard of one.
Bidding farewell to sojourners,
You mortals overwhelm yourselves in tears that you
don't see the smiles on their faces.
You should know
Through watery eyes images seem broken.'

GRAVITY

The sun rises at dawn
Only by sunset to be drowned

Eagles soar high and round
Still come to perch on the ground

The moon struggles to rise in full bloom
Only at noon to disappear in gloom

If nature and all with cavity
Are but subject to gravity

Then why the trampling getting to the top
When all that goes up don't stay up?

The Raving Brood

The hawk swoops on the brood
Not sowing
Not gathering
It soars high into the belly of the sky
Ensnared in her haven
In readiness for a feast

In the aftermath
Mother hen and brood
Whirl in the wind
In rankled anger
Fretting and complaining
And disturbing the peace

The hawk revels in her feast
While mother hen and chicks
Swing between the asylum and the penitentiary
And from her sanctuary
The hawk looks down in derisive laughter

The hawk in maturity and quietude
Receives medals and accolades
While the brood rants and raves
The hawk is the toast of society
An exemplar of conformity
While the brood is the scum, deviant and pain of society

The hawk mouths peace
While the brood cries justice.

From 1st October, 2022

The knife of division cuts deeper
Tales of selective justice
As those who ask to be left alone
Are hounded and brutalized
Splashed with the tar of terrorism
While those who cannibalize our farms and towns
Kidnap and rape, roam free
As we are herded into caves and camps

We quench our thirsts from ponds and brooks
Together with our four- legged companions
We are felled by forgotten maladies
As nature's free liquid
Is an oasis in a desert of despair

They would rather rehabilitate
Our four-legged citizens and our predators
Than restore the abode of our ancestors
And remove us from caves and camps

We dine with state-protected terrorists
As we cannot tell human hand from the monkey's

In the guise of menial workers, artisans
We are surrounded
As they await the first shot
Having sworn that our land is their heritage.

Gown and Hood in Flight

Teeming
They leave our dear shores
Stethoscopes, scalpels and all
To drink from the oil of the orient

Painfully
They feather the nests of other lands
They rummage the West for milk and honey
Our leaders cry, "Stay! Stay and salvage the nation!"

Resignedly
And fired by a consuming pity
The selfless stay
For this they get peanuts and skimped meals
The patriots are hounded
The hoodlums are honoured
The nation is infested with viruses

Usually
That which is ours
We scorn, spurn and dump
Picked up by a wandering stranger
Spun in novel and cosmetic beauty
Dumped on our shores for a fortune
With bleeding noses we pay
The vagrant smiles to the vault
While we peak and pine.

I Told Them

I told them he was an ethnic champion
But they laughed and laughed
I told them he was a regional champion
They laughed and laughed
I told them he was a fundamentalist
They laughed and laughed
I told them he was nepotistic
They laughed and laughed
I told them he was clannish
They laughed and laughed
I told them he lacked capacity
Yes, they laughed and laughed

And then, I told them
The robe was not his
They convulsed and went wild
With peals and tears of laughter

But now, in the tempest
We can see the fowl's rump
Now that we have crossed the Ethiope
They come to me for divination
But the last ashes have been blown away
The cowries stolen
The kola nut eaten up by worms
I can't even see the totems of divination
Let's await the divination of the divine oracles.

She Spat on Me

She spat on me
Rooted to the ground
Like the helpless tree
That heard of its death
I was mute

I remembered the poverty of Africa
The hungry nights
The endless days
When the stomach rumbled and rumbled
And I couldn't lift a finger

She shot a second one
Like a rocket
Yes, I was mute
I swallowed anger
Like unwashed bitter leaf
And witnessed the sweetness of bile

Even the trees whisper
But I couldn't give a whimper

I dallied between the freedom of Africa
And the comfort of Europe
A willing slave
I was still and mute

I was still and mute
A willing Slave

"Accept him as he is
So sang the dove."
Home, sweet home.

A HERO IS BORN

The night is still
The sky is dark
The place is calm
Hush!

I looked up to the horizon
For the sign of rain
But alas!
Everywhere was still.

Ouch!
Amidst the calmness
The groaning of a woman
Could be heard in the dark
PU-U-SH!
Came the voice of the doula.

Wow!
She brought forth a son
Penetrating through the stillness
A hero is born
In the land of Bethlehem
A saviour is born.

Oh Christmas!
A day to remember
A day to be celebrated
For a hero
And a saviour
Was born
On Christmas.

Linda Dusu Yamtal

DEATH!

You are
So cruel,
So brutal,
So cold,
So callous,
Yet inevitable.

The children fear you
The young fear you
The adults fear you
Even the aged fear you
'cos you spare no one.

I wonder
Why are you here?
What's the purpose
Of your existence?
Why were you ever created
In the first place?

If I had wings
I would fly so high
Where you would never reach me
If I had strength
I would build a barricade
Around my loved ones
If I had wealth
I would buy you off.

But you're a thief
So bold and determined
Just when we are at ease
You reach out your cold hands
To snatch that one person
That is so dearly loved

QUEEN OF MY HEART

Behold her
Elegance of beauty
Right in front of me.

Flames of passion
Burns within me
As I beheld her.

How I wish
I could hold her in my arms
Give her a soft kiss
Whisper into her ears.

Oh!
She seems far away
A million miles away
In a distant land
Away from this pregnant world.

Seated so still before me
Oh! How I wish
I could hold her in my arms
And whisper into her ears
About my hidden love.

LITTLE WANDERER

Hush!
Waking up,
Looking around
Searching...
Is it ever found?

Turning around
Alas!
It is visible
From a distance...
Is it ever touched?

Making up
Strong decision
Courageously
Um!
That's a good step!!

Aha!
It is now visible
Reachable
And touchable
Unbelievable!!

Hush!
My little wanderer!!
Tell me
How much does it cost
To buy a heart?

IN THE LION'S DEN

The noisome howling
The persistent barking
The crashing sounds
And hush came the silence!
Could this be real?

Idanbi
gbe gbi. laW
lounsi gidiyoo
...
Yamtal 1980-1981

Dragged out of my comfort
Forced to drink from the gutters
Persevered the endurance trek
In the calmness of the night
I was surrounded by terror.

lounsi uniofif
...
Yamtal 1980-1981

Three nights in the lion's den
Threatened with guns and machetes
Faced and surrounded by my captors
So so traumatizing.

...
...
...
Yamtal 1980-1981

I looked to the horizon
My life was hopeless
The nights ever unending
Such a nightmare.

...
...
Yamtal 1980-1981

Free at last!
Imprisoned in the mind
For the scenes of the nightmare
Forever haunting.

...
...
...
Yamtal 1980-1981

I returned anew
A lioness deeply wounded
Crushed but still standing
To take over her pride!

...
...
...
Yamtal 1980-1981

Hope Amidst the Ruins

Independence!
A meaning lost in the haze of time.

The years have etched their toll on our souls,
Decades of corruption and decay,
as we spurned the very freedom
our forefathers bravely fought for.

Devoid of vision and patriotic fire,
we succumbed to falsehood and apathy,
Becoming a nation in steady decline
in power, wealth, and fading fame.

Led by successions of spineless technocrats,
Blind to the impending doom,
their gazes fixed only on the bulge of their bellies
until at last, we became a nation
Ensnared in dependency's grip.

The bright skies swallowed the smoke
Of burning homes and human flesh
The death-trap roads tasted happily
The blood of their victims
Education, once a birthright,
Now a privilege of the chosen few.

Far from this menace called a country

I yearned to escape its clutches,
to erase its identity
from the maps etched upon my heart.

Yet, within me stirs a newfound hope,
a glimpse of a nation reborn,
emerging from the quagmire of despair,
The Nigeria of a patriot's dream.

Humanity

Discontented and disquieted,
Enraged hearts and souls,
Cowering with only the slightest sense
of pride and courage
Venting voices potent against the ills of the day.
Do you see us? Yes!
Our faces are not hidden,
neither are our hearts
for you must see in us
a reflection of the world you have created
Poor souls left with nothing
but the will to fight
A will ebbing away.

See the cannon fires and the dark clouds
that tell of the present doom
and the mourning of lives soon to die
The clouds will shed their tears
In sadness over courageous souls
Who were willing to have a face-off with evil

Where is your candor?
And the humaneness you once showed?
Yet, the gory ravages of war
The stench of dead loved ones
Do not thrill your hearts to pity

We struggle through the pain

For we know the battle will one day be won
In the hearts of future generations
And a nation shall emerge
Whose unity and stability
Was won by our blood and bones!

Enjugu Esla Jephthah

My Vote

My vote was my soul, my life, my all
A ticket to the joy I hoped to see
the peace I longed for in my nation
and the security of its unborn citizens.

My vote was the signature of my patriotism
and the determination to challenge the status quo
Dissatisfaction with the growing dependence
amidst the acclaimed independence we possess.

My vote was an exercise of my right
The right to live freely, happily, and joyfully
In unity with other comrades of patriotism
And sing out our happy days on earth

My vote was a drop in the ocean,
Weak and singular, but a powerful cellular block
That would make up for the loudest voice
Of a harmonious Nigerian melody

Let me count my votes, let my vote count,
For that vote shall make me confident
When I stand before my present and my future.
Let me vote when the time comes
to help make Nigeria great again.

The Scars of Purpose

The ugly bark along my stem,
 Said the oak to the thistle and the bramble,
 Come from years of standing in the tempest,
 And from bearing the heat of the scorching sun,
 Feel no pity for me!
 For they tell of years of purpose,
 and speak of my journey here.
 And when you see me no more in the forest,
 You shall find me in the halls of the great,
 As the tables and the pillars
 As the beds and the perfect reclining chairs
 And more than you could ever know and see
 And I shall be remembered,
 As one of the stars which shone brightly
 In the dead of those long nights.

When You Walk to Your Death

When you walk to your death
 You never know what you're stepping into
 That road has been trodden
 By the great and the small alike
 And the paths that lead to it
 Are both pleasant and painful.

When you walk to your death
 All the elements unite
 In preparing the pathway
 And leading you on
 Till you suddenly or gradually
 Find yourself in that dark realm.

When you walk to your death
 You never know how soon it will be
 The next second might be the last
 Or death waits for many more years
 Its power lies in your uncertainty about it
 And in the certainty of its choice of men.

When you walk to your death
 you never really know
 whether the happy moments
 or the sad, agonizing moments
 will be the last of your days here
 it comes calling, in ways you least expect.

Dele Arogundade

INSATIABLE

Yawning grave
Barren womb
Thirsty soil
Wild fire

The Insatiable quartet.

BOOS AND GROVES

Crystal clear yet glassy
Flowing rhythmically
Singing melodious tunes
Massaging and caressing
Rocks and boulders
In a congenial atmosphere

Green vegetation and blue sky
Bamboos and mangroves
Booing and grooving

Arinta* Waterfalls
Nature's gift to mankind.

**Arinta – is a waterfall located in Ikogosi Ekiti, Ekiti State, South West, Nigeria.*

Carthage

Dele Arogundade

Carthage

CARTHAGE

Carthage

Carthage

The ancient city

Founded by Phoenicians

Strong and Virile

Birthplace of Hannibal

Menace of primordial empires

Carthage

Beautiful princess of the Mediterranean

Courted by the Greeks

Dated by the French

Befriended by the Ottomans

Sadly

Violated by the Vandals

Desecrated by the Romans

Carthage

Crucible of civilizations

Fragment of history

Domain of architectural treasures

Delicately preserved

Ancient yet fashionable

Carthage

Home of exquisite marble

Dripping with olive oil

Pure and golden

Warm yet soothing

Fingers of Fatma

Beckoning on visitors

To come experience

Serenity and tranquility

Tunisia; Breathtaking...

**Carthage -- means new city. It is the ancient name of present day Tunisia.*

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Serenity and tranquility

Tunisia; Breathtaking...

Pitakwa

Domain of jolly good fellas

**Pitakwa – Another name for the city of Port Harcourt,
capital of Rivers State, Nigeria.*

Dele Arogundade

SINGING SAND

Array of magnificent structures
Myriad of Towering Forts
Bedecked in coloured lights
Kissing the clouds
Unique blend of arts and architecture
Intercourse of traditional and modern
Luminous blue waters
Beautiful Sky
like a huge canvas
painted in hue
A Congenial atmosphere
At the Corniche

Ripples of the sea
Caressing the feet of skyscrapers
Dhow boats
Drifting peacefully
Yearning to be cruised

Dazzling array of middle eastern merchandise
Pot pourri of Spices
Oud and jewelries
Clothing and falcons
At Souq Waqif

Homestead of desert roses
Abode of singing sand dunes
Stretching tens of kilometres
Pampering the feet of Tourists

Qatar; Bliss.

RIVULETS

Rivulets of words
Oozing effortlessly
From the cistern
The cistern of my pen
Quenching thirsts
Refreshing souls
Informing and educating
The literarily minded

RAVENOUS RUBY

Ruby Ruby
Ravenous Ruby
Vicious yet vigilant
Devourer extraordinaire
Foodie with a swag
Food mountain leveler

Pacing around
like a roaring lion
Looking for a prey
Prey to pounce upon

Bone crusher
Licking and lapping
Ruby and food
Inseparable twins.

**Ruby is the name of my late pet Dog.*

Leash Your Soul

Hustle and bustle
Activities here and there
Deadlines and set targets
Causes the mind
To drift far and wide
Dissipated and drained
Like spilt milk

Apply the reins
Like a seatbelt
Harness the mind
Calm down; Be still

Take a break
Leash the soul
Rest the body

Emerge!
Refreshed
Re-energised
Re-fired
Re-invigorated
Repossess your soul
Discover and see
Like a sailor at sea
New horizons; new insights
Novel innovations
Enablers of the next level
Catalyst of global exploits.

THE STONES, THEIR ADMIRATION

No one cares how long it took. No one bothered if I survived.

All I see is anger and desperation. My yield is all they want.

For years I toiled to succeed. Not a check, not a tap, not a nod.

I watched as mornings turned to nights. The rains gave way for the sun.

Through the travails of the days. Through the toils of the loins.

Through the hardness of the earth. I resolved to find solace in my success.

The rains gave nutrients to my roots. The sun gave energy to my head.

The hardness gave support to my truck. The wind gave freshness to my breath.

They walked passed without a word. Not an encouragement from them.

They noticed me not even though some found solace for their bowels under my embrace.

When my hope began to sprout and they noticed I was hopeful they began to notice me, still without compliments.

They passed by with so much disdain wondering why I haven't yet fruited to satisfy their lustful appetite.

Soon I was glad that my toils have yielded.
Soon I was done with the trials and travails.
Soon I have prevailed against all the tales. Soon I was
fully ripe enough to boast.
Little by little their attentions drew to me and they
suddenly beheld me without standing ovations.

I enjoyed the watch...I loved the points...
Suddenly it changed then they added the smiles and the
wows,
What a time to shine. What a moment to sigh. What a
glow to unleash.
What a brightness to exude.
While yet preparing to accept their admirations to make
up for their long wicked abandonment, suddenly they
visited me with the greatest onslaught.

Oh, what again?
This can't be! Oh dear...not yet again!!!
Little did I know that they had hidden plans for my
assassination. Now they leach at it and I the pains to bear
What was to me my desire in the yesterdays became a
sublime dead-end for the gallows!

Stones and hurts, shots and wounds.

Wounded all over with cheers for more from their little
and mischievous miscreants.
Daily my fruits got wasted even if for a lone ripe one.
The higher I fruited and ripened, the more they hailed the
stones

I am wounded and hurting but they care not to treat. I am
bleeding and dizzy
but they chaptered not.

"More stones, more stones," called out the monsters.
"Have some, have more,"
their little miscreants retorted.
Chants of victory echoed when I lose my ward. What
excites them is the same
that hurts me.
"You were closer, shoot some more, throw some more" ...
"Check this side
and stone harder," these were all their chants
I cannot fathom this heartless specie. What a wicked
generation.

My hurt their pain? Their joy my groan? How did they
ever become human?
Can't there be any tutors?
In my pains I watched their faces. They seem more excited
by the throw of every stone.
I was patiently groaning to unveil the mystery. I must
apprehend the theoretical
philosophy of this pain.

When I was tender and naive they prayed I survive and
nursed it in their hearts. They
hoped I grow and yield and hoped they will benefit from
it too.
When I began to fruit they hoped it came sooner than later
and their patience
could not be patiently patient.

When I fruited and ripened now I have provided benefits they long awaited though without a pat on my back.

They cannot reap of my fruits safe they cut it or pluck it off and the higher and careful I was in ripening, the more they improvised how to reach out and reap me well.

The more the stone, the more the sign that I was well ripened for the most serious of them.

The more difficult it was for them to reach me, the more the stones were called to duty.

If they had walked past, it would have signaled that I failed to bear attractively but since I did they cannot but express it by the stones and the climbs.

Their stones my pains, their stones, their expressions, their expression of admiration expressed in stones and throws.

They cherished my beauty and fruits that was the secret of the throws and the stones. This is the season of patient reflection.

The stones can hurt and the throws deliberate. The message does not hurt and the admiration is good season.

Be not angry of the silence that meets you. Do not be angry with the passing without a Hi.

Give up not in your toils, quit ye not amidst the travails. Only ripe fruiting get cherished and sought after and the stones, learn it today...it is ovation and applause.

Panmak Mark Lere

SIMPLE TO TRUST

Many good things come around, many decisions I needed to make,

Many steps to be taken

How then can I quickly conclude?

My parents never loved me - so I thought to myself

How can they watch me cry most times?

I saw them watch me cry

But they never did as I wanted!

The coldness it seemed was surety they never cared,

The firmness though I got hurt at times was assurance they never cared.

May be beyond my tears

Lies the secret to my maturity

May be because of the pain my gain will forever flow.

What will it then be to me?

A cry for a sweet met with a sour for the want

Could this ever have been for good?

Much of the wanting, some of the longing;

All of the asking never met a constant giving.

I had wished and wanted many things amongst which were to toy with knives and fire,

To play around the transformers and highways

How I loved they let me have my way.

Never to school...but to play

Never to bathe...but to play!

Never to work...but to play!

Never to rest...but to play!

Work was wicked, school was hard labour:

Help was frustration, bath was most inconveniencing.

Now I know better: they rescued me from myself

I am delivered of myself

My self-destruct and doom.

They gave me as they thought best, they cared as they reasoned wise,

They disciplined as they saw needful, they encouraged just when needed.

How can I say I know better?

How can I suddenly know better than they who nurtured me?

Even while I was unknown to myself!

Through the nursing

Through the cradle

Through the infancy

Through the childhood

They cared and kept me

I couldn't contribute

They nurtured and trained me I couldn't contribute.

My best bet was trust all they did: to bathe...to eat...to rest...and all, to hospital...

to school...to church

I saw they knew all I needed for good.

Since they did while I knew not, they meant well while couldn't supervise them,

They cautioned while I was raw and careless, can't I trust them much more now to aid?

God did for you when you knew not, God cared when you were helpless,

He kept watch while you slept safely.

Can't you trust Him now when you have a choice?

Or has He suddenly become mean not to care as before?

Not by giving all you long will He prove love for you

But by doing as He knows is best!

Soon you will see He cared best, rescuing you from self-destruct, keeping you

From more regrets, helping you to come to know as now.

He did when you couldn't

He kept you when you were delicate, He planned for you when you were completely ignorant,

He is still able, willing and capable... Just a little trust!

AND THE ROSE DIES WITHIN

*A special dedication to all those who make their pains
and hurts joy and beauty for us, whose lives give reasons
for ours to live while they sneak out on us in death. You
cannot make alive and you In turn not live yourself. Give
us yours to love and take ours too and live*

Beautiful from the outside graceful all around,
What is on the inside no one can explain

Gorgeous through the travails and nothing less displayed
Wishful be the others desperate to attain

What could be the secret to keep such glowing spree
A recipe achieved we all covet the delight

Praises all around and others can't deny
With this all around you, you cannot but gain life

No one drains all out and a lot more can yet flow.
This stream is a sure source of fountain clear and true

Have you ever wondered why all seem so well
How can one be this graceful with no one giving in return

Expenses and no incomes seem to be the game.
How long be this sustained, this graceful monument keep

Call to me to wonder, why this sure hurts so much
To see a life so splendid, yet wasting unannounced

Call me to discern from the distance all the way
I am always bothered, the mystery deep beneath

The silence steps at night and the teary eye reclines
The deep keeps hurts and all we get to see is smile

Why be indeed troubled only to give peace
Peace around is priceless yet you know not one

Be the product you make and let us share this too
Take from us and make life priceless deep within

This is no mean feat for us to make you live
Don't deprive the joy we barely can achieve

To know we give you life as much as you do us
Will keep us all alive the rose to keep with us

Don't sneak out on us when we seldom not fathom
That the rose we also cherish is fizzling slowly out

Out with all the farce and in with us to live
We can't hoard it away what needs to keep you hale

Take this from me too as much as you are here
This beauty is too graceful to let my sight lose out

To all who give and take not, harken to my call
We need the rose around us but healthy and alive

Don't give us life and die, but let us share it all,

What is good for the goose, the gander needs it too

Show me forth the pains and let me cure the hurts
You too be alive and let me be a rose

The rose that gives should take too the rose we all should
be

A world of roses we shall safely build for all

Keep not all those hurts and let the rose not die
Safely from within the healing balm will suit

Heed to me this day and our roses shall yet live
Never you let go 'cos the rose shall die within

This a call to all and not the truth withheld,
Never lie to us for the roses can die too

Give and take from us too, we've got enough to share,
Take this from us too and this rose never die

What you give to us is what you need yourself.
But since you give us yours you need ours too to live

What we share is splendid and we need it all the way,
What you give excites us and you need it too yourself.

We cannot be selfish to take and never give,
But give us also the space we gave you deep within.

We took yours and we lived, you need to take from us.
You need it to be here so we all are roses too

Go all out and search from the corners far and near
Many roses out there are sneaking out on us

Check and learn the heartbeats when theirs get to faint
We must all be guilty when our roses die within

Life for life is lovely, rose for rose excites
Safely now with me and this rose shall never die!

A Drop of Mercy

My heart levitates in excitement whenever I listen to the Nigeria national anthem adopted in the late 1970s; my favourite verse being:

‘To serve our fatherland, with love and strength and faith, the labour of our heroes past, shall never be in vain, to serve with heart and might, one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity’.

Whenever we sang the anthem on the assembly in Masawa Primary School, with my eyes closed, my mind would open like a book and the verses would pour out of my soul in ecstasy. My eyes would water as I stood erect without moving any part of my body: not even an eyelash until the anthem would be over. One morning, I kowtowed and kissed the earth after the anthem to the cynosure of all eyes. The headmistress, teachers and pupils roared with laughter. I smiled sheepishly, looking away far from the curious eyes, and like one that had just won a gold medal, I galloped to the rhythm of the drum in the air as I marched to my class. From that day, I earned the name “Abdullahi the gallant soldier”.

But that was years ago. The life of a man appears long, but in reality, it is brief. I made destiny played out itself by joining the Nigeria Armed Forces in 2001 after obtaining a National Diploma in Engineering from Masawa Polytechnic. Masawa is where I was born and bred into a lanky young man with a baldhead sitting on my ostrich neck. The dream of joining the force became a nightmare to my parents.

B. Prose Fiction

My father was an avid reader. I grew up to so many Masawa people calling him a walking newspaper. I got to know the meaning of the name in my secondary school. I could not summon the courage to ask him why he was being addressed by that name because he was a disciplinarian. I never dared look him straight in the eye, especially whenever he was angry with me. At such times, his eyes would turn red like someone who had lost sleep for a full month sending an uncontrollable shiver down my spine. One seldom saw him without a newspaper in his hand. He had an avalanche of information from around the world at his fingertips. Many a time, his friends would come around to have first-hand information from him about current global issues, especially politics.

He grimaced when I told him that I wanted to join the Nigerian Army with the motivation to defend our nation and fight corruption, which had become the bane of our progress and development as a nation. I told him I would wipe out banditry and stem the tide of the insurgency and high-rate genocide in Damaturu, Plateau, Borno, Rivers and other states which were ravaged by some blood-sucking enemies of the country. Although surprised at my knowledge about the goings-on in the country, my father was impressed that I was toeing his path and matching up to him in knowledge. He was proud I was becoming his true son who would seek information on the media rather than abuse their existence. I noticed he wanted to hear more, so I spoke further to satisfy his ego.

‘Hundreds of thousands of innocent Nigerians are being killed and buried in shallow graves daily as a result of religious conflicts, ethnic bigotry and chauvinism. The

conflict in these states has claimed more lives than common diseases. It has led to irreparable socio-political and economic instabilities.’ I sighed, signalling a break

My father who had been waiting patiently for me to finish speaking, hissed, looking livid and irritated by my argument and then said, ‘*Walahi* Abdullahi, you’re speaking nonsense. A bird that flies from the ground on an anthill doesn’t know that it is still on the ground,’ I began.

Like the eyes would bow to sunray, I lowered my countenance as our eyes met. Now, it was only his voice that was resounding in my ears. I could not look at his eyes.

‘Have you gone mad? Many have been lost to the force. Don’t you know? The country is not worth your blood. Where are the soldiers, the ones that risk their lives fighting for the country? They have been abandoned in many hospitals for friends and families to care for the ones on the hospital beds. The ones whose families couldn’t cater for died there. Are you not aware that Mohammed was dismissed after being irredeemably injured in the war front? Mustapha who retired ten years ago resorted to begging when he could no longer cater for his family. It is after all these things you know that you still want to stick your neck in what will destroy you? *Kai*, Abdullahi, think! *Ka ji ko?*’

He looked at me for a while, held my left hand and lifted me as he also rose. He continued.

‘The leaders of this country know what to do to make the country a better place. Imagine the peasant being paid to soldiers. Some time ago, they threatened to go on strike for non-payment of their salaries. The count

would have been in a great mess if they had embarked on the strike. Many of our leaders would have boarded the next available flight not even minding the cost of their journey, leaving you and me behind to suffer the trouble which they have hatched on the ground. Is that the country you want to defend? The country that cannot provide good weapons for its soldiers to combat external and internal forces? Money budgeted for ammunition is being looted by the same people who needed the protection most. What do you want to tell me that I have not seen, my son?

He paused a little and continued, 'We are suffering from leadership failure in this our nascent democracy. So you need to stay away from them. There are better jobs out there awaiting you.'

As if that wasn't enough lecture, my mother's voice trailed his. '*Kai! Walahi* whoever sowed the dream in you must be our enemy. Use your tongue to count your teeth. Abdullahi, you need not learn in hard ways. I don't think we'll ever feel safe and secure at our old age. Defending the nation is good but not at the expense of your life when and where it won't be valued. You need to have a rethink about your dreams before you finish your secondary school education. Remember you're our only son and so much responsibility rests on you in our old age and when we will be no more. Going to the army is being lost and denying us the respect of old age and at death.' My mother sobbed and sobbed uncontrollably. I felt tormented for tormenting my parents with such an ambition that put so much pressure on them.

This reflection notwithstanding, the majority of the times I yawned the feeling off because I would have been extremely tired after their voluminous advice. At

such times, I would feel a thingy in me that was giving me the I-can-do-it kind of assurance not to relinquish my happiness of joining the force to please my parents.

I got married to Aisha while I was in the army. We were expecting our first child when I unexpectedly received a letter from Abuja that I had been transferred to Borno State for a peacekeeping mission. My heart felt as though it would leap from my chest after reading the content of the letter. Borno was famous for tales of horror. The forests of the state harboured the belligerent and most dreaded terrorist group. Those who have returned alive from forests in Borno always told of the fierce madness of the jungle. There were stories of how bandits stormed some communities in Zamfara State, killing men, setting their houses on fire and seizing infants from their screaming mothers and throwing them into burning fire. The fear of the unknown gripped and overwhelmed me at the thought of it all. I then diverted my mind to thinking about my wife and my unborn child. I remembered Aisha's vehement rejection of my marriage proposal when I told her I was a force man. She told me that she did not only dread the high risks of my profession but that so many of our men always have so many wives.

'You have signed your own death warrant long ago, Abdullahi,' she disclosed to my dismay. I wondered whether she knew what she was talking about or just peddling unverified information in the public place.

'You don't even own your life again. Neither do I nor your parents. Anything can happen to you at any time, and I don't want to be a widow at the early stage of my life. I love you but I'm scared.'

'Aisha, you're being so pessimistic. *Haba!* Nothing will happen to me, okay?' I placated her, wiping her teary eyes with my handkerchief. After a while, she beamed an infectious smile; I smiled back at her.

'I love you, Abdullahi,' she said softly as she ran to my embrace.

'I love you too, Aisha.' I felt some warmth as our frames fused in cuddling.

Eventually, she agreed to marry me that day and my joy knew no bound.

I was dizzy. I didn't sleep well that night. But by the morning, I was on my way to Borno State with officers from my area. Yusuf, a senior officer returning to his duty post in Borno, and I got talking on the bus. We occupied the front seats. We were in our uniforms. Drivers loved it to scale police harassment and other unnecessary delays on the highway. As the bus moved past landmarks, monuments, forests, mountains, valleys, cities and towns, cars and buildings, our conversations went deeper dwelling on vast subjects. Yusuf was not only a brilliant soldier after all but an intelligent one also, knowledgeable in all the subjects of discourse. He was dark in complexion and should be in his late thirties and early forties.

'Which state are you from, Abdullahi?' We were alighting from the bus at the terminal in the barracks from where we trekked to our lodges when he asked me the question. I never gave it a thought that we had not shared that information since we had been talking.

'Masawa division.' I slurred, yawning. He admitted I was tired. He tossed out brief smiles and said, 'Let me show you your lodge. You need to rest now.'

'Ok, that will be nice,' I replied as we headed into a dormitory-like building shielded away by a semi-thick plantation. We walked passed the battalion, some lying in bed and some engaging in chitchat. He showed me a bed that had my name inscribed on it. I went there and laid on it; fatigued. He went to meet one of them who leaned himself against the wall smoking a cigarette. He was fair in complexion with an elaborate scorpion calligraphed just below his neck. The artist that did it must be a genius, I thought. While they conversed in a hushed tone, he motioned to me to join them. But I was too tired. He giggled. Yusuf might have told him to allow me rest. I fell asleep after a while.

I was rejuvenated when I woke up the next morning to say the *Fajr* prayer. The pain in my body had gone. I savoured the bright lights of the sun that shone through the windows into where I laid, making the house brilliant. I stood up and hurried to the bathroom. I looked closely at the bathroom door to see the inscription in bold letters: CLEAN UP YOUR MESS. YOUR MOTHER DOES NOT WORK HERE. I bolted after a quick shower. Yusuf and two of his friends were already waiting for me in the dorm. They were neatly dressed in their uniform and smelled nice.

'*Walahi*, you need to hurry up, we're out of time. We're in the same group. Meet Usman and Hassan. We're ten in a group assigned to Asu community.' Yusuf said. 'Inakwana, nice to meet you guys. *Yaya kake?*' I asked in handshakes.

'You're welcome, *Lafia Kalau.*' They replied beaming with smiles.

Usman was chocolate in colour and the tallest among us. His hat was slouched at his back.

‘So let’s meet you,’ Hassan said, expecting a reply.

‘I’m Abdullahi, aka the gallant soldier.’ I replied, then smirked. The house roared with laughter when I introduced myself to them. Usman quickly interrupted my thought, ‘Don’t look down on that pot guy. He moves faster than hare when the need arises.’

We burst into a guffaw as he teased Hassan; pointing to his belly. I could feel the hot air his nose was blowing on my face as he held out his hand to shake me with smiles ‘*Yowa, sannu*. Don’t mind him, he is a naughty boy. *Walahi*, a noble task is ahead of us we need not laugh over it. If you’re not aware, let me educate you briefly before we leave. The community is known all over the states as the abode of terror, abductors, kidnappers, bandits, assassin, and human traffickers. The forest of Asu is a haven for the perpetrators of these heinous and nefarious activities. With the information, I consulted native doctors to prepare charms for the *banshee* to fester their evil. My friend stressed that politicians and the community leaders use some of these idle minds to fight their opponents that want to square their paths in any given competition. He said that some of these boys and girls are cultists and street fighters that make the community unsafe. In fact, these vices have gone viral in social media. To curtail these vices, our concerted efforts are required.’

I was gripped by fear and silence as he spoke authoritatively. My legs began to wobble; it was as if they were not part of my body anymore. On the other side where Yusuf was seated, Usman’s eyes grew puffy as he

turned to look at me, towering on Yusuf’s shoulder while Hassan had been speaking. Yusuf, who had been staring at him, sucked his teeth with annoyance and said, ‘Crime and guiles of the community should not be subject here. We need to focus on facts rather than the fluff of bush radio stations and blogs which unfortunately misguide and misinform. We need to watch out for them. *Ka ji ko?*’ His wisdom disseminated life to my entire body. Indeed, my apprehension was swept away as in a vuvuzela. His words did not break bones but my heart. I thought aloud. ‘The government has placed curfew in the community.’ Hassan declared.

‘Yes, of course, that is why we are posted here. The assailants have sophisticated weapons and we only have IDP ones to combat them. I’m angry with this country. The money budgeted for ammunitions is in the bank accounts of our so-called leaders. They buy big houses abroad and in Nigeria. Instead of establishing companies in Nigeria to provide job opportunities for the teeming population and improve our economy, they are busy building the economies of other countries. Bad leadership, that’s all I see. Our leaders sleep with their wives and children in cosy beds, leaving the jungle, creeks, slums, desert unimproved. The labour of our fallen heroes is now evanescent and in vain. Their children, wives, and families are living daily in despair and depression over the death of their loved ones that have served the country meritoriously. *Wallahi*, it is hyper rubbish!’ I whined.

By this time, our driver who was honking repeatedly outside stopped abruptly as he saw us through the rearview mirror running out of our room with our

AK47 rifles. Then we began the journey with an old ballad as the vehicle sped along the farmac road to Asu Local Government.

Serving our fatherland and defending its cause is our utmost priority

Allah is to help our nation in this unjust cause.

Cure the hurtful traits that lurk within us.

Cure our ethnic and religious bigotry,

We're one nation bound in freedom, peace and unity in this nascent democracy...

We drove into the community to meet the irony of our song. Several houses were deserted and some burnt down. The people of the community ran to us when they saw us alighting from the vehicle. Frustration, anger, bitterness and loneliness were stamped on their faces. It was a real theatre of tears. An old man of about seventy-five years, looking scrawny with rough beards that covered the outline of his face, wept profusely over the gruesome killing of his wife and his four children; a boy and three girls. As I consoled him, my mind flashed back to my father. I was almost moved to tears.

'They kill many of us here. They invade the community every now and then killing our people. We're helpless, the government is doing nothing to rescue us. That house burning there, I laboured to build it. It was burnt down last night. And I don't have where to go now,' another aged woman lamented.

'Can't we make the country peaceful for ourselves? The government people were here last week to

pay a visit to us. They promised to end the killings and bring the perpetrators to book. They also assured us to provide a place for the IDPs. The killers only came back last night to sweep on us, killing many,' another woman whined.

'We see them only during election season when our votes are needed. But after voting them into power, they abandon our community for the killers to take over. Whenever they come here, we hear grammar. It is undemocratic. It is a primitive act and preposterous. We dey die every day. We don tire, we need urgent attention. *Wallahi*, only God will rescue us from these greedy and depraved leaders.' One of the youths spoke in anger.

It was not an easy task consoling them over their losses. We then could assure them that we would go after the assailants and bring back those that were captured. The bushes reeked of decomposed corpses as we combed them. The earth had lightly covered some of them. We stepped on them now and then. The jungle was horrendously noisy. Fear immediately scuttled up and down my body as the bullets crushed obstacles on their way to fly freely in the forest. They felled tree branches and their leaves on us where we lay for snipes.

'You hear that? That is not AK47. It sounds deadlier.' Usman ducked in apprehension.

'She is dehydrated, where can we get water for her?' From a distance, Yusuf's voice interjected.

'That is Yusuf's voice,' Yari, who was a member of my group, whispered, cowed frantically. We hurried to the voice to see a little girl slouched on Yusuf's back like a dead branch. Her entire body was wet with dew. She was somewhere around sixteen and seventeen years old from

her blossomed breasts. She was very pallid. She told us that her name was Hassana when we inquired of her name. 'The abductors are many there. The girls are chained like slaves and they are being dragged around the forest. I managed to escape,' she disclosed.

Hassana's information fuelled us into the jungle again. We went into the dense forest. We heard a ruffle ahead of us suddenly. Someone hurrying away. It was one of the assailants. We thought it was an animal. He had taken a peek at us and was madding away. He shouted at the top of his lungs for help as I shot sporadically at the ruffled bush. I smirked, elated and my lips pocked with delight as we hurried to where he laid in his pool of blood, dead. '*Kal, Wallahi n aka sh a shi.*' I said. The bullets tore his left shoulder to his heart region.

As the sun emerged with golden fleece from the East, the glistering of the ray opened our eyes and we heard the resonating noise of the jungle. I jumped up and said my morning prayers briefly. Then Hassan hurried in with tears in his eyes, and said, 'Yusuf is dead, he was whacked and beheaded. His corpse was dropped somewhere in the bush last night.' Yusuf was the head of his troop. We left for different locations at nightfall.

'*Maigida*, how come? Yusuf? Dead?' I screamed, wiping off the leftover sleep in my jaded eyes. I wept rivers. Yusuf was the closest and bravest soldier I had ever met in the Force.

'Indeed, danger knows not the brave,' I said out loud. Hassan said he had walked into the bush alone and they thought he had gone for some gaming. After waiting for him for a while, they went in search of him. They

found his corpse under a tree. We became apoplectic of his death.

'I know for sure his ghost won't come out of jungle until his killers are brought to their graves lamented.

I learnt to tread the forest with caution after that fateful morning. Each passing day and night, fear laid my heart like a heavy cross. My brain felt mushed up. It was the fourth morning of our expedition in the jungle became thirsty for water as we began our search for girls again. For the first time, my mind went to my parents, my wife and our unborn child. If I had been a victim, perhaps Aisha would have become a widow. I would then get married to another man, leaving my children for my parents. It may be that she would take the child with her to her new husband's house where the child of the man would maltreat the child. My mind went wild. I pushed away the second thought that dominated me. My face lightened up a smile as we came across a small pool of water. It was steaming with wriggling mosquito larvae and butterflies. They flew away as we poked it. I scooped up some water from it to quench our thirst. It felt cool and indeed soothed the hotness in our body. We quickly moved on. Flies kept trying to land on my face. I suck up the water I used in washing off salt from my face. For a moment, there was a long silence among us. We walked around without seeing anyone.

We returned to our dorm at dusk. All sorts of dreadful things kept flashing through my mind, mainly how to survive the few days ahead of us. I hadn't had a good rest since we woke up. What I needed at the moment was to lie down and let my mind rest. I lay on the lo

earth and listened to some night bird cooed. I closed my eyes and tried to sleep as time glided swiftly by.

We were jolted back awake by sounds of sporadic gun shots. I felt it more than I heard it. The leaves rattled as many feet stepped on them. They killed five of our men that were on guard. I slowly brought out my head up from where I was hiding, turned, and glanced around the leaves and trees that were hiding me from the lights of their torch lights. They were fifteen of them in army uniform with five black hunting dogs leading the group. My heart somersaulted in my chest and landed in my stomach as their leader's voice pierced through the silence of the night, bristling with rage and belligerence.

'Come out of your hiding, you the most corrupt nation of the black race. We will always live to burry many of you in this forest. Heed my warning now and go back to your home to meet your family and loved ones instead of hiding before death in shame and moving around like a belligerent ghost that is killed untimely.'

I crept faster and faster over the moist path filled with dead leaves. It made my movement noiseless, though my path was as dark as a tunnel, and there were no stars or moonlight to guide my path as I crept to an unknown destination. I suddenly heard the dogs barking and sniffing with some footsteps hurrying towards me. They were after me now, I thought in a maelstrom of fear. Then I increased my pace rapidly like a scorpion. Then, my father's advice reverberated in my mind: *Stay away from the withered tree and its withered branches... The nation first daddy, to defend it and fight its course.* I would reply with smiles. I shook my head and chuckled sadly at the thought of it.

'If my men catch up with you ready to say your last prayers. Surrender your weapons now.' The banshee leader echoed what sounded like a note of finality. Then guns continue talking, putting fears and apprehension on me. One that sounded like grenade reported elsewhere. My thought zipped around like a bird. A creature slithered up to my leg. But I was too wrapped up in fear to slap it off my body. It was a snake! I felt a sharp pain in my left leg as the snake bit me. Few minutes later, I became weak. The venom of the creature seeped into my skin and deeper into my muscle. I groaned, gnashing my teeth in pains. I quickly held my breath as one of the men stood not too far from the tree in which I was hiding, flashing his torchlight at my direction while the two dogs that were with him barked continuously as though smelling human stench. Their iridescent eyes rummaged through the bush, sending fever around my body. I leaned against the tree. He walked closer to the tree as if his instinct was telling him that someone was there. My eyes shot open and practically wet my pants as I gaped.

'Allah have mercy on my soul,' I cried.

After starring around, he slapped off what look like a creature from his back and went back. I whimpered as his footstep died away. Then I tormented the silence of the nascent morning with a drone. Smile imprinted on my face as I slapped dirt off my body. My eyes jumped around, bouncing off the treetop to the direction where the man had gone, to the eerie birds that made their abode in the tree cawing surreptitiously, as though commiserating with me in my misery. Then, I looked back. I knew I had crawled a mile away. I fished my pocket for my device and called the headquarters without further ado. It was

o'clock. The last time I checked my watch before the men invaded the jungle was 1:30 am. My pains became severe. I might probably die within milliseconds if they did not come on time to rescue me, I thought. I gritted my teeth through the pain as I scratched at the snake bite that was itching me terribly.

My colleagues drove in by 8 o'clock. I was angry at their delay. They pleaded that their vehicle developed a fault on the way. They added that they went back to get another one which led to their delay. They went in search of the men but they were nowhere in the forest. They took me to the hospital. The nurses put me on bed and quickly contacted the doctor for urgent attention. After an examination, the doctor said to my amazement that my leg would be amputated. He said that if the leg was not cut off, the poison would spread to other parts of my body which would eventually lead to my death. I shivered in fear as I heard him say that. I closed my eyes and allowed my tears to seep into the bed covers.

The town went agog the following day as the news spread through the National newspapers, radio, television and social media. Journalists in their writing referred to me as a hero. They implored the government not to abandon their heroes that have fought gallantly for the country. I was happy at the write-up. My photograph and those of the soldiers that died were splashed on the front pages of the papers by photo-journalists. Moments later, I heard my parent's voice and my wife at the front door. My father might have seen it in the newspapers and perhaps told Aisha. She has put to bed. The baby was strapped to her back. It was a baby boy. I wept as I peered to look at

him. He was pretty and handsome. I stayed in the hospital with Aisha for two months.

The government abandoned me and my family later on. My salary was no longer paid at the proper time. None of my several letters of appeal received any response. I could not fend for myself and my family anymore. Hunger struck my home. My wife and I had bouts of quarrel every now and then. One morning, while I was weeding my garden, my wife took her luggage and left with my son. I was left alone without a wife and a child to take care of me. My parents were in their old age. I paid someone to take care of them. All efforts I made to look for Aisha and my child failed.

Daily, I walked around the compound like a reptile and stared into space, disillusioned. No one saw my tears and shared my pains. Life tossed sadness to me. The sacrifices I made for the nation was shrouded in sadness. We need a national rebirth if our leaders know what is good. The blood of our compatriots is still fresh on mother earth. The forests daily cry for justice as the feet of men and vehicle tyres drive past them.

The Web

A new academic session had just begun in Ajibodu College of Education. The new students were placed in different campuses since the government was yet to put a permanent campus in place. The Social Peoples Party (PSP) had promised the citizens free education at all levels among all other promises made while campaigning. Having won the election, the Party stalwarts believed in delivering the dividends of democracy and making good the promises made to the populace. The major challenges to the provision of free education were classrooms and teachers to man the classes. A crash programme was immediately put in place to train the secondary school graduates who were above average in the West African School Certificate Examination as well as the Grade II Teachers who desired the National Certificate in Education (NCE). A majority of the new students were fresh from secondary school, some just getting out of their parents' coverage for the first time. The newly found freedom was strange and quite exciting to most of them, especially the girls. The young men were not left out, some of them being innocent of the ways of women were very anxious to take part in the October rush.

Chinedu, a science student in Etoile Rouge Campus was barely sixteen years old. It was his first time of leaving his strict parents to taste the world far away from the eagle eyes of his highly disciplined father. Mr. Obinna was not only a teacher but also a disciplinarian who wanted his children to excel in everything.

You must not mess up on campus, he counselled his first son. Remember the child of whom you are, avoid cutism, shun drugs, and be careful with girls.

Though Chinedu nodded in agreement, he was not ready to tow the lines the elderly man placed before him. As soon as he got to the campus, his eyes were fixed on Wunmi, a Yoruba girl about his age who also was his mate in St. Gregory Comprehensive High School. Though they lived on the same street back home, Chinedu did not have the courage to make his intention known to the girl. While he was dilly dallying, Ade beat him to it. By the time he eventually found his voice to ask Wunmi out, the girl was already in a relationship with Ade, his pal. Chinedu was highly disappointed but carried on as a man. It is part of experience one acquires while learning the ways of the adults, life experience and part of growing up, he consoled himself.

Having overcome Wunmi's seeming disappointment, Chinedu shifted his eyes to Beatrice, another beautiful girl in Wunmi's Department. It was love at first sight. Beatrice and Chinedu were all over the campus. The love birds were always together after lectures. Chinedu could not wait for the last lecture of each day to end before speeding to Awelewa Hall where Beatrice resided. Both of them were members of the notorious Palm Wine Drinkers Club, so they went for gyration at the different high institutions in town. Beatrice was wonderful chef who knew her onions when it comes to food preparation. Chinedu enjoyed the delicious meals. This glued him more to Beatrice.

Chinedu had not slept with a woman before, but Beatrice was not a novice to romance. Unknown to

he wanted the butterfly kind of relationship. He wanted to pollinate as many flowers as possible before settling down. Peek and go was the game in vogue but peek and stay was Beatrice's plan. No sooner had they started the relationship than Beatrice announced that she was expecting Chinedu's baby. Chinedu was taken aback, terribly horrified. He vehemently denied being responsible for the pregnancy, but his parents especially his mother did not believe him.

Will you say you never slept with her? She asked. I warned you, Chinedu. I shouted. I screamed. I counselled you to be careful with girls. Chinedu, you smoke. You drink. You sleep around with girls. I don't know if you are not even in a cult. A dog determined to get lost will be deaf to the hunters' whistle. The consequence of your stubbornness is staring at you. Now you argue that both of you are not compatible, are you just realizing that? She is not sociable enough for you. She is sluggish, you said, but not sluggish in bed. You must marry her and that has to happen as soon as possible. That's my decision, concluded Mrs. Obinna.

Chinedu left his mother's presence in tears. He was not even twenty years old but an expectant father already. He regretted the nights spent in Beatrice's warm embrace. He felt like vomiting all the delicious meals. He wondered why the girl refused to do an abortion. That wasn't an option anymore as both families were already aware of it. Both were expecting a new member into their fold. Beatrice seemed like a trash to him. He hated the ground she treaded; hated everything about her but could do nothing about it, since he had been trapped in her cleverly

Beatrice, she would not hinder him from going out with other girls who dressed better and were more presentable. While Chinedu was battling the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy, Wunmi and Ade had called it quit due to incompatibility. Ade was a womanizer who had no respect for his fiancée. He was abusive too, so Wunmi decided to walk away instead of having an abusive marriage. She considered a broken engagement better than a broken home. Chinedu was yet to forgive Wunmi for her refusal to date him. He was so petty that he decided to spite her. He thought Wunmi was jilted and so wanted to rub it in. Wunmi who was now a graduate was gainfully employed but yet to be in any relationship.

Chinedu pretended that all was well with his forthcoming marriage. He approached Wunmi to cover his wedding programme as a broadcaster. He told her to be in his bride's house as early as possible to record the events and get him the financial details of the broadcast on her station. Wunmi was confused about the contract. She had her own challenges at the broadcasting station where she worked. She was green and yet to know how things worked there. The political atmosphere of the station was not conducive. She wasn't in any relationship, and age was not on her side.

Getting to her lonely room, with her chin resting on her pillow, tears rolled down freely. The picture of Chinedu asking her out flashed her mind. She looked back at her relationship with Ade, remembered all the young men interested in her as soon as she attained puberty – all the boys she turned down because of Ade. However, she was not perturbed, knowing that she would get the right

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woven web. Chinedu decided that if he must marry Beatrice, she would not hinder him from going out with other girls who dressed better and were more presentable. While Chinedu was battling the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy, Wunmi and Ade had called it quit due to incompatibility. Ade was a womanizer who had no respect for his fiancée. He was abusive too, so Wunmi decided to walk away instead of having an abusive marriage. She considered a broken engagement better than a broken home. Chinedu was yet to forgive Wunmi for her refusal to date him. He was so petty that he decided to spite her. He thought Wunmi was jilted and so wanted to rub it in. Wunmi who was now a graduate was gainfully employed but yet to be in any relationship.

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man at the appropriate time. She was aware that most young ladies get anxious when they attain a certain age and no suitor was forthcoming. She was a bit anxious. She decided to cast her burden on the Lord after she had listened to the preaching of some believers of the Christian Union on campus. Getting to know the Lord was her greatest experience. Richie was partially responsible for that.

Richie, a Prince from the North East of the country, was a Christian who was brought up in a godly home. Richie though engaged to Taira back home was interested in Wunmi because some of his friends showed interest in her. Wunmi was in her penultimate year in the university then and wanted a life partner. She saw Richie as an eligible bachelor; as the perfect man. No sooner had they started the relationship that Richie realized that he was stepping out of the narrow way. He remembered Taira back home. He also remembered that he must not be unequally yoked with an unbeliever. To him, Wunmi was an unbeliever even though she was a Christian by birth, because she was yet to confess the Lordship of Jesus with her mouth. Richie told her about Taira and also explained that he was an active member of a students fellowship on campus. He introduced her to the fellowship and God took over.

It was not easy to get over Richie. The first and only time Wunmi travelled to the North was to visit him when he was on the mandatory national youth service scheme there. The plan was to lure the poor boy into an unholy relationship and have a baby for him. This would tie him down. Richie had found his way back to his savior,

helped him to be steadfast in the Lord. The Obanyas were very warm towards Wunmi. They gave her a room where she slept after a warm bath and good meal. Richie patiently explained to her again that the relationship could not continue and wished her well in her future endeavours. He was so calm and considerate that Wunmi could not but understand that she had to look for her own man and stop living in a world of fantasy. Very early the next morning, Wunmi picked her travel bag and went back home. She was through with her studies and left the campus as a born again child of God who cast her burden on the Lord. She threw everything about her life on the Lord and became a very active member of her local assembly.

Chinedu did not enjoy his marriage with Beatrice. He continued following any available girl. He did everything to frustrate his wife so she could leave, but she refused to go. Despite their differences and quarrels, both of them kept having children. They eventually separated for several years as a result of a major misunderstanding. Wunmi eventually met a sweet guy named Charles. They were deeply in love with each other and had an elaborate wedding. She was blessed with four children and prospered in her career, but joy has a slender body. Charles was transferred out of Nigeria and Wunmi decided to go with her husband. A loving husband, Charles was every woman's dream husband. He was a responsible father to the children, a loyal, faithful and kind husband. Their home was heaven on earth. Charles was very proud of his wife and would do everything to please her. It was a happy home until sickness struck. Charles was emaciating. Wunmi did not notice early enough because Charles lived a life of fasting. She thought the

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It was not easy to get over Richie. The first and only time Wunmi travelled to the North was to visit him when he was on the mandatory national youth service scheme there. The plan was to lure the poor boy into an unholy relationship and have a baby for him. This would tie him down. Richie had found his way back to his savior, and was living with a seriously religious family which

helped him to be steadfast in the Lord. The Obanyas were very warm towards Wunmi. They gave her a room where she slept after a warm bath and good meal. Richie patiently explained to her again that the relationship could not continue and wished her well in her future endeavours. He was so calm and considerate that Wunmi could not but understand that she had to look for her own man and stop living in a world of fantasy. Very early the next morning, Wunmi picked her travel bag and went back home. She was through with her studies and left the campus as a born again child of God who cast her burden on the Lord. She threw everything about her life on the Lord and became a very active member of her local assembly.

Chinedu did not enjoy his marriage with Beatrice. He continued following any available girl. He did everything to frustrate his wife so she could leave, but she refused to go. Despite their differences and quarrels, both of them kept having children. They eventually separated for several years as a result of a major misunderstanding. Wunmi eventually met a sweet guy named Charles. They were deeply in love with each other and had an elaborate wedding. She was blessed with four children and prospered in her career, but joy has a slender body. Charles was transferred out of Nigeria and Wunmi decided to go with her husband. A loving husband, Charles was every woman's dream husband. He was a responsible father to the children, a loyal, faithful and kind husband. Their home was heaven on earth. Charles was very proud of his wife and would do everything to please her. It was a happy home until sickness struck. Charles was emaciating. Wunmi did not notice early enough because Charles lived a life of fasting. She thought the

slim stature was due to constant fasting. She was so alarmed when a visit to the doctor revealed that Charles had cancer of the liver. He bowed to the illness and departed the world. Wunmi was devastated. Cecil, Dike, Junior, and Harry were still very young. Wunmi wondered where to pick her life from. It was a devastating experience but she was determined to make sure her children were well educated. Being an industrious woman, Wunmi took up part time jobs as well as a full time employment. She was also buying and selling stuff. While the children were in school, she continued to develop herself, paving the way for success beyond her imagination.

Divine providence brought Chinedu and Wunmi together, and having separated with Beatrice, Chinedu decided to try his luck again now that Charles was no more. He kept pestering Wunmi at the slightest opportunity. Wunmi would shout at him at times and at other times explain to him that a relationship with him was impossible yet Chinedu was persistent. Every opportunity to assist Wunmi in kind was an avenue to show his love. Chinedu would call to advise her if she had any issue with a friend, or bail her out in case of any problem with law enforcement agents, being a high-ranking law officer. All these drew him closer to Wunmi. Wunmi made up her mind to find a way of reconciling Chinedu and Beatrice but all her efforts proved futile. It was like both of them were no longer interested in coming together. Beatrice would not use the information given by Wunmi to her advantage. She would always get something negative out of it. Chinedu on his part was not willing to hear about Beatrice. At the mention of the name, he would flare up.

Since both of them did not want a settlement, Wunmi ignored them and went on with her life but Chinedu did not leave her alone.

It was a cool beautiful evening and Wunmi was so happy Junior had graduated from the medical school of the University Teaching Hospital, Kano. Charles Junior insisted his mother must be at his induction. Although excited about her sons achievement, Wunmi was scared about the trip. Who will not be scared of the Northern part of Nigeria? What with the abduction taking place everywhere. It was her first time of going to Kano. She thought of who to discuss her plight with. As the thoughts were on her mind, Chinedu called just to disturb her as usual, and keep himself relevant in her life. No time could be as appropriate and timely as then. Wunmi chuckled as she picked the call. After exchanging pleasantries, she gleefully announced her sons success and her fear of travelling to Kano. Chinedu quickly grabbed the opportunity to show his interest to host her and others who might likely travel with her. He told Wunmi that he had just been posted to Kano and that the security threat was not as terrible as being broadcast on the social media.

Wunmi became courageous and made up her mind to embark on the trip. She had no choice but to go since Junior made it clear that she must be there to honour him. Chinedu was more than prepared to host Wunmi. He kept calling until Wunmi arrived. He sent his driver with his official car and an aid to pick and drop her in his house. There was more than enough food for dinner as Wunmi got to Kano late in the evening. Unfortunately she could not eat because of stomach upset. She sent for some drugs which Chinedu personally bought and handed over to her.

Wunmi took the drugs and noticed that Chinedu quickly ran out of the house claiming some friends were waiting for him. Chinedu would come back from work, change his dress and get out of the house immediately for the two nights Wunmi stayed in Kano. Wunmi thought it was his routine, not knowing that he was getting out of the house just to control himself as he found Wunmi very attractive and irresistible. In order not to do what he would later regret, Chinedu left the house each evening throughout Wunmi's stay to come back when Wunmi had slept.

With the programme over, Wunmi went back home but she could not get Chinedu out of her mind. Should she be blamed? Since the demise of her husband twenty five years ago, she had blocked her mind to any relationship. Many men came her way but she showed no interest. Some of them saw her as being too independent, so they did not bother to tell her their intentions. The few who did went back with a negative response. Wunmi was very disturbed as Chinedu's thoughts never left her mind. She wondered about what could be responsible for this. The attention she had not received from any man for so many years which Chinedu lavished on her might be responsible for the sudden development of interest in the opposite gender.

Chinedu was a smoker. He also drank alcohol and did everything that Wunmi could not stand in men but for the first time, these habits were ignored. She tried pushing the thoughts off her mind and she was almost successful until one fateful night. Junior had travelled to the East very early in the morning. It was getting late in the night and he was yet to get to his destination. Wunmi was very alarmed, she kept herself busy cleaning her apartment

while calling intermittently to monitor her son's journey. There came a time that she could not hold it again, she called Chinedu to inform him about her predicament. Chinedu immediately called his colleague in Owerri to go pick up Junior from the motor park. The driver had decided they would spend the night there to continue the journey the following day since it was dangerous to go further at that time of night. Chinedu assured Wunmi that he would not sleep until Junior got to bed. Wow! That did it. Wunmi went to sleep immediately as the peace she could not comprehend came upon her. It was then that she realized that she needed a man in her life. Chinedu reminded her that she would have been his wife if not for her relationship with Ade. He promised to take care of her if she would just agree to his proposal.

Beatrice was Wunmi's former colleague. She was the mother of his children. Wunmi was trying to reconcile them but found herself falling in love with Chinedu in the process. She did not know either to be happy or sad. What a complicated life! The sensible thing to do was to turn Chinedu down politely but Wunmi did not do that. She followed her heart, gave in to Chinedu and lost her peace of mind.

Flutters in a Jar

We live better when we live apart, my husband and I, away from each other's breath, in my own opinion, at least. No, it is not as if I hate him. I love the man to bits, just that I can't stand living more than four consecutive days with him under the same roof without him causing me some form of inconvenience. I would prefer he lives somewhere else and come around only once in a while, like the sighting of the moon. Knots and niggles of life can be tangled brushstrokes on canvas.

It's our anniversary next month, twenty long years of marriage, and now he wants us to embark on a trip as part of the celebration, just the two of us, to some holiday resort on an 'exotic island'. He is proposing Maui or Crepy-en-Valois. He has a funny way of making his lips intertwine like shoelaces in mimicry of the French accent when describing the serenity in Crepy-en-Valois. He researched and sent me beautiful pictures and video links with destination names I have since googled. In a world only of brilliant clear blue water, you can see multi-coloured fishes swimming, canopies, cocktails, coconut trees, limp hammocks, gangly bikini-clad girls sprawled on mats or strutting their stuff with reckless abandon - an appealing liberation that comes with wearing those strings.

Gosh! What do I do? I am not in the mood for any vacation at the moment, but I have always tried to please my

husband, my mother's advice to me on the eve of my marriage to Mutfwang is still fresh in my memory. 'Whatever you do, be sure to submit to your husband and obey him in all things, as the Bible prescribes. When you submit while he loves you, believe me there will be little or no friction in your marriage', Mum had said. She was such a religious woman, and I have tried to live by her advice all the years of my marriage, and truly it has paid off for me.

My mind is always caught in a million places, making out if I have adequately pleased him. I don't see why I should try to please anybody at this stage in my life. But then he is my husband and, like Sarah, I must call him 'Lord'.

My husband melancholic husband is always in the habit of dishing out such strict rules to me, he has a flair for perfection in everything. 'You have to sit up, in both senses of the phrase', he would say. He drills me with words like, "Don't slouch", "Don't hunch over your food", "Pay more attention to electricity consumption", etc., etc; and I would be left with no option but to respond with a resounding 'Yes sir!' between his commands, which are usually accompanied by the sonorous blasts of his whistle.

'When you're done charging your phones, please switch the damn things off,' he marshals.

I remember a time when he held on to all the phone chargers in the house till our batteries drained of power. We had to promise disconnecting our chargers from the

wall sockets and putting them away in a drawer before he gave us back our chargers. He hated to see cords crawling like snakes underneath beds. The children went berserk after two days, twitching and suffering withdrawal syndrome. They couldn't live one more second without squirreling their phones away.

Sometimes, when I want to rile him a little, I intentionally leave the lights turned on in the kitchen, store, or bathroom, and his reaction never disappoints. He knows he can't hit me, so he takes to grumbling to my hearing about how one can't learn in old age to be left-handed, thus suggesting that I have not had a good home training.

My husband should accept my shortcomings and vulnerabilities and accept me the way I am. Of course, I am trying my best to change and keep up with his strict rules, but he is too hard to please. He should learn to tolerate and protect me, and consider my indiscretions as our fragile little secret that flutters in a jar locked away in a corner of our wardrobe.

Another area of friction in my marriage was cooking. The thought of what to cook makes a monkey of my entire education. Sometimes I sit in the kitchen staring at the fridge, hoping that something will magically pop up from the blues and say, 'Ta-rah! Food is served'. It is just so much mental torture for me, just thinking about what to cook for the family. It's a misconception that a woman is expected to know what to cook, when to cook it, and how to cook it. But husbands should know that we are not born with some kitchen chip planted in our heads that sends

nerve prompts to the brain ... 'plantains, rice, and peas for lunch madam', or something like that which should make us automatically good at cooking food.

Talking about food, my husband likes to cook. 'Well, then that ought to solve your cooking problem', you may say. But I don't like him in the kitchen when I am cooking. He keeps telling me to chop tomatoes and peppers into cubes. I mean, I am the woman here and I've been cooking for as long as I can remember. I don't need someone telling me to do this or that in my kitchen. Whether one pours hot water into a bowl of *garri* or pours *garri* into a bowl of hot water, it's still the same *eba*. I will appreciate it if he leaves me alone to my task. After all, too many cooks, they say, spoil the soup. But my husband is such an unwanted nuisance when it comes to supervising my cooking.

He always insists that I rinse out the sponge properly after scrubbing the dishes. If there are soap suds on the sponge it would still be used for another wash, so, there's no need to rinse out the sponge. But for him, it's a no-no.

He folds kitchen towels after every use, wipes the plates, folds; wipes his hands, folds; wipes onion juice on the granite top, and folds. I wish I could fold him and toss him in a bin. When I tell him to leave the cooking to me he begins to boast to me about how many women 'outside' would die to have a man like him. I never get tempted to say, '*oya go* and meet then *nah!*' Mama would consider that as gross rudeness to my husband, who is supposed to

be 'my Head'. So I have to quietly stomach all the irritations he causes me.

The man still inspects cutlery before eating after all these years. I watch him tilt forks this way and that under the light, trying to catch smudges of food jailed behind prong bars. He acts as though the crumb that escaped the sponge will kill him, or blood from my monthlies left on the toilet seat will cause a genetic mutation on his skin, so he wipes the commode so methodically.

He has a sense of cleanliness that is as annoying to me as dirt itself. How ironic!

Let me add that I can't stand cooking for his dogs, those monstrous beasts that tower above me. I die each day they come to welcome me. They like pouncing on me with their gigantic paws in what is their own idea of a hug. One of them loves to chew my windscreen wipers every night, and so I had to start detaching my wipers in the evenings. Trust me, I often forget to put them back in the mornings. I have learnt never to make the mistake of leaving my slippers or clothes out on the line to dry overnight again since the day one of them shredded my lovely pink bed sheet. I couldn't take it anymore, so I secretly employed someone to start taking care of the nasty beasts. That caused a quarrel between me and Mutfwang, because he is such a miser and too frugal with money despite his enormous resources. But I did not give a damn. One has to stand his grounds sometimes.

He is such a dinosaur, my husband. So old-schooled and socially out of sync with contemporary realities. He should just stay wherever he is and remain a fossil. I think of all the possibilities of the internet and wish we could simply have a virtual anniversary. Of course, I can't mention that to him, as that will trigger another long lecture, and I was not in the mood for one at the moment. And there is the small matter of me having to wear 'decent' clothes when he's around. He doesn't believe that a woman should be seen in her pyjamas, or my own version of pyjamas. The sunrise must not cast its rays on me in my nightclothes, as if that will turn me into a vampire or something. Normally, I don't bother with bras or panties all day in the house, those things stiffen me. Jelly should be jelly.

Lest I forget, he likes to snuggle. It gives me the creeps. I'm tired of enduring his wet kisses, 'yuck!', he will give me such a rough kiss. His bushy moustache holds a convention with the hairs in his nostrils. He seems to think that scrunching up his nose will untangle that relationship. Strangely enough, my husband has a sense of humour only that his jokes are as ancient as the 1980s. I've heard them all, at least a dozen times, but he still gets a kick out of repeating them to me. He also tickles me at night like a child but we both know that can't stir up anything. There's no strong erection down there anymore. Sausages aren't carrots. And so I have been sex-starved all these years. These are times when one is so tempted to see satisfaction outside marriage, only that Mama had strictly warned me against such a practice.

I thought I was doing him a favour the other day when I slipped a Viagra pill into a handful of multivitamins he is in the habit of consuming every morning and at night. He didn't detect the strange pill, so he swallowed it along with the rest. I watched in vain to see his reaction, but that night was still the same: wandering around the garden, trouncing foliage and leaving cherries. It was during the next morning that he looked different. He hobbled into the kitchen for a glass of water as though he had a thousand soldier ants up his trousers. He later walked gingerly to breakfast, and when I asked him if he was okay, he was too shy to say what was going on – I saw the twelve years by which he is older than me shrink till it diminished. I promised myself never to try that again. I knew we had crossed over one phase of our lives.

I once suggested that we sleep in separate rooms to save us both such embarrassment but he rejected the idea so vehemently, rebuking me, casting out and binding the evil spirits in me for suggesting such a thing.

I wish I were a magician, with the ability to perform the rabbit-out-of-the-hat trick, or pulling out an unending string of patchwork handkerchiefs from a child's ear; but this time, instead of conjuring up a rabbit from an empty hat, I wish I could put the art to a better use... put my husband in a hat and, after four days: Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo`.

Oh gosh! Silly me. Just imagine the thoughts that I am preoccupied with, at a time when I should be looking forward to celebrating twenty years of marriage. I think

I'm hurting because I know that he has the right to celebrate this milestone of an anniversary, even though it will not be as interesting to me as our honeymoon. How time changes things! I should be preparing for a vacation, all the same.

Thank God for our wonderful kids. They are the only reminder of the blissful days of our marriage, and the only reason we are not divorced. I'm told that many marriages nowadays don't make it past the reception venue, as if the ceremony is what couples long for. Once that is out of the way, it's 'see ya later... I had a nice time`, as if marriage is a three-hour party, an event for the cameras: click, click, click. With or without flashlights. Contents for social media clicks.

I met my husband at an art exhibition twenty years ago. A couple of us put our work together and decided to show the world and, if possible, make some money out of it. The little signs clearly said 'do not touch' in front of all the paintings hanging on the wall but, this prim and proper man couldn't resist the temptation of violating the rules; he had to right the angles.

'Only an aggressive smudging of the brush over the sun with pale orange at the top could cast this vintage hue over the roofs ... brilliant... brilliant', he had remarked about the artwork he was admiring. He turned around to ask a few of us behind him if we could see what he discovered. He twirled the wine in his hand more than he sipped it. He would swivel his glass and take it to his nose rather than

his mouth, feeding his moustache. I was spellbound by his queer mannerisms, but we became friends, all the same.

The exhibition was my very first outing. I had been too afraid to show my work until my instructor convinced me that it would only be a win for me either way, as any criticism would only strengthen and improve me. So, I stalled behind visitors, eavesdropping on their thoughts. Before I realized it, this man was in front of me, speaking about how young I looked. He said he expected the mind behind the art to be a lot older. We spent the rest of the evening together and became official in a moment, setting off three months of courtship, and then marriage - boom! Marriage. It was during my Jambite year in the university. My parents had no reservations whatsoever about the marriage, or so it appeared.

I'm now a mother of four. My daughter came home with a boy the other day. At first I did not know how to react, so I quickly ran into my room and cried. I watched her dotting around the boy from my hideout. The sudden thought that she would soon leave me had me felling so scared, although I was happy for her for finding her true love, and for the fact that she brought him home, and not allowing some random boy to pinch her backside in dark corridors. I wondered how she knew that I would approve of their marriage, when she did not hint me about it ahead of time. I ended up blessing them, to her relief.

She is still my baby who held on to me the first day I enrolled her in school. She buried her head in my chest, clasping her hands around my neck so tight it was

impossible to pull her free. She always cried whenever I had to plait her hair. So, I cut it short from her primary school years. I was taken aback when she tinted and carved lines in her hair in secondary school. She secretly got second ear piercings and bribed me with an anklet before I could yell with disapproval. Her marriage plans are some of the things that make me hesitate about my trip with Mutfwang. But, hey! I have my own marriage to look after.

Tell you what! I will go on this trip. I will go, even if it is just to please my husband, I will celebrate the number of years I have spent with this husband of mine, regardless of the number of days he wants us to spend there. There's no need to send the marching ants scuttling in a thousand directions. Listen. Listen to them shout, 'Hurrah! Hurrah!!' as they march.

Not That Poor

My first visit to Abuja was courtesy of my father's foolishness. It was during the year of General Sani Abacha's timely death, 1998.

"I am going to take you to Abuja, to see your uncle and the President," he whispered into my ears in the morning of the eve of our departure. "But you must not tell anyone, you hear?" he pulled his right ear but I felt his hand pulling my own ear. I nodded. "Good boy!" He rubbed my head and shooed me to school.

By the time I reached the school, my mind was already in Abuja. All that was said at assembly by the headmaster or in class by the teacher made no sense. Five minutes into break time, I still hadn't told anyone except Rinji. I whispered my little secret into his ear as a sign of appreciation for the two balls of kulikuli he dropped into my cupped hands.

"Manji, is it true that you are going to Abuja?" The class monitor asked when break-time was over. About a dozen pairs of eyes accompanied his demand for an answer. Rinji had not even returned to the class at that moment.

I heaved and grinned. "Yes." My response kindled toothy smiles, "But don't tell anybody *fa*." Beneath the smiles I detected admiration, sarcasm, and even jealousy. I was about to become the first pupil in L.G.E.A Primary School, Abwor-Dyis to visit the Federal Capital Territory.

Abwor-Dyis was about twenty kilometres away from Pankshin town, Pankshin was a hundred and twenty kilometres to Jos, the capital city of Plateau State, and Jos had about two hundred and fifty kilometres between itself and Abuja. Nearly a quarter of the pupils in my school had ever made it to Pankshin. Less than half of the teachers had ever been to Jos and only the headmaster had ever reached Keffi, which was less than thirty kilometres shy of Abuja. There I was, about to visit Abuja, so any kind of admiration or envy was understood, tolerated, and accepted.

During the short break, both sides of the players on the football field were struggling to have me on their teams. I was the king of the pupils for that day.

Teacher Nansat called me away from the rushing crowd when the school bell chimed for the last, signifying the end of lessons for the day. She dropped her Mr. Do-good – a cane – on the table. She mopped the sweat off her face with a handkerchief that was meant to be white. Her eyes pried into mine, and with a voice, soft and sweet like cotton candy, she inquired. "Is it true that you are going to Abuja tomorrow?"

My eyes fell on the floor. "Mnnn.." I nodded.

"Enhen!" She clapped her hands. "As small as you are?"

"Yes," I smiled, proudly.

"You are a lucky child. What is taking you to Abuja?"

"We want to go and see my uncle."

"Haba? That Engineer that came back from the U.S some years ago?"

"Yes, ma. We might even see the President, my father said." I sauntered out of the class without waiting for her to dismiss me.

"Don't forget to remember me o!" I heard her say as I increased the distance between us.

My father's older brother, the Engineer, was the only person from our village to have made it out of Nigeria at that time. The very first among my tribesmen to have set foot on American soil. Naturally, he commanded a lot of respect from our people. Aside his only sister, my father was the only other person to have suckled the same breast with him but it turned out that my father fed on the sour remainder of the breast milk, owing to his asininity. Engineer Markus Dalong got wedded a few months after my father had impregnated my mother. Later in life, I was told that all the money sent to empower my father went into wooing my mother and into drinking of alcohol. Pikolo was what they called my father in all the burkutu oints of the village.

A few months after Engineer's wedding, resources stopped flowing to my father. My mother took to fending for the family. When she was not tilling the farm, she was at the market, and when she was not at the market, she was fellowshipping with other women in the church. And

Pikolo, riding on the fame of his brother, was always touring different locally brewed-burkutu-beer parlours. Anytime he was found not drinking, he was either battling a hangover or planning to go for a drink. Somehow, the many beneficiaries of his brother's magnanimity were always buying him calabashes of Burkutu. His job was to thrill drinkers with unfounded stories after which he would boast about his brother and me, his son.

My parents were not at home when I came back from school. Telling my father's whereabouts wouldn't be hard to guess. Mama was either at the farm or at the market, with my only sibling, Nankyer, strapped to her back. Having learnt from the hardship in nurturing one child without money, Mama had sworn to maintain just one child – me - until her situation improved; a vow she had kept before an obstinate sperm cell broke through her contraceptive wall.

* * *

Mama and Nankyer returned before the remaining half of the yellow sun hid below the horizon. A mental inventory of all domestic animals followed at evenfall. Pikolo was marked absent, as usual, but her biggest nanny goat was conspicuously missing and that triggered an alarm. Together, we combed the nearby bushes and then checked out pens of neighbours when darkness took control of the time.

“Yes, with a large patch of white at the right side of her stomach.” Mama clarified, having checked the last pen we visited. Her torchlight was still on.

“I am not so sure but it seems as if I saw your husband dragging a goat around ten in the morning.” Mrs Dikwal said, when she came into the picture.

“Don’t say that!”

“I have said it already.”

“Haba Jama`a, what kind of useless man is this!” Mama jerked her loosely-tied headscarf from her head and flung it to the ground. Instantly, her hands bounced on her lap. She murmured curses under her breath. She grabbed my hand and collected her headscarf from the ground when her five senses returned. “He will come back and meet me at home. How can I run a house and still not have peace in the same house?” She dragged me home while the stupefied neighbours watched our figures blend with the colour of the night.

At home, Mama didn’t mourn the loss of her goat as she would a human being. Her sadness grew into an aggression which was transferred to the aluminium dishes and pots that clanged violently as they were employed to prepare dinner. I got an unusually small ball of *tuwo*, and in response to my request for more soup, I got a tirade in which she reminded me of how I resembled my father and that fact compounded her nightmare. After she rained abuses on me with accompanying droplets of saliva on my

face, she snatched the bowl from my hand. She returned with a nearly filled bowl of meatless miyan kuka as if to compensate for the delay in meeting my request. Nankyer, too, for throwing up tantrums, was forced to suckle Mama’s breast even when she just wanted to be lulled. It didn’t take long for Mama and Nankyer to succumb under the embrace of sleep almost at the same time. Nankyer’s mouth was disengaged from Mama’s breast hanging out of her bra. Mama slept with her mouth ajar while holding the baby. My mind returned to Abuja and to the possibility of not going there since my father was not around. I watched the flame of our kerosene lamp lose its strength and nudged Mama to go to bed before the flame turned blue and died.

* * *

“Manji! Manji!” Someone whispered in a voice that was unmistakably my father’s. I felt his coarse hands around my neck. He had already groped in the dark for my slippers. He located my hand in the dark and put the slippers in them. “Here, put them on, let us go.”

“But I have not taken my bath.” I said sleepily, but loudly even though I still couldn’t see his face.

“Sshh... Keep quiet. Do you want your mother to hear us? If she does, our journey to Abuja will be cancelled.”

“Mmm” I agreed without uttering a word.

By the first crow of the cock, we were already at the outskirts of Abwor-Dyis village. Under Pikolo’s directive,

we stopped by at the stream which served as a boundary between our village and Jiblik village and washed our limbs and heads. From a large polythene bag, my father produced a grey T-shirt which would have fitted me if I was two years older.

“Superman,” I read, aloud, the words boldly inscribed on the T-shirt which also had a coloured image of a muscular man.

“You know what it says?” My father was surprised that I could also read what was written on clothes too, not just books. He patted my back and he flashed a smile. “You know, I took the right decision by picking you up for this journey.” He also gave me a pair of jeans which was about two inches short of my ankles. The icing on the cake was the pair of canvas which he brought out from the same bag; it didn’t matter that it was filed from overuse by the previous owner at the edges of the heels. For himself, he produced a faded black suit and a quarter-to-die pair of shoes.

“How do I look?” He inquired, confidently, even arrogantly.

“Not bad.” I didn’t want to say he still looked like a drunkard and was still reeking of burkutu.

“I look good. Engineer is going to bow down for this outfit.” He puffed and straightened himself, attaching an aura of importance.

Even as a nine-year-old, I knew that second-hand clothes, no matter how new they looked, as long as they carried the signature *gwanjo* – as they were called – smell, were looked down upon by the rich. Nonetheless, I was excited to wear them as new clothes.

I bent down to pack our old clothes into the bag.

“What are you doing? Packing our old clothes?”

I nodded. “So that we can change tomorrow.”

“No, that wouldn’t be necessary,” he belched. “Leave them here for any lucky bastard. Once we get to Abuja, Engineer will get us new set of clothes. He will also know that, after all, we are not that poor.”

“But we are . . .”

“I said not thaaat poor. Now, let’s go before your hysterical mother finds us. I know she will be very angry with us.”

He motioned me to walk in front. After a few reluctant steps I halted and made a U-turn then our eyes met. “Baba, did you have to steal Mama’s prized goat to buy us new clothes?” I caught the guilt he released. He shifted his gaze from my face to the bushes around.

“Who told you?”

“Mama is terribly mad at you.”

"That was why I didn't come home until midnight but she will be on her knees in appreciation by the time I return with enough money to buy two big she-goats for her. In fact, she will know that her husband is not useless after all."

"Baba, are you sure Uncle Engineer will give us money?"

"You must be a fool. That is my own blood we are talking about. We sucked the same pair of breasts. How will he not give me money?" He turned me around and set me in motion with a gentle push. "I hear he is now a big man in an office called F.C.T.A, or is it F.C.D.A? And that he has the ambition to become a senator when Abacha's military uniform transforms into a babban riga."

"What is a senator?"

"Didn't they teach you about that in school? A senator is a big politician who wears babban riga and eats a lot of money."

"I don't understand. He already has enough money, why would he want more?"

"My boy, money is never enough. Sometimes, you have to spend money to get more money. That's why I had to spend the money from the sale of your mother's goat to buy us clothes and to transport us to Abuja. In the same way, Engineer has spent so much money around our region, from what I have gathered, in order to soften the ground for the launch of his political ambition. Just two

weeks ago, he gave forty thousand naira to the Ward Chairman and Secretary of his party when they paid him a visit in Abuja. Both of them were from Jiblik, not even our own village *fa*. Can you imagine?"

"The Chairman and Secretary," I noted, trying to make sense of why he gave them that much and how our case could be similar, or different.

"Nonsense! I am going there to show them that blood is thicker than water. I have kept quiet for far too long. Now it is time for me to go for my share. I have instructed Mama Nashwar to prepare her excellent burkutu and give anyone who wants to drink today and tomorrow for free. I will pay for everything when I return. That is when they will all know that I - Tokwam Pikolo Dalong – is the real brother of Engineer Markus Dalong. We cannot share the same father for nothing."

In the car, he told me how the ward Secretary of Engineer's party knocked them out with beer for three consecutive days. When beer had loosened his tongue on the third day, the Secretary told them how he and the Chairman went on a secret mission to Abuja without the knowledge of other party officials and returned with twenty thousand naira each. My father recounted his disappointment with his brother. Somehow, he got the Secretary to write Engineer's address for him on a sheet of paper.

"Here we are." He produced a sheet of paper and handed it to me. "I know you can read this."

“Plot 251, Area 11, behind Africana Hotel, Wuse, Abuja.” I read without stumbling on any word. I raised my head and saw pride looking at me, rubbing my head.

“Now read the words on that signboard over there.” He pointed at the large green signboard, where I would later know as Mararaban Jama’^a,

“WELCOME TO JOS, THE CAPITAL OF PLATEAU STATE” I read the words excitedly. “Jos?” I couldn’t believe it. Even if I had turned back from there, my journey would still have been an achievement.

“Yes my boy, were are here already.”

“No sir, the main Jos is about thirty minutes from here. That is where you will board a bus to Abuja.” A passenger remarked, automatically earning the right to be our guide. He eventually led us to the Plateau Riders’ Motor Park where we boarded a vehicle for Abuja.

* * *

At a place called Forest, our bus was assailed by a horde of hawkers, mostly of groundnuts, oranges, and bananas, as it slowed down to a halt. The passengers had to struggle their way out in order to ease themselves or buy things from stalls of other sellers. My father and I opted for water first. He then bought me roasted groundnuts and roasted tiger nuts. I swallowed a mouthful of saliva when he led us to bargain for a whole roasted chicken. Not long

afterwards, the woman packaged the roasted chicken as a whole and gave it to my father.

“This time around there will be no more stopping until we reach Abuja.” The driver announced to the hearing of all the passengers in the vehicle but no one acknowledged hearing him. The engine of the bus came alive and after a brief spell, I surrendered to sleep.

“Here is your Abuja!” My father spread out his hands, clearing my sleepy sight. “The land of milk and honey.”

“No this place is called Nyanya and we are at the motor park,” the driver declared while offloading the goods of his passengers. “You will have to hop into one of those green-and-yellow buses in order to get to A.Y.A. Junction, from where you will get a taxi or motorcycle to wherever you want to go in Abuja.”

Getting to A.Y.A. Junction was not a problem, but reaching the house from that junction was a great problem. My father insisted on using a motorcycle to make the last lap so as to savour the beauty of the city and at the same time feel the breeze on our skins having been crammed into buses like sardines. At this point, he asked me to do the talking since the address was written in English. Much to our dismay, many of the commercial motorcyclists didn’t understand addresses in terms of numbers but in terms of landmarks such as buildings, bridges, and junctions, which had to be explained in Hausa. When we found someone with a fair mix of Pidgin

and Hausa, we took our chance. The only clue he had was Africana Hotel.

"The hotel get white colour abi?" He asked. We shrugged. He deduced we were newcomers and he seized the opportunity to milk our purse. "I know the place. *But e far well well o! Akwai rata sosai fa!*" Baba understood and smiled when the man spoke in Hausa.

"No problem," my father said and he inserted me between the rider and himself.

"How much is it?" He asked after the motorcycle had started moving.

"Na six hundred naira?"

"What? That is almost what I paid for two of us all the way from Jos." My father jeremiad, threatening to disembark.

"Okay, okay, I will manage four hundred and fifty naira." He said with a tone of finality.

After about five minutes, we were riding in front of the CBN Building. "Central Bank of Nigeria," I said, reading the words crested on the shiny tower. I tried to read two other bold writings as much as the speed of the motorcycle could allow before my eyes landed on AFRICANA HOTEL. "Baba, see the hotel here. AFRICANA HOTEL." I descried.

"It is not this Africana Hotel, there is another one u there." The rider pointed forward as he fired the throttle. He meandered through a maze of buildings lined with trees. I read Nigeria Television Authority (NTA) in my mind when we passed the building and read it again the second time when it was standing by our right-hand side. A minute later, still on our right-hand side, I read "AFRICANA HOTEL" to the hearing of the three of us.

"Not his one, we are almost there." The motorcyclist declared irritably.

"Will you shut up and allow the driver to do his work. Where do you know in Abuja that you are opening your dirty mouth to talk?" That was my apprehensive father, the one who had lost confidence in my reading ability, afraid we might get lost since the amount in his pocket had crossed the reserve level.

Shortly afterwards, we were standing right in front of Africana Hotel and it was no different from the previous two I had seen before. I would have raised an eyebrow if my father's last shut-up command had simmered down. The rider asked a gateman of Plot 251 and he was directed to a duplex behind the hotel.

"*See di house for dat side. The one with black gate.*" The rider instructed, and with the same hand he gestured for his pay. I was counted upon to lead us to the house. At the house, I asked the gateman whether it was Engineer's house, not minding the fact that PLOT 251 was written on one of the supporting pillars of the gate.

“Yes, who are you? From where? What are you doing here?” He demanded in a single breath.

With a hint that we were at the right place, Pikolo took over the conversation. “See, Engineer is my brother. He sucked our mother’s breast and left some for me. Ask him whether I am not his brother. Our village is . . .”

“Enough. He is not around,” the man checked his watch. “It is to five, Oga will soon be here. Madam and the children too are not around. Just wait here.” He pointed to a wooden bench and I rushed to make myself comfortable. From my point of view, it was easier to draw a relationship between Pikolo and Engineer’s gateman from their worn-out suits to their parched skins.

“What about Lion, is he inside?” My father uttered with an air of familiarity.

“Yes, he is inside but you cannot see him until Oga arrives.”

While I was thinking about who Lion was and why my father hadn’t mentioned him, a sleek black Peugeot 505 drove to the gate. Seated at the backseat – owner’s corner, as we referred to the spot – was a younger and chubbier version of my father, someone I wished my father was. He wore a frown upon recognizing his brother. We followed the car into the perimeter of the house. The driver and the gateman nearly fought to open the door for the Engineer.

We stood a few meters away and bowed slightly when he stepped out.

“Tokwam, what are you doing in Abuja?” He demanded, supposedly in response to our greeting.

“I am here to see you”

“For what? Did I tell you that I want to see you? Why can’t you people stay in one place for goodness sake?” He handed his briefcase to the chauffeur and adjusted his necktie.

“You are going back to Abwor-Dyis tomorrow morning.” He commanded.

“Wait!” My father pleaded. Engineer turned and faced him. “Where is Lion?”

“Lion? Who told you about him? Hey Musa, get Lior here.” Engineer barked and within seconds a large Alsatian dog appeared and growled.

My father laughed hard, for a moment I thought I was dreaming, he tore open the polythene that contained the roasted chicken we had bought at forest and he threw the whole of it to the dog. I wanted to catch the meat before it touched down but I was restrained by my father. The dog looked for a hiding place as soon as it felt the weight of the whole chicken between its jaws. I couldn’t remember ever sharing a whole chicken with just one person. During Christmas a chicken was eaten in bits for at least two days.

in our family. Here Lion, a dog, was munching a whole roasted chicken not given by its owner but someone from the village. Engineer was too stunned to speak, or even move. I was equally dazed.

“A very wise dog,” my father remarked. I allowed tears to freely roll down my cheeks.

“What was that for?” Engineer asked, using his hands to communicate other things intended.

“I was told he likes chicken.” Pikolo grinned unabashedly.

“Bones of chicken, not the chicken.” Engineer corrected and hurried inside.

We cleared all that was set on the table for us inside, including the bottled water we were served.

* * *

Engineer’s wife and children entered the house at the same time the bulbs, powered by the generator, came on. Sighting their father, the children abandoned their mother at the door and they covered him on the chair. Before then, Uncle Engineer had quizzed me about school and had seemed more interested in conversing with me and watching T.V than chatting with his brother.

My father and I chorused “welcome” to her.

She eyed us derisively. “Ehen.” She hissed. “So what brought villagers to the city?” She didn’t wait for our response. I took a disliking for her immediately and I was sure it was a mutual feeling.

“Good evening uncle,” Jesse, the oldest child saluted. His brothers repeated the same words and they ran to their mother. Jesse was caught by the image on my T-shirt. “You also have a Superman T-shirt. Wow!” It occurred to me that he was also wearing the same kind of T-shirt. He ran to the kitchen screaming and I walked behind him.

“Mummy, uncle’s son is wearing Superman’s shirt, just like my own.” Jesse spoke gleefully.

“Yours is the real one and it is more expensive. His own is just a *gwanjo*, a second-hand. Didn’t you perceive the smell? Don’t ever compare yourself with those villagers.”

I was shocked when I heard her. Obviously, she was referring to us but the tone she used to deter him delivered more hate. I turned my frozen body and dragged myself back to my seat. Home was where I longed for, where even my mother’s constant haranguing conveyed more affection. Jesse reappeared with corresponding coldness. Without the benefit of mobile phones, then, we couldn’t call home to say we were fine, to say that were already tired of their Abuja. If there was any advantage to our coming, it lay in the fact that my father was a lot sober and the chances were that he would be more useful in that condition.

I saw a telephone being put to use for the first time by Engineer's wife. She called a friend, I think. I positioned one ear to eavesdrop on her conversation and the other ear on the television acting as my father's interpreter.

"My dear, you can say that again. I don't want to be a widow because of politics *o...*" Pause. "We are fine *o*, except for the fresh battalion that came from the village..." Pause. "Markus would not listen." Pause. "Ah! They have to go back to their witches and wizards tomorrow morning *o*."

My father noted how my attention had switched to Engineer's wife, who had given us her back as she conversed with whoever it was at the other end of the line. He followed my gaze and amused himself with the manner in which she laughed boisterously. We returned our faces to the T.V as soon as she dropped the call.

"Ehm, there is water in the bathroom." She stated. "You should wash those smelling bodies before you rub your disease on my sheets." She murmured as she stepped to her room.

Jesse returned to the sitting room triumphantly, "my mother said you people should take your smelling bodies to the bathroom."

Tas! I struck him on the face, sending him to the floor. "Mummy . . . mummy . . ." He ran inside.

His mother emerged with a wrapper tied around her chest. "So you are the junior village wizard that wants to kill my son eh! You will not succeed." Pikolo came between us

but he still turned and doled me a compensatory slap to calm her down.

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The following morning was the right time to say goodbye for us and our Abuja hosts. I had thought that that would be the last time I would ever come to Abuja. Back in Abwor-Dyis, Pikolo's debts and mama's wrath were waiting. On the milder side, my teachers and my friends were waiting for goodies. Uncle Engineer instructed his driver to drop us off at Nyanya park. He shoved one thousand, five hundred naira into my hands.

Engineer Dalong looked at his miserable brother who was smiling sheepishly, expectantly. "I suppose you would not need anything since you had enough to buy my dog a whole chicken. I will see you people in December."

“Why not? Do you honestly expect me to take that drab excuse from you as if I don’t know your stuff?”

“See men!”

“See women! What’s it *you* can’t do if you truly want to?”

“Blowmehot! Women are magicians!”

“Naturally!”

“Hm! Please sit down and calm down.” She tries to pull him to a seat.

“I’ll stand. You incarcerated me in the hotel room throughout yesterday – whole day!”

“My hussy... he’s your best friend; you know him. He hasn’t ‘super-glued’ me against his body to ensure we’re together 24/7 in the name of love because it’s impracticable. Your phone... throughout yesterday and up till the very minute you stepped in –”

“Ah, it’s under arrest and detention.”

“Again? Hian!”

“Just like her breathing, that *trouble* monitors me non-stop,” he grumbles with a grimace.

“Aye! Husband-monitoring wives!”

“Don’t mind them! They don’t know that men are like dedicated workers while they are like stingless honey bees – the former are not deterred by the disturbance of the latter.” He eyes her breasts which their provocative protrusion is interfering with his willpower.

“Wetin you dey look? Abi your eyes no dey vex? Now wey you come after you nearly kill me...”

He reaches for her hands with his fretting face melting into a smile; she responds positively and they fall on the sofa

“I tried to reach you through alternative phones without success. The device called phone is liable to disappoint – seems a necessary evil like...” he throws her a reproachful expression.

“Like?”

“I’ve not said women!”

“Mr. Pot, when you’re done calling the kettle black, tell me what they say about a guilty conscience. By the way, isn’t your *necessary evil* using your captured *necessary evil* to catch all your suspected *necessary evils*?”

“You and your *mberembere* mouth! Well, it’s he who sups with the devil using a short spoon who has issues! I’ve a way of *managing* my phone,” he says with a chuckle.

“Smartie! That means you’re also cheating on me!” She casts accusatory eyes at him.

He ogles her and blurts, “Your hair-do’s charming! Turns you into a sweet sixteen!”

“Wow!”

His fingers creep to her erogenous zones. “What’s this style called, ‘Honey-I’m-qualified-for-daily-phone-allowy’?”

“Wow! That’s a catchy hairstyle name. But this is Boho braids.”

“Hehn, women with suffering, sorry, fashion. Just ten–fifteen minutes’ ‘kriiiiiii’ would give men a fresh look. But women would take one, two or even more days to do Goddess braids, Jumbo Senegalese twists. Authentic Fulani braids –”

“Ahh! Smartie knows all the names of women fashion hairstyles. Now, deny that you’re cheating on me.”

...why, I'm not cheating on you; I cross my heart." He intensifies his play.

"You had better not, if not..." She wags a warning finger at him.

"You'll pay double for yesterday..." he says, trying to yank off his clothes.

"Stop! Not here!"

"Today?"

"My husband..."

"Hasn't he gone to work? And the children are in school?"

"He may come in."

"Lock the door!"

"Mn-mn, it's not right."

"Kitchen?"

"N-no-o."

"He won't come."

"You can't tell."

"Toilet?"

"Ha!"

"Ah!"

"Oh, heck!" Angel exclaims and smacks the attention-grabbing protuberance in front of his trousers. "Can't you control yourself? Abi your thing na Dollar rate against Naira?"

"You know there's a backlog of unmet demand," he says and whispers something into her ear.

"Nah-nah-nah! See school, see house; and it's about his break period."

He still eyes her up.

"What about your Formula?" she asks.

"My Formula can't work now."

"Ohoo, you see! NOW is 'No Emergency Time!'"

"This is school time. He can't possibly leave the school to be tied down in a joint with palm wine over plate of catfish pepper soup and my excuses like, 'Ah, I've an emergency somewhere, let me rush and attend to it.'"

"Eyaah! My poor hussy!"

"What you don't know doesn't kill you. Moreover they're all forms of enjoyment! He sits and enjoy himself while I come and meet you and we enjoy ourselves."

"B-a-d G-u-y! Go and apply the Formula. He's the Principal; he can afford a few hours' absence."

"My office -?"

"Local Government Office? Is today your pay day?"

As Angel "drags" Atogbon whose eyes are bursting with yearning to the door, her alert eyes pierce through the window and sights Shima coming from afar. A sudden profound panic engulfs her, and she starts wailing about hysterically and pushing Atogbon to hide.

"I can't hide inside while my car is outside. Calm down, let me manage the situation." Atogbon says assuredly; then makes a frantic call. "Hel-hello-hello Orkov. ... Morning - where are you? You're not in the school and you're not in your house. ... Yeah. ... You're close to the house? ... Oh, ok, hurry up please. ... Yes yes, I'm waiting."

"Hey, Mr. Formula!" Angel exclaims.

"This is an opportunity to lure him..." he says excitedly.

"Mr. Formula! Kwagh wou gande gburu-gburu!"

"Prepare o - as soon as I tie him, you'll see me."

“Ahn-ahn! Does work ever finish? Do you know the volume of work I left on my table and rushed here? If you finish the work today and have nothing to do tomorrow, they will declare you redundant and sack you.”

They all laugh.

“But let me go and put one or two things in order at least,” Shima argues.

“Listen, there’s no time. Can’t you see that I’ve to leave my office and *run* to see you? We can’t afford to miss this golden opportunity on account of dilly-dallying.”

“B-a-b-i-e, if I heard well, this is an Oil and Gas Business Deal – the in-thing in Nigeria. I don’t think you should waste time. Aren’t you the Principal?” Angel persuades her husband.

“Oil and Gas Business Deal direct from NNPC Towers, Abuja,” Atogbon hammers in.

“Well...” Shima shrugs his shoulders resignedly; then ogling his wife, asks, “My Angel, your...?”

“It’s ready, Baby.” She dashes inside and brings a folded sheet of paper for him.

“Only these items?”

“Baby, you’ve so much on your head. Your car is down, my first semester tuition fees, my parents’ –”

“Oh, stop-stop! You don’t know that you’re my Teramshashima? *U tera’ m sha atôshima jigh jigh ghang*. I can’t sleep if you need something and I can’t provide it. Update the list!” Shima declares lovingly.

“Yippee! God bless you my Baby!” Angel screeches, and gives him an appreciative kiss.

“Madam, you’re lucky indeed!” Atogbon says, then hurries Shima up, “Now let’s go. ‘Time is money,’ they say”

“Teramshashima, send the updated list to my phone,” Shima tells her while at the door.

Also at the door, Atogbon signals her to expect him back shortly.

“Wowee!” Angel explodes.

The two friends drive in Atogbon’s car straight to Temabiishii Mem Ate, situated in the highbrow area of Makurdi town. It is populated even around that mid-morning time. People are eating varieties of food like pounded yam, amara, eba, rice, beans, rice/beans/dodo, akpukpa/akamu. Bottles of beer and palm wine are also on some patrons’ tables. The way some people are eating can easily give one an impression that eating competition is afoot. The two friends select a secluded section and sit down.

“Orkov, you don hit jackpot, dis one wey you dey declare for your wife anyhow?” Atogbon enquires.

“And you my closest friend no go know? You know me, even if the whole world dey for my head like Atlas, I can’t joke with my wife happiness.”

“Dat your wife na wife!” Atogbon says and turns to the waitress. “Bring us pounded yam with bitter leaf soup with catfish pepper soup. Hope una fish big like this –?” He demonstrates with his hands a large-sized fish.

“Oga, our fish fit swallow person self.” says the waitress jokily.

“Like the fish wey swallow Jonah?” Shima jokes, and

“Oya, go bring de food fast fast. Kill de fish o, make e no come swallow us. After, you go bring cold palmy and Star,” Atogbon says, and quickly adds, “You know nau, de one wey cold sotee e don dey sweat.”

The waitress leaves, laughing.

“I know I’m in order.” Atogbon says.

“Hundred percent.”

“I know you more than you know yourself.”

They shriek with laughter.

“Ehnhen, this hot Oil and Gas Business Deal, let me –” Atogbon drops his statement and suddenly starts checking his pockets. “Kpei!”

“What’s it?”

“K-p-e-i!” he exclaims louder, searching his pockets agitatedly.

“What’s the matter?”

Atogbon leaps up and rushes out. He returns after a while, stands and talks to Shima in a panic-stricken mode, “My keys – my sensitive Office keys I can’t see them. I just checked inside the car too. Please excuse me, I’ve to rush to the POS Operator where I did a transaction to check. You know I was rushing to see you.”

“What about the food?”

“Eat your order. Tell the waitress to keep mine for me,” he says, already walking away.

As Shima is eating his food sulkily, his phone rings. He looks at the number and answers the call edgily. “Hello, Sir.” His voice is tinged with apprehension. He unconsciously drops the ball of pounded yam in his hand, visibly struggles and suppresses the urge to stand up but ends up perching at the edge of the chair. After the

greeting, all he says at intervals throughout the call is, “Yes, Sir.”

After the call, he looks at the phone dolefully, hissing, “These Ministry of Education Officials... as if they’re God.” Then he grumbles, “See what Orkov Atogbon has caused me now.”

He fixes contemplative eyes on the food; then decides to wolf down the fish, leave the food, and dash off.

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The door’s clicking sound “Klii-kikiki” as it opens makes the expectant Angel chirp elatedly from the kitchen without seeing who entered, “Are you back already?”

Shima who has burst in angrily tries to say something about Ministry of Education Officials’ urgent request for some documents but Angel’s ecstatic voice shoots in against his, “Hope the pepper soup is tasty enough to make him eat and forget himself.”

Shima is dumbfounded.

“Mr. Formula, just a moment let me freshen up.” she chimes.

As he is transfixed by Angel’s strange behaviour, he sights Atogbon drive in like one rushing a critically ill person to hospital; then hurry towards the door after looking about shiftily. Impulsively, Shima scurries to a murky side of the dining room.

Atogbon breezes in and announces breathlessly, “I’m back, my Angel.”

Shima is yet to come to terms with what’s happening when Angel emerges from the bedroom and the two go into each other’s arms and engage in a passionate kiss. Thunderstruck, he positions himself to capture their further exploits.

“Applied?” Angel asks anxiously.

“Trust! I would have come back earlier if not one stupid Okada rider who made me nearly kill him.”

“Kill him?”

“Okada riders? Forget them! He just didn’t want me to come and... anyway, it’s been sorted out. I’ve to hurry up and go back and meet my friend.”

“Wow! While he’s enjoying himself there, we’ve got the whole house to ourselves!”

“Any time I look at you, I can’t help feeling my good friend doesn’t deserve you.” He caresses her.

“Let him hear you and let’s see if he wouldn’t pound your balls.”

“I can’t ever have enough of you! Having one- or two-hours’ fling in a lodge or a *quickie* here and there is not satisfying – not fulfilling.”

“You wan kolobi de whole thing? Oh, my poor h-u-s-s-y... how he loves me... If he gets to know about us, heads must roll.”

“Definitely! But will he ever... with his simplicity and trusting nature?”

“Imagine tying him down in a joint with palm wine and catfish pepper soup and flimsy excuses –”

“For as long as it takes me to come and enjoy a round or two...” He lifts her up in a flurry of passion and depositing her on the sofa, starts stroking her voraciously.

“Wait – wait... I’ve prepared your favourite.”

“Is there another favourite? *Kpa-kpash!*”

Shima maneuvers his way into the inner room and then runs out madly, flourishing a machete. He grinds its blade on the floor in a sweeping movement with a resultant fear-provoking grating sound. The amorous

lovers are startled out of their enthralled state. Atogbon jump-stands up, quivering profusely like an old woman exposed to biting harmattan wind. Angel too struggles to her feet, but her quivering legs cannot support her; she squirms like one riddled with a volley of bullets, staggers back and forth and falls like a bag of heavy commodity.

Shima repeats the action more ominously, generating sparks of light and a blood-curdling *w-y-e-e-e-i-i-i-n-g* sound simultaneously, sending Atogbon racking with spasms of guilt and Angel rolling on the floor in a paroxysm of wailing.

His hand clutching the machete tightly as he raises it, Shima rolls his eyes turned scarlet-red and barks rabidly, “Atogbon, Angel...”

A RARE GEM

Little voices cheering happily with joy running out of the house to meet and welcome their mother and wife. "Mommy, welcome home," the three lovely kids welcomed their mother gleefully.

"Welcome home my queen, my joy, my life, my wife and my pride," her husband echoed in an unfamiliar but suiting tone.

Chloe came in with a beaming face as if the sun was planted in her heart. She embraced her children after dropping her basket of groceries by the door, lifting them with love. She kissed their foreheads coyly, with love in her eyes and sweetness in her voice. She then hugged and nuzzled her husband freely, resting on his chest like a child. The servant girls watched their mistress and her family with envy, joy, and respect; happy to serve in Chloe's house. They picked the basket of groceries by the door and waved their mistress with deep smiles on their lips, as they returned to the house to continue their chores. Chloe walked towards the house beside her husband and children, all beaming with joy in their hearts.

"You are the reason I sit and chat with elders, and almost everybody in the community treats me like royalty. You are indeed a virtuous woman. Many women do noble things but you surpass them all. I love you very much, mother of our beautiful children."

"Stop flattering me please. I am also honoured to have you as my king, my hero, and my husband. You have been supportive in raising these kids and loving and

protecting me all the time. You've never brought shame to me or our household. I love you," Chloe retorted.

They all went back to the house. Chloe quickly took a shower and refreshed herself, decking herself in a fine blue satin gown. After dinner she decided to go in for a short as her husband stayed with the children in the library, all reading their favourite books.

"Father, my lord and my king. Thank you for the gift of life. Thank you for my husband and children. Thank you for giving them to me. Thank you for forgiving them their sins. Thank you for blessing their lives and increasing them. Thank you for preserving them all and protecting them in every area of their lives. Thank you for giving them peace. Thank you for my servant girls and all the workers in my house. Thank you for giving them the heart to serve me and my family wholeheartedly. Thank you for blessing them all. Thank you for my friends, relatives and neighbours. Thank you for blessing them all and..."

It was in the wee hours of the morning while everyone was sleeping. Chloe was already awake and preparing breakfast for her husband and children. She prepared meals for her husband and children whenever she was home. She always felt it was her responsibility to keep her family happy. Every morning, she would wake up and pray for her family, servants, friends, neighbours and everyone in her room before leaving her the house for work. She believed in supporting her husband with her earning, not just as a wife but as a friend and companion. After setting food for her husband and children on the dining table, Chloe went upstairs and took a shower. She wore a fine flay short gown with golden embroidery

around the neck, put on a diamond necklace and bracelet, and a golden shoe to match with her satin designs. She wrapped her hair in a youngster fashion. She loves dressing well and simple. After dressing, she checked herself in the mirror to see if she was fit to go out. She then set out for her business trip. Her consignment would be delivered to her around 9am that morning at the cargo airport. Still standing in front of her mirror, Chloe felt a little tap on her shoulder. Before she could turn to see who tapped her, she heard, "And where is my beautiful young girl going this morning, looking radiant?"

It was her husband. She turned shyly and buried her head on his chest as usual and held him softly with her tender hands. Her husband cuddled her gently in his arms like an infant.

"Good morning my love. Hope you woke up feeling great?" Chloe queried.

"Sure, my love," replied Constantine. "And how is my baby doing this morning?"

"Your baby is fine. Sorry I was not able to tell you last night about my consignments that will be delivered at the airport. I was tired and needed to be there before 9 o'clock so that I can take records before returning to the office to have a meeting with my managers. I didn't want to disturb your sleep that was why I didn't wake you up. My love I'm sorry for not telling you earlier, hope you are not angry with me?"

"No, my world! I'm not offended at all. I'm just short of words I don't even know what to say again. But I want to thank God for giving you to me. You give me joy at all times. You give me peace and you have never raised your voice at me even if I might have done things to hurt

you. Even if I misbehave, you always know how to talk to me without allowing a third party to know about our issues. You always inspire me with your words of wisdom and encouragement. I'm proud of you and I will always be." Constantine said in a usual deep voice.

"Don't start that my love," Chloe said with sternness in her voice. "You always say that, I don't need all this. My prayer is that God would make our union last forever, and don't break my heart in future. That's what I ask of you. Take care of yourself. I need to rush to the airport now as it is almost 7am and I need to rush to take stock. Your breakfast and that of the children is on the table. Just try make them ready and take them to school. I will try and see you in your office after I am through. Love you and see you later." Chloe hugged her husband and he kissed her forehead and whispered in her ears "I love you; and please don't allow those men to toast you thinking you are a teenager. That will make me jealous; just kidding anyway." Chloe only smiled and gave him some naughty gaze, looking radiant like the lone star in the sky.

"What a beauty and God's gift..." Her husband said to himself and went straight to his children's room to wake them up. He loved his wife deeply and practically adored her. She meant the world to him. He showed the same affection to Christine their only daughter and replica of her mother; sandwiched between the boys. Whenever he saw her or looked at her face, she always reminded her of his dearest one and only Chloe; a woman that carried wisdom on her tongue. A wise and virtuous woman, full of grace and honour. He loved and cherished her so dearly. Constantine couldn't stop thinking about his wife. She was always fresh to him and to his face every day.

He's always thanking her for loving him and for her understanding at all times even if things went awry between them. She never stopped praying for him and wishing him well in everything he did. Constantine went in and woke the children in their separate rooms to prepare them for school.

Chloe walked out with softness in her voice and smile on her lips and with happiness on her face as she responded to her servant girls while they greeted gleefully.

"Good morning ma'am," said the three girls simultaneously.

"Morning to you all. Hope you all had a wonderful night rest. Take care of yourselves. May the good Lord bless you all this day and forever, and may his everlasting peace rest upon you all." Chloe replied her servant girls as she entered her car and drove away.

"Such a good and wonderful woman," said one of the servant girls. "I wish I was like her or related to her by blood, to be identified with such a woman is an honour not only at home but the society at large. Ooh! what a world!"

"You are right," said the other two girls. "But at least we are privileged to serve in her house and through this we are already her blood and we are always identified with her because people always describe us as girls working in the virtuous woman's house. We are honored as well."

With joy in their hearts, they all went back to the house and continued with the house chores for the day having enough time to rest. No stress. No anger. No pain.

Back in the office, Chloe summoned all the managers of her hotel over for a meeting. She owned a hotel in the heart of the town. The hotel is known everywhere in that city since it's the finest and largest - a five-star hotel. LIBERATION HOTEL had facilities such as swimming pool, pharmaceutical store, shopping mall, beauty salon, boutique, gym, a studio for production, and a spa. The hotel provided affordable services, with hospitable staff in every department. Prominent people within and outside the hotel location often lodged in it or held business or political meetings there. Even the average and middle-income group could afford its services. The hotel also had a section for the lower class.

Chloe called her managers for an emergency meeting. She had received complaints from expatriates and business partners that lodged at her hotel about some changes they had noticed. Students on internship, youth corps members, and ad-hoc staff had been seen doing shady things.

"So I'm calling on you all to brace up from your individual offices. Take attendance seriously. Give them a proper orientation. I can call on anyone of you in the management team to address those youth corps members and the students on Industrial Training (I.T) and instruct them on the etiquettes of working in a hotel and most especially my hotel." And with that serious address from Chloe, all the management staff of her hotel went out happily. She didn't blame any of them because she knew them as good people who had won service awards working in her hotel. The government and other hotel organizations had recognised their contributions. They were so happy she did not scold them.

nice person to them. Didn't she notice? They wondered. But it was brought to her notice by some of her clients who lodged in the hotel. She knew about some shady things going on by some boys and girls in the hotel. She asked them to go back and check and conduct proper orientation.

Chloe was popular for impacting positively on other children in her children's school. She knew that some never had enough to eat or probably hungry, so she brought snacks or some packages for quite a number of kids. Although the school had a limited number of children because of adequate understanding, she brought some packages that could reach out to many children. The children would always ask after her when she didn't come for school runs. Obviously, the children would've preferred her for their mother.

"Where is mummy Craddle?" they would ask Constantine any day he dropped his children in school.

"Will she bring it tomorrow? Tell her we miss the chocolates. We miss her smiles and the way she plays with us and tells us happy things." The kids would tell Constantine and expressed their feeling for his wife.

"Please tell her we long to see her face again."

The husband knew it because of the snacks. He felt that the next time he would go pick up his children from school, he would take some snacks along. He wanted to compete with his wife for the praises of the school children.

"Why is everybody talking about Chloe? You enter here, Chloe Chloe Chloe? People always sing praises of her, showering her with blessings. They Respect her more than me. Why? Is she better than me?"

Or it is because she is richer than I am? I know I shower her praises too. But human beings can change and let this not make her start disrespecting me in future. I am to be respected more than my wife. I have to act fast in order not to lose my respect from her in future. I will have to address this late when I get home. But I love her and she has never disrespected me."

Still pondering in his heart on the decision to make, his thoughts were interrupted by a call from his secretary.

"Sir, your sweet wife is here to see you."

"Let her in, please." He answered in a deep but low tone.

"Thank you, dear." Chloe told the secretary with a soft smile on her face as she went straight to her husband's office exactly the time she told him she would go over. Chloe entered the beautifully furnished office of the company owned by her husband. The fine furniture was a special gift from Chloe on his previous birthday to change and transform the office in a unique way. Chloe entered in and hugged her husband happily and he kissed her.

"Good to see you, my love," Constantine said nervously and tensed.

"Anytime, my love. I can't be tired of seeing you. I came by to keep to my words when I told you earlier that I was coming over to see you and know how you are doing in your office."

"Ahhh... I'm honoured," Constantine answered with uncertainty in his tone, not coming from his heart. "You don't seem happy this afternoon. Have I done anything wrong to you? Open up so I can apologize. Or

did you hear anything bad about me?" Chloe smiled and held her husband's hand to her lips and kissed it.

He didn't reply her but only shook his head.

"I'm just tired and not in a good mood. I'd love to be in solitude for some time to think well."

"It's alright then, my love. I will let you have your own time. I came to keep to my word and to know if you could go pick the children, or should I go pick them instead?"

"I prefer you go pick them instead, so that you can be showered with more praises, love and respect. I don't know if your show of love is hypocritical." Constantine replied with coldness in his voice, as if he was ripped off of his pride. He was gazing straight into her eyes without a blink in his eyes. On hearing this, Chloe knew the sudden change in the attitude of her husband was about her. She didn't want to create a scene there since they weren't at home. So she decided to get hold of herself and behave well. She didn't want to fill her mind with negative thoughts by assuming that Constantine could change all of a sudden after fourteen years of marriage. She wondered why he couldn't wait to go home first but decided to stir it up in his office.

Chloe stood up and came close to him. She bent over and kissed his forehead without saying anything and headed straight for the door. As she turned the door knob, she turned to him and said, "I hope you are prepared to finish what you have started."

She then opened the door gently and smiled at him in pretense as she closed the door behind her gently. Chloe unhurriedly walked back to the reception. Seeing his employees smiling sweetly at her, she also smiled back at

them and bid them farewell. Chloe left for her children's school and picked them, heading back home to rest for a while.

Back in his office, Constantine felt ashamed and guilty for entertaining such thoughts earlier. He regretted why he was filled with anger the moment Chloe came into his office. He wouldn't have allowed the same praises which he also showered her with to affect him. He felt pain for uttering those words to Chloe. Constantine decided to put an end to this by calling one of his oldest staff members into his office to confide in him. When Mr. Adams came into the office, Constantine asked him to sit. He sat gingerly, wondering whether he'd wronged his boss to be summoned into the office. He felt relieved when Constantine informed him that the reason for the invitation was to have a very important discussion with him.

"I'd love you to keep whatever we discuss here as a secret without a third party involved in it." Constantine said with firmness in his tone and seriousness in his eyes. Adams promised his boss that he would conceal every word discussed with deep assurance.

"I called you here because I respect you so much and believe that you will give me a good advice. I have never disclosed my family issues outside and this is the first time. I have really hurt my wife and I don't know what to tell her when I get home. People love and admire her, both men and women, young and old, even children. And because of her respect for me and her commitment and contribution to the house and the people outside, people respect me. They all sing praises of Chloe. Sometimes when I'm passing, I always hear them say,

LOOK at the husband of that virtuous woman." I thought I loved my wife but I am feeling guilty of the thoughts that came into my mind this morning. I have realized that I have punished her trust when she came in earlier to see me. The words I uttered weren't right and mature. I have failed my wife because of fear of losing my honour in future. Please, help me, Adams. I can't afford to lose my home."

Constantine couldn't hold back his tears while talking. Adams could see the pain in his boss's eyes. He could judge his mind at that moment.

"It's alright sir. I understand everything. As your staff, we always admire your wife and envy you as the husband. You are lucky to have such woman as a wife. You should be honoured and grateful to God for blessing you with Chloe. Do you think she is the only woman in the society? But it is her character that made her unique from other women. Even though we still have good women, but Chloe is not ordinary. She has really played the role of a woman; the perfect role of a woman that God ordained for women to play. Do you know that if you had not realized your mistakes today and seek for counsel immediately, your home would've started collapsing from today? Remember, women play vital roles in our homes. Forget that we are the head of the house; but women are the keepers and custodians of our homes. If a home is great today, look carefully, it is the handwork of a woman," he paused, searching Constantine's face.

He went on. "A good woman prays for her family. She works hard to contribute to her home as a companion, to walk side by side with her husband and to give him a helping hand always as a helper. She does this so that the

burden would be light for the husband to carry. This will certainly build the love between the husband and the wife to wax stronger, and it will build your home as well. Remember, the role of a wife is different from the role of a woman. By the time you the man starts imagining your wife assuming your position and start treating her with contempt, the woman will start failing in her responsibility as wife. That will be the beginning of your downfall as a man. Men don't know that their lives are in the hands of their wives which can be taken away from them in different ways. When you fail as a man, your house will be destroyed because that peace is taken away. The woman will no longer pray for her family for its wellbeing. She will depart from your life. That respect you used to have will no longer be there. And those people praising and respecting you will start laughing at you, insulting you and saying all manner of things against you. They'd be saying, '...see this foolish man that drove his good wife away.' Even if you bring her back into your life after settling your past differences, you have already lost your glory as a man to your wife and people. She will no longer respect you. Remember, everything that is happening today is already written in the Scriptures. There is a passage in the scripture that really talked about a woman and I will quote one that is found in Proverbs 12: 4. It says, '*a wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is like decay in his bones.*' Your wife is your crown which shines at all times," again, Adams paused to allow that sink in.

"That is why everybody sees her first before you", he continued, "and all the parts of your body which are under the head respect the crown which gives the face and

the body glory. You are the one taking the glory instead. For the crown is only advertising the real person that is in charge of it. A woman always glitters and shines in order to pave way for her husband to have his glory. If your wife who serves as the crown does not shine, your head and body will not be seen or recognized by people because it is dark. But if the crown on your head shines brightly, definitely people will see you clearly. And instead of them to concentrate on the crown that announces you or respect the crown, they will respect the bearer of the crown the more, and that's you the man. Please, Mr. Constantine, don't allow your wife to turn and become disgraceful. For she will begin to start honouring herself instead and will no longer be your crown. That support will no longer be there as she'd say, 'after all, it is the man's responsibility to fend for and provide the need of his family.' With this the crown will cease to shine again. Your wife Chloe, who was seen as the crown will become a decay in your bones. Don't allow that sir. Go home and apologize. If you waste time, she will start sinking. It doesn't take a long time for a woman to fade or change."

"Wow! I'm very happy to get this good advice from you, I am now free. Thank you and God bless you for saving my home from destruction. Truly a woman plays a vital role in her home. A wise woman builds her home; but the foolish destroys hers; and Chloe builds hers. Let me rush to my happy home again."

They both left the office together after the important discussion.

For the first time in their fourteen years of marriage, Constantine didn't return home early. Chloe after preparing dinner decided to still keep some for her

husband on the dinner table in case he made up his mind to return home that night. After setting Constantine's meal on the table, Chloe managed to cheer her children up as she was being disturbed and questioned about their father's delay in coming home. The kids really missed his presence because he was always there with them before their bedtime. That day wasn't a happy day for Chloe and the kids. She told them he was having a busy day at work and might not be back. This helped in calming their minds. Then they had their dinner and were taken to their rooms to sleep. The kids slept almost immediately since they were no longer expecting their dad's return. Chloe seeing that she had succeeded in making them sleep peacefully felt at ease and returned to the living room.

By 9 o'clock that evening, Chloe set varieties of fruits and creamy-looking omelette spread on the table for her husband. Still worried, Chloe kept every disturbing thought in check and then prayed for her husband.

"Father, Lord God, protect my husband anywhere he is right now. Be his security at any height and in any crag." She wasn't aware of her husband's return. He used the latch key and opened the back door, came in and stood by the couch watching his wife praying and positively mentioning his name for God's protection wherever he was. He felt guilty and at the same time realized and became certain what a real woman she was. Constantine was very happy to have a virtuous woman like Chloe for a wife. Despite the words he smeared on her in his office earlier that day, she still loved him and prayed for him.

"Amen..."

Chloe heard an almost sonorous voice answering 'Amen' right behind her as she stood up. She was startled.

It was her husband, standing, looking at her sheepishly with a countenance mixed with smiles and guilt. Instead of Chloe holding back because of what ensued hours earlier, she resisted every bitter sentiment and ran to him with a joyful heart. She hugged him the way babies snuggle in their parents' arms to be held and caressed.

"Welcome back, my love. Thank God you returned to see us." She whispered, still in her husband's arms.

"My heart, I really love you." He said with a trembling and shaky voice.

Lifting her head up to look at her husband face to face, she saw tears welling up in his eyes.

"Don't cry, my love. It's okay now. I understand how you feel and your pride as a man sinking and a woman is taking it away from you. I am not a disgraceful woman that would dry your bones by supplanting your role when I know my place in your life for God sake's. I am your crown which is always shining for you to be honoured and respected. It is because I respect you, that is why people respect you. But if I don't respect you, people will follow suit. I helped you to be seen and honoured because I am your helper and complement. Please, forget about all that. You have to trust me on this. I love you and will always respect you till eternity. So, please get over this so that the kids will not notice."

"I am highly honoured by God to have you to hold and cherish, to be my life, friend, companion and my helper, I am truly sorry to be rude to your heart and emotions. I was jealous of you earlier because of what people both young and old say about you even though they were all compliments. But I now understand your

role as a woman. For many women do noble things but you surpass them all. I know what I'm giving you is not good enough because of how far you've gone and what you've achieved in life, but I'm wrong. Even the way praises come to you makes me feel inadequate. I am sorry and I'm honoured."

"Don't feel inadequate. The spell you have on me is heavier than all I have ever achieved. You are my biggest achievement and that makes you the winner. I never knew someone will ever look like me and you gave me Christine."

With that, they held each other tightly and Constantine ate his meal joyfully. Later, they went to bed. They slept like babies with little or no snore. They didn't wake up at dawn until it was half an hour before mid-day, because it was weekend.

Theirs was a home at the verge of collapsing. They put the past behind and started on a new happy life without a third party. They were able to solve their marital issues and succeeded in keeping human problems at the lowest ebb. A disgraceful woman would have let the world know there was fire that was about to start in the vault and would make it burn out for all to see. But this woman of noble character, Chloe, was able to quench the fire by herself not even allowing her own children to know about it.

The following week, back in the office, Mr. Adams was graced with an official car that made him a very happy person.

Chloe lived happily ever after with her family because of the role she played as a woman and a wife.

A THIEF OF LIFE

She was with me when the bomb went off.
She survived; I died.

Within seconds, I saw myself getting up, leaving my mangled body – what was left of it – buried under the rubble of our once elegant church house. The explosion took out the entire front wall of the building.

And Maureen, my lovely Maureen – was flung out by the explosion through the collapsed front wall. She lay motionless, her hands spread out and clutching the ground like a worshipper, her wedding gown discoloured by dust and soaked in her blood. I dashed to her and tried to hold her, but my hand slid through her like she wasn't there. "Angel Eyes," I called her, hoping our pet-name would trigger that excitement in her.

She remained still. A thick patch of clotted blood covered her right eye. She was oblivious of my presence and the pandemonium that surrounded her. People were hysterical as they scrambled to assist the wounded – my friends, groomsmen, family – those that I saw. I tried calling out to some of them, but no one heard me; they didn't even seem to notice me.

Some movement around Angel Eyes drew my attention back to her. She was flexing her fingers – the finger my ring would have been hugging by now. Reverend Tok had completed administering the oaths and was saying, "... pronounce you husb...."

Then...
Boom!

The land of the dead was nothing like I've ever imagined. Not the place with foreboding darkness or impoverished demons making eerie noises as they combatted each other over the right to possess the bodies of their mortal victims. Nothing like that.

Instead, it was beautiful.
Organised.

Immediately, I saw the harmony in everything – the whole of creation: air, water, earth, vegetation, mountains, valleys and deserts. Blacks, Whites, Indians, Caucasians, Japs, Chinese, Latinos, tall, short, plump, skimpy people – they all formed a beautiful mosaic of colours, light, shade, forms; each a part of the greater design, each a small piece essential to the whole. Everything fitted together to form a giant mural on an eternal canvas.

And it was beautiful.

Nobody told you where to go after dying. You just knew you had to head for the Crystal Gate. There, everything ended. There too, everything began: eternal bliss for the righteous and dread for the unrighteous. For me, I wasn't sure what my feelings were. In fact, I felt cheated: I wasn't supposed to die now. But pieces of me scattered everywhere scoffed at my supposition: from my torso in the rubble to the tiniest shred of serrated flesh embroidered on broken pieces of some pews. The earth refused to hide any of it, instead it treated my flesh like a kin: receiving each piece and appointing it to its dignified spot within its vast domain; the same way a carton of sardine was appointed to its spot on the shelf in that Amazon mega warehouse, ready to be retrieved with precision whenever an order was placed. I was surprised

the earth was such organised, but that also gave me a huge relief. The dust part of me was now home. Maybe that was why they called her Mother Earth. She carried me all my life; each of us, and received, when we transited to this side, the part of us that came from her.

So I set out for the Crystal Gate and found myself walking on a street paved with what appeared like gold. It was spotless, clear as crystal, and it reflected everything above it. Was this really the land of the dead? So why then were people afraid of dying?

I didn't know how far I went, but I suddenly realised I was alone. Where was everyone? For certain I didn't die alone. What happened to the people who died in the explosion as me? Where did they all go? Okay, if I was the only person who died in the explosion, what about those who died through accidents or wars or in hospitals? Where did they all go to?

"So where..." I stopped and continued walking, not sure if I was permitted to question things here. I must reach the Crystal Gate. It was something I just knew, like the knowledge was a part of me. What would I find there? What would my end be?

The thought seemed to transport me faster because I suddenly found myself inside an old city. There was something vaguely familiar about it: from its old houses with their rusty brown roofs, to the chaotic markets and disorderly streets...

Tudun Wada?

But I'm certain I died. Yet, here was confusion in fluid motion. What was this place? While I pondered on these, someone tapped me on the shoulder. When I turned, I couldn't believe my eyes. There, one of my ancestors,

my patriarchal grandpa going down several generations. He stood regally like the morning star, his long flowing priestly robe reminiscent of mosaic times. His hair was white like wool and eyes sharp, strong, fiery.

"Grandpa!" I yelled, grinning, unable to contain my excitement. He died before I was conceived, but it was like I knew him all along.

"Congratulations," he said, smiling. His voice was like the sound of many trumpets echoing across mountains.

I raised my eyebrows, "For...?"

"For choosing to die."

I was stunned. "Great grandpa..., I didn't choose to die." I protested, intent on expressing my displeasure and reminded him how I got here. If killing me was someone's joke, I needed him to understand I wasn't cool with it; and if I was in a dream, it was one with a sour taste.

But my vituperations failed to rattle Grandpa. He placed his arm lovingly around me and drew me to him. As our bodies touched, I immediately felt his love. It washed over me like a shower, seeping into every cell, calming me. I instantly knew he had one of the most important things to tell me.

"She stole your life to live." He whispered, like some conspirator divulging an important secret. A chilling silence enveloped us as I tried to figure out what he just said. No. Angel Eyes wouldn't do that. She wasn't a thief of life. We loved each other too much. She and I were besties...

I met Maureen in a supermarket – one of those neighbourhood stores barely larger than a standard room – which sold everything: from provisions to groceries to

nails, screw drivers and even camping mats. I was just making my payments when she stormed into the store. They'd sold her a packet of expired toothpaste that was covered in dust. She was protesting to the shop owner, a retired civil servant who boasted she used her gratuity to set up the store; she didn't understand why Maureen was protesting over a simple matter like dust on a pack of toothpaste!

"Are you not dust yourself?" The woman had asked Maureen, further infuriating the loquacious but elegant twenty-something-year-old who was fresh out of National Youth Service.

Maureen turned to me, her eyes rolling and lips twitching, "Can you imagine?" She blared, her glazing eyes boring into me as though I was the culprit.

Shaking my head, I said, "It's not fair, but I need you to calm down." Then I pleaded with the woman to return Maureen's money, but she refused, claiming Maureen had tampered with the packaging already. To broker peace, I persuaded Maureen to leave everything and offered to buy her a fresh one.

"Thanks for your offer, but it's not about the money." She fumed, "She has to accept she's wrong."

"It's your mother that's wrong, *yeye* girl," The woman had interjected, hissing.

Maureen flung the toothpaste at one of the shelves and stormed out. I ran after her and caught up with her.

"Hey, you're smarter than that. Don't let her attitude get to you."

She stopped. I took her hand. "I apologise on her behalf."

"That's all she should have done. But no, she must show me she's older than me."

She was crying. I gave her my hankie. "It's not new, but I hope you can manage it."

"Thank you." She cleaned her face, "I'm sorry."

"That's okay. Crying is one of nature's best remedies." I told her. "What Mama did wasn't right. I guess it's one of the things we must deal with in Africa - that notion that the elder is always right. Let me get something else for you, like wine?"

"No thanks, I just want to go home."

"Oh, oh, oh... roasted fish then."

She looked at me. I stared back, my head journeying up and down like an agama lizard's. She smiled.

At the next neighbourhood, we got her toothpaste, some roasted fish and a bottle of wine. Our conversation centred on the woman's behaviour - how selfish and insensitive people had become; how traders ripped citizens daily, with no consumer protection, or an adequate system for seeking redress, how this, how that...

Afterwards, I walked her home and was surprised to discover she lived just a few blocks from me. She said we attended the same church and that she recognised me very well as the youth drama director. I apologised for not recognising her, because in truth, I couldn't remember ever seeing her.

"You guys are up there, close to Jesus, while we are down here near Satan."

We laughed at the joke.

"It's not like that." I tried to assure her. "I'm sure it's because..."

"...we're not important for some of you, abi?" She completed the sentence for me.

"No, No, No." I denied. "Nothing like that. It's just that I meet too many people and..."

"...so you can't even remember the insignificant ones."

I gave up. But, her remarks got me thinking. Was I snobbish? Was I too full of myself? That night, after I returned home, Maureen's statements stayed with me all through. And they hurt. But I took them as a wake-up call. We met the next day and the next and the next and we became friends, and the more I got to know her, the more she became endeared to me. She was just who I needed: someone who could point me to myself; who could help polish me. Our love affair was explosive: *Telemundo* style. I guess even the folks on Zee World got jealous. And when we announced our intention to get married, everyone was ecstatic. They looked forward to the wedding day like the early church waited for the coming of Jesus.

Many thought I was lucky. Maureen was industrious, intelligent, and beautiful. A typical sanguine, she had a way with people – she could calm a storm, and persuade a dead body to wake. My only snag with her: she was intensely selfish; everything had to be done her way. And she was super jealous. Just a call from any of my exes could trigger a tsunami. "Why must they call you?" she would query.

"Well, you know I can't stop them; no matter how many times I warned them not to call..."

"Maybe you're not warning them hard enough."

She simply believed she owned me and no one else could have me; not even the drama group. Can you beat

that? Well, I tried my best to love her, to make her feel comfortable, to assure her she was the only one for me. She knew there was no one else, but I couldn't figure out why she was insecure. Miss seeing her for one day and I had tons of pacifying to do. I did everything the relationship books recommended; and honoured her like the queen she was.

Yet...

To be fair to her, she did her part as well. She'd call to ask what I would eat before I closed from work and always made sure my fridge was no longer bachelor-like. She literally played the wife. I learnt to let go of many things – that feeling of entitlement to my time, views, feelings, etc. Somehow, she taught me how to be a better person. She taught me how to be prudent with my finances: we were both heavy givers, but I also learnt how to 'sow in good soil' – her expression. She wouldn't allow me to hold back from helping someone in need. "You can't be saving money, honey, when someone around you is hungry." She would say. I taught her the principle, but she helped to bring it to life in a whole new dimension. Now life had snatched her from me.

Or rather she stole my life. This was the most shocking for me.

When I found my voice, all I could say to Grandpa was, "Why did she do that?"

"She loved you."

"So will I be wrong to want my life back?"

He shook his head. "But only if you remained dead."

Oh, that was somewhat more confusing. "How's that possible, Grandpa?"

He gave me a dirty-looking old coat. "Always wear this."

The coat was ugly, drab; nothing attractive. It resembled those worn-out coats technicians wear in underfunded public hospitals. Why would Grandpa give me this crappy thing to wear? Even the towel I used to wash my car was cleaner. And it was stained with fresh blood. How did he expect me to wear this? Maybe it was because Great grandpa didn't really know who I was before I died.

I wasn't exactly a trendy person, but I had my dress sense. And it got the ladies looking in my direction. I even received awards for the best dressed staff at my work place - an investment bank - for seven straight years! Okay, fine; if Great grandpa wanted to test me, I thought it shouldn't be with a blood-stained lab coat. Didn't he know I had always hated lab coats? I wasn't a scientist. I wasn't a butcher either. That was why I stayed away from the sciences in secondary school.

As though he read my thoughts, he said, "Without the blood, the coat is nothing. It is for your own good. Go on, and wear it."

I didn't understand what he meant or how it could be for my own good, but I gingerly wore it all the same; just so I didn't disappoint him. First impressions matter. Not with the stories of his exploits I'd heard. Great grandpa was a legend. Family folklore taught us that he was there in the beginning of creation.

As soon as the coat settled on my body, everything changed. It fused into me and I became lost. I literally ceased to exist. It became me and I became it - we became me.

Harmony.

What had appeared on the coat like dirt to me earlier wasn't dirt at all. In fact, they were treasures: solutions to the world's woes; each patch a remedy for a particular human condition. It was like a fusion of everything.

And the blood stains..., oh it was the most awesome! It pulsed, giving rhythm to everything. It was life - the life of everything; everyone.

Without it was not anything made that was made. Nothing could exist without it. It held everything together, things on earth and here.

Now, I suddenly saw that we weren't alone at all. Millions of people surrounded us, each busy with their transactions: buying, selling, killing, conspiring, robbing, eating, drinking, revelling in whatever gave them pleasure. They fought themselves over positions, ownership of lands, properties, appointments, etc. They celebrated everything, small and great, peoples' successes or misfortunes, throwing lavish parties and showing off their wealth. Some people begrudged each other on matters as mundane as not addressing their titles correctly. I couldn't believe this. I recognised one of them: a burly man in our church who prided himself as the highest giver at each church donation. He was an elder in the church and a close friend of the Senior Pastor. He was begrudging the women fellowship leader for not publicly announcing his donation at one of their programmes.

"Hey brother, the Lord knows you gave generously, even when they don't announce it." I tried to intervene. They both seemed to be suddenly aware of my presence.

who invited you. The woman picked offence at me and together, they chased me away.

I realised it was the coat I wore that was their problem. They hated it. And treated it with disdain, just the same way I did when Grandpa gave it to me. I noticed they were all dressed in a particular coat, each with a label on their chests. When I looked closer, I saw the label read, 'self.'

"Why are their coats labelled 'self' Grandpa?"

"They're slaves to 'self.'" He replied.

"How's that?"

" 'Self' rules their lives. It always wants to be in control."

'Hmmm,' I thought within myself, not quite sure if I understood him. But one thing became clear to me: self always wanted to dominate. It was the reason for the chaos; for the injustice, oppressions, deprivations, suppressions; for the conflicts and wars.

I looked at my chest. My coat had a different label: NOTHING. I looked at Grandpa's chest. His was the same also: NOTHING. So, it got me thinking? Why nothing?

"Because unless you become nothing, you cannot become anything." Great Grandpa said, "During my time too, they called me a crazy fool for wearing the coat." Great grandpa said as though to console me. "Wearing this coat is foolishness to them." But he seemed unperturbed. A certain kind of peace enveloped him. Then, I also sensed that a burden – a sense of pity for them – seemed to weigh on him. "Now, go and find her. When she sees this coat on you, she will give you back your life." There was a solemn tone to his voice.

I knew he was right. I had to find her. I had to take my life back.

Maureen Amaka Azuike

THE NIGHTMARE

My head throbbed as if I'd smashed it against a wall. I ached all over. In panic my heart raced, faster than a heavy-duty locomotive pounding down the tracks. I was not feeling okay. I was held hostage inside a dingy room by a masked intruder and I was desperate to escape. But a great fear crippled me. It left me dumbstruck the entire time I was held hostage. I found myself drenched to the skin. I sweated like a Christmas goat about to be slaughtered in the vilest way.

My fear steadily grew more and more palpable and drained all of my energy. I was bone-tired, broken in spirit and I remained on the floor where the intruder had pushed me, gagged and bound. The room was airtight and suffocating. My breathing was abnormal. It sounded sickening. I could hear it trying to rip out my heart. The more I heard it, the more fear paralysed me.

NEPA had cut power supply. There was a lighted kerosene lantern desolate looking and abandoned on a rickety coffee table. Its wick was weak and flickering out. It cast terribly dark shadows, emitted bad smoke and smelt nauseatingly. I was not the only one held captive in that dingy room. The masked intruder held Eric captive too and he brazenly wielded a handgun before us. We were worried we would die and no one would find our decomposed bodies.

Eric was gobsmacked when I was pushed down by the intruder who warned us against being raucous and attracting undue attention to the room. We readily

complied. Our lives were in his hands anyways. We dared not jeopardise our safety any further by disobeying him. But our will to escape had become more and more panel beaten especially every time the man pointed his handgun at us. Eric looked pointedly at the intruder and told him:

'If you are going to kill me, kill me, but let the woman go.'

The intruder laughed and gave Eric a wicked stare. Eric's eyes moved from the man's covered face to his handgun. The metallic weapon looked old. Eric wondered if the intruder would truly fire it. He was so fixated on the gun, blind to the darkened room with worn couch, smeared walls, dishevelled book shelf at a corner, old television set and cheap coffee table. The kerosene lantern now cast a pall on our skin. Eric winced when he saw my petrified face. I was in shivers. I had only a loose wrapper draped round my body. The wrapper barely covered my nakedness.

The masked intruder was intimidating, slender and tall. He was dressed in an all-black leather outfit with matching hand gloves. He was bad tempered like one who ran on too much local *ogogoro* drink and too little sleep. His eyes were two white rings in intense black sockets. They were ugly, scary and dark. Eric attempted to strike up another conversation with him.

'What do you want?' Eric asked him. The intruder ignored him.

'I don't have any money. I don't have anything to give you. I am a lecturer and I haven't received salaries in months due to prolonged ASUU strike, so I have nothing to give you,' Eric stuttered.

'Shut the fuck up,' the masked intruder ordered him. His voice was disgusting and disgruntled. His head twitched toward the rickety coffee table as he barked out orders.

'Come here! Sit down and drop a suicide note before I blow your brains out!'

'I am a Christian. I can't do that. Please don't kill us. Let us go,' Eric pleaded.

'Do it.' The intruder's voice became strained. 'And make sure your handwriting is clear.'

Eric was disorientated but he obeyed reluctantly. He sat down languidly and groped for a pen. When he found one, he picked it up and held it gingerly.

'I am ending it all,' the intruder told him to write, 'because I am a worthless piece of shit.' There was a pause. Eric was hesitant to write. The intruder gave out another long, wicked laugh and repeated: 'Do it or I'll blow your brains out!'

Eric's pen began to inch across the paper which the intruder had provided him. His hand was shaky and his palm was clammy. His effort was awkward like that of a child learning to write.

'What I am,' the intruder continued, 'is a molester and a pathetic liar.' Eric stopped writing again. He looked up with eyes dimmed with tears.

'Keep writing, you bastard! Do as I say,' the intruder again barked out orders.

Eric wiped his left nostril with his left hand. He looked pathetic. I started crying empathetically when I saw his vulnerability. Again, Eric wiped his left nostril. The word 'molester' was difficult for him to write.

I have raped countless women and I deserve to die,' the intruder dictated. Once again, Eric hesitated. His nose began to run. He blew it into his shirt. He was deeply flushed with anger. He gritted his teeth as he stared at the words he had already written. His vision was blurry. He could hardly see. He lifted his left hand for the umpteenth time and wiped away tears. The intruder lunged forward and struck him hard across the face with his clenched, gloved, fist and sent him reeling. Eric's left nostril began to bleed. The bleeding was profuse.

The intruder stepped back and looked involuntarily at the book shelf standing at a corner. It had a photograph of three children on it. They were daintily dressed with smiling faces. The intruder retrieved the photograph and smashed it on the floor. Turning, he menacingly looked at me in my crouched down position and said to me slowly: 'you are beautiful, dark-haired with exotic features. You are any man's dream. And you choose to be here fucking this loser?' The words were spat at me. They were acidic. They cut through me like a sharp knife. I almost peed on myself.

'Lady!' the intruder screamed. 'I know this prick is blackmailing you for sex. Otherwise, you would be a moron to let him between your legs.' He paused like he gave me time to be mortified. I wished I had shrivelled up and died instead. The man continued his lamentation: 'My daughter made same costly mistake as you are doing right now.' He then turned and pointed at Eric and said: 'this bastard raped my nineteen-year-old Phyna to death and fled. He was caught on CCTV but he heavily bribed policemen to release him. Fucking corrupt nation we have here, you know.' As the intruder narrated what he

believed was a grievous injustice done him, I was horrified and deeply ashamed of Eric. I made an attempt to speak and choked on my words. Fear clutched at my throat.

'Do you know that this scumbag is married?' the intruder asked me. It was more like a rhetorical question. I knew Eric had a partner so I nodded my head by bobbing it up and down. I was tongue-tied. Eric took the cue and stood up and attempted to bolt from the room.

The intruder was livid. He aimed his gun directly at him and fired a shot. Eric made a loud guttural sound and gripped his chest. His body hit the coffee table and he fell backward and flopped on the floor. A crimson liquid gushed out and soaked his midriff. I was numb with fright. The intruder's face was emotionless, horrifyingly hidden behind a dark mask. He was unperturbed by his action and simply hovered over Eric's fallen body.

There was a luminous wristwatch on his gun arm. It read 09:15 pm. The intruder bent over and pushed open Eric's lips with his handgun. He slipped the barrel into Eric's throat and pulled the trigger a second time. More blood spewed out of Eric and merged with the red rug he lay on. Eric was lifeless. His brains were literally blown out. I froze from my head to my toes. With a smirk on his face, the intruder pulled out the gun and then pulled out a hanky from his back pocket and wiped the gun with it. I collapsed and lost consciousness.

My eyes snapped open at 6:00 am the next morning. I frantically looked around my bedroom, paranoid the

masked killer had followed me from my nightmare. When the early morning sun shone through my curtains, it was then I knew I was in the cosy comfort and safety of my bedroom. I felt relieved. I got up and hurried to shower. Twenty minutes later, I came out fresh faced and revitalised. My mother had entered the room while I showered. I found her presence so much reassuring. Her voice was very soothing when she spoke to me.

'Chika, you are glowing from head to toe. Nothing like a warm shower to pep one up, you know.' I chuckled at the astonishment on my mother's face. 'And that pretty smile of yours always lights up your face,' she added.

I stared at my reflection in my standing mirror after I wore my floral gown. Every time I wore the gown, my mother always claimed it complemented my figure and accentuated my perky breasts. My father had gifted me the gown. I wore it to work the day before he died; the day before my horrific nightmares began. It was a perfectly modest gown, knee length, long sleeved with a shallow scoop neck. No one could possibly accuse the gown of any overt allure. My mother loved it. And so did I. She tried to cajole me into eating breakfast with her and Eric, which I declined.

'I made your favourite, Chika,' she insisted. 'Come join us.'

'No thanks Mama. I am not hungry.'

'I am really worried about your recurrent nightmares,' my mother said to me as she changed the subject. She gave my rectangular whitewashed room a quick, searching glance and told me how she came in and found me lying helplessly tangled the night before. She said I was screaming over and over in my sleep.

'It has been weeks since your last nightmare, Chika,' my mother said. 'Last night was clearly traumatising for you. I could tell. Your screams for help left a painful churn in my gut. I came in and found your body damp with so much sweat.'

My mother always checked out my room for potential danger because of my nightmares. I knew that I could trust her to keep me safe at all cost. I knew she would protect me even at the cost of her own life, if it came to that. I looked at her standing there next to me and watched her sigh. She then reached up to my face and ran her fingers through my slightly damp hair. She pushed back a few dark tendrils from my forehead and pulled tight the elastic band that held my hair in a tiny ponytail. This move helped to tidy up any loose tendrils I had dangling on my face. She came closer and gave me a big hug.

'I know you are here checking for assassins lurking in my bedroom, Mama.'

My mother found my joke amusing. She said I was silly to make a mockery of my queer, nocturnal, situation. I agreed with her and laughed.

'I think your bedroom should be safe enough,' she told me as she watched me finish my light makeup. She walked a few steps to the bathroom door and peered through the peephole. She looked like a detective. I found it funny and bit my lower lip to hold back another laugh.

Suddenly, we were startled by the sound of the bedroom door banging back. My mother and I jerked our heads towards the door. Eric waddled in. He was my mother's live-in lover. Our eyes widened in dismay. Eric's presence in my room greatly perplexed me. My

mother and I stared at him in stunned silence. I hated him with passion and he knew it. I detested him inexplicably. He knew that too. I wished he died in real life like he had died in my dream.

'You want something?' I asked after a few moments. My mother seemed like she had bitten her tongue. She was taciturn.

'I wanted to join in the fun,' Eric said. 'I heard you hooting with laughter.'

My hatred for him propelled me to push him out of my way as I edged towards my bed. My mother kept staring at him, completely smitten by him.

'Sorry for barging in on you both,' Eric said and gave me a leering look. He always enjoyed my discomfiture whenever he did that.

'Why don't you get out? Get lost!' I cursed at him.

Eric was unfazed. He bobbed his head, groped for the door-knob unwilling to take his eyes off me.

'Go on, honey, I'll see you in a bit,' my mother cooed with affection, though she doubted that he heard her.

Eric opened the door, shot one last glance in my direction and let his eyes linger on me before darting outside. He slammed the door shut with more force than was necessary. A few minutes later, we heard tyres spinning on gravel as he drove off. I turned and angrily asked my mother.

'Why do you indulge that maniac?'

'Because he loves me, Chika, and he is just a man reacting to missing his woman,' my mother replied.

'Why do you hate him so much?'

her. My response was candid. It set my mother off on a fit of laughter.

'You've always perceived him as the masked killer in your nightmares or taken him for a monster. Please, love him too,' my mother teased.

I wrinkled my nose in disgust and reminded her that the Eric in my dream was shot dead by the masked killer for being a rapist. I also told my mother her live-in lover resembled that Eric in moral qualities. She didn't find the statements amusing and expressed her displeasure in feigned annoyance.

I wished she knew how the thought of living with Eric filled me with abhorrence. My hatred was heightened because he slept with my mother barely six months after my father died. I also despised him for making passes at me while he screwed my mother. I had caught sight of him checking me out too many times and warned my mother about him. Eric's lecherous intentions deeply disgusted me. I couldn't fathom out the reason my mother loved him like she did. He was an idiot for bursting into my room. To me, he was the demon from my nightmares. He wasn't just a figment of my imagination.

I cautioned my mother against believing that Eric was good for her. To me, he was playing her for my father's money and I told her so. Before she left my room, my mother felt her breath catch. My insinuation deeply troubled her. I perceived it from her reaction and change of mien. She swallowed hard before dragging her eyes away from me. She knew Eric and I were a long way from being friends. She probably felt if we were going to be

be nice for me and him to be on friendly terms.

'Please, get along with him for my sake,' she pleaded before she left.

'Not in this lifetime,' I retorted.

That afternoon, Eric telephoned me at my downtown office. I refused to pick. After work he appeared outside, waiting for me. He was in pink short sleeves on blue jeans. His shirt was unbuttoned to show off his bronzed chest. He also showed off his powerful arms. I remembered how I had ordered him out of my bedroom that morning and felt fear squeeze my stomach. I wondered if something sinister was going to happen to me. Eric smiled and walked up to me. I took two steps back and shuddered in disgust.

'Can I buy you late lunch, Chika?'

I looked into his eyes and immediately felt a sinking feeling of panic sweep over me. It was because there was a menacing force about Eric. Everything about him was disturbingly dishonest and scary.

'What do you want from me now?' I shot at him with angry words.

'All of you,' he responded. 'I want everything about you.'

'You are raving mad, you bastard. You are fucking my mother for Pete's sake!'

Eric laughed. I hated that he had the guts to disrespect me and my mother as he often did. 'I hope you die and rot in hell,' I screamed at him.

the bedroom,' he said in obstinate arrogance.

It was then I knew for certain my mother and I were endangered. I longed to tell my mother but doubted she'd believe me. Eric was beyond spooky and sly. In my mind, I thought how the masked man was right. Eric was a molester, a cheat and a compulsive liar. *'I can't let him win us,'* I thought. Then, I heard an eerie, foreboding voice in my head telling me: *'kill the bastard or he will kill you.'* I just knew my worst nightmare was about to begin.

NEGLECTED TROPICAL DISEASES AND OUR LOCALS

“*Cui bono?* – For whose good or benefit?”

Cicero, (106 BC – 43 BC)

Roman Statesman, Philosopher, and Academic Skeptic

As a journalist, a storyteller and a researcher, I think I am a compendium of peoples’ stories – real people, and real stories in real places and this is one of such stories. To me, storytelling is a platform through which our so many voices are heard.

Firstly, I start by blessing the “Uniting to Combat NTDs,” “The Crown Prince Court of Abu Dhabi,” “Youth Combating NTDs,” Mrs. Toyin Ojora-Saraki and her “Wellbeing Foundation Africa” with Heaven’s speed for the measures they have put in combating the New Tropical Diseases. Blessings!

In my little life, I have met a lot of people and the most engaging of those are women who have stories to tell while the most important are young people, especially children – children are amazing people with uncontested potentials and truly they are gifts from God. Children are the future!

One of such is Nafisa (Nafisa is not her real name for the purpose of privacy. Nafisa is the name of a dear friend, girl-friend and sister of mine that I’ve lost to the phenomenon called “a brief/sudden illness.” May her soul rest in peace. Amen!) Nafisa a beautiful Hausa-Fulani girl aged six (6) . (the age of one of my daughters - Agatha) is not only charming but futuristic and compelling. She was

NATURESSAY

Always active, jovial, and full of questions - and of the holeric spirit.

I met Nafisa in 2020 during the Covid-19 lockdown at a family clinic. I was down for nine (9) months with malaria-fever, typhoid and ulcer and I had been in-and-out of the hospital. Her father was a local vendor who used to bring fruits to the hospital for sale hereby acquainting himself with the hospital staff and management. Overtime, he became a friend of the hospital.

She was diagnosed with *Echinococcosis*, the parasitic disease caused by tapeworm larvae in organs such as the liver and lungs but in her case, it was the liver - it was failing her thereby causing her nervous breakdown. Her family probably lived in an environment that had animal feces just like most Fulani settlements. Cystic echinococcosis is globally distributed and more than a million people are affected at any given time, with the highest prevalence in rural areas where animals are slaughtered.

The most interesting and loving thing about little Nafisa's family which had been transferred to her was that she had a bossy mother and a very calm and calculative father, yet the father loved, respected and adored the mother from the depth of his heart. One could see these expressed in the manner he talked to her, held her and most often, listened to her. Yet, little Nafisa was dying. Nafisa was receiving a *pro bono* medical service - free of charge. This simple favor sparked the good spirit of her father to always go on a ward-round, greeting patients and their loved ones; an activity he sometimes did with little Nafisa - probably exercising.

On a certain day, I was at the hospital for my routine check-up and there came Nafisa to the nurses' station where I was on a flagyl infusion *metronidazole antibiotic*. For the first time, I admired not just her beauty but her majestic entrance as if everything paused for some seconds. I could not even hear the nurses calling her; she stole my attention.

Nafisa came straight to where I was, looking straight into my eyes. Seeing those deep eyes of truth, I acknowledged to myself truly that the beautiful ones were yet to be born.

She was peaceful yet energetic. When she came closer to me, without greeting, she touched the cannula on my left hand and softly rubbing the hand, she asked in our local Hausa parlance,

"Is it paining you?"

"Yes!" I responded.

"Sorry," she replied.

She then positioned herself in a way that I lifted her up to my lap and I sat her down. She sat there as if deep in contemplation and then asked:

"Uncle, why is the leg of the man in the other room so big?"

I was speechless because I knew not what she was speaking of, until one of the nurses intervened. In the room next-door was a patient suffering from Elephantiasis (*Lymphatic Filariasis*), a disease caused by the settling of parasitic worms in the lymphatic circulation which causes severe fever and painful swelling of body parts, especially the legs and the hands but in the case of the patient next-door, it was one of his legs.

Research has shown that 893 million people were at the risk of the infection in 2018, with 36 million people estimated to live with its chronic condition. Sixteen (16) countries have since 2012 eliminated elephantiasis and preventive chemotherapy coverage had increased from 40% (2011) to 62% of people in need by 2018 and as serious as this disease is, the parasitic worm is innocently transmitted by mosquitoes so even I who was on malaria treatment caused by the parasitic mosquitoes was at a high risk of contracting it everyone is vulnerable.

When I asked Nafisa to take me to where she saw what she saw, she did.

The patient was alone; his room was choking with so much smell from the swollen leg and deserted as well. While we were there, her father came searching for her and from there, we became friends with little Nafisa whose father loved so dearly and passionately.

That evening when I returned home, I sat down thinking about what transpired in the hospital, especially as it pertained the elephantiasis patient. He was desolated and it looked as if there was no one to take care of him and it brought to my mind the story of my lady friend who was bitten by dogs twice within a month; till date, the bites sadly adorn her two legs from her hips down to her knees. During her nursing period, she was told that the second dog that bit her had never been vaccinated and it could cause her to become 'mad' and from then, she was never herself. Until her complete healing took place, she suffered fever, dementia, confusion, fever and hallucinations and it was indeed a difficult period for her. Rabies, as it is popularly known, is spread by bites and scratches of infected domestic or wild animals though the

large majority of rabies cases are caused by bites of infected domestic dogs. Rabies occurs in 150 countries worldwide, with 95% of cases occurring in Africa and Asia with an estimated 59,000 deaths annually.

For the cases of rabies, mass animal vaccination is the way out because these animals, especially the domestic dogs, have become part of us and our way of life. Reports have shown that the World Health Organization (WHO) is partnering with other Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to promote a one-health approach to controlling rabies, including animal vaccination and human immunization; people need to be aware of these New Tropical Diseases (NTDs).

Some weeks later, I went back to the hospital for my follow-up and I decided to visit Nafisa in her ward. As I entered the ward, I saw her bed empty and I thought she had been discharged but I decided to ask the relation of a patient close to the bed that Nafisa confined to who told me that the poor girl had passed away just two (2) days ago.

My heart started beating very fast as if it would explode. I had to sit down on the empty bed to put myself up. I was shocked and fear had gripped me. I was short of shedding tears. I remembered when I first entered Nafisa's ward; it was full of children afflicted with various forms of ailments and some of them seemed to be awaiting death. It lacked government presence and it was pitiable. The patient relation told me that Nafisa's bossy mother brought some herbal drugs to fast-track her recovery and after administrating the herbal medicine

passed away as the saint that she was. She was the only one who knew her pains.

I remember Nafisa telling me on one of my visits that when she grew up, she would become a medical doctor so that she could treat the man with elephantiasis. The patient with elephantiasis was equally a culprit of herbal medicine complications because such grave ailments are usually associated with the diabolical and spiritual world amongst the locals; only when it gets worst are the patients brought for medical-science treatment.

Neglected Tropical Diseases (NTDs) are a set of preventable and/or treatable illnesses and are conditions affecting more than one billion people in predominantly poorer communities mainly in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

We have to be committed to taking action to fight these diseases if we are interested in the future of the young generational people or we will one day wake up to a no-young next generation. These diseases are silently killing many and largely due to ignorance and our various cultural practices but culture is dynamic and so should our approach and understanding of these Neglected Tropical Diseases be.

Drama

ELASA PARTY (A PLAYLET)

That takes a gripping swipe at Nigerian English language undergraduates and graduates who speak and write unbecoming English grammar.

Characters

- Bob Dee - Master of Ceremony (MC)
- Prof. D. D. Foor - HOD, English Language, Guest of Honour
- Tine Hon - Lecturer, English Language Department, Distinguished Guest
- Yila Tom - Outgoing President, ELASA
- Sule Uva } Students
- Adoo Kuma }
- Bem Wase }
- Prankster }
- Janie Jack }
- Mimi Saanga }
- Emmy Ode }
- Angel Tor }
- Andy Bull }

Lecturers, graduands, other students, ushers, Disc Jockey (DJ)

The Scene

A well-attended university student party in a hall stylistically arranged and decorated to invoke an unmistakable sense of a grand party. Conspicuously positioned behind the high table is a banner with a bold and artistic inscription: WELLCOME TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION (ELASA) SEND-OFF PARTY. Posters of various sizes, colours, and messages intersperse and adorn the corners and strategic positions: 'IMAGINE LIFE WITHOUT LANGUAGE', 'ENGLISH IS OUR LINGUA FRANCA', 'LANGUAGE IS LIFE COMPAS, etc. The party is in progress. MC's mellifluous voice amplified by mic booms in the hall and hushes the party buzz.

MC: Ladies and gentlemen, tonight's tonight. Let me remind you once again that we gather here this auspicious evening because our great English Language Students' Association (ELASA), of our popular, great, and esteem University – Fantasy University of Nigeria otherwise known as FUN, is sending off her graduating members. I remain yours sincerely, Bob Dee, one of the English graduates, anchoring this event. We're now on item six which is Speech by Guest of Honour. As a grand party for great achievers, there are distinguished personalities among us like our Guest of Honour. If I'm a praise-singer, I'll call him a person of honour, an epitome of dignity, a doyen of knowledge. In fact, he doesn't

need any introduction at all. For who doesn't know his academic and social standing in this University? Who is ignorant about his resources, dedication, and capabilities that metamorphosed our students into *batures*? Are you waiting for me to tell you that he's Prof. D.D. Foor, the HoD of English Language? Oh, where are the ushers? Lead our Guest of Honour to the podium for his speech.

Two female ushers conduct the Guest of Honour to the podium in grand style amidst claps, hails, and music.

MC: Sir, you have our ears but we retain our aural faculty for your speech.

PROF. FOOR: The Chairman, Chairlady, other members of the high table, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. The outgoing President of ELASA has observed that today is not a day for speeches and I don't want to counter him. However, let me say a word or two. On behalf of the lecturers and students of English Language Department, I heartily congratulate the graduands on the successful completion of their course of study. It's not, indeed, a mean feat. In a short time from now, the gate of this University will be unbarred and you'll troop out into the world. The world into which you're going is like a bed full of thorns; things are not easy there. Job opportunities have dried up and start-

up capital is not easily available to set up small-scale businesses. But you'll not have much to worry about if you put God first and also realize the power of *thought*. We're products of our thought. Think yourself a failure, you'll be a failure; think yourself an achiever and nothing will stop you from being one. If you can't get a white-collar job, relax, it can be a blessing. Starting with your NYSC allowance, save money and supplement it with soft loan from family members, friends, micro finance banks or other money lending sources out there to start a business. With the right mind-set, not even the sky will be your limit. Always remember that ideas rule the world. This piece of advice is equally relevant to the rest of the students. I call on the entire members of ELASA to continue to cooperate, and exhibit more sense of commitment to the cause of the Association for its continued existence and progress. I thank the outgoing Exco members for their dynamic and purposeful leadership which has made the Association one to be reckoned with in the University. And I urge the new Exco to pick up the challenge and take the Association to greater heights. Thank you.

The audience gives him a standing ovation.

MC: Wow, wow, wow! Our Distinguished Guest of Honour has served us steaming plate of food for thought. Let's chew it very well. Our Program is full of important items. The next one is almighty item seven. So, you can now sit back for your lavish refreshment.

Joyful shouts from the audience. Refreshments start going round.

MC: Our people talk say, 'Person wey dey play flute dey also blow im nose.' Because of time factor, let's combine refreshment with riddles and jokes and free time. By the way, some of us graduated with combined honours degrees. So, if you have a good joke or riddle or you want to advise us, we're all ears. Tell us your name, course, level, and whatever.

Many hands shoot up at once. MC darts eyes around and points at a student.

SULE: My names are Sule Uva, level 100, English Dept. What's the full meaning of LONDON?

After one or two unacceptable responses, a girl collects microphone.

ADOO: I'm Adoo Kuma, Aeronautical Engineering graduate. Am a guest here.

LONDON means: Ladies Of Nowada;
Depend On Naira.

Some students clap, some hail, some blow mouth whist for her.

MC: Waaoooh! I wish I own aeroplane manufacturir company to give you automatic employment. Al We've many hands up. Ladies and gentlemen let's hear what the distinguish outgoing Presider of our esteem Association – English Language Students Association (ELASA) has for us.

YILA: I stand on existing protocol. As you all knows, m name is Yila Tom, outgoing President of ELASA I delivered my speech before, now I just want t offer pieces of advice to both outgoing an remaining students. My fellow graduates, whe we're released from this ivory tower, into th world, let's not forget the saying that, 'Life is no a bed of roses.' Another one says, 'As you make your bed so you'll lie on it.' These are true sayings, so, let's try and imbibe their tenets for ou benefit. You, the remaining students, you have to realize that the bane of undergraduates are exan malpractices, boyfriend and girlfriend stuff and waste of time. I'm therefore charging you to shut away all this and you would one day graduate like us. Thanks.

Students give him a deafening applause.

MC: That's a very wonderful advise from our outgoing Presidoo. Let him feel us again.

Another resounding round of applause. MC calls another student.

BEM: My name is Bem Wase, English language graduand. I would like to appeal to my fellow graduands that wherever the ups and downs of life take us, we should try to maintain the bond that held us here for four years, suffering and enjoying together as one big family. Let it not be a case of 'Out of sight, out of mind.' Those who are destined to be great men and women should always remember those fated to be commoners. You the remaining students, please learn to make the best use of your time. It's such a useful resource that needs not be wasted. Thanks.

Students give BEM a hearty applause.

MC: Oh! We're going to leave here as wise as King Solomon.

PRANKSTER: *(Goes boldly and collects mic without being called, asks for a bottle of Coke, opens it with his teeth and after guzzling the contents, raises the empty bottle and asks).* "Who can tell me what I've just done?"

Students understand the prank and shout and call him names while he runs to his seat.

MC: That's a hot joke, isn't it. Well, let's make progress. *(Calls another student.)*

JANIE: I'm Janie Jack, English Language, 300 Level. I just wanted to bid the graduates farewell and say they should always remember us behind. Thanks.

Students chant and stamp: Janie Jack, J.J.! Janie Jack, J.J.!

MC: Thank you, J.J. I don't want to be like needle which sews clothes for people but is naked itself. Let me also ask a question: What is the full meaning of GULDER?

There are three failed attempts.

MIMI: I'm Mimi Saanga, Business Management, Level 300. GULDER means: Girls Under Liquor Demand Extra Romance.

Mouth-whistles, drumming, and laughter from the audience.

MC: Girlie, you got it. Thumb up! Wow! Many hands up. Okay, let's hear from you - *(Points at a student.)*

EMMY: My name is Emmy Ode, graduating English student. Mine is a joke. A mother who was sure she had given her daughter useful tip to avoid pregnancy was mad to learn that she was put in the family way all the same. She accosted her, 'I feel like tearing you into pieces, yes, I feel like killing

you. Didn't I advise you that if a boy touched your bra, you should say DON'T and if he touched your pant you should say STOP? How comes you're pregnant?' Sobbing, her daughter said, 'Mummy, Wakisko touched my bra and pant at the same time, and I told him DON'T STOP.'

Roaring applause and shouts of Wakiskoko.

MC: Hahahaha! 'Wakisko don't stop!' Ladies and gentlemen, we're actually catching fun but time is far ahead of us so, let's move to the next item on the program.

A spontaneous objection breaks out from the audience and amid that, a female student takes the stage. MC feels reluctant to recognize her but she wins him over with her seductive appeal and gesticulations.

MC: Ladies and gentlemen, I crave your indulgence to recognize her as the last person.

Students react variously: Ojoro! She don buy you!

ANGEL: *(Amidst students' reactions)*. My name is Angel Tor, Level 300, English Dept. *(Students shout Seductive Angel. She laughs and continues.)* My own is a joke. An exhausted Bank Manager having challenge with his computations and analysis decided to asked his lady P.A.: 'If you're to deduct 17.5% of \$500 million, how much will you remove?' The lady P.A. replied impulsively, 'Everything sir, blouse, bra, skirt, and even pants.'

Wall-shaking laughter and banging on tables greet her joke.

MC: Hiho-hiho-hiho! Ladies and gentlemen, I can be you that if we don't discontinue with riddles and jokes, we're not going to leave here with our ribs intact.

More protests. In the course of that, Tine enters.

MC: Oh! Ladies and gentlemen, I think you heard the sound of aeroplane that just touched ground. It brought our English Lecturer and Distinguish Guest, Mr. Tine Hon. You're welcome, sir. Please sir, would you mind giving a word or two to your students before you seat down?

TINE: *(jokingly)*. This looks like my tacit punishment for lateness. *(General laughter)* Well, I accept it and while standing on existing protocol, I wish to advise that all of us here have latent potentials to be prosperous in life, just like every seed have a tree in it. Let's always look inward for the key to unlock our potentials. Thank you.

Students cheer and clap as the Ushers take him to his seat.

MC: Hmmmm! Your reactions say it all. Thanks a zillion, our great Lecturer for your great advise. At this juncture -

ANDY *interrupts the MC by jumping to the floor. Students shout his nick name = SHOW BOY.*

ANDY: I'm Andy Bull, B.A (Hons) English Language,
FUN. *(Students hail him more.)* I want to advise
my co-graduates that life has many ups and downs
but the challenges are not surmountable, if only
we can face it with uncompromising
indefatigability. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

*Various remarks and shouts of SHOW BOY follow him
as he runs to his seat: Bullet. Jengbes. Too much
grammar.*

MC: We can see that everybody have something very
important to tell us but I'm afraid time won't
permit us so we'll draw the curtain here. Before
we move to the last item on the program which is
Dance! Dance!! Dance!!, we wish to thank our
Distinguished Guests who wish to leave at this
juncture.

*MC's announcement causes a frenzy of excitement among
the students. The Distinguished Guests start leaving.*

MC: Those dying to show us that Michael Jackson is
still alive, this is your time. It's going to be dance
till dawn. But the DJ will give a special number
to the graduates before general dancing.

*At once, DJ releases the volume of music that all but
shakes the very foundation of the hall. The graduands take
the floor in ecstasy and start displaying their dancing
skills.*

[Lights.]

Victor Meshak Jat

NEW MATA (A RADIO PLAY)

CHARACTERS

Mishkaham (King)
Blessing
Hunter (Nanle)
Endurance
Honest
Glory

Prologue

It's dawn in Ajing village.

*FX: Canaries, pigeons, and other birds are chirping
The cocks are crowing to give glamour to the
morning.*

*It's a day to mourn the spirits of the dead. Patience, an
unmarried poor woman of 63 years with dreams and
aspirations for a better Nigeria as against the reality of
what is on the ground, is sitting in her one room
apartment thinking aloud about the predicament of the
nation. She feels disappointed, betrayed, cheated and
abused. She soliloquizes for three minutes and was
interrupted by a knock on her door.*

PATIENCE: Who's at the door?

BLESSING: Na me (*Sounding tired and exhausted; she is let in by PATIENCE.* They begin to talk for three minutes about the 'Kaho' that was earlier blown; a call for all in the village to assemble at the village square, which PATIENCE does not want to go but is persuaded by BLESSING).

The village square and also the local market are experiencing a low turnout because it is a day of mourning.

FX: *Buying and selling are going on, and commercial motorcyclists are busy scouting for passengers shouting: "Oga! You dey go? Madam, na going? Na where you dey go?" The sound of the traditional drums interrupts the proceedings in the market, and is being played for ten minutes as the villagers cheer the dancers. Some are laughing at the dance steps and mocking: "See how dem dey dance oh, hmmm. I never see this kind dance for this village oh," said a villager. Another villager in a mocking tone said: "Who tell that man say na so the step suppose be? Abeg." "See Mishkaham, see Mishkaham, he's angry oh, he's angry oh", said a villager in apprehension.*

MISHKAHAM (King), *on arrival, ordered the drumming to stop immediately, and it stops. He expresses unhappiness and displeasure over the happenings. But the villagers for thirty-seven minutes through*

HUNTER, HONEST, GLC
ENDURANCE, *and other villagers forward in turns to let the Mishka know the reasons for the celebration. A sharp rejection and disapproval from Mishkaham, the Mishkaham event gets persuaded and convinced and join the celebration by instructing drumming to continue as he dances other chiefs amidst cheering and jubilation from the crowd. The setting is a typical traditional African village setting of Mwachavul People of Plateau, S Nigeria.*

FX: *(Sounds of drumming continue...)*

ACT ONE

It is early morning. FX: (Sounds of birds chirping, barking and crowing of cocks). Patience is sitting on a wooden stool soliloquizing).

Patience: I'm sick beyond medication. Fear blocked my optimism. The slate of nation is full of deceit and mediocrity, and corruption beyond hope. As a nation (*emphatically*), we've been walking with false hope that has made the voyage of years a pathless journey (*pauses*). The mundane is like destitute. Leaders are a cup of greed served to candle compete in the vein of nationhood. (*Sulking*) E time a new leader emerges, we sing so

of hope deep into the night, singing and chirping more than the birds. *(Pathetically)* I am 54. My hope in the nation is rotten. Our national character is corrupt, and our trust doubted my brothers from another side of the universe. Corruption, like cancer, is eating deep everyday in all facets of our state. No hope! No hope!

FX: *(Sound of a horn is heard and a knock on her door follows)* Who's knocking?

Blessing: Sister P., na me. Blessing. Mata don get as e bi oh, dem blow Kaho of celebration for inside market square o. I say make I come make we dey go together. I don tok with Pikolo

FX: *(Door opening and closing).*

Patience: My sister, enter. *FX: (Footsteps shuffle, as she drags wooden stool)* Siddon. *(Pauses).* Wetin make dem blow this Kaho, abeg? E don dey we dey celebrate but na barawo we dey clap we hand for oh. Abeg I no get time to be hypocrite joor.

Blessing: Sister P, I hear Pikolo dey say na New Mata. New Mata wey don change our tory, say tory wey bin get k-leg don change *(Reluctantly)*. We fit go hear the new mata now. Aunty P, make we go now.

Patience: Okay, I no go too tey for there. Which kind new mata for this land? Anyway sha, make we go

FX: *(Door opens and closes).*

ACT TWO

FX: *(Sounds of African traditional drums in crescendo while the villagers are shouting, dancing and clapping hands in celebration, and as the jubilation is going on, the Mishkaham, in an angry voice tone, shouts "Stop. Stop this madness! And the music and dancing stop abruptly).*

Mishkaham: *(Angrily in a husky voice)* Abomination! Abomination! Evil! Provoking! Are you all insane? Are you strangers in this land? When the elderly reason like a child, it is obvious that reason has gone out of him *(Pauses)*. Today is not a day of celebration. Today, we're mourning the spirits of our ancestors. We eat only in the morning, wear rags and stay without going to our farms *(pauses)*. We're expected to be at the shrine to listen to the spirits. Why do you want to invoke the spirit of bareness into our land? *(Pauses)* Why?

Hunter: *(Joyfully)* Your Majesty, I am Nanle, the great hunter. There is an echo of hope resonating through the mountain cleave.

Something is born; a rebirth from our blurred possibility. From the peak of the Plateau, our hope has come.

Mishkaham: (*Angrily*) Hunter, I see your long nights in the forest have begun to rob you of your common sense. Stupid! Nonsense! Useless! Trash! Foolish!

Endurance: (*kneels*) I kneel before you beloved of the gods. We are still your loyal and submissive subjects. Redeem thy loyal subjects. Doubt not our loyalty to our tradition. We mean no harm to your throne. Our dance is a celebration of good tidings brought upon us by the gods you resemble.

Villagers: (*Cheerfully*) Yes! Your majesty yes!

FX: (*They all clap and whistle*).

Honest: My lord, my name na Honest, and na trader I be, we dey celebrate the wake-up of we leaders. We dey clap for a true saviour, the discovery of we hope wey don dey. We for long dey pray for, make the death of the evil master of progress com. A profit more than that of my 'Laawur' wey I dey sell every Friday for Mangu market.

Patience: (*Happily*) Na me be Patience. E don dey wey pains dey hurt for this we country

mata. Your Majesty, we dey I celebrating a fight worth fighting; wey before before dey no fight am, vior worth achieving, the unmasking of the breed among we in our land. The cure has met its cure and dead end, majesty. This na something to celebrate oh,

FX: (*shouts of Joy*) Let the drum of celebration continue (*all starts dancing in joy jubilation, shouting*).

Mishkaham: (*Still in anger*) Stop! Stop! (*They all say*) This is impassive and insulting! What is this cure? What does 'Unmasking' 'fighting' carry join our rites and traditions abeg?

Glory: (*Very sweetly*) my sir, the chosen Today is the renaissance, a rediscovery of truth and competence, accountability change, the breath of freshness, variety, and a breed of leadership. Na : mata wey we all for come dance, sak say corruption is no longer hidden under the sun.

FX: (*Clapping in joy, they all shout*)

Villagers: Yes! Your Majesty.

Blessing: *(Clapping hand and talking)* It is the end of the night; the nativity of possibility where the dream of one corrupt-free nation is a reality. It's no longer a dream land far away. The harvest is done. It's time we laugh and even dance in the theatre of gift. Our ululation is over.

Glory: *(Confidently)* Our hope is alive; we are on the wheel of prosperity. a progressive agenda. Today, our history of our sweats is now a celebrated blood of sacrifice. We're the lamb *(cheerfully)* Let's celebrate our sweats; it's our pride. Corruption that stops schools from functioning, electricity is unstable, hospital without medication, youths without jobs, nation without security and people without hope. Corruption will die, and we as people will live.

Mishkaham: *(To the villagers)* My people, what should a man do to his beautiful hope on her first request? You've all heard them. Are you for or against them?

Villagers: *(They all chorus)* For...

Mishkaham: *(In a happy tone)* Give us the melody to celebrate the birth of a new and fresh personality. Let the melody rain; let's

dance on our night of nativity, a harvest of devotion and passion. Our renaissance rediscovery has come, our enemy, our setback - corruption - is dead
(The music starts with Mishkaham leading the dance).

FX:

THE PRESS CONFERENCE (A SHORT PLAY)

Dramatis Personae

Presido - President of Chumanga

Sadiq - Moderator

Sammy)

Amina.)

Madaki)

Sa'adatu)

Ngozi)- all journalists

John)

Etim)

Adewale)

Michael)

Kyermun)

It's 8 o'clock in the evening. Venue is the International Press Centre which is filled with journalists. The moderator is Sadiq - a tall, bespectacled man - wearing a green kaftan, with a cap to match.

Sadiq: Good evening, esteemed members of the fourth estate of the realm. I heartily welcome you to the last media chat of this administration. Shortly, Presido will arrive and we shall commence. Thank you for your patience.

(Siren suddenly starts blaring faintly)

(The sound gradually increases. Protocol officers suddenly swarm the hall as well as security personnel clearing the entrance with exaggerated actions). Then Presido suddenly walks in as the journalists rise to their feet. Presido, with eyes hidden behind dark eye glasses, is wearing a black suit with a red tie and a white shirt. He goes to the stage and sits down. The journalists also sit down).

Sadiq: Members of the fourth estate of the realm, let's welcome Presido with a round of applause *(They clap)*. Thank you for availing yourselves at what may be described as the last press conference of Presido. We shall round off everything in less than 1 hour. *(Turns to Presido)*. Sir, you may proceed!

Presido: *(Clears his throat)* Members of the fourth estate of the realm, thank you for being part of my last chat with you. You will recall that you gave me your mandate 5 years ago - to be your chief servant and I did my best. *(There's murmuring)*.

It was the best of my ability. Here is my score-card.

(Presido gives a run down of his achievements. He concludes within 35 minutes. There is the traditional after-speech clapping).

Sadiq: Thank you, Presido, for taking us through your 5 year tenure. Now, it is time for questions from members *(Tone changes)* of the fourth estate of the realm (with emphasis on *fourth estate of the realm. Looks around. Many hands are up. He points at a man*).

Sammy: *(Stands up and takes hold of the microphone)*. My name is Sammy representing *Daily News*. Presido, let me take you back to your campaign. I recall clearly that you promised to place a ban on government officials from travelling abroad for medical treatment and at the same time you promised to guarantee quality health care delivery in our country, Republic of Chumanga. Should I take it that you lied to us?

Presido: *(Clears his throat)*. I'm not a liar, though I did make that promise. Sight from the driver's seat is always different. I'm now on the driver's seat. When I entered office, the healthcare system was bad. No thanks to the previous government. I became sick. Did you want me to die?
(There's laughter).

So I had to travel out for treatment and their facilities there were fantasticall amazing. I'm sure if you were in my shoes you would have done same.

(Sammy raises his hand again but the moderator ignores him. He points at a woman).

Amina: *(Stands up)* My name is Amin representing *BBC*. Sir, in your score-card you did not say anything about gender policy. You promised to give the nation a national gender policy and offer 45% appointment to women. But it seems you failed in that regard.

Presido: *(Adjusts his tie)* Are you insinuating that I'm a failure?

Amina: No sir, but you've failed to fulfill that promise *(Smiles)*.

Presido: *(Smiles)* Amina, you share name with my wife. You're a bright girl like my wife. But let me tell you that women are not to be trusted. If we give them an inch, they will take a mile. They try to dominate us at home and you are talking about 45% employment. How many countries in the world have that kind of gender policy? Women should remain where they are.

Amina: *(Smiling)* Sir, then why did you make that promise?

Presido: *(Coughs)* Honestly, for election purpose. If to say I no make that promise, women for no vote me. I get plenty sense for my head *(Taps his head with the index finger of his right hand)*.
(There is laughter)

Madaki: *(Stands up)* My name is Madaki representing *International News Agency*. In your score-card, you said your administration had reduced the activities of terrorists. Do you sincerely think it's true?

Presido: *(Clears his throat and looks around as if expecting someone to whisper something to him)*. When I came on board, insecurity was at its peak. But today, kidnapping, banditry, attacks, herder/farmer clash, are not a recurring decimal. If they were kidnapping 700 people at a go and now they are kidnapping only 10, no be improvement be that? If they were killing 20 people in a day and now, they are killing 3, I no try?

Sa'adatu: *(Stands up and adjusts her scarf)* My name is Sa'adatu from *Golden Star Media*. What would you say you have done on the high rate of unemployment? You promised to

create a million job opportunities yearly but ...

Presido: *(Interrupts as he removes his eye glass)* Where did you want me to get the money to pay them? Can't you see that I had to borrow plenty money plenty times to execute projects and other things? That is why I always encourage people to go into entrepreneurship. Government cannot give job to everybody. You should be self-employed.

Sa'adatu *(Shouts from her seat)*: How would someone start business without money?

Presido: *(Rising tempo)* That's why I earlier said that women are not to be trusted *(There's laughter)*. Must you shout at me? You're an ambassador of your family; is that how you shout at your husband? How can I offer 45% employment to people who shout at me? Next question please *(Hisses)*.

Sadiq: *(Scratches his head lightly)* But sir, you've not answered her question. How can one build something on nothing?

Presido: *(Wears his eye glass)* Climb a tree and pluck the money *(Sarcastically)*. If you

can't do that, then go to the bank and borrow.

Sadiq: But the requirements for borrowing are ...

Presido: *(Interrupts)* The requirements are meant to be met. Aren't they?

Adewale: *(Stands up)* I'm Adewale from *ABC News*. My interest is on the immunity clause. You promised to amend the constitution to remove immunity for elected political officers in a criminal case. Has that been done?

Presido: That would have caused a lot of distractions. If you put an elected political office holder under trial, it means he can no longer continue to perform his legitimate duties effectively. Because of this, I changed my mind. After office, they can face the music.

Adewale: In a criminal case oo.

Presido: If a person is facing a criminal charge, does it automatically mean say deperson na criminal? One is not guilty until proven guilty, na wetin the court say be that. No be so?

Adewale: It means you have to be very careful when making promises.

Presido: *(Tone rises)* Are you advising me? You are a very small boy. If you find yourself in my position, you will understand. Na Achebe talk say wetin old man dey see while sitting down, a young man no fit see while standing.

Michael: *(Stands up)* My name is Michael from *International Daily*. Would you say that all your appointees complied with the directive on public declaration of assets? You are also yet to release the full report of your asset declaration to the public as you're about to leave office.

Presido: I have a total of 5 houses here in Chumanga and 3 abroad and I can tell you how I raised legitimate money to buy them.

Michael: Formal declaration entails filling forms and ...

Presido: *(Interrupts)* I know. How old are you to tell me what formal declaration is?

Michael: *(Sorry sir)* How about your political appointees?

Presido: Ask them *(Sarcastically)*.

Kyermun: *(Stands up and smiles showing her conspicuous dimples)* My name is Kyermun representing *Grassroot Media*. Sir, you had made us believe, through a promise, that you would establish a scholarship scheme for pupils who had shown exceptional aptitude in science subjects at o' level to study ICT related courses. Would you say that has been achieved?

Presido: What's your name again?

Kyermun: Kyermun - K-Y-E-R-M-U-N.

Presido: 'Looking after us.'

Kyermun: *(Excited)* Sir, you understand Mwaghavul?

Presido: No. I had a secondary school classmate with that name *(Smiles)*. She left Chumanga after secondary school for London, and up till now, I've not heard anything about her. Back to your question. This is an ICT era and I really wanted to create the enabling environment for the young minds to grow into it but, honestly, I cannot say if I had achieved that. That question would have been answered by my ICT adviser.

Kyermun: *(Slowly as if scared of annoying him)* S does this not suggest that your monitoring mechanism is not effective?

Presido: You're a small girl. You won't understand

John: *(Stands up)*. My name is John representing *The Voice*. Your score-card was silent on some important aspects of education sector.

Presido: Silent *(raises eye brows)*?

John: What I mean is that in many countries, education at all levels is free. You promised to do same here and you also promised to allocate 20% of the budget to education in line with UNESCO's recommendation. Have you done that?

Presido: John, what's your level of education?

John: PhD

Presido: Kai! *(Expresses surprise)* PhD?

John: Yes, sir.

Presido: In what?

John: History

Presido: Which university?

John: University of Kentucky

Presido: Government scholarship?

John: Sponsored by my father.

Presido: *(Pauses for a few seconds)* And you are not a university lecturer?

John: I was. I had to quit because of the insensitivity of your administration to university funding.

Presido: You're telling me that you left the classroom to be a journalist?

John: Yes, sir. For 12 months, we had not been paid our entitlements in the university. How should we take care of our families? Climb tree and pluck the money... *(Sarcastically)?*

Presido: University lecturers want the whole money from the budget.

John: *(Smiles sarcastically)* That's not true, sir. What we want is proper funding of the university which is a global best practice.

Presido: Well, I hope the incoming government look into that. I did not do it because lecturers' money would have been more than politicians'. How can that? Politicians are contributing more to lecturers to the socio-economic political development of the country. *(There's murmuring)*. I stand to be corrected.

John: I stand corrected *(Sarcastically)*. There is no basis for any comparison between lecturers and politicians in that regard.

(The MC intervened and called on another journalist to take the floor)

Etim: *(Stands up)* My name is Etim, representing the International Wave. You promised to fund the film industry to fully develop into a world class movie industry.

Presido: To compete with Hollywood and Bollywood? It's not possible: Rambo, Jackie Li, Jackie Chen, Schwarzeneger, Van Damme, Dharmendra, Amjad Khan, Anwar Abachan, etc? Our film industry will continue to grow at snail speed because our films are the same - rituals, babalawo, drug abuse and infidelity. And they all end with 'Watch out for part 2.' I have no regret not to have funded the film industry.

Etim: Then why did you make the promise, sir?

Presido: Because promises are meant to be broken.
(There's laughter)

Sadiq takes hold of the microphone and announces that only one more person will be given the opportunity to ask a question because Presido is already late for a banquet. Many hands are up. He points at one.

Ngozi: *(Stands up)* I'm Ngozi, representing V.O.A. My interest is in the power sector. According to your score-card, there has been a remarkable improvement in electricity supply but I think otherwise.

Presido: You think otherwise because you see the glass as half empty instead of half full. In fact, I'm sure you're in the opposition party. My administration has proudly and generously generated, transmitted and distributed plenty megawatts of electricity to the length and breadth of Republic of Chumanga.

(There is a sudden power outage plunging the hall into complete darkness).

The end.

E. Notes on Contributors

Ayotunde weaves tales around the everyday-little-things that spellbind us, in a world of realistic fiction. He is the author of *Ruffled Butterflies* and *Driftwood*. With a Bachelor and Master's degree in English Language, he currently teaches Fiction and Creative Writing in the University of Jos. When he is not lost creating imaginative worlds, he loves to be lost in the world of animation.

Bizuum Yadok is a teacher, a poet and a novelist. He holds both B.A and M.A degrees in Literature from the University of Jos as well as a Professional Diploma in Education from Ahmadu Bello University Zaria. He is the co-founder of Plateau Writers' Society (PLAWS), formerly known as Plateau Authors Group (PLAG), and he is also a member of Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA). Yadok is the author of *King of the Jungle* (a novel) and *Echoes of the Plateau* (a collection of poems). He curated an anthology, *JOSTICE*, which was released on the 1st of June, 2018. He has several academic articles, poems and short stories published in reputable magazines and journals across and beyond Nigeria. You would find him playing table-tennis when he is not reading.

Cinkinaan is a free spirited and cheerful Writer. Her temperament reflects interesting pulses focusing on writing Prose, fiction and building contents in her writing as a Woman activist and a feminist Writer. A philanthropist and social and fashion/Modelling exponent. Deeply involved in the art of dancing and training dancers.

Despan Kwardem is a self-published author of the novel *The Seventh Messenger*. His passion is telling the message of God's love to humanity through stories. With titles as *Algorithm* (coming this December), *Survival Instinct* (undergoing editorial process), and a published short stories, Despan's dream is to reach the world with God's message through his writing. He is a member of the Abuja Writers Forum.

Dr. Anthony Ojarikre, is a teacher and poet, teaches English, creative writing and poetry at Michael Otedola Cecelis Ibru University, Agbarha – Otor, Delta State

Esla Jephthah Enjugu is a resident doctor and an aspiring poet/writer who has drawn inspiration from both local and international writers. He is yet to have a published work. He writes from Jos.

Eric Ganan Pam, an indigene of Foron in Barkin Ladi LGA of Plateau State, Nigeria, has 7 creative works. He works at the Plateau State Polytechnic, Barkin Ladi and also voluntarily serves as Editor of *The Word of Life*, a monthly Catholic newspaper. He had worked with *The Nigeria Standard* newspapers as reporter, columnist, opinion-page (Op-Ed) editor and feature editor. Apart from creative writing, he loves gardening and is married and blessed with 2 children.

Francis Otole is a Nigerian born poet and academician. A member of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) and many other literary groups. He is an award-winning

featured in magazines, journals and anthologies; locally and internationally. He is a graduate of the prestigious Benue State University and a student of life. His hobbies are reading and writing. He is married with two children.

Georgie Iortema hails from Mbakato, Mbakuha, Ushongo LGA, Benue State. He holds B. Ed, Language Arts (English Language) (ABU, Zaria), PGDBF and M. Sc Banking and Finance (BUK). He has published *Clipping the Wings* (Play), Aboki Publishers Ltd, Makurdi (2022) and *Night Duty* (Play), Spectrum Books Ltd, Ibadan (2005). He is happily married with four children.

Hanya Lami Dorcas is a twenty-one-year-old poet, creative writer and student of English and literature in the University of Jos Nigeria. She was born in her state of Kebbi but has traversed many states of Nigeria as dictated by her parents' work-life. Her works are greatly influenced by personal experiences that have helped shape her. Lami currently writes from Jos, Plateau State.

Linda Dusu Yamtal hails from Pankshin LGA of Plateau State in Nigeria. She is a graduate of the University of Jos (B. A. Linguistics, 2007); PGDE, (2015). She is currently the Head of Department, Languages in the TCNN Staff Secondary School, Bukuru and also the Dean, School of Languages, TCNN College of Education, Bukuru, Plateau State. She is married and is blessed with four (4) beautiful daughters.

Maureen Amaka Azuike is a professor of African Literature and Women's Studies with the Department of English, University of Jos. She is a novelist, a poet and literary critic who has over twenty-nine years of professional work experience in lecturing at the university level. She is the author of *Campus Blues*, *Gentle Giant*, *Violated* and co-author of *Tides of Time*. Her creative works are a quest for self-autonomy for all her female protagonists who she depicts as vulnerable and are more susceptible to gender oppression and violence. She hails from Onitsha in Anambra State, Nigeria, but lives in Jos.

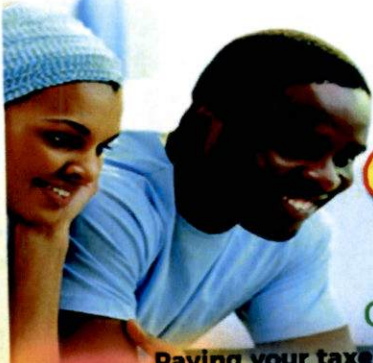
Nathanael Tanko Noah is a teacher who loves to read and write poetry. His love for poetry began when he met a lecturer at the College of Education, Akwanga, Nasarawa State. Nathanael's poetry explores themes of love, loss, hope and nature, inviting readers on emotional journeys that inspire them to appreciate life in unique ways.

Victor Meshak Jatau is a teacher, poet, dramatist and creative writer. He holds a B. A Ed and M Ed English Education. He is the author of *House on the Sand* (A Play), *Beautiful Dreams Across the Hills* (A Play) *A Dair of Treasures* (collection of Poems) *Spoken Silence* (Collection of Poems) and *The Soul of Nigeria* (Finding Answers to the Challenges Confronting Us), *Strings of Reason* (Echoes of a Silent Soul) *Sun of the Night* (Collection of Poems) and *Exegesis of Corruption in Post-Colonial African Literature: The Voice of Ngugi W Thiong'o*. He has to his credit two spoken word Albums: UNMUTED and UNMUTED (*Speech of a Dead Man*).

He lectures at the Department of English Language at TCNN College of Education (TCE), Bukuru, Plateau State. He is the Chairman, Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) Plateau state Chapter and General Secretary, Plateau Writers' Society (PLAWS) and Youth Leader, Youth Fellowship, COCIN Rahwol Kanang.



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