

THE NAKED CONVOS PRESENTS

LIGHTS OUT
RESURRECTION



Edited by: Wole Talabi

Lights Out: Resurrection

ODUKWE

DORMAN

ELENWOKE

OKOLO

ONOH

OKUNGBOWA

FALOWO

NKOMO

‘SAWALEH’

EZEIYOKE

Edited by

TALABI

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“We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones.”
— *Stephen King.*

INTRODUCTION

Halloween or Hallowe'en, also known as All Hallows' Eve, or All Saints' Eve, is a yearly celebration observed in a number of countries on the 31st of October, the eve of the All Hallows' Day and just before All Souls day. It is a time dedicated to remembering the dead, including saints (the eponymous hallows) and the faithful departed.

I personally find Halloween to be a strange and fascinating celebration because while it is a traditional Christian celebration, some believe that many Halloween traditions originated from pagan Celtic harvest festivals, such as the Gaelic festival Samhain, and that this festival was eventually Christianized as Halloween. Samhain was a time when livestock were slaughtered for winter, it was believed that the boundary between this world and the world of the spirits could more easily be crossed. The spirits of the dead were thought to use this as a time to revisit their homes so feasts were had, at which the souls of dead kin were beckoned to attend and a place set at the table for them. Not everyone however believes that Halloween had its roots in Samhain though. Some academics, have argued that Halloween began independently as a solely Christian holiday. Already, just from trying to trace Halloween's origins, we find a dilemma – is it a co-opted pagan holiday or is it just an unusual Christian holiday?

Whichever side of that fence you come down on, there is no denying that Halloween has taken on a unique pop culture image, its theme of using stories, revelry, music, images to confront the concept and power of death has been mostly replaced with meaningless costumes, candy, and parties.

Still, either through Samhain or its nomination as All Saints' Eve, Halloween had always been about death and the dead.

For some reason, despite the influence of Christianity that came to Africa with colonisation, Halloween has never really been popular in Africa. A bit odd, considering that Africans have many old traditions associated with honouring the dead and masquerading – two of the most obvious aspects of Halloween traditions. For example, the Alekwu of the Idoma people in central Nigeria, the Amadlozi, of the Zulu and dozens, if not hundreds, more. Christianity has a history of absorbing and fusing with local customs and beliefs as it spread. Syncretism—the process whereby two or more independent cultural systems, or elements thereof, conjoin to form a new and distinct system—is one of the most important factors in

the evolution of religion. Indeed, observing local Christian denominations all over the world, it is easy to see where local beliefs and culture have influenced the religious practice there. So this begs the question: Why did Halloween not find its way into Christianised Africa?

Perhaps it was because the colonists and Christianised Africans refused to allow their religion to be associated with what they thought were primitive, savage beliefs. Perhaps it is because there has been so much real death and cruelty inflicted by one group onto the other that Christianised Africans had enough to be afraid of in their day to day lives. They didn't need or want any scary festivals or fictional horrors keeping them up at night. I have no idea, I can only speculate.

Anyway, TheNakedConvos (TNC), being an online African community has always been about exploring concepts, opinions and ideas, no matter where they come from. Fear is no exception. TNC has its own Halloween tradition of publishing fictional horror stories during the week of Halloween. For the last 5 years, we have celebrated Halloween every October with *Lights Out*, an annual series of horror stories that aims to showcase the best horror fiction we could find, and use it to explore fears as best we could.

It started as a bit of a fun, not-so-serious, side-project in 2011, curated by the excellent series creator Chioma Odukwe and TNC founder, Wale Adetula. Since then, Chioma, Wale and I have arranged the *Lights Out* special every Halloween, working with some of our favourite writers while always trying to find new voices to add something new to mix.

Previous Entries in the series include:

- *Lights Out: First Blood* (2011)
- *Lights Out: Nightmare Theatre* (2012)
- *Lights Out: Twisted Fairytales* (2013)
- *Lights Out: Monsters* (2014)
- *Lights Out: Nigerian Horror Story* (2015)

To celebrate its sixth year, The *Lights Out* series expands into a full-fledged, continent-wide anthology, digging deep to find some of the best buried African horror fiction.

This year, *Lights Out* issues a special edition of 10 horror stories – some original, some re-issued, all excellent – by some of the best African writers working today. These stories are set in Africa, feature African characters and explore African fears through the horror genre.

This is: *Lights Out: Resurrection*

Why the theme of 'resurrection', this year?

Well, resurrection has two meanings, according to the Mariam-Webster dictionary.

1. To raise from the dead
2. To bring to view, attention, or, to use again

Similarly, we call this collection *Lights Out: Resurrection* for two reasons:

1. Some of the stories in this collection are brand new horror stories focused on the theme of Resurrection: The return of the dead, of that which was buried. Buried people, buried secrets, buried prejudices, buried sins. These stories explore what happens when the things we thought we'd put away return for us and find their way back into the world. They explore that which is raised from the dead.
2. Some of these stories have appeared in print but never online before. They are by self-published writers who have made a name and a business for themselves especially in the genre of horror fiction. We have resurrected their work and present it you know for your frightful pleasure side by side with edited and improved versions of some of the best stories from the previous editions of the *Lights Out* series that also explore the subject of resurrection. We have added thousands of words of text, changed endings and fleshed out characters that they may rise and live again. They are brought back to your view, your attention, used again.

The stories in this book are not sweet. There is murder, infidelity, cruelty, theft, rape, racism, and much more besides the monsters and ghouls. This is a horror collection after all, and every fictional horror derives its power, in sum or in part, from a real one. But there is love too, and kindness and hope in some places. I personally believe that horror stories are good for us. As the Stephen King quote that opens this book says, "We make up horrors to help us cope with the real ones."

I hope you enjoy this book, that you are scared and horrified by it, that it gets your blood pumping and your heart racing, that it gets your mind wondering, thinking about old horrors in new ways and that when the book is done, you go back into the world comforted by the knowledge that the fictional horrors are not real but keenly aware of those horrors that are.

*Wole Talabi,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
October 2016.*

DAUGHTER DEAREST

By

Chioma Odukwe

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-

It started with an, “I know a man who can help her.”

I don't even remember exactly who said those words and made the recommendation, but it was definitely one of the cleaning ladies at my office when they organized a commiseration visit to see me - the one people described as the big madam at work who had lost her husband and whose daughter had fallen into a coma months earlier, the one with the light skin and fine hair who was now the one to be pitied and prayed for. Fate had reduced me to a charity case.

There had been about a dozen of them, a uniform mass of rolling, plump flesh and chunkily braided hair that smelled of palm oil and Dettol. They'd all stood outside my daughter's room, offering their condolences and praying loudly for her recovery. As they left, one of them had pulled me aside and whispered those words, shoving a piece of paper with an address and telephone number scribbled onto it in rough cursive.

I was of course, sceptical. Usually, men whose numbers were offered in such scenarios almost always turned out to be frauds. False prophets and snake oil salesmen claiming to have some preternatural knowledge that could end an unfortunate series of events. But pain and powerlessness have a way of stripping away scepticism like rotten skin until all that is left is the hard, stark bone of desperation. The need to do something besides weep and hope for my daughter overwhelmed me.

“Okay.” I eventually whispered to myself one afternoon when Dr. Kolade brought me yet another inconclusive test result.

I pulled out the piece of paper with the number on it from my purse.

Okay.

But somewhere in my heart, I knew I would regret it.

He was not what I was expecting. For one, he wasn't decorated with fetishes as one would expect of a witch doctor. He looked so ordinary; I could have easily passed him on the street without suspecting who he was. He wore a fitted navy blue suit without a tie, brown oxford shoes. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut low, thinning at the centre of his head and he was clean-shaven with only a small stubble of grey around his chin. He seemed more like the CEO of a small-to-medium size business than a witch doctor.

Second, he agreed to come and see her in the hospital immediately after taking my desperate phone call. That was unusual.

"How long has she been this way?" He asked me, looking at my daughter's supine body on the hospital bed.

"Over four months now," I murmured, my eyes heavy. "The doctors say she is in a coma but they don't know what triggered it. It happened two weeks after we buried Bidemi, my husband."

He hummed, his obviously manicured fingers twitching as he stared at her. The fluorescent light of the hospital room made her bedding almost glow.

"This one will require a lot of power," he said, more to himself than to me. He walked up to her and placed his hand on her forehead like he were taking her temperature. He could easily have been mistaken for a real doctor. He leaned close to her and listened to her chest. Then he turned to look at me. His eyes told me he had bad news.

"Your daughter's spirit has gone to the land of the dead. Her spirit is now there, but her body is still here, still functioning. This is most unusual." He touched her forehead again, then her arms, humming a soft chant this time. He shivered visibly and then went silent for a few moments before asking, "You say your husband also died four months ago?"

"Yes sir." I responded.

"Hmm. She loved him very much. And he loved her very much too. He does not want to let go. It is not normal. This is my preliminary diagnosis: the spirit of your dead husband has called unto her own spirit in grief and is holding on to her too tightly. I will have to go and bring her out by force. Or else..."

My lips quivered as tears formed at the corners of my eyes and began to fall, wetting the front of my shirt.

He looked at me dispassionately and shook his head.

"This is not the time to cry woman! Your daughter needs you as much as you need me."

I wiped my tears with the sleeves of my shirt, embarrassed and confused but hoping against hope that he could save my Bimpe.

He hummed again.

"How much money do you have?"

I fell to my knees as I told him, "Baba, please, anything you want, I will

pay, please save my daughter, please.”

“Get up!” he commanded, apparently irritated by my dramatic demonstration. You will pay two hundred and fifty thousand naira to this account number once we are done, understand?”

I nodded and rose to my feet.

“Good. Now, you need to believe. Think about her alive and well. Picture her healthy and well in your mind. Don’t stop. No matter what!”

I nodded even more vigorously. “Yes.”

He cocked his head to one side and said, “I will lock this door so that no one can disturb us and then I will begin. I need you to hold on to me with your right hand and keep your left hand on your daughter’s. We will anchor her back to this world. The spirits will resist. You will hear a lot of noise. Do not open your eyes. Do not break contact with either of us or your daughter could be lost forever!”

He touched my daughter’s forehead.

“Now,” he whispered like he were telling me the password to some ancient secret.

I held on to his wrist, eyes squeezed tight in concentration, picturing the face of my daughter as I felt her slow, even pulse.

I felt sudden cold draft on my skin and I shivered, feeling my fingers go numb.

I got the sudden urge to warm them briskly. Trance-like, I felt my fingers begin to lift from his wrist one by one.

“Don’t let go!” I heard his voice and, startled, I strengthened my grip on them.

I heard shrieks, screams as if from a great distance and my heart quivered. They did not sound human. The room was cold. So cold.

“Bimpe! Bimpe!” I chanted, rocking on the balls of my feet and picturing my Bimpe as she had been a few months ago, swinging on the playground at her school and smiling at me. Smiling at me so beautifully. I focused on her smile, trying not to listen to the groans and screams that seemed to fill the hospital room.

The hairs at the back of my neck were raised. His skin suddenly became very hot. Too hot.

“Don’t let go!” I heard him scream, pain layered in his voice. Someone began to knock on the door, calling out what sounded like my name but I couldn’t hear anything beyond the inhuman screams that filled the room.

Bimpe’s pulse stopped and I bit my lip, feeling blood well up with a sting.

My daughter is dead, I thought. Oh God my daughter is dead.

My chanting rose to a loud shouting, sweat dripping in rivulets down my forehead as I tried to focus on the image in my mind where my daughter still had a pulse and smiled at me.

“Leave her!” the Baba commanded in a voice that sounded like it was made of explosions and suddenly, the room was quiet. The temperature of his hand was back to normal. Bimpe’s pulse returned. The knocks on the door seemed to have stopped. It was almost as though nothing had happened.

“She’s back,” he said softly and I let go, opening my eyes and reaching for my daughter’s sweating face. He stopped me with a gesture.

“No. She’s still asleep. Let her recover.”

I slowly backed away from the bed, staring at her. I saw her take a deep breath, open her mouth and let out a yawn. I smiled, tears of joy welling in my eyes.

I could not believe it.

“Thank you! Thank you!” I kept repeating as he led me to the chair in the corner of the room.

“Let her sleep tonight. Tomorrow morning, she’ll be awake.”

“Hungry.” Bimpe said again, drawing out the word like she were dragging it through her mouth with her tongue.

It had been two weeks since she was discharged from the hospital and she hadn’t stopped eating ravenously, as though she were making up for the four months she’d spent being fed intravenously.

I looked at her, confused. “But you just finished eating, dear. Two loaves of bread and six eggs already. Isn’t that enough?”

She stared straight at me with an empty look in her eyes and shrugged before repeating herself. “Hungry.”

I sighed. She’d barely put together a real sentence since she’d woken up. “Alright. Hold on. I’ll make lunch now.”

She nodded and I smiled at her, just happy to have my daughter back.

After a few weeks, I began to wonder if it was really my daughter’s spirit Baba had brought back.

And then it happened.

I begged him to come back and see her then.

“Tell me again what exactly happened,” he murmured, sitting on my sofa.

I shivered as I narrated the incident that forced me to call him back.

I had gone to the market, leaving her home. When I came back, I could not find her. I searched inside the house, calling out her name but got no answer.

I'd ventured to the back of the bungalow we shared and there she was, in the gutter, covered in mud, blood, filth and feathers, the head of a fowl between her teeth like some wild animal. The small bird's skull had been crushed between her teeth.

I screamed, dragging her out of the gutter. Her hands were covered in chicken guts and blood.

All she said to me was, "Mummy. Hungry."

At this point of my narration, a loud thud came from the far wall beside us. I jumped at the noise. He cocked his head to the source of the noise, his brown eyes silently asking what that had been.

"That... that's her." I told him. "I confined her to the guest room. I didn't know what else to do. But... she doesn't like it. She throws herself at the wall and groans maddeningly."

The thud came again and I looked at him, eyes begging him to do something.

He stood to his feet and approached the guest room door. I followed him and unlocked it when he gestured to the door handle.

"Stay in the living room," he said, going in.

I stood nervously beside the door, fingers trembling.

There was no sound, there were no voices.

He came out soon after, face sombre.

"She's asleep now. It seems something happened to her spirit on her way back and did not allow all of her to return. If the spirit is not complete, the body will regress to its most basic, animal state. But there is no need to worry. It's been fixed now." He said as he shut the door.

But of course, it hadn't.

She was very silent and seemed mostly alright for all of a week before the look returned to her eyes.

"Mummy. Hungry." she'd growl and sometimes, I was sure I was listening to something other than my daughter speak.

Then, one day, her skin began to rot.

"You have to fix her!" I shouted hysterically at him, in his apartment, a modern two bedroom in One Thousand And Four estate that showed no signs of being a witch doctors shrine. "You have to give me back my daughter o!"

"Let go of me you this woman!" he shouted, his hands shaking.

For the first time, I saw him lose his composure and that scared me even more.

I suddenly knew the truth.

He had no idea what to do.

“All you did was collect my money! What you brought back wasn’t my daughter! She is not complete!” I held him by the collar of his shirt, angry, terrified, and desperate.

“I have already lost my husband, I will not lose my daughter, you hear? No matter what! Where’s my Bimpe? Where’s she?!”

I screamed abuses at him, getting angrier at his sweaty, shaky attempts to calm me down.

He agreed to see her again reluctantly, his shifty eyes telling me he was more afraid of my instability than of the thing my daughter had become.

“I want my Bimpe o!”

For the third time, he came to see us. For the second time, he was in our house. For the first time, he was visibly afraid. He approached the room warily. As if sensing his presence, the constant thudding that had persisted for two days finally stopped.

“Listen to me,” he said carefully, “I don’t know what happened to your daughter’s spirit when it went to the land of the dead but it is not all here. I need to see if I can go and get the rest of her before she becomes more animal than human, you understand?”

I nodded my head as though I understood what he meant even though I didn’t. I just wanted him to bring my daughter back.

He removed his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves, muttering incantations to himself as he did. The air became hazy, hot, as though it was a sauna. The maddening thuds from the guest room resumed.

He entered the room.

Again, just like the last time, I stood outside, waiting.

But this time was not like the last time.

I heard screams.

Horrible, guttural screams.

I could not tell if they were coming from my daughter or the witch doctor.

The air seemed so hot I could hardly breathe.

And then the screams ceased abruptly.

Trembling, I ran to the room and swung the door open.

My daughter looked up at me from the place on the floor where she was kneeling and smiled. It was the same as her old familiar smile but... wrong somehow. Twisted. Like her face had been removed from her skull and then reattached by someone who wasn’t exactly sure how. I frowned, uncomfortable at the sight. My frown quickly turned to a wild scream when I saw what she was cradling in her lap.

It was his head, lolling on her thigh, his neck twisted to an impossible

angle and trailing the rest of him on the floor.

Dead. Dead. He is dead.

I gagged, sagging to the floor.

“Brains.”

She pulled his head over her laps and I watched her smash his head on the concrete floor, over and over again. The wet crack of concrete against skull was sickening but I was frozen with shock, unable to do anything but tense in disgust and watch the horror unfold before me.

After what must have been a dozen cracks, she shoved her hand into the bloody mess.

“Sorry. Mummy. Hungry.” she whispered. Her voice was almost apologetic.

“Brains.”

She scooped his brains out of the fissure in his skull and shoved her pale hand into her mouth, eating with obvious glee.

She paused, looking at me.

Then she reached out to offer me a part of her grizzly feast.

“Braaains.”

That was when fear let go of my limbs and I ran out of my house, my hair wild and my feet bare.

I was at the gate to our estate before I realized that I hadn't locked the door.

I spun on my heel and ran back home, heart in my mouth.

But she was not inside. She had escaped.

She came back.

I knew because I woke up with my head on her bare, scabby laps. I had fallen asleep, exhausted. The smell of her putrefying flesh overwhelmed my nostrils and I screamed in terror, pushing myself away from her.

I saw her eyes brim with tears. The edges of her bloody mouth curled, twisting her face with a dejected look.

“Mummy. Don't. Love. Me. Anymore.” she said, her voice so slow and heartbroken, I did not realize when I instinctively took her into my arms and hugged her tight.

Holding her, fear seized my heart.

Surely now was the end.

But I did not regret the maternal instinct that drove me to comfort her. She was still my daughter and I could not bear to see her sad, to see her suffer. Perhaps it was better for me to die at her hands, to end the nightmare there and then.

I held on to her tightly, waiting for the bite, the vicious tear into my skin

or smash to my skull that would end my life and my suffering.

I held on to her for what seemed like an eternity.

When nothing happened, I pulled away from our embrace and looked into her eyes. She seemed happy, in an animal sort of way. Like a dog whose belly had just been rubbed.

I thought, I am losing my mind.

“Mummy. Love. Me.” She groaned, the sound almost hopeful.

“I love you, Bimpe mi. I do,” I murmured, reaching up to stroke the skin on her clammy, flaky cheek.

She smiled up at me and for a moment I forgot I was stroking a monster.

No. Not a monster. My daughter.

“Bimpe. Love. Mummy.”

I wanted to believe her.

I had to believe her.

“Neighbour! Have you... seen... Dipo... crawling here?” My neighbour shouted in between heavy pants, her eyes wild and frantic with worry as she wrung a blue scarf in her hands.

“Ah! No o! What happened?”

“Was... outside... crawled away... can’t find him. Egba mi! Dipo!” she ran off, without even giving me a chance to reply, her hands flailing as she screamed her six month old son’s name.

“Finished. Braaaains.” Bimpe said a few minutes later.

I walked into the room, steeling myself to stomach the mess.

“Good. Braaaains. Thank. Mummy.” She groaned at me from the corner of the room, the chain around her ankle rattling with her motion. Her fingernails had fallen off.

“You’re welcome my dear.”

I cleaned up after my darling daughter, carefully putting the bloodied baby clothes in a special bag, along with all the other clothes I was going to burn. Then I mopped the tiled floor around her with antiseptic solution.

When I was done, I bent over and wiped her bloody mouth with a wet napkin.

She put a rotting arm around my thigh and drew close to hug my leg and groaned. “Hungry. Brains.”

“Mummy loves you,” I said as I allowed the tears fall.

Mummy loves you.

SHAME

By

Nerine Dorman

-
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“It’s a dead dog, for Christ’s sake, Thulani. I don’t know why –”

Thulani brings the car to a halt far too fast for the gravel road, and we slew sideways as we come to a standstill. I can tell he’s being stubborn from the way he juts out his chin. Mulish, I’ve called him, but I know better than to try engage him when he’s got his mind set on something.

With a sigh I follow him out of the car. I’ll get into worse shit if I don’t at least show that I’m making an effort to be supportive. And, ugh, I don’t want to handle a dead anything. I’ve seen enough road kill at close quarters during the two years I’ve been dating Thulani. Every bloody time he encounters some unfortunate next to the side of any road, he insists we do the honourable thing and move the creature to the side so the cars don’t drive over it repeatedly.

You can tell a lot about people from how they treat their dead.

How about having some concern for the living first? I’ve retorted, only to be met by a scowl.

But in a way I have to admit he’s right. That dead cat or dog must’ve been someone’s cherished pet that would be missed.

The sun’s just past noon and beats down on us on this dirt road branching off the N1. Pienaarsvlakte is halfway between Hanover and Beaufort West, about sixty kilometres into the Great Karoo, and this time of day nothing living wants to venture out from the shade. The life has been bleached from what scrub remains.

No sheep in sight, though. Only this dog Thulani’s examining. What the hell is a dog doing out here? This couldn’t possibly be someone’s pet.

“It’s still alive,” Thulani says.

A sick feeling wriggles in my stomach and I allow myself to look closer.

It’s a typical hound, a township special, all long limbs, pointed muzzle and short tan coat. The creature’s lying on its side, one eye socket pecked

clean and teeth pulled back in silent snarl. But it's twitching, the ribcage shuddering with sporadic breaths. As my shadow slides over it, the dog emits a faint growl.

"What the fuck?" I step back.

Thulani crouches, reaching out.

"Don't touch it!" I tell him.

He's already resting his big hand on the animal's head. The compassion in his gaze undoes me. Every time. He mutters some benediction in Zulu and carefully picks up the dog. I can't help but notice how its hindquarters seem curiously detached as the body flops. Thulani places the animal down in the shadow of a small thorn bush and remains crouched next to it.

"We can't leave it like this," he says.

"It's dying anyway." Already I can feel my too-pale skin reddening in the glare. My lips are parched and even a mouthful of the tepid spring water I've left in the bottle in the car won't do much to remove the traces of dust from the back of my throat. I bat helplessly at the flies that buzz around my head. There are always flies out here that tickle over lips or obscure vision.

When Thulani reaches for a rock the size of his fist, I know immediately what he means to do – a coup de grâce. Left hand on the animal's flank, he raises his makeshift weapon in his right, and I hide my face in my hands and half-turn away. This is not the first time he's had to offer mercy by dashing out some unfortunate critter's brains; I know what to expect. But the sickening thud of stone on flesh doesn't come.

The dog growls, Thulani swears, and I dare to peek between my fingers.

He's jumped back, the rock discarded as he clutches his left hand to his stomach. Bright blood blossoms on his white t-shirt.

"What happened?" I ask though I know it's not necessary.

"Damn bastard's bit me."

Thulani glares at the dog, but the thing lies completely still, as if this last action on its part pushed it past its limits. Not even the slightest movement of the ribs betrays life. Odd that no flies are buzzing around it – I'd have thought that they'd find the dog far tastier than me.

Now's not the time to worry about that. Thulani's been hurt and all the determination to do the right thing has left him; he allows me to lead him back to the car where I dig in my bag for a plaster.

"Ma'll have antiseptic," I tell him, but I don't like the look of the wound. A canine sank into the soft flesh of the ball of this thumb. Not quite a case for stitches, but he'll definitely have to go for a rabies shot. And soon. I want to groan and curse, but bite my tongue. There's no way we're going to find a doctor open in Pienaarsvlakte on a Saturday afternoon. That's if they even still have a doctor I can drag away from the rugby on TV. I don't even know if the neighbouring township has a clinic.

"I honestly didn't expect it had the strength to bite me." Thulani glances

warily over my shoulder at the still dog.

“Leave it now,” I warn him. I don’t want to remind him of the half dozen other times he’s been bitten before. Thulani has a simple faith that it won’t happen again, that he’ll be fast enough the next time he plays Good Samaritan.

He doesn’t argue with me and, miracles of miracles, allows me to drive the last ten kilometres to the town.

I never wanted to do this – return to my roots. Ma en Pa – I can’t call them anything else but that, in Afrikaans – decided to retire in the Karoo dorpie where Pa grew up and his father once owned a general store.

They know about me and Thulani. It doesn’t mean they approve, but I’d hoped to keep my past separate from my future.

They can’t keep bankering after the fleshpots of the previous regime, Thulani has said many times. Are you ashamed of me? I took you to meet my parents. Surely yours can welcome me as a son.

Are you ashamed of me? That’s the crux of the matter. I love this man truly, madly and deeply, with all the clichés all rolled into one. I can’t explain it. When I was younger I always imagined I’d date some blond surfer-boy ideal, but Thulani with his quiet dignity caught me by surprise. Love will meet you where you least expect it.

While the rest of the country has moved on, Pienaarsvlakte stubbornly clings to a bygone era. Most of the redbrick houses are squat, blockish structures that follow the curve of the railway line. Pa grew up with the metallic shudders of the trains shunting in the wee hours and the lonely, piercing horn of the locomotives resonating through the emptiness.

Now most cargo is freighted by road, and the railway is abandoned, but the people are tenacious, like the Karoo vegetation, and their roots run deep. Like the parched century plants they endure the extremes.

Ma and Pa live on the outskirts of the town. There isn’t much of a garden – the borehole water’s too brackish for that – but the two giant Peruvian peppers weep their green boughs over the porch in the front. The curtains are drawn. They’re always drawn, so far as I can remember. My parents dwell in a murky twilight.

“Doesn’t look too welcoming,” I say to Thulani.

He shrugs. “I’m sure you’re just making things worse by having a negative attitude. C’mon.”

He gets out the car and quickly changes into a clean t-shirt, but I sit for a few heartbeats, clenching the steering wheel while I try to pinpoint the source of my discomfort. I’d rather be anywhere than here. Mercifully we’re only staying one night – I’ve booked a room in the local hotel. I didn’t presume to ask whether Thulani and I could spend the night in the parental home.

The front door remains obstinately closed and I gather my bag and get

out. What, was I expecting my father to stand there with a shotgun to run *daardie kaffir* off his doorstep? Ugly words, as taboo as saying nigger.

Thulani gives no appearance that he's even the least bit aware of my misgivings. Instead he offers me a smile and squeezes my hand with his uninjured one, and we make our way to the front door.

The squeak of the aluminium gate swinging shut behind us feels like a gunshot.

Pa opens the door just as I'm about to knock the second time.

"Pa!" I say. "How are you?"

His smile is tight and the hug and kiss he gives me is perfunctory.

Thulani holds out his hand. "Meneer Coetzee." His Afrikaans is flawless. Very few of the older generation expect that when he opens his mouth.

Pa eyes Thulani but doesn't accept his hand. "Come inside," he says in Afrikaans.

We follow his shuffling form into the lounge. How is it that in the three years since I was last here he's grown so stooped, shrunken in on himself? Ma bustles out of the kitchen as we come in and there is much hugging and kissing.

While Pa is aloof, Ma's at least trying with Thulani. She takes his hand, gingerly, but it's a start.

And Thulani is full of compliments for the lovely mother of such a beautiful daughter. Ma eats the words up like chocolate drops while Pa glowers from his armchair. He's a troll king, gripping the armrests while he watches us with angry eyes.

Thulani winces slightly as he takes his seat, and I recall the bite.

"Ma, Thulani got bitten by a dog on the way here. Do you have any bandages and antiseptic?"

What a way to start an already tense first meeting. Pa stays in his chair while Ma flutters ahead of us down the passageway, her hands quick like flicking sparrow wings as she jabbars away. Thulani makes her nervous. This is probably the first time a black man has entered her home, as a guest, and she's too polite to say as much.

Framed black-and-white photos of long-deceased family members glare down at us from the walls. I can't even imagine what they'd think of our arrival in their midst. Thulani sits on the edge of the bath while Ma reaches into the cabinet under the sink for the first aid kit. I don't like the way he clutches his left hand, and a thin film of sweat beads his upper lip.

"Are you okay?" I ask him.

He nods. "Just my phobia of medical stuff." He manages a small laugh.

"This will only hurt a little," Ma says but then she pauses, her expression growing unreadable as she looks at Thulani. She thrusts the box into my hands. "Here, Marietjie, you do it. Then come help me in the kitchen with

the tea things when you're done."

She all but dashes out of the room.

"Well, that was weird," I comment.

"How so?"

"My ma's normally the first to dive in and take control when anyone's gotten hurt. Wonder what —"

"She probably doesn't want to make you feel uncomfortable," he answers.

"No, that's not it." I don't want to tell him that I think she didn't want to touch him.

The skin around the bite wound is swollen to twice its normal size and Thulani hisses when I dab at it with mercurochrome.

"I don't like the look of that," I tell him as I apply further antiseptic on the wound. "We really need to see a doctor."

"I'm sure we can hold out until Monday."

"I don't know about that."

"We can stop by the medi-clinic's emergency unit when we get back tomorrow afternoon," he tells me.

"That'd be for the best." I wrap the wound with fresh dressing, and help myself to enough supplies to last for tonight and tomorrow morning. I'm sure Ma won't mind.

He declines a painkiller, but I'm satisfied that I've done the best I can under circumstances. Thulani goes to the lounge to speak with Pa, and I join Ma in the kitchen.

"Did you clean up properly after you were done?" she asks me, almost angrily.

"Of course, Ma." I try not to roll my eyes. I'm not twelve anymore. Amazing how my ma will save a completely different face to show in the inner sanctum of her kitchen.

She approaches me and takes hold of my shoulders, her gaze stormy grey. "Has he been tested?" she whispers.

"What?" Okay, now she's confusing me.

"For AIDs. You know how they like to sleep around."

"Ma!" I almost shout and the word comes out all choked.

"You can't be sure enough in this day and age."

I pull away from her. "You can't make generalisations like that anymore. Thulani is not some tsotsi off the street. I'm more worried that he's going to get rabies from that dog bite."

"I hope you understand that it is very difficult for Schalk and me to accept your decision. I'm sure he's a nice boy otherwise you wouldn't have..." Ma evidently can't find the right words.

"I love him. Is that not enough? And he's good for me."

"What about Adrian? He was studying to be a doctor," Ma asks.

“Adrian cheated on me. He went on behind my back.” No matter how often I’ve told Ma that my ex had been a shit, she always brings up the fact that Adrian was going to have a Dr and not a Mr in front of his name. Not that it made him a better person than the next.

Ma evidently has more concerns to raise, but I am grateful that she keeps her mouth shut and instead orders me about the kitchen. It is almost like old days. Everything has to be just so: a tray with a crocheted cloth; the good coffee cups; milk in a jug; and a little doily on the sugar pot. Even staid milk tart. I can’t help but notice that a chipped tin mug and plate set still stands among the crockery. Ma must still give the gardener his meals using those utensils.

By the time we bring the tea things into the lounge, the old man has even unbent enough to not sit like the troll king anymore. In fact he leans forward, his hands loose in his lap and some of the grimness fled from his expression. Thulani relates a little about the work he does for an NGO that aids the city in facilitating the allocation of RDP houses in the townships.

Dad used to handle PR for one of the country’s big construction companies. Thulani’s talking a language he understands. I try not to let my relief show too much while I help dole out tea and slices of milk tart.

Occasionally Ma drops a few clunkers like “you people” when referring to black South Africans. I cringe, but Thulani’s all smiles and smooth words, and I relax for now. He might have a few choice comments for my ears only later. This entire afternoon could have gone much, much worse. Thank goodness my brother isn’t here to use the K-word. He still won’t talk to me since I took up with Thulani. And he sure as hell won’t let me see my nieces.

I’m comfortable enough to hold Thulani’s hand, and he squeezes my fingers gently while telling of the time he rescued an abandoned baby out of a stormwater drain. I don’t like how cold and clammy his skin is, but when I glance at his face I don’t see anything untoward in his expression to betray that he is unwell. Is that a slight tremor I feel? I’m not sure.

The inevitable happens. We run out of words. Ma and Pa’s world has shrunk. They know only what they read in the papers and glean from the radio and television. Cellphone reception let alone internet access here in Pienaarsvlakte is patchy at best. Ma goes to her bible study each Thursday and attends church. Pa occasionally goes on hunting trips with his retired friends. They speak of the world outside their town in terms of a country that has become hostile to them, and the farthest they’ve travelled recently has been to Beaufort West so Pa could go have some tests done at the hospital.

We leave shortly before supper. I’d hoped that they’d invite us to stay, but they don’t; Ma complains that she’s got a headache coming on. I don’t know if she’s faking it and I don’t want to confront her. I’m still annoyed

with what she'd said in the kitchen.

"That went better than I expected," says Thulani once we're in the car. He puffs out a deep breath and sags into the driver's seat.

I place a hand on his shoulder and feel a tremor pass through the muscle. "Are you okay?"

"Throat's a bit sore."

I look back at the front door, but neither Ma nor Pa stands there. The message is clear: *You've visited. Now you can go.*

I sigh and bite my lip. Yes, this was a lot for them to take in over one afternoon. Maybe there'll be a next time. Meanwhile Thulani's not feeling too hot and we're in the middle of bloody nowhere.

"Let me drive. We can go back to Cape Town tonight. I'll stop at the service station and stock up on strong coffee. I'll be fine."

I don't want to talk about this afternoon, at least not yet.

He shakes his head and flashes me that disarming smile. "We've been on the road all day, sweets. Let's get some rest at the hotel then leave first thing, okay? I'm sure my hand won't fall off overnight."

"How is your hand?" I try to reach for the injured limb, but he pulls away.

"It's okay. A bit numb. But I'll be fine." He turns the key in the ignition, a clear sign that he won't brook any argument from me on the matter, though I can't help but notice that he winces when he handles the steering wheel.

Every Karoo town has a Royal Hotel, it would seem, and Pienaarsvlakte is no exception. The building's walls are sheathed in slasto and several trucks are parked outside. From what I can tell, this is the only bar in town too – unless one ventures into the township to visit one of the shebeens. But there's no way in hell any of the local whites would do that.

We grab our overnight bags, lock the car and make our way into the reception area. More slasto. The walls are painted a pale mint green straight out of the 1970s, and the orange frosted glass panels in the doors are equally retro. A fern that's lost most of its withered leaves crouches in a corner and a moth-eaten buffalo head grimaces at us from above the front desk.

The noise from the bar room at the other end of the foyer tells me there's a bunch of men enjoying the beery interior and, from the sound of a televised commentator's tinny voice, there's still a rugby match on. A sudden, drunken cheer reverberates through the building. No one's manning the desk, however, so we end up standing like fools for a bit.

Presently Thulani slumps into one of the aluminium-and-vinyl chairs. "This is like something out of the *Twilight Zone*," he says.

"I'll go into the bar and find out if there's someone who can help us," I offer.

“You do that.” He grimaces and pinches the bridge of his nose, and I make a mental note to ask the manager if they’ve got some painkillers. Thulani’s not going to win the argument about taking medicine this time, and he’s doing a shit job of pretending that everything’s okay.

The bar room is filled with a thick miasma of smoke and stale beer, and the dozen or so bleary-eyed men are focused on the television screen over the counter. I’m a woman in their territory, and they ignore me. The barman’s just as engrossed in the game as his mates.

“Excuse me, sir,” I say at least three times before he deigns to notice me.

“Can I help you?” He doesn’t sound as if he’d want to.

“Um, do you know where the manager is?”

“You can talk to me.”

I swallow hard, unaccountably nervous. “Um, I made a booking under the name Coetzee. There’s two of us.”

“Oh. Right.” He stubs his cigarette out and walks out from behind the counter.

Gee, could he be any more enthusiastic? I bite back the smart retort that plays on the tip of my tongue and trot after the man. Oh, how I’d love to say something. All I want right now is for us to get into our room and have a bath so that I can check up on Thulani’s hand.

The barman comes to a dead stop when he sees Thulani in the foyer. “Can I help you?” The hostility in his tone is obvious.

Thulani rises with a tired smile. “I’m with this lady here.” He gestures to me.

“Oh.” The barman’s hands twitch then he grunts and goes behind the desk where he flips open a diary and makes a show of reading the cramped scrawl noted under today’s date.

The man squints up at me. “I don’t see any booking under Coetzee.”

“Um, but I confirmed with a deposit.”

“I’m sorry.” He doesn’t sound sorry at all. “And we’ve no vacancies.”

“This is bullshit!” I yell and lean across the counter. There, barely legible, I can read my surname. “My name.” I point at the word.

He slams the book shut. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Thulani holds up his hands. “Now I’m sure there’s a perfectly –”

“I suggest you both leave,” the barman says. “We don’t want your sort here. Go now, before I call the cops.”

Then it sinks in and I’d have lurched forward to grab the man’s t-shirt in both hands and shake him if it weren’t for Thulani, who snakes his arm around my waist.

“I understand how it is then,” he tells the man with so much scorn in his smile I’m surprised the barman doesn’t wither on the spot.

“Thulani!” I protest.

“Hush, baby cheeks.”

How is it that he’s so calm? Tears burn at the corners of my eyes and I struggle once, half-heartedly, then allow Thulani to steer me back to our bags.

“What are we going to do?” I can feel how my face is aflame with both anger and embarrassment at our treatment. “We can’t just let this man be like this. It’s not right.”

“I don’t want trouble.” Thulani winces as he hefts his bag but he keeps a firm hold on my wrist and guides me out the door.

“You can’t just let him walk all over us like this.”

“Relax,” he murmurs. “Let’s just go.”

My tears do start but I’m in no mood to argue with him. Thulani’s always the voice of reason in these situations. I’ve learnt to trust his judgment and we get in the car.

He lies back in his seat for a few minutes, his breathing slow and deep then he gathers himself and starts the car.

“On Monday,” he begins, “I’ll talk to Ziyanda. This sort of story is right up her alley. I’m sure she and Chris will be absolutely delighted to do a little stirring of their own and run a story in their paper. And it’ll explode all over social media too. So don’t you worry.”

“Oh,” I say, and feel the first stirrings of glee. I wipe away my tears. “But that still doesn’t help our situation now. What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to take a drive out to the township. I’m sure someone will be able to direct us to a home where we may spend the night.”

“But we don’t know anyone here.”

“Don’t worry. My people are your people too now, don’t you forget that.”

The township is on the outskirts of Pienaarsvlakte, across the road. No pepper trees grow here and the streetlights cast everything in a garish orange glow so it’s never really dark after sunset. Row upon row of cinderblock houses march in the grid pattern; many have attendant tin shacks clustering in their small yards.

While the neighbouring Pienaarsvlakte appears deserted already, Zingisa township is overflowing with activity. Children run around playing games while adults walk about. Lights blaze from old shipping containers that have been converted into spaza shops.

Our smart little green Toyota Yaris draws stares, but Thulani drives slowly, rolls down the window and soon he’s engaging a group of young men outside one of the houses.

I understand only one in every ten words, but the gist of the conversation is clear. Thulani’s summed up our entire experience at the hotel in the matter of a few sentences – much to the general amusement of his rapt audience – and they are equally quick to give directions to a home a

few blocks down where we can inquire by a lady named Nosipho Dladla, who might have a room to spare.

“You don’t have to worry, my dear little *umlungu*,” he tells me as we drive to our destination. “You’ll have a warm welcome.”

Nosipho turns out to be an older lady deep in her seventies, and she’s only too happy to take Thulani’s money and get her brood of grandchildren to share her bed for the night. We wait in the cramped space that is their lounge, dining room and kitchen, all rolled into one, while much activity ensues.

The interior of the home smells of floor polish, and belying the home’s humble exterior, a large flat-screen TV dominates a wall. As always, I’m struck by how these small houses always look bigger on the inside. The children, whose names I don’t quite catch, appear quite taken with me, and their curious fingers often stray to my hair which they play with until Nosipho shouts at them to leave me alone.

Only once we are in the room, does Thulani collapse with a stifled groan. “I feel like hell,” he mumbles into the linen.

I sit next to him on the narrow bed we’re going to share and stroke his shoulder. His t-shirt is soaked through with sweat and he’s shaking.

“Maybe we should drive to Cape Town tonight.”

“No. I can’t face another moment in that car. Let me rest, woman. Tomorrow is another day.”

“You’re sick,” I tell him. “I don’t particularly fancy spending the night in a strange place while you’re obviously not well.”

I get no response. Thulani’s fallen into fitful slumber and I do what I can to arrange his limbs on the bed so he’s comfortable. He takes up most of the space, and he’s so warm I can’t bear to touch him. The interior is muggy and I can’t get the window to open – it’s been welded shut. The family go about their preparations for the night, and I toy briefly with the idea of asking Nosipho for water, but the language barrier is too daunting.

Here we are, strangers in their home, and on top of things, I’ve brought a sick man with me. Once things settle down, Nosipho does knock on the door to check in on us.

I murmur in my broken Xhosa that Thulani’s sleeping already, and thank her before turning out the bedside light.

So I sit in the worn armchair, wide-eyed and unable to sleep, while Thulani twists and turns on the bed. There’s a shebeen a few houses down that’s playing kwaito. Men talk and laugh while they walk down the road. A dog begins howling, only to have its vocalisations taken up by canines nearby until an almost unholy chorus tears at my soul. The ululating shrieks make me shiver, and I can’t help but recall a quotation from *Dracula*, about the children of the night and what beautiful music they make. Not quite music to my ears, that’s for sure.

Then a man shouts and a lull descends, punctuated only by the throb of two competing sound systems. How do people sleep through this? Or is it only on weekends? I'm all too aware of the incidental noises from the family in the room next to ours. The partition does little to insulate sound.

Thulani moans quietly. His injured hand rests on top of the covers and I turn on the bedside light briefly so I can examine the dressing. A greyish liquid stains the gauze and a distinctly rotten-meat odour hangs about the affected limb. Oh god I hope this isn't gangrene. He didn't give me a chance to change the bandage and clean the wound before he passed out, and I don't want to disturb him now while he's resting.

Though I should.

But then he'll wake, and he'll wake the Dladlas.

I swear under my breath. I should have insisted on taking Thulani straight to Cape Town without allowing him to overrule my decision. Should have, but didn't. And now I am in this predicament.

I can hear my mother's voice in the back of my head, *It's not right for you to put your bosts in this spot. You don't make your problems strangers' problems. That's not how I raised you.*

Of course there's nothing I can do about it right now.

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I switch off the light, close my eyes. Breathe. Try a few visualisation exercises in the vain hope that I can get to sleep. My bladder is uncomfortably full. Shit. I should have gone to the bathroom before I settled in the room with Thulani. Of course I didn't.

All these should haves.

My cellphone informs me that it's five to twelve. Fuck. At least another six hours before I can politely stir and get my show on the road. I am so not going to manage to pinch for six whole hours. I need to pee. I'm also thirsty.

Thank goodness these RDP homes have a small inside bathroom. Because if I had to go outside now to use a long drop... As it is, I have to summon all my courage to get up from the armchair and press myself past the bed so I can get to the door. I stand there for what feels like half a century, just listening, but I hear only Nosipho's soft snores and the *tick-tick-tick* of the wall-mounted clock in the lounge.

The bathroom is across the passageway. The door is ajar and I cringe when it shrieks in protest as I push it open. So I halt, waiting, but apart from Thulani noisily turning over, no one gives the appearance of being disturbed by my visit to the bathroom.

I flip the switch for the light and close the door behind me.

The room has space only for the bath, basin and a toilet. Children's toys line the side of the bath – dolls with missing limbs, as well as brightly coloured plastic balls and rings.

After I've relieved myself, I fill the basin with warm water, take off my jersey, and soak part of the garment so I can use it as a makeshift washcloth. I might not be one hundred percent fresh tomorrow when I leave but I want to at least get the worst of the day's sweat and grime off my face and from under my arms.

The warm water goes a long way to making me feel that little bit better, as though I could wash away the stilted agony of tea with my folks and the nasty turn of events at the hotel. The face that stares back at me from the mirror is drawn, and my cheeks are flushed as if I in some way sympathetically experience Thulani's fever.

No. I'm imagining things. I'm not the one who was bitten.

It's when I pull the plug out and water gurgles down the drain that I hear the front door rattle then slam open. Sudden fear has me freeze. Has someone broken in?

I straighten my clothes and pause, undecided. I hate this. Hate not knowing how to behave and what to say. My pulse hammers in my throat and I try to draw a steadying breath. If only I could blink and make all of this just some bad dream. I could puke right now but I gulp in air.

"Who's there?" Nosipho calls.

"I'm in the bathroom," I respond.

Muttering follows and I can hear Nosipho moving about in her room. Children complain. We both end up in the passageway at the same time, trading wary glances. The front door gapes open yet there's no intruder.

"Hayibo! I thought I locked up tight," Nosipho says even as she stumps to the door.

I watch and wait while she peers outside then pulls the door shut and double-checks the lock.

"That is strange," I say.

"The key was still on the inside," Nosipho says, shaking her head.

That's when it hits me hard. "Thulani!" His name is a choked cry as I spin around to the spare room.

The bedding is all churned up and Thulani's gone. I stand motionless, unbelieving. What the hell? What's possessed him to run out like this? Dogs bark like crazy in the distance. A woman starts yelling at someone.

"Maybe he's gone to a shebeen?" Nosipho asks.

"At this time of the night?" I ask, incredulous. I want to add that Thulani barely drinks at all, but keep my mouth shut.

She shrugs then returns to her room, leaving me to the now-empty bed. This entire situation is wrong on so many counts. Why would he just get up and walk out the door when he was half-dead with exhaustion and sickness earlier? He's never left me in the dwang before.

By all rights I should be pulling on a jacket and shoes and go looking for him but yikes... Me alone. In a township. In the wee hours of Sunday

morning when there are guaranteed to be folks still out and about who might be inebriated?

Nosipho is no help whatsoever and, besides, what can I expect her to do? I briefly envision the two of us wandering between the houses calling after Thulani. Ridiculous.

I grab fistfuls of my top and scrunch it hard while I rock from side to side on the bed. What the hell am I to do now? I can't exactly call the cops. They'll laugh at me. I can hear them now, talking to each other, about "that crazy white woman with a black boyfriend".

Yet he's out there. No doubt delirious.

"Fuck," I mutter then start packing, my mind made up. I might not be able to walk between the houses, but I can sure as hell take the car.

When I find him he's not going to argue with me. We are getting the hell out of this place and driving straight through to Cape Town.

It's no use. The sky to the east has gone pale like a dove's wing and roosters have been crowing for an hour already. Thulani remains missing. Twice I've driven past police patrol vans, their blue lights painting the surroundings in a flood of sapphire. I don't even want to know what they've been investigating.

Perhaps a domestic disturbance or a murder. Or both. What if Thulani is involved? My fear rises in me like choking mist and keeps me from approaching the cops. Paralysis. I am a ghost skirting the edges.

Silly white woman, what are you doing here in this place?

I can't go on like this. At six, when the sun is just nibbling over the eastern horizon, I give up this venture and plan my next move. I go home. To my parents.

This was never my true home, but I visited often enough over the years that Ma set up the spare room with fresh bedding in case I should drop by. The place is familiar: the same grandfather clock ticking in the lounge; the Oriental carpets I recall from the old house in Sea Point grace the dining room. So it is home or the closest approximation thereof that I can find in this wasteland.

Pa is surprised to see me. He's sweeping imaginary leaves from the front garden – his particular morning meditation to get out of the house – and halts his labours immediately when I pull up outside the gate.

He hurries to the fence. "What's going on?"

Here things become hazy. Up until now I've done such a good job holding things together, waiting and watching, dry-eyed. Now the tears come as I babble my story.

Pa, in a rare display of affection, pulls me close to him and lets me cry.

His clothes smell faintly of naphthalene mothballs, but mostly of him, and it's like I'm five again and fallen off my bike. By this time Ma has come outside and she hurries us into the kitchen where she gets me to sip sweet tea.

I relay my story for a second time, slower now.

Ma shakes her head. "You should have come to us. You should never have gone crawling into that place. They gang-raped a teenager there last month."

They gang-rape teenagers everywhere, I want to say, but instead I respond, "We didn't want to be any trouble." Besides, I know how you and Pa feel about blacks.

"Well, this is a big mess now," Pa says.

"What are we going to do, Schalk?" Ma asks.

He shakes his head. "We can't really go to the police. I'll call Bertus and see if he can't get his garden boy to ask around. I don't want any of us to go into that place."

That place has a name, I want to say. Zingisa.

So we wait. Pa makes phone calls, but then they get ready for church, and Ma gives me something to help me sleep once I've had a bath.

"Get some rest. Pa will sort everything out."

I believe her, and swallow that little white pill that softens my world's jagged edges. Sleep, when it comes, is sweet bliss. Everything will be better once I've had some rest.

My parents' muted discussion rouses me and I sit up slowly. Sirens ululate in the distance. For a moment I can't quite figure out how and why I'm here, in the spare bedroom, but then every horrible event over the past twenty-four hours comes crashing down so hard I can barely breathe.

Thulani!

I rush through to the lounge where my folks are standing by the window, the heavy curtains parted slightly so they can peer out.

"How are you feeling, my dear?" Ma turns and asks; she's all sugar and sweetness while she guides me to the couch.

"I'm okay. Have you heard anything about Thulani yet?" I want to look out the window, but my head's all muggy from the pill. It's easier to let Ma take charge.

Pa drops the drape and shakes his head. "Looks bad."

"What?"

The wail of sirens is barely audible, but it's there, and the sound ices my veins with the stark reminder that all is not as it should be, and Thulani's out there, somewhere, hurt and possibly dying.

“Zingisa township’s burning,” Pa says, matter of fact.

“There’s been a lot of unrest today,” Ma adds. “It’s the youth league, I tell you. They’re protesting because of that whole thing with the clinic. Ungrateful people. Things were never like this in the old days.”

It’s not protests. Can’t be. The mood was so normal, ordinary when I left. People there just want to get on with their lives. I make my way to the window where the thick pall of black smoke drifting to the sky confirms that the worst has indeed happened. We’re not so far away that we can’t hear the periodic explosion of gas canisters.

Those are homes going up in flames.

“But you said you’d phone Bertus,” I say.

“Bertus tried to get hold of Jaco, but says no one answered.”

Oh hell. That does so not sound good.

A police van with its blue lights flashing cruises slowly up the road, and we watch in silent trepidation as it passes.

Then we go outside. This is no doubt more excitement Pienaarsvlakte’s seen in months, though definitely not the kind that I’d wish to be privy to. Oh please God let Thulani be all right.

We watch as two police officers make their way up the road, one on each side. They knock on the doors of every house to have subdued conversations with whoever’s home.

“Go inside, both of you,” Pa tells us.

“I want to hear what the man says,” I tell him.

Ma tugs on my wrist. “Come, Marietjie. Listen to Pa.”

For a moment I want to resist, but realise that if I complain about not being treated like an adult, I am indeed behaving like a child, so I give in and play the role of obedient daughter.

My ears are burning, and I contrive to be in the lounge when the policeman arrives. I can’t make out much of the conversation, but the man’s twitchy expression, and the way his hand keeps straying to his holster are enough to tell me something has gone more than seriously wrong.

“What did he say?” I ask Pa the moment he steps back inside the house.

“Big problems. Very big problems.” He slams shut the security gate with such a violent clang that the whole house shudders.

Ma comes down the passage. “What’s going on?”

“There’s unrest in the township. They’ve called for reinforcements from Beaufort West,” Pa says then wavers, as though further words and actions fail him.

“What now?” I ask.

“We’re going to sit tight until then,” Pa tells us after he’s had a few moments to consider our situation. “We’re not to go outside for any reason until we’re told it’s all right.” He marches past us and vanishes into the bedroom.

Ma and I stare at each other with wide eyes as we hear him unlock the safe. When we investigate, we're just in time to see Pa sight down the barrel of his shotgun.

"This should stop any *kaffirs* that come here looking for trouble," Pa says.

"You can't say that word!" I tell him.

The scowl he casts in my direction is so ugly I immediately wish I'd bitten my tongue. "This is my house and I'll say anything I please. Don't you think coming here with your citified *kaffir*-loving ways is going to change the truth of the matter?"

"Schalk!" Ma says.

"Go check that the garage door is bolted, woman."

Ma wilts out of the room and I elect to do the same.

Cold now, I go back to my room and pull on my jacket then return to the TV lounge. At least I can see whether there's anything about this being televised. Nothing. I flip through the meagre channels available out here. My folks don't believe in DSTv and whatever SABC stations we pick up are so snow-filled I wonder why my parents even bother.

Desperate, I try my cellphone's internet browser, but can't pick up a strong enough signal for Google to be my friend. Communication blackout. The not-knowing is in a way worse. I'm trapped in this house while the world goes to shit outside. A fresh wail of sirens, closer now, has me pause.

Pa comes in to check the windows, but barely glances in my direction as he goes through the motions. Like a shotgun's going to do any good against a determined mob. I've seen protests get ugly in Cape Town. I've been there. You can't do anything when a seething mass of angry people pours through the streets, but make sure you're not in their way.

Night falls. Ma calls me to the kitchen and I draw some comfort from helping her prepare supper: toast, cheese, defrosted vegetable soup – the tastes of home that I associate with any other normal Sunday evening with the folks.

Only it's not a normal night, and Thulani's absence is a gaping black hole in my chest sucking out all my joy. Pa sets the shotgun down on the kitchen counter behind him. The weapon gleams a dull, oily black, and I can't help but think of a mamba, ready to strike. Pa's jersey is hiked up slightly to reveal the pistol holstered at his hip. He's ready for any trouble. I should feel safe.

Why don't I?

We've barely said grace when a muted crash of broken glass has all three of us jerk and cast nervous glances toward the window.

"That was from next door, at Stevie's," Pa says.

Ma says nothing, but her lips are slightly parted. I wonder if my eyes are as round as hers.

He rises and shoves his chair back so hard so it grates on the linoleum. "I'm going to go take a look."

"Don't!" Ma says. "The police..."

"The police are worse than useless, and you know that," he retorts.

I follow him as he strides down the passage, the gun held at the ready, like the enemy's already on the doorstep.

I remember all the times when I was little and I'd watched him take his pistol out of the safe each night. He'd always slept with the gun within reach by the bed. In case there was a break-in. I don't think I'd ever seen him handle the shotgun indoors, until now, and the sight alarms me more than I can say.

"Stay with your mother," he tells me when I follow him outside. "Lock the door behind me and don't open it for anyone. Do not –" He pauses meaningfully. "Do not under any circumstances come outside. No matter what you hear. Do you understand?"

I can only nod, and my heart feels like it's beating so hard it's going to explode.

Pa has so much determination about him, but he's old. I can see that now. When I was little, he used to carry me on his shoulders, but now I'm almost as tall as him.

The last glimpse I catch of him is when he flips on the torch he must've had in his pocket all along, and the wobbly beam of light frames his silhouette as he opens the front gate and vanishes towards the neighbour's house.

I dare to stand a few moments longer than I should, listening, straining my senses to try garner some idea of what's going on out there in the inky night. The stench of burning plastic rides the air and the hellish glow from Zingisa scares me on a much deeper level.

Oh god let Thulani be all right.

Reason tells me there's a more than fair chance that he's anything but all right.

I don't want to listen to that voice. So long as I don't know the truth, I can pretend otherwise.

A dog three houses away starts yammering like it's the end of the world, so I slam the security gate, shut the door and make damned sure the key is turned in the lock.

Then the lights go out, and Ma screams from the kitchen.

"Ma!" I yell as I start running down the passage. I slam into a wall as I take the corner into the kitchen too fast and all the breath is knocked from me.

"The power!" Ma sobs.

"It's okay, it's okay. Just a power failure. Are you up to date with your electricity credits?"

“We got on Friday,” she says.

“It’s probably just a temporary thing.” I take out my cellphone and use the flashlight app to see whether any switches have tripped on the board. Everything’s fine. “Must be at the substation, Ma. We’ll have to be patient.”

“I don’t like this,” she says.

“Neither do I. But let’s get the candles, okay?” I don’t want to admit that I absolutely hate the choking dark that feels like it’s going to crawl down my throat and press me to the floor with its heaviness.

Deep breaths. Deep breaths, Mariejje.

My hands shake when I strike the match and that brief flare of fire is a welcome sight. Shadows leap from the candle and our faces are painted in ghoulish contours.

“I hope your father’s all right,” Ma says.

“I’m sure he’s fine. He’s got the shotgun.”

The pressure of silence in the house is so apparent, I realise how much I miss the constant purr of the fridge. The only other sign of activity is from the grandfather clock that will tick in perpetuity so long as someone is there to wind it.

Ma wants to go to the lounge so we can keep watch outside the window. I put the candleholder down on the mantelpiece and help Ma pull back the curtain. It takes my vision about five heartbeats to adjust to the darkness outside. The entire block’s electricity appears to be shut off.

That’s when I notice the movement in the road. Five figures lurch along drunkenly, and I dash over to the candle so I can extinguish it. I don’t quite know what impulse has me do this, but there’s something not right about the way those people move.

“Why did you blow out the candle?” Ma asks.

“Shhh.” I gesture out the window. “There are people there. I don’t like this.”

Ma doesn’t say another word, and I’m grateful for her solid presence pressed against me as we continue standing by the window, even if she’s shaking as much as I am.

The explosion of a shotgun right next door causes us to jerk.

Pa!

Ma gives a small squeak, and I pull her to me and hug her tightly. “It will be all right,” I whisper into her hair. “Everything will be all right.” I’m glad she can’t see the tears that wet my cheeks.

A man rages incoherently, but we can’t hear his exact words through the walls. Glass breaks. Another shot goes off.

Those shambling figures in the road veer from their course and make toward our neighbour’s home, where Pa’s gone. Where it sounds as if he’s shot someone. I make as if to move to the front door, but Ma holds onto me.

“Don’t,” she says. “You know your father wants you to stay safe.”
“But Stevie? Pa? What’s happening there?” I ask. “I need to go look.”
Ma squeezes me painfully. “Don’t. Stay here with me.”

“I’ve got to do something!” I say.

“Then call the police.”

“They’re probably too busy,” I reply even as I make my way to the study where the landline is.

Bless Ma and Pa for keeping all the important numbers written on a piece of cardboard right next to the phone. I check my cell – enough battery power, thank fuck.

But there’s no signal.

Whatever knocked out the electricity has done the same to the phone lines.

“What the hell?” I murmur. Panic claws at me, and a thin whine tears out of my throat. I don’t want to stay here in the house with nowhere to go, but I don’t want to go out there either. Those shambling, dark figures...

I stand for I don’t know how long, the dead receiver clutched in one hand, concentrating only on breathing. I don’t know what to do. I really don’t. Whenever something went horribly wrong in the past, be it a flat tyre or someone getting hurt, Pa would sort it out. Pa always knows what to do. Now he’s not here. I don’t feel much better knowing that all this time that I’ve been with Thulani, I’ve been leaning on him too.

The candlelight wobbles down the passage and Ma’s shadow leaps and prances as she approaches. “Did you come right?”

“Line’s...” I read Ma’s horrified expression. “Dead.”

“What are we going to do now? We need to find out if Schalk is okay.”

“I know, Ma.” I slam the phone down in its cradle and drag my fingers through my hair. Maybe the pain can distract me; it certainly doesn’t help my predicament.

Even from where we are standing in one of the front rooms, the sudden shaking of the back door is so loud it sounds as if someone’s trying to yank the door off the hinges. The handle is jiggled roughly, like an impatient child trying to enter.

Ma shrieks and almost drops the candle.

“Maybe it’s Pa,” I say, but I don’t believe myself. Why would he come round the back and frighten us out of our wits like that?

Whoever it is starts thumping at the door just as I enter the kitchen, and I’m grateful for the fact that the door is solid wood.

“Who is it?” I call.

A drawn-out moan is all response before the slapping starts again. I can hear nails scoring into the wood, gouging splinters. Or at least so my imagination informs me.

Ma stands in the kitchen, the candle held skew so that she drips wax on

the floor. “Who is that?”

“I don’t think it’s Pa.” I swallow hard and blink back tears. I can barely breathe. We’re trapped.

Dead. Dead. We’re going to wind up dead.

“Let me in...” The voice is raspy and dry, like old newspapers being crumpled.

“That’s not Pa!” Every instinct tells me to step away to go lock myself in the bathroom, but to what end?

Shaking, I approach the sink, part the curtain and shine the cellphone’s torch light out the window. But I can’t see much more than my own reflection in the glow.

A hand thumps against the glass hard, and a face is pressed against the pane. Skin sloughs off the cheek and the eyes are completely opaque – like fish eyes left out in the sun too long. Bloody saliva leaves a snail trail.

I stagger backward into the table, and upset a chair in the process. My scream has Ma drop her candle. Luckily I keep hold of my phone.

A fist crashes through the glass and sends shards skittering all over the floor. Then a long, arm, dark with gore and missing two fingers, snakes over the sill groping, feeling along. Almost the way someone would pat for his reading glasses.

“We must get out of here, Ma. It’s not safe.” I want to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation, but only sobs escape. I just can’t. None of this is actually happening. Please oh god let none of this be happening.

Ma’s crouched by the door, arms flung over her head as she wails, the cry that of an animal in pain. “Schalk, oh my Schalk where are you? I’m so scared.”

But Pa’s not here. And neither is Thulani. Whatever madness has descended on the town, we can’t stay here and wait for someone to rescue us.

Dead. Thulani’s dead. You know it’s the truth, my dark half whispers.

Shut up. Shut up. Shut up.

Then I do start laughing.

I get up and try my best to ignore that arm trying to drag its body past the burglar bars. If Pa’s done anything right, it’s the attention to detail he’s lavished on security measures. This is Africa, after all.

I’ve always joked and said they’d trap themselves inside so thoroughly they wouldn’t be able to get out if there’s a fire, but now I’m perversely glad.

“Let me in...” the madman wheezes. “So hungry...”

“Leave us alone!” I yell. Then, in as calm a voice as possible, I say to Ma. “Come. We need to go.”

She won’t respond, keeps repeating Pa’s name over and over again.

More than ever I realise my urgency; I must get into my car and go. We

can't stay in this house. We can't wait for someone else to keep doing things on our behalf. So I leave Ma for now and go get my things. I don't bother packing neatly; just stuff things in. Bag over shoulder, check. Keys. Cellphone. I go grab Ma's handbag, a jacket for her.

I try to ignore the fingers spidering over the big window in Ma and Pa's bedroom. It means there's a person – let me not think it's another one – along the side of the house. We don't have much time. What's wrong with these people? Skin sloughing off like that? Goose flesh rises at the mere thought.

I try to breathe, but my chest hurts. It's dark out there. I won't be able to see anyone coming. Hands can snag my clothing, drag at me. I can't help but recall Pa talking about Uhuru – The Night of the Long Knives – when all the black people will rise to murder the white oppressors once and for all once Madiba's gone. No. That's just stupid. Even though Pa's been preparing for it his entire life, with his guns and his talk of shooting those people. I won't say the K-word.

And I can't help but think of that long, black arm that's trying to find a way to bring its owner into the house.

I get our things together in the passageway then go back for Ma, get her to pull on her jacket. She's like a small child, crying and trying to bury her head in my arms. Why must I be the strong one? I'm just as scared. My fingers are shaking so much I can barely pull up the zip of Ma's jacket.

It's as we stand by the door that we hear the first dragging step on the front porch.

"Shit," I murmur. The car key almost cuts into the soft meat of my palm. I kill the cellphone torch and we stand absolutely still. I hardly dare to breathe and Ma's crushing me to her.

I don't have to see to know someone's standing there outside. Waiting. Aware that we're here, alone in the house wanting to leave.

Ma gives a small whimper and I hush her; squeeze her back. "It's going to be okay, just be quiet. I'm here."

Tears run down my cheeks and wet Ma's hair as we hold each other in the dark.

"Let me in." It's Pa, but his voice sounds wrong.

He sounds *changed*.

I can't help but think of those shambling figures I saw out in the road before the lights went out.

The body outside throws itself against the door with a meaty thud. Ma and I both shriek and jerk at the same time.

"So hunnnngrrrry..."

"Go away!" I shout. "You're not my father! What have you done with my father?"

A futile gesture. I know. But I have to say something.

Do something.

“Let me in.” The words slop out with a wet gurgle. “There’s nowhere for you to go.”

“No.” I try not to sob out that one small syllable, but I can feel my entire world contracting to this one point.

“Why not? Are you ashamed of me?”

Ma goes limp in my arms and I clutch at her. Ma cannot help me.

No one can.

SLEEP PAPA, SLEEP

By

Suyi Davies Okungbowa

Max Aniekwu stands in the shadows cast by an abandoned danfo under the bridge at Otedola, where he always meets his buyers. Grime lines his wrist and tucks under his fingernails, making his increasingly sweaty palms greasy. Dark clouds splotch over a sky as gray as TV static, announcing an impending thunderstorm, yet Max sweats, and juggles the Ziploc bag from one slimy palm to another in search of some friction. He shifts from foot to foot and wipes his gleaming forehead with the back of his free hand, leaving dark stains.

Max knows something's different here. Beside the fact that the buyer is late, something in his chest doesn't sit right. He knows he should never have taken this shit, not from Chidi of all people. Max wipes sweat from his brow again, suddenly rethinking it. Chidi, whose tips and contacts have twice gone bad and landed three colleagues in the police net. Chidi, who every trader worth his salt in the black market has blacklisted.

He should turn around right now, dump the bag inside the abandoned danfo and leave. But that'll ruin his cred on the market. Rule number one: never stand up your buyer. He'll struggle with finding another buyer for sure, and God knows how he'll eat then. *Remember, Maximus. Remember why you gats to do this shit in the first place.*

There's a couple peals of thunder, and a mild drizzle starts to bathe the bridge overhead. Max, unable to shake off the spiders marching up the nape of his neck, seriously considers a break for it. Worst case, he'd ask Chidi to call the buyer and apologize. Set another delivery time and date. He's tired from all the digging, anyway.

He's still thinking this when a shadow falls on all other shadows around him.

Max looks up, into the scraggly face of a gangling dark man. The man wears a long, gray kaftan that cloaks a sheathed curved dagger clamped to his belt. He's draped an equally gray shawl over his head, hiding most of his features, but Max can still see two lines of vertical tribal marks etched into each cheek, right below piercing eyes.

"Ne Maximus?" he asks. His accent is heavily northern.

Max swears under his breath, anger flaring. Not only did Chidi tell the buyer his full name - you never tell a buyer your name; you never know what they're going to do with it - Chidi the idiot also brought him an *aboki*. Was he not clear enough about his preferred client types or was Chidi just stupid? Even after Max made him repeat it like a mantra: get only middlemen who buy and smuggle to storage centers in Cotonou and Yaounde, for shipping to boutique museums who do live exhibitions in China, Mexico and Poland.

Anyone else is a big risk with the police, especially these fucking guys who everyone says only buy to eat - though no one has ever been able to prove that. Which makes it more of a problem. *Knowledge is power, and the lack of it, danger*, his father used to say. Truest word, that.

Max looks the man up and down from shawl to sandaled feet. Twilight looms, and with the street lights yet to come up, there is nothing before him but a tall, gray ghost.

"Your order?" Max inquires.

There's a moment of hesitation, then the man says, "Yatsun, hakora, da kunnuwa."

Max nods. Having lived in Kaduna for a couple years, he knows what those Hausa words mean.

Toes, teeth, ears.

Max opens up the Ziploc bag and shows him its contents. The man stretches a bony index finger and pokes about in the bag, inspecting the five dead toes in the plastic, poking at both ears and making a squishy sound. The teeth are wrapped in clear cellophane, and for a minute, Max thinks he's going to open it up and inspect that too, but he seems satisfied after the ears.

He reaches into his robe and produces a black polythene bag. He pulls out a bundle of dog-eared one-thousand naira notes and begins to count. Max counts along silently and re-zips the package. The man stops at fifty and hands it over.

Max hands him the bag, grabs the money and shoves it into his jeans pocket. Keeping his hands there, he turns and heads up to the bridge in the rain. He jumps into the next yellow danfo down to Berger, climbs out and hops into another to Isheri, his hands tight in his pocket the whole time. The bus snakes its way into the heart of the maze that is Lagos. Max drops off at Ishola Bello and walks the remaining couple of miles in the rain, down to his miniflat at the end of the close. At no point does he look back.

The dead of night prods Max awake. Electricity is still out from the week before, and the rain from dusk has mixed with the bottled air in the

cramped miniflat, producing humidity that is thick to the touch. Max slogs through the living, out front to the verandah and powers on the 650VA gen. A couple yellow bulbs blink into life, except the living room's, which is burnt out. He turns on the TV for light, flicks through a couple of DSTV channels. Most are out of subscription, so he settles on EWTN, the Catholic station. He doesn't know why he still watches it. Maybe because his father, Mazi Aniekwu, made him watch it when he was growing up. *The Catholic way*, as he'd say. His father's been dead for years now, but Max has found rhythm and solace in the routines, the chants, the incense. It's his go-to for post-harvest downtime.

Max leaves the background noise on and heads for the kitchenette. There, he pours water into a bowl, squirts in liquid soap, and washes his hands for the sixth time since returning from the bridge. He turns out the water, squirts another dose of soap and starts again. *Have to wash the death off you*, his father always said. He was wrong, though, Max knows. You can never wash off the death. Never.

He finds a mug and mixes three hits of fruit bitters with a hit of schnapps, drags it down. It traces a familiar burning dryness from his throat to chest, settles in a squirm of wet warmth at the pit of his stomach. He pours another slush and takes the mug to the living, just as the priest begins the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

There are mud tracks on the floor tiles that he didn't notice before.

They run from the door, but don't end at Max's feet at the entrance to the kitchenette. The TV's light is insufficient, so Max squints to follow the tracks, which he notices are odd because while one is a complete footprint, the opposite foot has most of the sole with no trace of toes.

The footprints end at the couch where a man sits with his back to Max.

The mug slips from Max's hand and crashes onto the floor. The man on the couch doesn't stir or flinch at the sound, devoid of all movement but for the flickers of television images over his head. Cautiously, Max steps around the broken ceramic and to the front of the couch.

The man's eyes are open and stare at nothing. There are only bloodied holes where his ears should be, and Max discovers the cause of the odd footprints: one of his feet has five stumps instead of five toes. If Max could see into his mouth, he'd see that the teeth were gone too.

But the face...

Max is frozen with shock at the face.

The face is that of Mazi Aniekwu.

If asked later, Max would not remember how the next few hours of this night go.

First, there is a persistent urge to swoon that Max fights and fights. The TV lights blur, and he no longer hears the priest's invocations. He hiccups, dashes into the restroom and hurls the schnapps and Mummy Isheri's jollof rice and Coke into the sink. He wants to turn on the tap to rinse, but his hands shake too much. He pulls off the faucet head.

After a time he cannot measure, Max finally manages to rise, but he does not return to the living room. He locks the bedroom door, gets in bed and throws the blankets over his head. He does not put out the lights.

An hour passes, maybe two. Max's eyes are bloodshot wide, and his tongue tastes of ethanol, bile and dread. Sleep is a faraway phenomenon his mind cannot comprehend, but Max persists, counts the seconds with his heavy heartbeats, asks questions and answers them himself.

The generator groans from low petrol once, twice, then shuts down.
Oh God, fuck it.

Another hour passes before Max dares to rise and grope his way across to open the bedroom door. Armed with a smartphone torchlight, he focuses the beam on the floor.

There are no footprints where the first beams land. Hope and relief start from the bottom of his stomach and grow and grow as the beams pass from tile square to tile square, showing nothing. Nothing. Nothing.

The next tile has a footprint. It's one without toes. The tile after that, footprint. And after that. And after that.

The thing that used to be Mazi is still seated in the couch when Max lifts the beam from the floor. It sits frozen, but the *blink-blink* of its dilated pupils are directed at Max.

Max spins, speeds into the bedroom and slams the door.

Max stays holed up in the bedroom for half a day before any manner of common sense returns and he realizes it will be impossible to spend another night with it and hope to remain sane. If it does not return to the depths from which it came, he will have to take it back himself.

Then dread piles in his chest when he realizes he has to touch it. He hasn't touched his father since... when? The day he packed up and left the man alone with his big dreams of grooming his son into taking over the family's funeral parlor. That was no life for Max, and he didn't want to be a pawn in Mazi's fantasies.

But Kaduna was hard for a twenty-something with no university degree, and after several failed efforts to land some steady way to build his life, Max decided that a life as an undertaker was better than surviving on hope alone. So he packed his bags once again and headed back to Lagos.

Except, by then, Mazi and everything he built was gone. No trace, no extended family, no last will and testament, nothing. The most credible story came from word on the streets, that it was Mazi's apprentices, a group of three known harvesters, who murdered him. Not only that, they also ran off with everything he owned. There were stories that said they'd cut him up and sold his parts in the black market. *Na im make him body lost*, they said. Others said he'd been buried somewhere remote. No one could point Max in a direction.

Max knows it's his fault. If only he'd stayed, you know. If only.

And that's why he decided to stay, then. Wait and see if those bastards ever came back. Wait and see if, somehow, someday, maybe he could make something of himself and not put all of his father's sacrifice to waste. He visited Nwansoh, the biggest name in the harvesting business and a friend to his father, apparently. The woman took a good look at his hands and said, "Come work for me."

Under her tutelage, he wormed his way into the market in no time. Met her nephew Chidi on an early run and took a fast liking to the guy for some reason he couldn't place, especially since Chidi was, and still is, pretty shit at his job. Maybe Chidi reminded him of what he would've been; young man stuck in the family's grim business according to his father's wishes. Maybe Max is living Mazi's dream vicariously through Chidi. Or maybe Max is saving him. Maybe saving Chidi is the one thing that keeps the shadow of guilt over Mazi's death at bay.

They've done business ever since. Max is good at this, a natural. But over time, the lines have blurred and he no longer remembers why he does it: to find those bastards, or because it's easy work that puts food on the table.

Or worse yet, because it keeps him close to Mazi.

Handle this thing, Maximus. Handle it.

Max grits his teeth and tiptoes out of the bedroom with his eyes shut. To look upon it will be acceptance of its existence, and Max will not look, will try to un-know what he thinks he knows. He gropes, breathing heavily, teeth clenched. He reaches out, retracts his hand, reaches out again and yelps when his fingers touch something damp and sticky.

Max sweats in his fists again, rocking back and forth because his legs no longer do their job. The thing sits as he left it. *Blink-blink*. His feet

already turn of their own accord, facing the bedroom, but Max knows he can't, he *can't*.

He bends and lifts a leg, the one with toes still complete. The body slides off the couch as one unbendable unit and thumps on the ground like an ounce of hardened bread. Its skin cracks and bursts when it lands. As he pulls it, more cracks appear and travel upward, upward. Fluids ooze out of them. Max coughs but does not stop dragging. Across the tiles, to the kitchenette, where he shoves it under the shelves with his leg and shuts the door. He turns and retches, but there is nothing left to vomit. He breathes, struggles to quell his marching heart. He shuts and opens his eyes, shuts and opens, blinking away the ghostly caricatures that form on the edges of his vision.

Finally, he rises, fetches his only two neckties and binds the thing's hands and feet. He ties a hankie over his nose when he does it, because the thing smells like the fucking corpse that it is. Max will not look it in the face, choosing instead to look at the stumped toes and remind himself that it is not Mazi. The hankie soaks a couple trickles of tears from his watery eyes. Max tells himself it's because of the smell.

He has to borrow a car. Chidi's hearse, maybe. The bastard was dumb enough to make this mistake so he has no choice but to help in getting out of it.

It's drizzling under an early gray sky when Max catches a danfo to the funeral parlor at Ojodu. It's a stall squeezed between a coffin maker and a provisions store, long enough only to house a casket and a corpse table. Chidi sits on a stool under the canopy outside, for the lack of a corpse to attend to, running his fingers over a phone screen in a way assures Max he can only be playing Candy Crush. Before he hails Max's arrival, Max grabs him by the singlet and shoves him into the back room of the parlor. There's an office the size of a toilet cubicle in the back, too small to have a desk, but with a desk in it anyway. Max shuts the door and puts Chidi up against the wall, a heavy wide palm on his chest.

"Maxy, wait, wait," Chidi pleads. He's thin and haggard, and has nothing on Max, who has spent too much time with crude weights fabricated by a roadside welder.

"Don't be calling me that name, are you mad?" He hates it. *Maxy*. Sounds too much like Mazi.

"I no tell you say the guy na *aboki* because you for no do," Chidi says, "but I need that money die, I swear." He touches the tip of his tongue with his index finger and points to the sky.

“You stupid idiot,” Max snarls. “Which kain grave you arrange for me?”

Chidi frowns.

“Answer!” Max pushes against his chest, carefully. Too much, and he just might crush it. “Who dey inside that grave?”

“I no know na. I no check before I mark am.”

“Eh?” Max slaps him across the cheek, hard. Chidi yelps. His eyes water and sweat pools in the curve of his singlet. Finger marks start to materialize on his cheek.

“Wetin be the first thing I tell you when we start this business?” Max asks, his hard stare boring holes in Chidi’s face. Chidi breathes and breathes and says nothing.

“You gats to check the fucking register for every single harvest!” Max says. “You gats to check! You don’ forget wetin Nwansoh talk? You don forget?”

Chidi mumbles a no.

“And even if you forget, you no get eye? You no see wetin happen to am? You no see say na everlasting fuckup to-”

“Harvest your own person, I know,” Chidi says. “But no be your person we harv-”

“Fuck you!” Max screams, fighting a choke in his throat. He releases Chidi and pounds the desk, kicks a chair. “You for check this grave, Chidi! You for check this grave!”

He shuts his eyes but tears come running through the floodgates anyway, pouring anger, hurt and dread onto his cheeks. He turns his back on Chidi and hides his head in his arm.

Why? Why?

He would give anything to see his father again, yes, but the real one; the one who taught him to watch EWTN. Not this, not this.

Chidi shuffles on his feet and watches Max, unsure. After a silence punctuated with Max’s sniffs, he asks, “You dey cry?”

“Shut the fuckup.” Max wipes his eyes and turns to him. “Wey the wagon?”

Chidi coughs. His breath smells of tobacco. “Why, wassup?”

“Are you mad? You still dey ask me question?”

Chidi’s frowns. “Ah? Na my car now. I gats to ask-”

Max’s grip on Chidi’s throat is strong enough to cut him off.

“Get me the fucking keys.”

Max returns to the miniflat at Ishola Bello after the fall of darkness. There are dull throbs in his joints from digging twice in two days, and the

drive back from Jafojo Cemetery was especially jarring because the hearse is a rusty old container. The only thing he can think of is sleep.

He strips and takes a freezing bath, then proceeds to wash his hands in the wash basin. He does it six times, seven times, but it does not stop him from replaying the *blink-blink* of the Mazi-thing's eyes once he put that first shovel of humus into its face. Taking another freezing long bath does not drown out the sight of its gap-toothed mouth, the stumped foot as the earth closed it up. Even sleep and two sweaters cannot melt the iciness in his chest.

Max wakes after midnight, swamped in a cocoon of wool and sweat. He pulls off the sweaters and heads to the kitchenette for a slush mix.

There are footprints from the door, one foot with toes, one without.

They are thicker, muddier than the last time.

There's something sitting in his couch.

Heavy pounds rattle his front door by morning. Max opens the door a peep and finds himself staring into Chidi's face. He sidles out and shoves Chidi backward.

"You this boy, you no dey hear word? We never gree say no visit? Ever?"

Chidi puts his hands up. "I know, I know. But I get work today, so I need the wagon."

"Ugh." Max shoves his hands into his trousers and tosses him the keys. "Oya go. Leave me alone."

Chidi lifts a finger. "Wait first. Another thing."

Max rolls his eyes. Chidi pretends not to notice.

"I go Jafojo this morning, go check the register last last." He blinks, zones out for a second, as if trying to disbelieve what he saw. "The name wey I see there, the name no make sense."

Max already knows. "Just go to work. We go talk later."

"Na your Popsie name dey there, Maxy. Na Mazi Aniekwu dey the register."

Max holds Chidi's eyes. "Go to work." He turns to leave.

"Them say the body don dey since like four, five years," Chidi continues, oblivious. "Nobody know say na him, because him join one mass burial like that, different people from different hospital wey them bury because nobody come claim them for mortuary after many years. I been dey ask, but nobody know which mortuary your Popsie from come." He sighs.

"Bro, I swear, I no know-"

Max puts up a hand. "Just go."

Chidi sighs again and heads for the car. Max goes back in, shuts the door and listens to the grunting sounds of the hearse until they're out of earshot, before he opens the kitchenette.

The thing is still there, where he'd bound it with the neckties and stowed away under the shelves once again. Max studies its blinking, stumped for next steps and worried about his safety. Imagine what the police would think about having your father's mutilated body in your kitchenette. How many years in prison does one even serve for something like this?

Max runs a hand over his head. This was how Nwansoh's madness started, first with the simple panic that leads to denial. Then came the slow descent into dementia, so much so that she had to be driven out, to sea. He feels it already, the onset of his own promised madness. What is this exactly, juju or what? He's never really believed in all that rubbish, but then what happened to Nwansoh happened, and now there's a dead-but-not-dead father in his kitchenette. He isn't going to sit around asking stupid questions.

Nwansoh's shanty is six two-by-four timbers dug into Oniru beach's sand with tarpaulin wrapped over and around them, situated only as far from the shore as the waves go at the highest tide. The woman herself is as ragged as the tarp and as old as the sea, her skin as pockmarked as the stabs of footprints in the sand around her shanty: stray dogs, seagulls, crabs left behind by high tide. Max notices his are the only human footprints beside hers.

They sit opposite each other on little stools outside the shanty, the breeze snatching her words. She peers into Max's face through cataract-ridden eyes, her hair wild and separated, like seaweed.

"I told you, you don't touch your people," she says.

"I know, I know. It was a stupid mistake."

"You don't touch your people," she repeats, "because if you've kept them alive enough in your chest, they will come back. Then you will think you can let them stay, you will think you can't lose them again. And that's how you become mad, old, rotten." She shakes her head "That's how you become them."

Max has known the hidden dangers of harvesting all along. Difficult to recognize a loved one who has bloated, shrunk and then decomposed, and sawing off body parts in pitch darkness didn't help. You had to fail to know, and by the time you did, you'd already awoken something you couldn't send back to sleep.

"You're saying I can't take it back?" Max asks.

She gazes at him, blank. “You don’t touch your people. It is known.”
“Biko, Nwansoh,” he says, leaning in against the breeze. “There has to be a way at least.”

She shakes her head again, mumbles to herself. Max watches solemnly, remembering the once vibrant woman from her days as senior mortician at LaSUTH, when she still topped the harvesting charts on the market. Not the crackled and remiss caricature that sits before him now, the ash dust of morning after a night of glowing embers.

She stops mumbling, then says something. The breeze swats it aside.

Max leans in. “You said what?”

“You need to destroy it,” she screams back.

Max lifts his eyebrows. “Like, burn the body?”

She laughs, shakes her head. “You’re foolish. You think I haven’t tried that?” She casts a quick glance behind her, at the shanty’s opening.

“Burning only worsens the smell when they come back.”

“I don’t get.”

“You still have things that keep bringing it back. You need to destroy.”

Max thinks, then it strikes him. “I’ve sold them already.”

“Destroy it,” she says, looking past him at something distant, beyond the shore.

A thrill runs up Max’s calves. “You mean I have to go and get it back?”

Her eyes shift to him.

“Destroy it,” she repeats.

Max swears under his breath, then to Nwansoh, “So there’s no other way?”

She shrugs.

“Did you destroy yours?” he asks. When she frowns, he adds, “You know. Your sister.”

Her face stays expressionless for minutes, blinking.

“You’re still here,” Max says. “You must’ve found a way.”

She studies him for a beat, then slowly, pitifully, she shakes her head from side to side, and glances back at the opening to the shut-off shanty. Max follows her eyes and notices two sets of footprints there. One leads out to where Nwansoh sits. The other meanders about the opening, but never goes past it.

Max knows he must go back to the buyer.

Or else.

Chidi pulls the hearse off the Ketu-Oworonshoki expressway and eases down the windy path to Chinese Village. The arch-and-turret

simulation of the Great Wall that passes for the entrance into the village looms above. Max thinks the “China Commercial City” written in Chinese characters bears a dismal look. It frowns down at them, caught the wrong way by the light of sunset.

Inside the village, it is quiet, which is all sorts of wrong. It once possessed the vibe of the commercial hub that it’s meant to be, until the customs authorities raided in 2006. So now, the shop windows have lace fabric, flower vases and jeans hung next to their *Closed* signs. It’s a dead man’s town with people living in it.

Chidi drives to the far end of the village and pulls into a cramped nook before turning off the engine. Dusk quickly approaches and the place stinks of decomposing refuse. There’s a row of back doors to what used to be shops or living quarters or both. Or still are.

When Max gets out of the car, Chidi doesn’t follow.

“No way.” He folds his arms in the driver’s seat and pouts. Max slams the passenger door and heads for the door Chidi has pointed out. He knocks, once, twice.

“Wanda?” A voice asks from inside in Hausa.

Max doesn’t respond. The door pulls back, and the buyer’s marked face peers out. He studies Max for a second, then frowns and steps out in a flurry of robes. Max’s eyes don’t miss the dagger underneath.

“Me ya sa ka ‘a nan?”

“We need the goods back,” Max says, pulling out the money from his pockets. “See, I have your money. Two sixty. I added ten on top, for the wahala.” He hands it out to the man, but the man doesn’t even look at it. His face is set, focused on Max.

“Ba mayarwa,” he says.

Shit, thinks Max. *No returns.*

“We can’t sell it anymore,” Max says. “We need to use it for something else.”

The man’s eyes rest on Max, then flit behind him to Chidi at the steering. He finally gives one short nod, and retreats into his quarters. There’s an antsy wait where Chidi smokes two cigarettes in huge drags and Max hops from foot to foot and sweats in his palms.

Finally, the man re-emerges with the familiar ziploc bag and hands it to Max. Max tries to give him the money again, but he isn’t even looking at it. He’s looking at Chidi.

“Ba kudi.” He points to Chidi. “Ina son wannan.”

Chidi spooks immediately he notices the man’s finger, and starts to get out of the car. Max is about to tell him to calm down, that he’ll take care of this, but it happens so fast.

They appear out of nowhere. Five or six men, robed as the buyer himself, with daggers jutting from underneath the robes like so. They

pounce on Chidi, clamp his mouth and constrain his arms without any effort. One of them whips out his curved dagger and holds it to his face.

“Wait wait!” Max says, suddenly confused. “What do you want, what?”

The buyer cocks his head, stares at Max.

“I say, we no want money,” he says in broken English. “We want,” he points to Chidi, grappling between the men, “man.”

“No, no,” Max says, tightening his fists. “You can’t just... take him. For what na?”

“We no take am,” the buyer says. “Only goods.” He points to his body parts as he says them. “Yatsun, hakora, da kunnuwa.”

Chidi’s eyes widen in understanding as the men clamp down harder. One of them pulls out his curved dagger and steps on Chidi’s ankle to hold his sandaled foot down.

“Stop!” Max screams, but it’s too late. The man lifts the dagger and brings the curved edge down.

Chidi howls.

Two toe roll into the dirt.

“Stop!” Max clenches his fists and charges for them. “Stop!”

The men back away and circle the nook, dragging Chidi along. A trail of blood follows their path and Chidi’s wails and whimpers echo off the walls. A shutter opens somewhere in response.

“I’ll kill you,” Max says, following them. “I’ll kill you, I swear.”

They draw their daggers and keep them pointed at Max until they reach the buyer where he stands. They stop and one of them hands the freshly cut toes to the buyer. The man rolls them in his palm as he steps out to meet Max.

“We stop,” the buyer says, “if you bring our things.” He shows his hands. “Dukiya,” he says, weighing one hand. “Mutum.” He weighs the other.

Goods. Man.

I’ll turn you into fucking goods right now, just watch, Max thinks, head pounding and vision blurred. These savages must be fucking crazy, if they think he’s going to let them butcher Chidi like that. Chidi might be a bastard, but he’s Max’s bastard. Max needs him. Yes, he’ll even admit it now; Chidi is his vent, his release. Saving Chidi is the one thing that keeps the pressing guilt of leaving Mazi to die from smothering Max in his sleep.

Oh.

Max stops and unfurls his fists. The haze in front of his eyes wipes away.

You still have things that keep bringing it back, Nwansoh had said.

You need to destroy.

She wasn’t talking about the parts.

Like a punch, it hits Max. A solution. *The* solution.

Goods or man, right?

“Wait,” Max says suddenly. “What of goods *and* man?”

The buyer cocks his head. *Yes*, Max realizes. *If Mohammed won't go to the mountain, the mountain will come to Mohammed.*

“Leave him,” Max says. “I’ll bring what you need.”

The buyer shrugs, then taps on the back of his wrist, universal sign for get-the-fuck-moving.

The thing feels heavier than before when he pulls it from under the shelves, but Max doesn’t care. All he can think of is Chidi with one of those curved daggers paused just above his fingers, above his teeth, above his remaining toes. Max quickens his pace, murmurs a made-up mantra to himself. Yes, he *is* exchanging-replacing-a dead thing with a living one. Yes, he *is* doing a Good Thing.

He shrugs the body into the wagon and bumps the boot, gets in and flies back to the Ketu-Oworonshoki expressway, practicing his negotiations.

Take everything, he’ll say. Just take it. I’m done.

Mazi used to say knowledge is power, and the lack of it, danger, But Max thinks it’s a blessing sometimes. Like now, when he’ll sleep better not knowing what they do with it. How he’ll sleep even better knowing it’s never coming back.

Blood seeps from Chidi’s toes and stains the back seat of the hearse as Max lays him in it. Max rips his shirt and ties two tourniquets: one on Chidi’s ankle and one over the toe stumps. Chidi whimpers through both.

Max gets in the hearse and turns the rear-view mirror away as he eases out of the nook. He will not look back at the men who, under the pale light of yellow bulbs, circle around the thing that was Mazi and unsheathe their blades. He will not look as the buyer lifts his curved blade and brings it down. He will not look as the next man does same, and the rest follow in synchronized motions of lift, fall, lift, fall.

He will not look.

He will *not* look.

BLOOD AND FIRE

By

‘Sawaleh’

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“What do you want?” Ngohide asked the thing that was suddenly standing in the far corner of the shed, sheathed in shadow. The space behind the church office was small and sweltering with strange heat; Ngohide’s body was coated in unnaturally dense dust and grime and sweat. A mosquito scudded noisily over and bit him; he instinctively jerked his hand away. The tropical evening heat attacked the Lagos air all around him like an abusive husband.

“Where are you taking that money?” The voice was a sexless, ageless vibration of air. He could tell nothing about the thing that spoke with it.

“Its offering money. It belongs to the lord!” Ngohide exclaimed, instinctively pulling the brown bag of money to his chest and looking up through the gaps in the metal roofing, to the sky. The edges of the clouds were a browned orange, like burnt citrus. And darkening fast.

They were in a makeshift shed behind The Church of Jesus of All Nations’ office, a space created by hastily assembled wooden latticework and sheets of aluminum siding that was clumsily attached to the back entrance to the church. Ngohide stood in the center of the shed, caught mid-step, beside a large slab of concrete that had probably been part of a wall once. Warm spears of rapidly diminishing sunlight stabbed into the shadows through the holes in the aluminum roof.

“If it belongs to God then why are you taking it to your pastors car?” Ngohide said, “He will take it to the bank tomorrow.”

The thing laughed in the shadows of the shed. Ngohide squinted, trying to make out a shape, but it was useless. He saw nothing. But he could sense that it was there — a menacing, ancient, vaporous presence that was mostly in front of him but also felt like it was *around* him. He felt like it could coalesce behind him any minute and do terrible things to him before

he had the chance to plead the blood of Jesus. He wanted to scream but something sinister held his tongue.

“I need to enter your office,” The thing said calmly.

“Then enter, why are you still here talking to me” Ngohide said sharply, a little emboldened by the things apparent hesitation.

“There are rules. There are things I cannot do. Our people say, *Òbẹ kẹ i mú kó gbé òkù ara rẹ*, no matter how sharp a knife is, it cannot cut its own handle. So I need you to invite me in,” the thing whispered before adding, louder, “Invite me into the church..”

“God forbid! I bind you in the name of-”

“Stop!” The thing bellowed; it sounded like the breaking of bone.

Ngohide went silent. The shadows were long and the light was amber now.

The sun was almost gone.

“I have seen your heart. I can smell your blood.”

It laughed again. A rolling, suffocating sound that made Ngohide want to press his hands to his ears and scream himself hoarse with brightly colored heat and many-splendored madness.

Suddenly, its face emerged from the shadows like an ancient beast from the oceans depths. It wore a woman’s face like a mask. A beautiful mask that crowned a voluptuous body with swollen, full breasts and wide hips streamlined to a lightly haired vee at her intimacy like the place where old rivers meet.

The sun was almost below the horizon.

“Tí ògiri ò bá lanu, aláńgbá ò lè ráyè wòò. *If there are no crevices in the wall, the lizard cannot penetrate it.* But you and I both know you have many crevices, don’t we? Sloth. Greed. Lust.” The thing tilted its head and cupped its breast. “You don’t even believe in God. You are here for business. Church business.”

Ngohide felt his lips quiver and his breath shorten. He heard footsteps behind him but he could not turn around. He could not move at all. The thing was doing something to him.

“I know the things you fear and God is not one of them. If you feared God you would not be helping your pastor steal this money. You would ask questions when he tells you to take the bag of money to his car. But you will learn, I will teach you to fear again.”

Something hard and wet fell behind Ngohide. He strained to turn his head but he could not. The veins along his neck tensed.

“Who are you?” He asked, sweating.

The thing laughed again.

“I have been here for a long time. I will be here longer still.”

“Who are you?” Ngohide asked again. This time, in a low whisper.

“They have called me many things. Aranran. Obayifo. The old one. It does not matter. Names and bodies shall pass away, but my essence shall remain forever. Do you want to see what awaits you beyond death?”

In a flash, Ngohide’s world shrank to nothing.

The shed was gone.

He was in a soundless, sightless place. A cocoon of pure black, not a color, but an absence. An absence of everything.

He screamed, but he could not hear himself.

He tried to move but he could not feel his body.

He kept screaming and struggling in vain for what seemed like hours.

It could have been years, he had no sense of time or sense of self.

Hell. I am in hell.

Then suddenly, abruptly, he was back in the shed, the thing staring at him. Fear wrapped its cold fist about his heart and squeezed the words from him in whispers.

“Oh God, please, please, I’m sorry. I don’t want to go hell.”

“Do you want me to save you from the void?” The thing looked directly at Ngohide as it paced in front of him, just beyond the fast-fading beams of light between them. Its eyes were dark, hollow caves.

The light’s color had deepened to near darkness, the beams tilted until they were almost parallel to the ground. Night was settling over the city.

Ngohide was not fully aware when he whispered, “Yes.”

“Invite me into your life. Accept me as your personal overlord and corruptor. Invite me in.”

Trembling and desperate not to return to that dark and soundless non-place, Ngohide said, “Come in.”

With a red spark of triumph in its eyes, and a smile that Judas in hell might be proud of, the thing reached forward through the remaining beams of light and embraced Ngohide, pressing the long fingers of its slender hand onto his chest with a weirdly graceful motion, as delicately as a lover. The stink of burning flesh exploded into the air as the thing whispered, “Die and rise again.”

Heat flushed Ngohide’s body. Every nerve ending was aflame. The thing touched its lips to his throat; its tongue slid along his jugular, fondling the pulsing red rill beneath his sweaty skin.

And then it sank its teeth into him.

It was a sharp, lovely pain, like a kiss with teeth.

Ngohide’s vision blurred and the edges of shed around him began to run into each other. The sun was completely gone and the dark sky was weeping itself into the shed as the moon melted like wax. The door leading to the church pooled around the ground. He heard footsteps from inside the church as the men and church leaders he was sure he had just betrayed moved around inside it. Ngohide shut his eyes. He quivered as his blood

left him to feed the thing and his fears eased into a comfortable numbness. The darkness receded from his mind. Everything became beautiful.

Radiant.

Bright.

And then Ngohide's world exploded around him as he started to burn, intensely. He screamed, opened his eyes and looked at his hands. Parchment-thin strips of his skin swelled and slipped and hung loosely from blackening sinew and muscle.

His eyes swelled with expanding fluid, red and bulging; and then they popped, spewing a geyser of clear fluid and blood onto the thing around his neck, drinking his blood. He was in pain, so much pain.

The thing said, speaking into his skin, "Èyìn tí yóò dì epo, yóò tọ́ iná wò." *The palm nut that would become palm oil needs to have a taste of fire.*

Ngohide felt himself fall down to the hard earth, the flames finding their way through his skin, starting a fire in his bones.

Ngohide screamed and screamed.

The pain crested, crashed and then there was darkness.

Death and darkness.

A scream woke Ngohide into a world of noise.

He heard the heavy sound of running, followed by a crash.

Then silence.

Silence like death.

He tried to rouse himself. To make himself get up. He couldn't.

He felt like he'd lost control of his body but the burns and the pain were gone. His eyes and skin were normal again.

His eyelids fluttered open and he saw the beginning of a flame dancing along the bottom of the door to the church and through the doorway, behind the fire, he saw the two senior deacons from his church, Festus and Bidemi.

Oh God!

Their throats slit and there was crimson blood seeping from their eyes like liquid sin.

Abh, no, no...

He slipped back into darkness.

When Ngohide awoke, the moon was a low, round orb in the sky. He saw it through the holes in the aluminum roofing. He was soaked with

sweat. He rose slowly, his skin as smooth as a baby's and his throat parched with thirst.

He entered the church.

He found Festus and Bidemi on the floor by the entrance. They had left blood and black stains charred into the floor as evidence of the suffering that preceded their deaths. Burnt skin was covered in a coating of pus, blood and lymphatic fluid. Festus's head had been plucked clean off and lay three feet away from his body, tufts of black hair stubbling the peeled skin of his head. Bidemi had been sloppily drained of most of his blood before he'd burned, the skin around his head and neck were shrunken. His eyes were still open and glassy staring at Ngohide in an accusatory death gaze.

I'm sorry.

Ngohide paced past the corpses, heading for the Pastors office. When he opened the door, he recoiled at the sight.

Pastor Okonkwo was suspended upside down from the ceiling of the office, his feet tied with a belt to the ceiling fan, which had come partially free from its anchor. There was no skin left along the stretch of his body. Only red, striated muscle.

He'd been flayed. *Alive?*

He'd been drained too, but not by teeth. Blood was splashed on the floor beneath him, running into the cracks in the floor like so many perpendicular rivulets. His throat had been slit and his face had been burned. He had been tormented and his blood had been wasted, spilled to the earth for show. This did not look like murder.

This looked like... punishment.

The floor creaked suddenly and Ngohide turned to look behind him. The thing stood staring at him, smiling and covered in blood. It was still naked. It was still beautiful.

"I waited for you," the thing said calmly. Its voice was sultry now, no longer sexless. No longer ageless.

Ngohide's lower lip trembled. He tried to say something but he couldn't get his voice to work. Finally, he struggled to ask, "Why did you do this?"

"*Eyẹ kǐ dédé bà lòrùlé, ọ̀rọ̀ lẹyẹ ńgbọ̀.* *Birds do not ordinarily perch on rooftops, they are drawn by words they hear.* I heard that your pastor was a bad man. A false *Okomfo* like all the others. They all use the same words. They say they can hear Olorun's voice. Or Amadiohas's. Or Jesus's. They are liars. I know their kind. They feed people false hope at a price. They are the kind that take money or yams or cowries and speak lies in the name of something holy. The kind that used to accuse girls like me of witchcraft and kill us with the chop nut when our husbands wanted an excuse to get rid of us. But sin is not silent. I heard. His time came."

“So this was punishment?”

“Yes... Mostly. And I was hungry.”

The thing extended a hand to him. “Enough now. I will keep my promise. Come and kiss me. The sun will rise soon.”

Almost against his will, he walked toward the thing. Knowledge flooded him in fullness and in truth.

He knew what it was now.

What he was.

He reached it and the vampire wrapped its fingers around the back of his head and drew his head to its neck.

Whoever drinks my blood...

The vampire said, “Go ahead. You have already died once and yet here you stand, arisen. Now taste me and taste eternity. Taste freedom, from hell, and from heaven. Taste. Don’t be shy.”

Nhogide’s lips grazed the vampire’s cold neck and his breathing became labored. He bit in and for the second time that night, everything became beautiful.

Radiant.

Bright.

KOI-KOI

By

Raymond Elenwoke

Isioma and Hauwa rounded a corner in the darkness, bumping into a chair. The sound it made cut through the silence of the halls, like a beacon to them, giving away their position.

Not that it really mattered.

She always seemed to find them.

No matter where they ran, no matter where they hid, no matter what they did, she always seemed to find them.

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

They'd tried to call out for help, but she'd either stolen their screams or cast some kind of powerful sleep juju on the entire school. Even the night owls had not so much as stirred.

They ran.

They'd been running for what seemed like an eternity now, but in reality had been a little over twenty minutes. They didn't know it, but they were in the JSS 1A classroom. They'd run out of their hostel after trying to get into their room, which had become locked mysteriously. They'd screamed for help, but no one had come. They'd thought it had been a prank or a joke, but now, they knew otherwise.

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

That slow sound of inexorability that said: *run all you want, I will still find you. I will be in the corner you don't check, in the room you where you hide. I am inevitable.*

I am the night.

Hauwa had tried to run upstairs but Isioma dragged her back down, convinced that running upstairs would mean certain death. Together, they'd run for the other hostels.

Their front doors had all been locked. All four of them. Even when they'd run around them, beating on the windows hard enough to crack one

of them, no one had gotten up.

In the morning everyone would wake up, wondering if they'd all collectively had the same dream, until they would see the cracks.

Until they would see the bodies.

In the end, it wouldn't matter where Isioma and Hauwa ran.

Lady Koi-Koi was coming, and blood would flow.

The party is in full swing. The drinks are flowing, the music is heavy and heady. There is not a still body in sight, here, in the incomplete multi-purpose hall the school is building behind the hostels, in a bid to have an additional source of revenue.

Everyone in the SSS 3 class of St. Charles' Grammar School, Ozubulu, is intent on having as much fun as they can possibly have. Tomorrow, they will be graduates. After six (seven or even eight for some of them) years of giving and taking shit from teachers, and giving and taking *no* shit from their juniors, they will become graduates. Yes there was a lot to do, plans to make for the future, things to be worried about like what and where to study for university (although a few already have a head start on their peers in this department), but damn anything that would attempt to deny them this one night of bliss.

The boys have 'organized a babe' to come and sing, and perhaps dance for them. She's rumoured to be a dancer in some private gentlemen's clubs too. The pictures she sent them definitely support that theory, she was wearing 'stripper heels' in them. Maybe they will get lucky tonight, the boys hope, either with their class girls, or the babe... or both. Of course everyone knows the guys who will likely get the chance, the ones who have the boldness, the 'mind' to do so. But nobody really cares too much. It is a fun night. A night of fun. And fun, they shall have.

Stroke of midnight.

The lights dim.

The DJ announces for everyone to give way on the dance floor, and then raise their cups or bottles to cheer the arrival of The Day. Their Day. A countdown.

10... 9... 8... 7...

6... 5... 4...

3... 2...

1...

HAPPY GRADUATION DAY!

A mighty cheer goes up, so loud it is a wonder the teachers do not come to break them up. But they know they will be left alone. It is their night. Their time. Every year, the graduating class is left alone to celebrate their

achievement on the eve of their graduation ceremony. All that is required of them is that they show up the next morning at 11 a.m.

Most of them won't be getting any sleep tonight though. Too wired.

For some, before the night is over, they will have blood on their hands.

The lights come on to reveal a lady in a red gown and long, black heels. She is so beautiful, she looks like a model. A lascivious cheer greets her appearance; a few whistles. Some girls bristle with jealousy as they cling on to their boyfriends. And when she starts to move to the beat, there is not a still heart in the room.

Ejike woke up with a start. Something had disturbed his sleep. He'd dreamt he was running from something, but it had been dark, and he couldn't see. All he knew was that he'd felt like he would die if the thing that had been chasing him had caught him. He sat up in his bed, the blanket pooling around his thighs. There was no light, but the weather was still reasonably cool. For that he was grateful. He listened to the night. Everything was quiet.

Still.

He had the nagging notion that something was not quite right. He waited a bit longer, and then lay back down. Maybe just a bad dream. He needed to sleep. It had been a long da-

There.

Was that...

A scream?

He waited again. Sounded like a girl. Was that coming from inside the school?

He got up from his bed and went to his window, looked out. From his first floor apartment he had a view of the assembly ground and the path leading to the hostels. The administrative block was on his left, and it obstructed his view of the classrooms, and hostels. The scream had sounded like it came from beyond there.

Was there a thief?

Nobody was up though. Not even the security guards were patrolling, as far as he could see. He would make sure the school principal had words with them in the morning. He walked to his sitting room, picked up the extension, and dialled the security post. It rang, but no one picked.

Angry now, he walked back to his room and dressed up. Forget making sure the principal talked to them in the morning; he was going to have *words* with them right now. Harsh words. By the time he was done with them, they would be begging to be reassigned.

Picking up his phone, he exited his apartment.

Isioma clamped her hand hard against Hauwa's mouth, cutting off her scream.

"Are you stupid?" she asked. "Do you want to let her know where we are?"

"I... I'm sorry" Hauwa said, hyperventilating. "But I'm afraid!"

"Me too!" she whispered forcibly. "But we have to be quiet! We don't want her to know where we are!"

Nodding, Hauwa said, "Okay." Then, "Do you think anybody heard me? Apart from... you know?"

"After all the noise we've made, no one woke up. Shun talk. Its only us, her and God now."

Hauwa closed her eyes, trying hard not to cry out again. "Oh God! Oh God! Oh God! Why now? Ehn? Why do I feel like peeing now? I usually don't wake up at night to pee!" She tried to peek from their hiding place in the classroom, behind a desk in the corner.

"Shh!"

"Sorry!"

"Please God, save us." Hauwa whispered.

They waited with bated breath, straining their ears. Nothing. Maybe she had disappeared. Maybe God had answered them. Maybe it was ob-

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

The lady has danced through eight songs now. Some of the girls, in a bid to do her one better, have dragged their boyfriends off to different dark corners of the hall, some outside. Two in the corner are engaged in serious osculation. One is giving her boyfriend a lap dance while their friends cheer them both on, the boy looking like his head is going to explode any minute.

Four of them. Of course, it has to be four of them. They really like what they have seen, and want to take the party somewhere else. Somewhere private. Chekwube, Tolu, Stanley and Tami. Thick as thieves. They raise some money amongst themselves, and Stanley goes to whisper in her ear as she stops dancing and makes to leave. She halts, looks at him, a glint in her eyes. Her first thought is: *these spoiled kids*. But the money is attractive; almost half of what they have already paid her. Some extra money will not hurt, for what, half an hour of more dancing? She looks beyond him, sees his friends staring expectantly. Even in the dim light, she can see the hunger

in their eyes, smell it coming off in waves off them, like feral steam. One of them is openly rubbing his crotch. Chuckling to herself, she nods. Stanley turns excitedly to his friends, gives them a double thumbs up.

They lead her across the field, towards another unfinished part of school, a classroom block. Chekwube has a portable cassette player, and he carries it with him. Once they get to their chosen venue, they set up, and turn it on. Tolu stands on lookout duty, but once she starts dancing, he forgets that and turns to watch. She doesn't dance so much as glide, flitting from boy to boy, teasing. When they try to hold her, she dances out of reach. She sees the familiar change in the way they look at her; two of them are openly caressing the bulges in front of their trousers now. She ignores them, thinking, these are just secondary school boys. She ignores them, thinking, I can handle them.

But she is wrong.

Very, very wrong.

Ejike knocked at the security post. Nothing. He pounded on the door with his fist. Still, nothing. Anger gave way to surprise, then curiosity. This was beyond strange. He tried the handle. Locked. He tried to look in through the glass, but it was too dark.

And then the realization that no one had shouted at him to stop the ruckus hit him.

Odd.

Now he turned in the direction of the scream. Something was very, very wrong. He felt the cold hand of dread climbing up his spine. His legs were rooted on the spot, and he began to question why he was out here in the first place. *What was he doing? What was he going to do?*

He took out his phone from his pocket, dialled the Emergency number for the police. Reported that he'd heard a scream. They asked him what kind of scream.

"I don't know, sounded like a girl."

"Where are you now?"

"The school. I am a teacher here."

"What of your security?"

"I don't know." He looked at the security post again. "They are... sleeping? I tried to wake them, call them. Nothing."

"Okay. Stay there."

"Okay." He ended the call, and then sat down on the step. It felt too cold, so he stood back up. He felt like he was being pulled in two different directions. He was a teacher, not a security guard. He hated fights, and he had no weapons anyway.

Could be thieves. *Could be worse.*

But...

How would he look at himself in the mirror if something happened to one of the students while he stood here? The least he could do was to go and try to take a look at what was happening there; maybe he would scare off the thieves, if there was one, or maybe two. More than that?

Or it could just be the kids, off on one of their late-night shenanigans. That would get them a flogging of almighty proportions, and before the assembly too, but at least then he would know.

That was better than not knowing. Anything was better than not knowing.

His heart started pounding in his chest.

He didn't know when he started running.

She bats away his hand, putting on her dress. The music still plays in the background, but she has had enough. She wants no more of this. She promised them a dance, that was all. Against her better judgement, because she'd been lost in the moment and they'd offered her more money, she'd stripped to her undies. That had really set them off. The grinding, she could stomach. But the pawing, the sloppy attempts at kissing her; that was where she drew the line, and she'd told them earlier, a stipulation of hers that they'd agreed to. Now, they are breaking it.

"Baby come on," Chekwube says, trying to hold her. He is obviously the leader of this group. She's seen boys like him. "Make we just do am small na." The look in his eyes is hunger, like a barely-caged animal.

"Hapu m aka biko! I told you, no kissing. Dancing was as far as I was willing to go, and I told you. I told you. And now you want to do what?"

"You know na," Tolu says. He is fondling himself now, not caring about the look of disgust on her face. "You no fit come carry us play like this, come leave us go. Make we do am. We go pay."

She whirls on him, her fury palpable. "Are you mad? Ara o n'agba gi? Chai! A taala m ahuhu n'uwa!" *I have suffered in this world.* She shakes her head in disgust.

"Omo wetin dey worry dis one sef!" Stanley shouts, attempting to grab her from behind. "O boy make we do this ting comot from here jor. This girl dey craze!"

She swings her arm back, catching him on the nose. As he cries out in pain, she pushes past Tami who has been silent all through this, knocking him to the floor. Purse in hand, she runs out of the class.

The night is lit brightly by the moon, and the grass is slick with rain from the evening. Across from them, on the other side of the field, is the

incomplete building that houses the party. A safe bet; halfway across the field and even in this poor visibility, someone is bound to see her, and the danger will be averted.

But she panics, and turns left, hoping to lose them in the bushes. She knows this school; its fence doesn't go all the way around. She knows how to get out, if only-

She slips on the slick grass, her purse flying out of her hand as she goes crashing to the ground, the fall knocking her breath out of her. She cries out as a hand grips her ankle, pulling her backwards, and then someone is sitting on her back, pulling her head back and slamming it into the ground.

She blacks out.

They pounded up the stairs, not thinking of stealth now, but of survival. Those heels, beating a steady cadence on the concrete floors.

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

Slow. Inexorable. Like death.

Hauwa tried to take the stairs to the next floor, but Isioma pulled her back to one of the classrooms. "We have to jump!"

"Jump?" Hauwa asked. "Are you mad?"

"It's the only way! How will we escape her from there?" she asked, pointing upwards.

Seeing the logic, Hauwa followed her into the classroom.

Someone shouted from downstairs "Hey! Who's there?"

"HELP US!" Hauwa shouted back, running outside and peering down the staircase. "IT'S HAUWA AND-" she saw the billow of a dress. A flash of black heels. "ISIOMA SHE'S COMING!"

"Who's coming?" the voice asked from downstairs. "Hauwa?"

Isioma was already opening the windows, pushing them out. The night air rushed in. They climbed the window sill. The ground stared unforgiving at them.

"Just jump Hauwa, don't worry. Jus-"

The sound was in the room now. They stared at each other; their breaths caught in their throats. They heard a pounding sound as someone ran up the stairs.

"HAUWA! ISIOMA!"

So distant, so useless. No one could help them now. Slowly, their heads turned as one. And at last, they saw her by the cold, merciless light of the moon.

She wore a decaying dress that looked like it could have once been red.

The left strap was torn and the dress sagged there, exposing her left breast. Her skin was pale.

Her shoes were shiny, black high heels.

She was beautiful even in death. Her eyes were cold, filled with a dark, vengeful knowledge, a terrible knowing. The air around her seemed to freeze.

Isioma and Hauwa turned to look at themselves. Both knew what the other was thinking; better to jump than to be caught by her. Nodding to themselves, they both launched themselves into the night.

A hand gripped their necks, halting their flight mid-air.

They screamed.

First she feels the pain, like a sawing motion on her insides. Up, down? No, forwards, backwards, and then radiating outwards from there. Now, it feels like a hot bar of iron is being used to tear her apart from within. She feels a weight on her. Someone is breathing on her face. Murmurs. Sweat. Cold, cold back. Someone is pinching her left nipple; it hurts, oh it hurts.

She opens her eyes.

Tolu is on her, in her, above her. Sawing, sawing. Panting. His eyes are shut in ecstasy.

She screams.

His eyes snap open. Hands grip her tighter as Tolu says, “Abeg make una hold am well make I chop my own jor. I don dey finish.”

Someone laughs.

The back of her head is pounding where they slammed it against the ground. She feels like it is bleeding but she does not know for certain. All she knows is that she feels herself getting weaker and weaker. The edges of the world are blurring.

She starts to cry. She wants to struggle, but she is too weak, too drained. Powerless.

Her powerlessness turns to internal rage. Rage at the injustice of what they are doing to her. Her anger distils itself, becoming pure and potent, calling unto an ancient thing. She looks at the boys, one after the other. Marking them. Engraving their faces in her memory.

Chekwube, the leering leader.

Stanley, the dealer, the haggler.

Tolu, finishing now.

Tami, who looks like he doesn't want to be here but has no choice.

She marks them with her hate, marks them for their sin. Marks them as God marked Cain. The ancient entity that calls the bush home finds her anger. It comforts her in her pain and in her bliss, she smiles, so small they

can't see it.

As the darkness claims her, she carries their names, and their faces, into the passageways between life and death.

The pain was unlike anything they had ever felt before, and it was not just the pain of being held aloft by an impossibly strong hand.

No.

There was something else, a different kind of underlying pain, at once distant and pervasive, growing, spreading, until it overwhelmed them. This pain was cold and hot at the same time, blooming, in their minds. It cut through to their bones, and even though they wanted to cry out, the vice-like grip around their necks was too tight; they could hardly breathe.

There was a sawing pain emanating from their private places; like they were being raped.

Slowly, the hand pulled them back into the building. Their knees, then their shins bumped and scraped across the window sill, drawing blood; not that they noticed. Hauwa's left shoe fell off to the ground below, and then they were hanging in the dim light of the moon in the classroom. The hand turned them until they could see who... what held them.

Those cold eyes, empty, unforgiving.

Their hands clawed at the grip on their throats; they might as well have been clawing at the wall.

Those eyes bore into them both, one at a time, as though it was searching their souls, reading the words written on the walls of their hearts.

To Hauwa, she said "You, I don't need." Her voice was grating, like a hacksaw cutting through zinc.

She tossed Hauwa out of the window, her screams cutting off when she slammed face-first onto the wall of the adjacent building, and then fell to the ground.

The lady changed her grip on Isioma's throat, holding her in her right hand now and pulling her close just as Ejike shouted "NO!" and slammed into her. A pain bloomed in his left shoulder and in his head as he fell down, scraping his palm on the floor. Later, he would find out he had cracked his shoulder blade. His eyes wide, he stared as the woman turned and stared at him.

Those eyes.

In the darkness, they held their own terrible light. She looked like a corpse, but her eyes were not dead; no. They held a dark, ancient knowledge that Ejike knew if he knew would make him claw his own eyes out.

He pissed himself.

She turned fully now, carrying Isioma in her hand like a piece of luggage, her grip on her neck just loose enough to let her breathe, but nothing more. Ejike heard a whimpering sound; it took him a moment to realize he was the one making it. He tried to clamp down on it, but only succeeded in making himself croak, like he'd forgotten how to talk. Slowly, she walked towards him.

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

She closed the distance between them and stood over him, staring.

She bent down, took his left, outstretched arm, and snapped it like a twig.

The pain hit him like a truck, obliterating everything in its wake. His vocal chords opened and he sang his pain in an incoherent monosyllabic word.

When she broke his left leg in two, he blacked out.

Isioma lay on the floor, struggling to keep her eyes open. She didn't believe what had happened to Hauwa; the woman had just tossed her out of the window as if she had been a doll, and then she'd broken this teacher's bones like they were a minor inconvenience.

But, why?

She was tired, and she couldn't move, even if she tried. The woman had done something to her so that she could not feel her legs, but she could feel every scratch, every pain, and every bleed. Had she broken her back?

Isioma didn't know, and was surprised to find out that she didn't particularly care. The hope she'd held on to was fast dissipating with each passing second. She strained her ears to hear; there.

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

The sound of her heels, and a sound like a rod being dragged. When she turned, she saw her in the doorway, the moon behind her. She held the rod at her side; an avenging demon. Then, she walked forward until she stood over Isioma, the rod in her hand like a spear pointed down.

"Why?" Isioma asked, her voice hoarse and cracked. She was beyond begging now.

Her eyes stared, impassive. "Your father," she said.

The dead lady in red drove the rod through Isioma's stomach, into the concrete as she tried to process what she had just heard. She thought she'd felt pain before but she was wrong.

She was very wrong.

And as the dead lady in red bent the rod until the other end was touching her sternum, she said “Chekwube. You will see him soon.”

Then she pressed down until the other end touched the concrete.

The last sounds Isioma heard were the her own gurgling as she drowned in her blood and the sound those shiny black high heels made as the dead lady walked out of the classroom and into the darkness.

Koi.

Koi.

Koi.

You may have heard about her. You may have heard her. Walking down your hostel hallway in the dead of the night, when the day is done and the undead cavort. No one knows her name, though some call her Lady Koi-Koi.

No matter what you call her, just don't leave your bed if you hear her at night.

Not even to pee.

EATERS OF FLESH

By

Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso

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“Your mum disappeared.”

That was how Dad said it, as if he were cracking a joke about the crazy attitude of Arsenal’s coach with his friends. I didn’t even realise when I stood up and pushed my ceramic plate away. It fell from the dining table, breaking as it hit the ground with a shrill sound. My ogbono soup spilled on the floor, staining the white tiles. Dad grabbed my shoulders with his rough hands and forced me back into my seat.

He leaned against my chair, his eyes on my face. His glare was unbearable so looked away from him and instead tried to concentrate on the white curtain in front of me. The curtain was used to demarcate our dining room from the parlour. It had a pattern of hibiscus flowers on it. I forced myself to count those flowers to numb my thoughts.

“Everything will be okay,” he said with, his voice now coated with seriousness.

But I knew that wasn’t true.

I collected the key to Mum’s room from Dad. I needed the memory of her like a junkie needed cocaine. For the first time in three years I had the chance to see her room again. I was lucky to be the last of her two surviving sons to be weaned from her presence when the illness began to take too much of a toll on her. Anyway, Dad didn’t see it as an illness. He said that it was her excessive religious involvement that caused her peril. He would always scream at her, “Religion is bondage, free yourself.” But her friend

Onyinye believed the illness was a spiritual attack from her enemies, especially since the disorder began a day after her forty-fifth birthday when Dad had given her a Honda Jeep as a birthday gift. She said Mum's relatives, who envied Dad's love for her, had struck her with madness.

I opened the door. My eyes automatically went to the eastern side of the room where I saw her last. She had been sitting on the ground beside her bed with half of the bedsheet on the floor. An untidy heap of her clothes and shoes were on the bed.

Her hair was unkempt, her sky-blue wrapper haphazardly tied so that parts of her underwear were exposed. Her chubby body was gone. What was left was a skeletal entity. She was flicking her hands in the air as if she was dancing to an inaudible beat. When my eyes caught hers, she'd called my name, become quiet and hugged her legs, resting her chin on her knees.

In the place where she'd sat then, there was only a plate of pap and four balls of akara. The food was untouched. Perhaps the last meal she'd been given before her escape.

My eyes swept across the entire room. It surprised me to see how neatly everything was arranged. No rumpled bed, no clothes on it either, no shoes kicked away in every corner. Perhaps Dad had asked our housemaid, Nneoma, to clean up the mess. But if so then why did she leave the food?

I needed something of Mum's, something with her scent to hold onto, something that would bring memories of her back to me. I opened her wardrobe. I took my time caressing each item of her clothing with tears pouring from my eyes.

In the middle of her clothing collection, my hand felt something thick. It was in her blue jeans, the one I bought for her on the last Mothering Sunday we celebrated before she broke down. I put my hand in the pocket and pulled something out. It was a red journal with a thick paper cover.

I opened it.

The leaves of the journal were all torn out but one. On the centre of the page she inscribed in bold letters:

12/4/2000

I SAW HIM TODAY.

Saw who?

I turned the page. There was a drawing of a heart with an arrow piercing through it. Nothing more. Who did she see?

C'mon, speak to me, Mum.

"Gozie! Gozie!" my dad called from the parlour. I squeezed the journal into the back pocket of my black trousers.

"I'm coming."

Police. Two of them. They were in their early forties, judging from their physical appearances. One was in a uniform and the other wore navy blue trousers and a white long-sleeved shirt. The one in uniform sat on the sofa. The other sat on the chair beside him with a jotter in his hand. Dad was toying with his keys, the key holder of which had a small sticker on it with the inscription, ARSENAL FOR LIFE. The two policemen were observing as I entered, but pretended that they were taking random glances.

I greeted them.

“Take a seat,” Dad said with a pulpit voice, waving to a seat on his right.

I went there and sat.

“These are the policemen that will help us find your mother. They were here yesterday when you weren’t around and just checked our house.”

The one on the sofa cleared his throat and said, “I am Matthew. We are from zone two, Uwani police station. Accept our sympathy and we assure you that we will do our best to find your mother.”

I nodded.

“I understand that you are her only child in Nigeria, the other is studying abroad?”

I nodded again.

“There are certain questions we need you to answer to aid our investigation. Are you okay with that?”

I nodded again.

They began their questions, which were centred on who Mum’s friends or enemies were and the last time those people had come in contact with her. Dad would interject at different points to show that he was the only true friend Mum had had. Before they left, they asked me to contact them if I suspected anything.

“Trust your instincts.”

When they had gone, Dad told me that we would travel to see some of my maternal uncles in the evening.

“Why?” I asked.

“You can’t predict these locals and how they reason. I have been hiding this from them. If they hear this from a secondary source, they may start thinking that I used your mother for some crazy ritual. You know most of them think backwardly.”

I sneaked into the toilet. I was tired of Dad invading the privacy of my room, leaning on the wall, hands tucked in his trousers, with his ‘*I-just-came-to-check-on-you’s*.’ Perhaps this was his means of reassuring me that everything remained the same. I posted a note on my door for him.

In toilet. Acute diarrhoea.

I pulled Mum’s journal from my pocket. I sat on the white ceramic bowl of the toilet, pretending not to be bothered by the smell of camphor and antiseptic. I opened her journal and the writing over and over again as if I were cramming it for an exam.

The main question on my mind was: *where was the rest of the journal?*

Clearly it was torn and the person that did it made no pretence to cover it up. It was haphazardly done. A lot of the edges of the torn leaves were still stuck in the jotter. Who did this and why did they leave only one page?

A knock at the door. It was Dad.

“I am still here. The diarrhoea is terrible.” I took a heavy breath as if I was in pain.

“Then we have to go to a hospital.”

“I am not going anywhere.”

“Are you masturbating?”

Fuck you. I didn’t say that.

“Sorry that you are going through this,” Dad said.

We were in his grey Peugeot 406 going to my mother’s home. He was driving. I sat beside him looking out through the window. I wound down the window to allow some air in. I hated the smell of air fresheners, but there was a yellow Air Wick right in front of me. I ignored it. I usually preferred sitting in the back but that wouldn’t be possible with Dad. He had told our driver to take the evening off so that he would have a private moment with me on the way. Although I wasn’t in the mood for discussing anything with anybody, with Dad I had no choice. It was one of those crosses I had to bear for being his son.

I didn’t know what to say so I decided to cast my mind away from him by looking through the window, watching trees blur past us. Right from childhood, I had always thought that it was the car that was constant and the trees that sped by. My father had corrected me often. “Things aren’t always the way they are seen,” he said. It is strange that, up till now, I still think the same way I thought over a decade ago. When I got bored of watching those trees, I adjusted and returned my focus back to the car. My eyes met my father’s. The way he jerked nervously like a lad caught stealing fish from his mother’s pot told me that perhaps he had been watching me for a long time.

His right hand slipped to squeeze my left hand where I rested it on my lap. His left hand on the steering wheel, his eyes rested mainly on me, he only stole a few glances watching out for an oncoming vehicle.

“You have always been the same,” he said.

“How?” I asked.

“Since you were a child, I have watched you whenever I was in the car with you. You like to look through the window whenever you have something under your skin.”

“I...”

“I really want you to share that... whatever it is... with me.”

I looked away.

To start with, I never knew I had the tendency to glance out of the window when bothered with thought. Perhaps my father was right, because sometimes we are what we never knew we were, and it is that part of ourselves that we hardly change until a close person brings it to our knowledge. But even if this was truth, I think it was silly for Dad to claim ignorance of what was bothering me. Or was he seeking something else from me? The journal; did he know about it?

“Things weren’t always this way, you know,” he broke my thought. “Your mum used to be great. We had good times when we had you, Uche and Ebuka. We bought our 504 just after Ebuka was born. Things were good for us.”

Dad had banned Uche and me from using the white Peugeot car after Uche, my elder brother, had had an accident with it. That was four years ago, about the same time my mother’s illness began. Dad had parked the car in a corner of our compound, which Nneoma had nicknamed the ‘compound annex.’ Since the accident, only Dad drove the car, and even then, only on a few occasions. But he would always be in it during the weekend taking a nap, head bent on the steering wheel. It amazed me that he didn’t lock away the car key somewhere in his room after banning us from using it. He still kept the key on the top of our 12-inch TV in the visitor’s room. Perhaps it was still part of the memories he had of Mum, which he didn’t want to lose hold of.

“She was an Arsenal fan too but then... but then...”

His voice sounded as if he was choking. I turned, and saw he was crying.

Uncle Odinaka was sitting in a white plastic chair under the shade of an udara tree. He cupped his snuff in his right palm, and with his left, he tapped it to sniff. He sneezed and some of the brownish droplets spread onto his white singlet. I called the colour of the singlet white because I

knew when it had been that colour, when Mum bought it for him as a gift. The colour of it now was something yet to have a proper name. He used the edge of the yellow wrapper that was tied across his waist to clean up his streaming nose.

Dad parked a stone's throw from the udara tree. As he turned the engine off, I knew what he would say. "Don't eat anything from anybody except the ones I approve and don't shake hands with any of them."

I never knew at what point this began, but what I could recall was that since Ebuka, my eldest brother, died, Dad had suspected that my mother's uncles had something to do with it and would always give me this instruction whenever I travelled to my mother's home with him.

We approached Uncle Odinaka. When he saw us, he stood up and started towards us. I realized why Mum used him as an example whenever she felt that we weren't eating as we ought to.

"Do you want to be like a single 'P like your Uncle Odinaka?" she would say.

And truly, Odinaka looked like an 'P with a flat stomach and bottom. He looked like a strong wind could blow him away.

From his gestures, I knew that he wanted to hug Dad as he usually did Mum whenever I came with her, but Dad just smiled and tucked his hands in the pockets of his white kaftan. Odinaka understood, so he withdrew. But I went to him and hugged him just the way Mum used to. If eyes were a sword, Dad would have slain me. I tried as much as I could to avoid his eyes. Then I told Uncle Odinaka that I was tired and needed some rest. He gave me the key to his house. I thanked him. Without looking at my father, I left them standing under the tree.

In the visitor's room, I bolted the door behind me. My hand went to my trousers. I brought out the journal. Again I read the entry:

**12/4/2000
I SAW HIM TODAY**

I turned over the page to the heart pierced with an arrow. I tried to make some meaning of it. But the more I struggled with that, the more confused I became. I was like that for almost thirty minutes when it occurred to me — I began scraping off the white paper of the thick cover of the journal. After a few minutes, I saw:

LOOKING FOR MORE, COURTING TROUBLE. TRY BED.

When I came out of the house, Dad was still under the udara tree. About fifteen other extended relatives sat with him in a circle. From where I stood in front of Odinaka's bungalow, I couldn't make out what the discussion was about. The way Nna, my mother's nephew, who looked like a scarecrow, was speaking, swinging his right hand up and down and sometimes pointing an accusing finger at my father indicated that it was not a friendly chat. Tochi, Odinaka's younger brother, sitting on Nna's left, kept shaking his head. Odinaka, kept using his two palms to intermittently gesture at Nna to calm down.

I looked away. My eyes again found my mother's jotter from my pocket. I examined what she wrote again and again. Nothing was forthcoming.

My eyes went back to the udara tree.

Virtually everybody there was standing up. I think my father was in the middle because I couldn't see him. Whatever led to the present situation I couldn't tell but I was certain that if nothing was done my father could be in danger. I walked over.

Immediately they saw me, the commotion began to calm. Chidi, Ejike, Mmadu and Ude, the elderly older cousins of my mother began to sit down.

"You have a week to provide our daughter or you will face our wrath," Nna said as I approached them.

By the time I reached them, they were in a conspiracy of silence. I greeted them. They responded in chorus, like little children in a nursery school, rehearsed. My father's hand grabbed mine, pulling me to him. We were heading to our car. I just managed to throw Odinaka's key to him.

I expected my father to burst out in anger as he usually did when boxed into a corner, but he didn't. We drove home in silence. Even though I had an idea went wrong with the meeting, I needed to hear it first-hand from him. But he didn't speak.

The only thing he said to me when we got home and were about to come out of the car was, "Your mother was deep. She wasn't the woman you saw and think you know."

I wanted to ask him what he meant, but he slammed the door and entered the house, locking his room when he reached it.

I stole the key to Mum's room from where Dad hung it on a wall in his room while he was in the toilet. Since we'd returned from my mother's family house, I had been monitoring his movements. He had locked himself up in his room, producing strange sounds like falling metal objects, and murmuring. Lots of murmuring. All this tension, mystery and strangeness ramped up the feelings of fear inside me.

What was going on?

When I heard his door open and I saw him rush out, I immediately sneaked in.

Mum's room was dark. I leaned my back on the wall and waited for my father to be done with his business in the toilet before I began my searching, since a corridor linked my mother's room to the toilet and then to my father's. It turned out that he went for the 'complete cycle', as we jokingly called it among ourselves at school. When I heard the door of his room click, I turned on the light of my Nokia phone. I went to the edge of the wooden platform bed and began hunting. I started at the headboard. I checked for notes or messages or an encryption but there was nothing there. I searched at the foot of the bed, under it, between the mattress and the frame, nothing. Where was the trail?

I sat down to think. I couldn't hear the strange noises from Dad's room any longer. Instead, I heard the croak-like sound of his snoring.

As I flashed the light on the wall, it caught the mirror, reflected back in my eyes.

I froze.

It was like a flash, as swift as a shooting star but the image was there.

The face of my mother in the mirror, blood in her eyes streaming down like unholy tears.

I wanted to scream but I could not find my voice.

My jaw was wide open, but no sound came out. My entire nervous system was gone, all that was left of me were frozen feet, paralysed hands, and an immobile head.

And then, as suddenly as it had come, the image vanished.

My body began functioning again.

My instinct was to run out of the room – and I followed it. Halfway to the door, a voice within me, its urgency like the scream of a drowning child I saw years ago in Ofi River, persuaded me to do otherwise.

I stopped.

The voice urged me to go back to the bed and search again. I walked back, tense, my mouth drained of saliva.

I searched the bed again. The result was the same. But the voice inside me urged me to further my search, focus on the mattress. I rubbed my hand across the foam. It touched something rectangular. Soft, like paper.

When did it get there?

I slipped my hand under the mattress cover and fetched out the piece of paper. It read:

I knew you would find this but I hoped you wouldn't. If you are reading this then it may be too late. Your father is not what you think. He knows them. He is them. They ate my son; they will eat you. Run as fast as you can.

Was this written for me? Certainly it wasn't part of her journal. I read it over again trying to make meaning of it. What did Mum this Dad was?

“Ahhhh...!”

A scream from Dad jerked me out of my thoughts. The scream was continuous. I ran as fast as I could to his room. I turned on his light. I saw him kicking his legs on the bed where he lay, struggling like a person being suffocated. He was still asleep.

I went to him, shook him awake.

His bare body was drenched in sweat.

He woke and hugged me like a kid would his mother after a nightmare. I held him close, his head on my shoulder, mine on his chin. He was breathing heavily.

“Calm down, Dad, calm down.”

After a minute or two he recovered from the shock, and untangled himself from me.

“You have to leave this house,” he said.

“Why, Dad? “

“Your mother is evil, her spirit torments this place as I speak to you,” he said. “I told you that she is deep. She is not what you think. Leave this house. The house is haunted by her.”

I checked my wristwatch. It was 12 a.m.

“So you are telling me that she is dead?”

I felt desperately confused.

“She is not dead.” He said, his eyes avoiding mine. “She knows how to manipulate her spirit out of her body. That is Cherubim and Seraphim for you. That Church ruined her life.”

“But why is she haunting us?”

“I don't know what she wants. You see I don't want anything to happen to you. I will still go to meet her relatives for the second time about her being missing in the morning. If anything happens to you, it will be my funeral, they will be convinced that I am the one responsible for her disappearance.”

“Nothing will happen to me, Dad.”

“I am not asking you to believe, I am telling you what to do. Leave this house.”

“Where do you want me to go Dad? It is 12 a.m.”

“Anywhere... anywhere.”

He closed his eyes and lay back on the bed, hugging his two legs. I knew that I had to leave. That was how my father works. Comply with his instruction first then come for explanation and perhaps negotiation later.

My hands were akimbo as I was thinking of what clothes I needed to take with me. Deep within me, I knew that wherever I was going, I wasn't going to stay long.

I brought my school bag near the wardrobe. I collected a pair of ash jeans, a red polo shirt, a jumper and two boxers. I went to my toilet, collected my red towel and sponge that I hung on the back of the door. At the edge of the sink was my herbal toothpaste and toothbrush, on the wall just above the sink was a mirror. I went there to collect the toothbrush and the paste.

I slightly raised my head to the mirror.

I saw something like a human shadow, difficult to differentiate whether it belonged to a man or a woman, pass in a twinkle of an eye.

Cold descended on my body.

I waited.

I looked again, but saw nothing.

“Bullshit,” I swore as I slammed my hands on the steering wheel of my car. I was in my deep blue Mercedes 190, trying to start it. It seemed the car battery was dead. No matter how many times I turned the ignition, the car didn't respond.

I thought of what to do next. To use my mother's Honda Jeep? I declined the idea. If she or her spirit or whatever wanted to get at me as my father had said, I had a feeling that it would be easier for her if I were in her car. Dad's 406 Peugeot wasn't an option either. That would anger him. The only option left was the white Peugeot 504.

I entered the house and collected the car key. I was heading to my school hostel, Zik, at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, to pass the night before it occurred to me that I was in the car that my brother Uche had almost died in.

There was a buzzing and vibrating under my pillow.

It stopped and then came again, ruining my much-needed rest. I lifted the

heavy weight of sleep from my tired brows and lifted my pillow.

It was my phone.

Dad was calling.

I picked up the call, yawning and stretching my body, still lying on my bed. My head was hammered by a headache.

“You took the 504. Are you crazy?” he screamed. “What happened to your car?”

“Dad...”

“Don’t Dad me. Bring that car home immediately.”

He cut the phone.

Outside, I stared at our school garden, the one between Zik and Belewa hostels. The two hostels were opposite each other but were linked by a footpath that ran through the garden. There, the dry, hot, and dusty wind of harmattan was tossing dried leaves, pieces of paper, clothes, and sand around. Sometimes it spun the rubbish in a vortex, creating a dust devil, tall like a pole and moving fast like the torrent of a river. Uche used to threaten me that he would drag me into the vortex and it would take me to a land of demon women with half-skeletal bodies, and they would marry me off to their princess or make me their pet. I would run to Mum who would assure me that Uche’s words were vain threats and that there were no demon women in the wind.

A male student in ripped grey tracksuit trousers was battling with the harmattan cyclone in the garden over his clothes. He dove, rescuing an olive green sweatshirt, but he wasn’t lucky with his two white boxers. He cursed and watched the wind take the boxers and drop them on top of the zinc roof of Belewa’s hostel.

Apart from him, the whole school seemed deserted, like a graveyard. The *twit-twoing* of owls made me shiver. I walked to the parking space in the front of Zik hostel where I’d left the car; the back left tyre had gone flat.

“Shit!” Slipped from my mouth unconsciously.

I had no option but to change the tyre and drive the car back home before Dad descended on me with rage. I opened the trunk with the hope of finding a spare tyre.

There were two red candles tied together with a tattered strip of red cloth and a red paperback booklet titled *Evening Worship of the Sons’ of Light* with my father’s name written across its spine in red ink beside the tyre I was looking for.

When had Dad become religious?

Sweat rolled down my armpits.

Something didn't seem right.

I didn't know what I was more afraid of in that moment: my mother's spectre or my father's mysteriousness.

I had to know what was going on.

I had to search my father's room.

He would be going to see my mother's family as he told me before I left the house last night. If I had to search, the best opportunity would come when he was out, meeting my mother's uncles.

I called Dad to tell him about the flat tyre. I lied, telling him that the car engine was having problems too. I wanted to use the time I would buy with the lie to keep him from worrying me to come home quickly. To give me enough time to figure out how to break into his room.

"Come back before evening, in fact before I return from my in-laws," he yelled. "I need the car. You understand? Just drop it and leave the house immediately. I don't want to meet you at home when I come back. You have terribly annoyed me."

Dad's door opened after I had loosened the bolts of the lock with my screw. Ejiiofor, my friend who is a carpenter, had given me the suggestion.

"Act fast and fix the lock back," he'd admonished.

Inside Dad's room, I was surprised to see the bed now dressed with a red bedsheet, the pillows stuffed into two red pillowcases. In the middle of the bed was a wooden red cross surrounded by what looked like small bones. He had even changed the purple curtains that were in the room yesterday to red plain ones. A surreal feeling engulfed me. The saliva in my mouth drained away.

The room looked like it was being prepared for something... but what?

There was red.

Red. So much red.

Like Blood.

Something in my mind told me to check the wardrobe. It was locked. I had to loosen it just as I did to the door.

There were no clothes in it.

Instead, there was a wooden table three inches high. It was painted red. A red table cloth also covered it.

My heart thudded in my chest.

Oh God, Dad, what have you been doing?

Two red candles were standing on a red candle stand. A book was opened and faced downwards on the altar.

Cold descended upon me when I read the title:

rites of sacrifice

I could hear my pulse beating in my ears.

Dad, what have you done?

My mouth was shaking, body trembling.

I picked up the book, taking care not to close the page it had been turned over to. At the top of the page, in bold print was written:

ON THE WEEK OF THE SACRIFICE, ENSURE NONE OF YOUR LIVING FAMILY MEMBERS ARE IN THE PREMISES WHERE YOUR SACRIFICIAL OFFERING WILL BE CONSUMED.*

My eyes scanned the entire page. There were detailed diagrams showing what looked like crude dissections of a human body. The phrase, “Eat Raw”, appeared over and over again.

I retched.

At the bottom of the page, also in bold print was written:

IF ANY LIVING FAMILY MEMBERS ARE IN THE PREMISES, THEY WILL BE BLESSED WITH MENTAL ILLNESS.

The book slipped from my hands and fell on the ground.

I heard a crash.

My heart skipped a beat.

I jumped and spun in the direction of the noise.

The crash had been sharp and sudden, like ceramic shattering on the ground, perhaps a cup or a plate.

It must have been a plate.

Right?

I listened, no further sound came forth. I could not shake off the feeling that my father was on his way back. Everything in my mind condensed to one sound, repeated in my mind over and over again: RUN.

I rushed out of our house, my feet pounding madly first on the tiled floor, then, as I exited our house, the street. Thoughts flashed across my mind like light glinting off a knife blade. Had dad killed Ebuka? Sacrificed him to some evil cult?

Eat Raw.

Had Mum witnessed Ebuka’s sacrifice and become ill and insane? Had mum died? Had her spirit returned from beyond the grave to warn me? Was it even her spirit I had seen in the mirror or something else?

Something... evil?

Your mother was deep.

Had Dad's nightmare been real? Was had she returned to torment him too? Or had he been faking being tormented in order to get rid of me, to save me from witnessing a sacrifice and suffering my mother's fate? Was there to be another sacrifice in our house... today?

I thought of what Mum had written in her journal.

I saw him today.

What had she seen? Where had the rest of the journal gone? Tears were streaming down my eyes as I ran. Ran away from the house that had once been home but was now a strange place, a terrible place.

I ran as hard as I could, my lungs burning.

I knew that I was not going to set foot in that house again.

I knew I would never be courageous enough to confront my father. But I could call Uche and tell him what I had seen. I could call Uncle Odinaka and tell him too, hoping that he would sort whatever had happened out with my father. I could break my phone SIM card, and delete my Facebook and Twitter accounts. Change my name. I could try to find another life elsewhere, hoping that the nightmare of it all would not haunt me forever.

I could try to start again.

But in that moment, all I knew for certain was that I had to run.

Run.

And not look back.

AFIN

By

Edwin Okolo

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Snow White is my name. Or at least that's what the oyibo settlers have chosen to call me. They marvel at my yellow hair and call it sandy blonde and call my red eyes vermilion. They gawk at my milky white skin and their eyes play *sume* with the red spots that dapple my skin, plentiful like ticks on a calf. They like me because, as they say, I remind them of home.

The wives of Oba Baroka have other names for me; afin to my hearing and aje under their breaths. The Oba knows that they call me a witch and he hears about the hostility I entertain from his other wives who are all jealous of the ripe girl bought from her parents for the sole purpose of breeding children who look like the white men that are slowly stealing the loyalty of his people with their mirrors, spices and gun powder.

He knows but he says nothing because he too thinks there is truly something unsettling about me, his albino flower. I like to cock my head to the side and look up at his other women when they pass by as I grind elubo, my eyes catching the light and becoming translucent. I like to sit in doorways and thresholds; places they believe are usually inhabited by malevolent abiku an eshu and daydream, my ears deaf to the world. I hardly ever speak to anyone, I prefer to gesture lazily; Baroka's wives are cattle and I cannot waste my spit on them.

Yes, Oba Baroka knows he has brought home a peculiar creature but he's not worried because his first wife, our Iyalode, is a renowned priestess of Olokun. She first declared me harmless and welcomed me to Baroka's harem. I even slept in her room for the first month. But she has not remained welcoming.

Today, I can feel Oba's lecherous eyes on my buttocks as I work the grinding stone, pureeing beans for Iyalode's allele. I exaggerate my moves, jiggle my bottom and thighs a little more. I can see Oba's trouser rise

through his reflection in the silver tray I used to pick the beans and it makes me smile.

I have been in this palace for almost a year now, waiting for my sixteenth moon so that I can finally, finally taste of that massive *igi* Bakoka is rumoured to be carrying between his flabby thighs. While he was yet a prince, he gained fame as a hunter and it is said that he was as skilled at hunting young maidens as he was at hunting game. I spend many nights pleasuring myself to fantasies of him demolishing my insides so thoroughly, I would need a crutch to get through the next day.

Iyalode usually hears my moans but she says nothing. I do a lot of things to irritate Iyalode but she bears them quietly. I would have left her alone but the stupid woman struck the first blow when she lied that Olokun had forbidden our husband from deflowering with me for a year. I think she is afraid that once Oba tastes me, he will no longer want her. She is right to be afraid. I have waited quietly for a year, and I needn't wait anymore. Tomorrow is a new moon.

I'm just about to spit into Iyalode's beans puree when I hear her wail from outside the compound. The other wives jump out of their rooms and head for the source of the noise but I continue grinding as though I have heard nothing. I don't want to pay her any more mind than is absolutely necessary.

Iyalode's screams grow louder and I can make out a single word – sacrilege. She runs into the compound and straight to me, the other wives following behind her like flies on a corpse. Her wails increase when she spots our Oba. She throws herself at his feet and begins to roll around.

“My lord, your life has been threatened. This is an abomination, sacrilege!” She turns and points at me, a malicious glint in her eyes. “Your wives were right, the *afin* is a witch. I have looked into the reflecting waters in the calabash of Olokun and seen the truth of her! The seven spirits who possess her want your head and she will be able to give it to them once she consummates your union.”

I rise to my feet and straighten my back, shocked. This accusation is a new low for Iyalode. Oba's eyes betray his surprise. Iyalode rises to her feet and other wives pile behind her, whispering and stealing glances at me.

“Is this true?” Oba asks, his voice trembling with rage.

I stay silent, looking him straight in the eye before I finally whisper a “no”.

“Then eat this,” she says, thrusting a strange fruit toward me. It is round and red and shiny, “Eat the apple of Olokun, it is harmless to humans but its juice burns the throats of witches. Eat it now!”

I take the fruit and slowly take a bite. Its juice is both sweet and sour but its flesh is too hard. I choke on it.

“Witch!” Iyalode cries and flies at me, her clawed hands outstretched.

She slaps me flush across my face. I stifle a scream and drop the fruit. She follows up with a barrage of blows, driving me to the ground. The other wives join her, their greedy fingers tearing at my clothes and stripping them away. Every kick and slap feels like a death blow. I can no longer stifle my screams. There is blood pouring into my eyes and I cannot see. Their faces become a blur on top of me and I close my eyes tightly and hope for death, screaming at Baroka to stop them. Finally I hear him speak.

“Bring her to me.”

One wife pulls at my hair, dragging me across the sandy floor to the Oba’s feet while the other wives mock me, sneaking in kicks at my side. Beyond the pain and the shame, I am beginning to feel anger build up inside me and something else underneath it, something long buried, dark and slippery, slowly awakening inside me. No one else seems to notice the sky is darkening.

Oba Baroka raises me by my neck and I feel the world swim as my breathing breaks into shallow gasps. The thing inside me uncoils slowly, pressing against my chest, constricting my breathing even more.

“How dare you? Come into my home and pretend to love me. Dine on my food and drink my palm wine while you torment my wives and plot against me?” Baroka growls at me. I feel my skin shudder and my flesh flush at the sound of his voice. The thing inside me uncoils a little more.

“Afin, I am talking to you! Answer me!”

I feel words pour out of me like vomit. The sound I hear terrifies me. It’s a chorus of gravelly voices, not my own and they rasp like a snake shedding skin.

“Did you ask who owned her before you came and took her away?” The voices taunt.

The veins on Baroka’s neck grow taut as his fingers tighten around my neck. Spots dance in my vision, playing suwe against the sky which has darkened to evening time. The voice comes out of me again, even though I have no air with which to form any words.

“You are testing our patience, Baroka, bastard son of Sadiku. Do you think killing her will mean anything to us? It will merely anger us and our wrath is a fearsome thing.”

Baroka throws me to the ground with such force that my nose breaks, freeing a fountain of blood. He throws all his weight into a kick that sends me skidding across the compound. My back feels raw like a bloodied skinned calf. Iyalode begins to make incantations.

She has noticed the darkening sky.

She screams for Oba Baroka to leave me alone but he is too angry and scared.

He comes for me again, oblivious to my swollen eyes and bleeding nose and flayed skin and the red welts on my breasts and buttocks. He punches

and punches and I pray for the release of unconsciousness but the thing inside me presses against my chest and keeps me awake.

Suddenly it unfurls and I scream in pain, a powerful tearing sensation twisting my body, as if something is trying to claw its way out me through my belly. I feel my limbs contort and my mouth twists in a rictus of an inhuman screech, foam coagulating at the side as I begin to convulse on the floor, all feeling subsumed by the blinding pain that has enveloped my abdomen.

My throat begins to itch as I feel the thing dig its thousand legs into my esophagus, as if deciding my mouth is a better orifice to expel itself.

Excruciating pain.

My eyes roll in their sockets, my body feeling like it is turning itself inside out. With a slow creak, my head turns back at a humanly impossible angle nearly. With a sickening snap, I feel my neck break.

I do not lose consciousness.

I cannot lose consciousness.

The thing finds purchase on my tongue and I retch, the taste identical to rotting meat festered with worms. I roll my grotesque body to the side and what feels like a drum of black oily vomit pours out of me, spilling onto the ground and spreading towards Oba Baroka whose old huntsman instincts make him scamper just out of its range, his round eyes even rounder with terror as he watches my transformation. I feel my lips stretch to a smile as more bile pours, staining my chin black.

Unexpectedly the vomiting stops and the exertion of it forces me to fall on my face with a thud.

My head turns another angle and the sky and hard earth have switched places.

I do not lose consciousness.

I cannot lose consciousness.

The sky goes from evening to night in a matter of seconds and the puddle on the floor begins pulse like flesh. Baroka's wives, who have been rooted in terror at what is happening to me, sense the impending danger and run, gathering behind me, shuddering and cowering like innocents even though bloodied toes and knuckles betray them.

They watch Iyalode fearfully as she continues her incantation near me, hoping for a miracle.

Hatred, thick, viscous, black hatred saturates me and I wish them dead, every single one of them.

ALL OF THEM!

A deep chuckle crawls out of my throat and as if sensing my innermost desire, the pulsing puddle begins to grow, slowly separating till they number seven. The blobs begin to twist and swirl, stretching out to form limbs and hair and eyes.

They are too short to be human, stunted and round like tree stumps with rounded bellies and short legs and hands that look more ape-like than human; their appearance like the evil egbere folklore. Their eyes, large as saucers glow sickly yellow and where their mouths should be is a wide black chasm going from ear to ear.

“We warned you.”

Their voices hiss.

They disappear from my line of view, running on stumpy legs that smash the earth at an inhuman speed.

The first of the dwarf-like egbere reaches Iyalode and scrabbles onto her, wrapping his legs around her chest. Its mouth widens like awonriwon and tiny serrated teeth glint in the darkness before it buries it into her neck and tears away. Warm red blood spurts onto its face and chest, drenching black skin red as it throws his head back and swallows. A cackle comes out of it so loud and dark that I wish I could cover my ears. The other wives begin to scream as the other dwarf-creatures attack Iyalode, tearing chunks of flesh out of her legs and arms. One claws at Iyalode’s stomach and breaks the skin, reaching into the bowels and pulling out her intestine, stuffing it greedily into its orifice. Iyalode’s final words are screams to her goddess who has obviously forsaken her. They pile on top of her, pushing her to the ground and covering her. When they crawl off her five minutes later, there’s nothing left but bones. The screams begin again.

They circle the rest of Oba Baroka’s harem, giggling hysterically as he swings his talismans for protection against them. One darts in when his back is turned and drags out one of his wives and the rest surround her. They do not bother to eat her like they did with Iyalode, settling instead for breaking her bones to get at the juicy yellow marrow inside. The resounding crack of bones and the greedy slurping sounds rent the air. The smell of urine is pungent as some of the wives begin to lose control of their bowels. The next two wives, they quickly strip apart, cackles of glee as their blood and excrement is used to smear the floor. The next two wives, they force on their knees and make them plead for mercy before digging into their eye sockets with sharpened nails. Their screams grate at my ears, making my skin crawl. They put the women out of their misery by turning their heads so viciously their necks tear off their shoulders. Blood spurts into the air and the egbere dance in the artificial rain.

Baroka begins to weep, his screams of horror getting worse with each wife that is taken.

Soon it is just him left.

They surround him, hysterical laughter punctuated with screams. I squint to get a glimpse of what is happening but their hands and feet blur around Oba Baroka.

They finally release him and back away, admiring their handiwork.

All the blood building in my stomach expels itself out of me in a wet heave.

Oba Baroka has been broken.

Literally.

Blood pools where his eyes should be, and his mouth is a mangy mess of torn skin. His lungs hang out of the side of his mouth, still slowly rising and falling.

One arm droops at his side and one leg is bent all the way to his buttocks. Somehow he is still alive and he tries to crawl away, leaving a fresh skid trail of blood behind him.

My eyes rove, looking for the egbere but I cannot find them. Then I see the blob slowly flowing back to me.

I try to roll away but pain lances at my chest and I let out a dry painful rasp. The blob begins to pour over me, starting with my toes, bright spots of pain blooming where they touch against my skin. My head feels like it has been cut open with a machete and my brain has been pulled out in tiny strips. The darkness advances, covering my chest and arm and my broken and bleeding neck. It covers my mouth and my nose and I begin to choke. It pauses there, enjoying my body's attempts to thrash inside of its immobilizing gelatinous form and then it suddenly covers what is left of my head in a swoop. A blinding fear overwhelms me and I try to scream one last time before darkness finally takes me.

Its work done, the being inside me returns to its shell to hibernate, sated.

I open my eyes, pink iris glimmering in the gathering dusk.

I smile as I stand up, twisting my neck with my hands till it is at its right angle. A small smile plays at the corner of my lips as I inspect the carnage, curious flies already perching on the feast of bones, blood and feces.

The most envied harem in the land, reduced to carrion.

I toss my head back and laugh, in derision.

Who is the fairest now? Who is the most precious of all the beautiful wives?

The one called afin.

Me.

HADIZA

By

Nuzo Onoh

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Khalid's decision to divorce his wife, Hadiza, had not been an easy one. But then, nothing in his life had been easy. Growing up fatherless, uneducated and destitute had not been easy. His decision to abandon the Christian religion he'd been raised with and which was the main religion of his Igbo tribe for Islam had not been easy either. It had taken him a long time to get people to address him by his new Islamic name, Khalid. The same was true of his wife, Hadiza, whose original name had been Ngozi, (meaning 'God's blessing') a decent and worthy Igbo name. In fact, some relatives still persisted in calling him Daniel, his original Christian name, out of sheer bloody-mindedness and spite.

But Khalid was not nick-named 'Okwute'" (rock) just for his stocky build. He was as hard as stone where his needs were concerned and being rich was one of his greatest needs. Becoming a Muslim had been a financial investment rather than a spiritual enlightenment. It opened the gateway to a wealthy Muslim fraternity in the North, leading to his eventual initiation into the highly lucrative fuel distribution cartel. Khalid was now a man of respect despite his illiteracy. These days, he called the tune in his clan despite his uncle's role as official clan leader.

It was therefore of little concern to him that his uncle and the extended family disapproved of his decision to divorce Hadiza, his wife of nine years, in order to marry his mistress, Latoya, an African-American divorcee he'd met on one of his frequent trips to the United States. Khalid had watched his wife go from a beautiful young bride to an obese mother of three. While she was a good mother and wife, anticipating and catering to his every need, Khalid no longer desired Hadiza as a woman. He knew his

inability to make love to her was a source of great unhappiness to her though she tried to mask it with that gentle smile she reserved especially for him.

Hadiza was aware of his infidelities; he never hid them from her. But as a good wife, she accepted them, subservient to his needs as she believed was her duty under the teachings of the Koran. He made sure he kept her and their three sons in comfort, which was more than most other husbands did. Her forbearance however, began to make him feel guilty and the guilt soon bred a resentment that culminated in his decision to take a second wife.

His intended bride, Latoya, was a liberated woman of the West; sophisticated, witty, sensual and most importantly, educated. She was like no other woman he'd ever known. She respected nothing and nobody. Her very indifference was like an aphrodisiac to him. She lived hard, worked little and played hard. Although she was only two years his senior, she had been divorced twice. He would be her third and hopefully, last husband. He was still in shock that such a woman would consent to be his wife, an American no less!

Everything was going according to plan except for one hitch - Latoya wanted Hadiza out of his life for good. Khalid had agreed to a registry marriage as demanded by Latoya, despite his preference for a Muslim ceremony. He had even promised to send Hadiza and her children away, even as Abraham cast away the faithful concubine Hagar and her son into the desert. He went further to promise Latoya a separate and more luxurious home for both of them, provided she agreed to let Hadiza retain her title of first wife.

But Latoya had no intentions of being anybody's second wife. She belonged to a Western civilization that recognised one wife and one hundred percent monogamy. There was no space in her life for a spare wife, first or otherwise. Hadiza had to be divorced or there would be no marriage - all or nothing, period.

For months, Khalid wrestled with his conscience, trying to come up with a solution to his dilemma. He felt bad about what he intended doing to Hadiza and did not relish the prospect of adding a humiliating divorce to her list of indignities. Knowing his wife, he knew she would go quietly when the chips were down, without much fuss, like the good Muslim wife she was. That was part of the problem with their marriage, Hadiza's total lack of spunk and adventure. Perhaps, if she had devoted less time on the kids and more time on him, then Latoya wouldn't have been an issue in their lives. In the end, Hadiza had really been the architect of her own doom. He refused to be held to ransom by pity.

Khalid called Hadiza into his bedroom just as she was about to retire for the night and told her he would be divorcing her. She stared at him numbly, her eyes pain-filled, unable to take in the enormity of his words. Then she fell to her knees before him, clasping his resisting hands, her movements feverish, desperate.

“Khalid, husband of my heart, father of my sons, what have I done to deserve this wrong?” Tears poured unheeded down the smooth planes of her plump face. “Have I not given you sons and secured your lineage? Have I not been a chaste and obedient wife to you? Have you forgotten your promise to me when you begged me to marry you, that you would cherish me for eternity? Why do you bring this shame on me now? Don’t you love me anymore?”

Khalid looked away, unable to hold her gaze or stem the flood of emotions her words raised in him. Once...a long time ago...Hadiza had been the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He had felt honoured and blessed to be her husband. Regret stirred briefly in his heart but then, he looked into the fat, tear-streaked face of his wife and Latoya’s sultry image superimposed itself in his mind’s eye. His vision became clouded. He ceased to see the good woman beyond the outer folds of flesh. With a violent shove, he pushed Hadiza away from him and strode to the door. He paused, looking at the crumpled form on the plush flooring of his bedroom, his eyes cold, his face remote. Then, in line with the Sunni divorce procedure, he uttered the *talaq* three times in succession, “I divorce you, I divorce you, I divorce you.”

And it was done. Khalid was a free man. He had not even given Hadiza the three months grace prescribed by Islam between each pronouncement of the *talaq*. He simply severed her from his life as if she was no more than overripe fruit from a second-rate market stall.

His relatives thought he had lost his mind. *Who in their right mind would divorce such a good woman who had sacrificed so much for his sake?* They were even more horrified that he planned to marry a foreigner, a woman not even from the shores of Nigeria, who was both his superior in age and divorce tally. His uncle Ezekiel, against his better judgement, eventually accepted custody of Khalid’s three sons. Latoya did not want them in her matrimonial home and letting Hadiza keep them was out of the question. It would be an abomination to reject the sons of the clan and Khalid had promised to provide generously for his children’s upkeep. Hadiza was sent back to her people, two villages away, and Khalid severed all contact with her.

As promised, he set up the luxury home Latoya demanded and in no time, she was throwing lavish parties for her fellow expatriates, drinking, smoking and dancing till daybreak every weekend. Khalid felt an outsider at

these parties, which he came to resent and dread as one dreads greedy in-laws. Worse, Latoya showed no signs of embracing Islam as she'd promised she would once he divorced his wife. Her publicly amoral lifestyle was beginning to affect his standing amongst his Muslim business associates.

Things were no better at the home front either, where his sons presented sullen and resentful faces to him whenever he visited them. He couldn't blame them for their attitude but there was little he could do to remedy the situation save to divorce Latoya, which was something he would never do. She was a fever in his blood, an addiction, too intoxicating to let go. He was providing his kids and his uncle with more luxuries than they'd ever dreamed possible. *What else did they want from him... his blood?*

In a small airless room, overflowing with clothes and boxes, Hadiza lay on a single metal bed, staring up at the sluggish rotations of the overhead ceiling fan. Her henna-patterned hand lay languidly on her brow. Her eyes were wide, overly bright with a feverish glint coating her pupils. Her body was so still that she appeared unconscious, save for the intermittent blinks of her long-lashed lids and the rapid rising of her chest underneath her flower-print night dress.

Though the short needle on the square wall-clock pointed to three o'clock in the afternoon, Hadiza had yet to stir from her bed. Its ruffled sheets and discarded pillows were a testament to the sleepless nights and restless days she'd endured since her ignominious expulsion from her marital home eleven months ago.

Why? Why? What had she done to deserve this shameful fate, stuck in a spare room in her father's house, a charity-case with little respect, when once she'd been the favoured daughter, wife of a wealthy husband who lavished her family with luxuries of every kind?

Hadn't she sacrificed everything for her marriage, just to make Khalid happy and keep her marriage and family together? She would have turned a blind eye to his affair with the American harlot as she had done with all his other indiscretions. She knew they meant nothing to him, just a man relieving himself of his semen overload as Khalid had explained to her the first time it happened when she was pregnant with their first son. She was the one he loved, the one he had married, the only one he would cherish for eternity.

So why had he broken his promise, turning her into an object of pity for all? How was it possible that he could forget her so completely as if she'd never existed? She, who had borne him three fine sons, loved him with every breath in her lungs, given nine years of her life in selfless servitude to him. He didn't have to divorce her. Most men married three, four, even six wives. She would have stayed on as his first wife without a fuss.

With a sudden jerk, Hadiza leapt from her bed and began pacing around the tiny room, her movements terse, manic, like a caged hyena. She kept wringing her hands with the frenzy of Macbeth's wife, like one washing out bloodied hands, her breathing short and harsh in the tight confines of the room.

Why wouldn't Khalid answer her questions? "Don't you love me anymore?" she'd asked him. Surely, that was an easy enough question to answer. A simple "Yes" or "no" was all it would take. It wouldn't have killed him to tell her if he felt anything for her...no matter how small...after all their years together. Or had it all been a farce?

Had their entire time together been one big lie? How could a man go from loving a woman so desperately one minute to rejecting her so completely without just cause in a blink of an eye? How could Khalid, who had wooed her so ardently, humiliate her so cruelly? How could they ban her from seeing her own sons, telling her to stay away so as not to upset them? Who would cuddle little Kene when he had a nightmare? How could Khalid reject their children for that whore?

Is this what life is all about, to give everything and end up with nothing? What's the use, then? Why bother with all this pain? Who cares? Is there even a God? What kind of God would allow this kind of injustice on a faithful devotee? Or was Jesus punishing her for turning her back on Him for Allah, even though she'd abandoned that religion as soon as she left Khalid's house? So, if there was no forgiveness of sin then what's the use of life? What's the use... what's the use?

In death, Hadiza achieved what she couldn't in life - a visit from her ex-husband. Khalid defied Latoya's objections and attended Hadiza's funeral with their sons and clan members.

He sensed the hostility of her family, who blamed him for her suicide. He stared at the wasted corpse in the open coffin, unable to reconcile it with the obese wife he had discarded almost a year gone. He could see the pain she had been through in the abundance of grey hair on her head, lush curls previously revealed only for his pleasure while she was his wife.

Hadiza looked so pitiful in death that he felt his throat constrict, unable to suppress the sudden wetness in his eyes.

He hadn't known what she was going through. No one had said anything. He would have done something had he known. It was all the whore's fault. She had blinded him with her witchery and turned him into an outcast amongst his people while doing nothing to make him less of an outcast amongst her own people. He needed to belong to his people once again, regain his roots and dignity which his good wife, Hadiza, had given him. He had stupidly cast away the one good thing in his life and now it was too late to make amends.

Khalid let the tears flow unashamedly. His open grief struck a chord with the mourners and their hostility turned to mild sympathy. The men beat their chests in commiseration and the women clasped his hands. His sons, seeing their father's tears, finally let him into their hearts again and that night, Khalid took his children back to the house he shared with Latoya for the very first time.

But Latoya would not have them. She would not play mother to another woman's children, dead or alive. She didn't tell the fool to kill herself so why should she be burdened with her responsibilities? It was either the children or her.

This time, Khalid chose his children. He took them away from Latoya's luxury home and moved back into the dust-coated house he'd once shared with their late mother, Hadiza. Latoya's callousness to his children on the day they buried their mother finally freed him from her carnal hold. He would divorce her and devote his life to being a good father to his sons, make up for all the months of neglect and irresponsibility, *Insha'Allah*.

The house had been cleaned up by the maids from his uncle Ezekiel's house but it was a rushed job. There was still a heavy coating of dust on the furniture and an atmosphere of abandonment pervaded the plush rooms with their ornate chairs and imported chandeliers. The house felt strange, yet familiar and the children wandered from room to room, touching things, talking in hushed tones unnatural for their age... remembering, mourning.

The walls were still adorned with pictures, family pictures of himself, Hadiza and the children, photos from a time they were still a happy family, their smiles wide and clear, without a hint of the tragedy that was to befall them.

Khalid felt a hard knot in his chest, a lump that crawled to his throat, painful, uncomfortable. He gently turned the pictures of Hadiza to the wall as was customary when a person died. It was something he should have done from the first day he received the news of her death. But the house wasn't in use then and he didn't know there were still any photos of her in the house. He prayed it wasn't too late, that her confused spirit hadn't found its way into her pictures and became earth-bound as the customs said could happen. From somewhere down the long corridor, he heard the house-servants putting the children to bed, their voices muted, distant. Stretching out on the soft rug in his otherwise bare bedroom, Khalid felt a heavy weariness descend on him. It had been a long and harrowing day. He desperately needed the warm, soft touch of a woman. *But not that whore, Latoya. Never again.*

The sudden ringing of his mobile phone jarred the mournful silence of the house. He picked it up and answered. It was Latoya, her voice cold, hard. She wanted him back at their house that night otherwise it was

goodbye forever. Khalid swore an obscene oath. That was fine by him, he told her. He'd had enough of their farcical marriage and her ridiculous friends anyway. He hung up on her and returned to his rug. He was done being a lapdog to that American whore.

His mobile rang a second time, almost an hour later, five minutes to midnight. He knew it was Latoya even before looking at the caller-id. *He'll be damned if he took her call again. She can deal with his lawyers from now on.* The phone went on ringing and he started getting really annoyed. *Bitch didn't care if she kept his children awake on the night they buried their mother. It was always about her... everything was always about Latoya. Well, he would soon tell her where to get off.*

He answered the call with an angry, "fuck off!"

But Latoya was hysterical, her voice incoherent. She was screaming so loud he could barely make out what she was saying.

"Khalid, she's here! Oh my God...Khaliiid! Help! Stay away from me... Oh Jesus! Khaliid..."

He heard a clattering sound and knew Latoya's mobile had dropped to the marble floor of her bedroom. He could still hear the sounds coming from her room; running feet... screams in the background. Then he heard a voice that caused his blood to freeze, almost forcing the hot piss down his kaftan - Hadiza's voice, clear and strong, as if she were in the same room with him.

"Infidel whore! Unclean daughter of a pig!" Khalid heard the terrible curse spill through the line. He felt a shiver run through his body again, peppering his skin with goosebumps. He pressed the mobile tighter against his ear, his hand sweaty and hot. *It was Hadiza's voice.* He was certain... yet... it was Hadiza's voice as he'd never heard it before; harsh, hard, with a terrible resonance that sent his heart racing so fast he struggled to breath.

"You turned my husband against me, you cowardly thief of the night. Whore of Babylon! May your soul rot in eternal hell! A thousand nights of pain shall be your lot. The sharp knives of torture shall pierce your wicked heart forever. My fate shall be yours as my husband has become yours. Pig! Whore!"

Latoya's blood-curdling screams drowned out the piercing sound of Hadiza's venom. Then absolute silence. Nothing...

"Latoya!" Khalid shouted into the mobile, even as a part of his mind still functioning told him she couldn't hear him, would never hear him again; that in all likelihood, she was dead. He gripped the mobile tightly, listening...hearing nothing but the loud thudding of his heart. His body trembled like leaves caught in a midday thunderstorm. His mind was in dark turmoil. *It's not possible... It's not Hadiza... she's dead... buried... it can't be Hadiza... No way... Latoya is okay. Just fine. It's a trick...her way to get me back to*

the house by any means... I won't fall for her tricks... not this time. I won't... Yet... that voice... Hadiza's voice...

Like one stung by a scorpion, Khalid rushed to the teak cabinet, grabbing his car keys and wallet as he pushed his feet into his leather sandals. He took the stairs two at a time, his hasty flight awakening the household staff who peeped out of their bedrooms, their eyes wide with fright and curiosity.

As if pursued by demons, he drove through the deserted streets of Enugu. Bands of sweat poured down the sides of his face in the chilled air-conditioned interior of the Mercedes S-Class. His thoughts jumped inside his head like restless ants, thoughts of *what-ifs* and terrifying images of what he might encounter at Latoya's apartment. *What if she was already dead and the police found him there? Would they think he'd killed her? Should he call the police... and tell them what exactly? That he thinks he heard the voice of his dead wife over the phone? That he thinks his dead wife has killed his present and soon-to-be ex-wife? Ha! He'd be lucky to be kept out of the psychiatric hospital with such twaddle.*

As he drove up to the shut gates of Latoya's lavish residence in the exclusive area of Independence Layout, Khalid kept his palm on the horn till the panicked guard dashed out of the small security house to let him in. He noticed that all the lights in the house were on, as well as the external security floodlights. The compound was illuminated like a carnival fairground. Under their glare, he noticed a strange car parked among the fleet of luxury Mercedes Benz cars he'd purchased for Latoya with the notion that like a Rolex, a Merc is forever. He barely gave the car a second thought as he rushed through the doors, past the startled faces of the house servants and up the wide staircase that led to the private quarters of his wife.

He heard hushed voices behind him and turned to see the frightened faces of the house servants.

"What is going on here?" he demanded. "Is your Madam alright?"

For a brief second, the servants looked at each other before returning their gaze to him. He read something in their eyes, something shifty and fearful, yet malicious. The head servant, Ifeoma, a fat indolent woman in her early thirties, finally spoke up.

"Oga, master, we don't know what is happening in Madam's room," Ifeoma said, her voice a combination of obsequiousness and fear. Khalid had never liked the woman but knew that for whatever reason, Latoya placed an unhealthy amount of trust in her. "We hear screams from they room but Madam not open they door when we knock. But everything go quiet again so we think Madam gone sleep."

Khalid gave a curt nod and sent them off to their quarters. Squaring his shoulders, he turned the knob of the thick panelled oak door. The door

opened, swinging inwards with a quiet whirr to reveal the white brilliance of the opulent room. Khalid stepped inside....

And froze.

On the King-size four poster bed in his wife's room lay a nude, elderly Caucasian man, dead. His lifeless eyes stared in frozen terror at an invisible horror now beyond the boundaries of his existence. His expensive shoes and clothes littered the cool tiled flooring of the vast bedroom and his mobile phone, wallet and keys were scattered on the bedside table with his open packet of Benson & Hedges. Khalid couldn't see any sign of blood on the man or any murder weapon. But there was no doubt in his mind that the man was dead.

Khalid felt his senses reel as he paused to take in the scene. *Chineke! God in heaven! What on earth was going on? Latoya! Where was Latoya!* His eyes scanned the all-white décor of the room and found Latoya crouched against the mirrored doors of the vast wardrobes running the length of the right side wall. Khalid felt his heart lurch at the sight of his wife, horror crawling up his spine with thin frozen fingers.

Unlike her dead lover, Latoya was partially clothed in an expensive but blood-splattered negligee. And she was alive, if one could truly describe the pathetic creature on the floor as living. Her eyes were wide... wild... like a caged hyena in a zoo. And her face... *Chineke! Her face...*

Khalid stared in stunned disbelief, shock and terror numbing his mind. Latoya's face was covered with deep bloody gorges, scratches that could only have been inflicted with talons or claws. The injuries resembled the carefully designed artwork of a maniac, both in their precision and execution, ensuring that no part of Latoya's face went unmarked. But for her body and the fact that he knew he was in her bedroom, Khalid would have been unable to recognise the horror he beheld. *Who would have hated Latoya so much to do this to her, disfigure her so viciously?* He felt a shudder run through his body as he quickly pushed away the thought and slowly made his way towards his wife.

As he drew closer, he heard her low whimpers, sounds that sounded like a puppy trapped by a wild Tomcat. He saw something on the floor that made his breath catch, trapping the air in his lungs and sending his heart racing once again. *Allah! Would the horror never end?* By Latoya's bare feet were bloody clumps of rich black hair, Latoya's once luxurious curls, pulled with malevolent force from her scalp. Khalid could see the blood already beginning to mat on her near-bald scalp and fresh blood trickled down her forehead, beside her ears, merging with the bloody mess of her savaged face. *What kind of monster could have done this evil,* Khalid wondered, stooping low beside his wife.

Latoya looked through him, her eyes bereft of recognition. All he could see in her gaze was terror, pure unadulterated terror beyond anything he could describe. He shook her, cajoled her, spoke to her. But she would not speak...could not speak. He stood up to get her clothes from the wardrobe and make her decent before he drove her to the hospital and put a call though to the police.

It was then that the smell hit him, assailing his nostrils with its familiar but now terrifying scent. It was the smell of incense, the familiar fragrance of his dead wife Hadiza, now pervading the bedroom of his living wife. Latoya's *Must de Cartier* perfume, the usual scent of her room, was overwhelmed by the suffocating smell of Hadiza's incense.

Khalid froze, his limbs turned to baby pap, soft, weak. His head was swimming, sending waves of terror coursing through his body. *Ob God! Allah, help me!* He cast his eyes wildly around the room, feeling the tremors quake his limbs and the shivers chill his spine. The smell was everywhere, getting stronger, suffocating, sending him rushing towards the door of Latoya's bedroom, heedless of the dead man and comatose woman in the room. All he knew was that he had to get out of that room fast. He had to get out of that house without delay.

At the staircase, he encountered Ifeoma, the head house servant. He forced himself to stop, control his erratic breathing and address her. Except she was already speaking before he could say a word, her voice urgent, pleading.

"Oga, I swear, we never see that white man before. I for call you, tell you say madam get boyfriend if I know. Please sir, no sack us. We no know anything, I swear."

Khalid stared at the woman boggle-eyed. *What the hell was she on about?* Then he remembered. The dead white man on the bed - Latoya's lover - definitely well known to the slimy bitch in front of him. He didn't for one second believe that she and the rest of the servants were ignorant of his wife's indiscretions. He'd had his suspicions but never any concrete proof till tonight. Dead proof.

"Phone the police immediately and tell them to come to the house. Go and dress your madam before the police arrive. Tell the police to come to my house if they need to speak to me. I will deal with you all later."

"Oga, we don't know address of your house," Ifeoma said.

Of course she wouldn't know. Up till tonight, he had lived in this house, shared it with Latoya, albeit in different bedrooms. He told her to give his phone number instead to the police. Without a backward glance, he drove out of the compound with the same speed he had arrived, but for entirely different reasons.

Four days later, he was arrested by the police for the murder of his wife's lover and her attempted murder. His arrest was a culmination of several factors, chief amongst them, the fuss raised by the American embassy about their two citizens and the damning testimony of the house servant, Ifeoma, who swore that Khalid had killed his wife's lover before rushing out of the house.

As Latoya was still in a state of shock and unable to give a statement, the police eventually yielded to the pressure from the American Embassy and arrested Khalid. He had managed to keep himself away from jail pending trial by bribing the police commissioner. But that didn't stop the local media from having a field day at his expense. After all, it wasn't every day that an illiterate Igbo, Muslim millionaire killed the white lover of his American wife and left her disfigured for life, on the same day he buried his ex-wife.

He tried to see Latoya, to speak with her and find out what exactly happened in her bedroom that night. He was as curious as the rest of the public despite having his own suspicions. But the police wouldn't let him anywhere near her; there would be no interfering with the prime witness. They had the American Embassy to consider and therefore, despite Khalid's generous bribes, couldn't accommodate him. They were really sorry and hoped he wouldn't take it personally.

He took it personally; very personally. But there was nothing he could do except read his leather-bound Koran and pray that Allah would come to his aid.

Allah did.

A week after the attack, the results of the autopsy on the American man showed he'd died of a massive coronary thrombosis that was as sudden as it was deadly. The man had a history of heart attacks and Khalid was removed as a suspect in his death. His good fortune seemed to hold when Latoya finally recovered enough to give a statement, an implausible account of temporary insanity after witnessing the sudden death of her lover. She claimed her injuries were self-inflicted. The police did not believe Latoya's story in its entirety but she was insistent on Khalid's innocence. Her statement exonerated Khalid and turned him into the darling of the media. He went from being the illiterate murderous villain to the innocent cuckolded husband of an American whore and the victim of bullying at the hands of the American Embassy. *Who were these foreigners anyway to interfere with the Nigerian justice system, even if they were the superpower of the world?*

Messages of support flooded in from all over the country and once again, Khalid became a man of respect.

In the end, he didn't need to divorce Latoya. She divorced him, leaving the country with the speed of antelopes escaping a wild bush fire. She neither called him nor answered his calls and she made no financial demands on him. It was as if she wanted nothing to do with him - ever again; as if she had been scared witless by something she was determined to forget.

Her silence left a lot of unanswered questions for Khalid, answers that could have stopped his disquieting nightmares and cured his incessant need to look over his shoulders, especially whenever he smelt the terrifying fragrance of burning incense.

The nightmares had started the night he discovered Latoya's mutilated face and fled the house in terror. At first, he thought it was his subconscious thoughts surfacing in his dreams, vivid and distorted dreams of his late ex-wife, Hadiza. He would wake up from the dreams shaking, his heart pounding, his ears still ringing with her voice, soft, insidious... chilling. He could never recollect the details of the nightmares, just flashing images, unpleasant and repulsive, like the slimy touch of something rotten and unwholesome. But he heard her voice; *he remembered her voice*. And it was a voice that sent the cold fingers of terror down his spine, causing him to dread night-time as much as he dreaded his bed.

Finally, he contacted a revered Imam, who in turn referred him to the powerful marabout, Sidi Brahim. Sidi Brahim was renowned in the Muslim communities for his powerful amulets which conferred invisibility to their wearers, making them invincible to their enemies. Armed robbers sought his help to cloak them from police detection while top politicians paid him a fortune to ensure their success at the polls. When Khalid explained his troubles to the holy man, he had demanded a cow the size of an elephant. Khalid had spent a near fortune buying such a mammoth cow and when Sidi Brahim saw the cow, he gave a wide smile of approval and assured Khalid that his troubles were about to end.

That night, the marabout followed Khalid back to his house, together with three of his acolytes. The men spent several hours digging a hole the depth of two graves. Sidi Brahim instructed that the live cow be placed into the giant grave. Then the men proceeded to Hadiza's village several miles away. They made their way to Hadiza's deserted graveside and began their frenzied digging once again. The acolytes were exhausted by this time. But

they had seen the wads of naira notes Khalid had laid out for each of them. They would dig till they collapsed as long as they collected their prize.

When Hadiza's coffin was finally opened, Khalid refused to look into the muddied and crumbling wooden box. But his imagination saw more than his open gaze would have seen and his nose smelt the cloying stench of maggot-infested flesh, the smell of death and decay. He stumbled away from the grave, leaving the marabout to his gruesome task. Still, his mind would not rest, building images of such horror that he thought he would go insane with fear.

As he waited for the men in his car, he kept glancing behind, jumping at every sound, his heart thudding as hard as his aching head. The owl's hoot, the bat's screech, the cricket's chirps and the occasional barking from a bored dog all had him almost pissing on himself. He nearly collapsed with relief when Sidi Brahim finally re-appeared, carrying a small bag in his hand. When Khalid asked him what the bag contained, the holy man frowned and instructed Khalid to drive back to his house in silence.

It was almost dawn when they arrived back to Khalid's compound. The marabout retraced his steps to the grave containing the cow. The cow was in a state of extreme agitation, shoving itself against the narrow walls of the grave, mooing pitifully into the dark skies above. Khalid worried that it might wake his children up.

The marabout and his acolytes were soon deep in prayers and chants, circling the grave several times during the course of their invocations. Khalid was made to kneel down at the edge of the hole, while the Marabout poured some liquid over his head. It felt warm and sticky and when he wiped the trickle by his ear, Khalid's hand was stained a bright red. He could not tell whether it was chicken blood or human blood he felt.

As the marabout exposed the contents of his bag, Khalid felt his heart stop. On the ground was a human hand, severed from the wrist. The skin was death-black and peeling, a wedding band still attached to the third finger – *Hadiza's hand!* Khalid felt the bile rise to his throat, his head swimming so fast he feared he would tumble into the deep hole that housed the mammoth cow. By Hadiza's severed hand were other personal bits of her - her grey hair, withered flesh from her cheeks, a singular tooth, white as chalk and bits of her wrapper, browned by corpse fluid.

Sidi Brahim proceeded to make a deep cut in Khalid's thumb, squeezing the thick blood over the pieces of his dead wife, all the while shouting incantations. At his command, the acolytes chucked the bloodied items into the grave atop the live cow. The animal became even more distressed, throwing itself about, its eyes wild, terror-infused.

"Bury the cow now," the marabout instructed, his voice cold, his face remote. Yet again, the acolytes began their nefarious chore, chucking large

chunks of earth into the grave, their movements frantic, even manic, as if they couldn't wait to be done with the job.

“Hurry! Hurry, before she escapes!” the marabout shouted at them, his voice urgent and loud. “Come, help them,” he said to Khalid, joining his assistants. Khalid wasn't sure who the “she” referred to, his late wife or the sacrificial cow. He didn't want to know.

Soon, he was pouring with sweat, his heart racing with the unfamiliar physical exertion. Sidi Brahim's white kaftan was also stained a dirty brown, same as his helpers'. The cow's terrified moans were so loud now that they feared detection. The damp earth kept heaving with the cow's desperate struggles. Khalid felt himself shudder as he listened to the cow's mooing fade into the night, buried alive with the pieces of Hadiza. He never would've believed a cow could sound so human had he not heard the sounds himself. He knew he would never forget that terrible cry for as long as he lived.

In no time, the grave was completely filled up with earth and payment made to the marabout and his acolytes. Khalid drove them back the thirty-mile distance to their village, returning later that morning with Sidi Brahim's guaranteed assurance that his nightmares were now a thing of the past. Hadiza's spirit had been bound and buried inside the live cow and she would never haunt his dreams again.

And that night, for the first time since his ex-wife died, Khalid slept the sweet, dreamless sleep of a new-born baby.

Khalid married his third wife exactly two years to the date Hadiza died. In that period, he had reaped the joyful fruits of Sidi Brahim's work. His sleep was undisturbed, deep and dreamless. The unsettling smell of incense that had dogged his every step had vanished from both his cars and his house. It had been a long time since he had looked over his shoulders in dread, always expecting to see a presence that was never there, yet, constantly felt. His declining health gradually improved and his business flourished once again.

The only aspect of his life that gave him cause for concern was his sons' progress, both at home and at school. The children's results were so abysmal that he'd resorted to bribing the teachers to ensure their grades were improved. In the end, he decided to get himself a wife, a young bride that would dedicate her time rearing his sons and warming his bed.

Khalid's new wife was a young girl from his village, Oluchi, who at just nineteen years was perfect for his needs.

The wine-carrying ceremony completed, Khalid was finally free to bring his new bride back to his house. Later that night, after his final salat, Khalid groomed himself meticulously for the consummation of his marriage. He doused himself in Paco Rabane aftershave and donned his flowing white kaftan over his body. He hurried to his bedroom, humming a soft tune under his breath. He knew his new bride was already in his chambers, oiled and scented, awaiting his arrival. He paused briefly outside his bedroom to adjust his kaftan and still his racing heart, turbo-charged by passion and anticipation. Slowly, he turned the knob and pushed open the door.

Khalid gagged, stumbling backwards, his heart pounding so hard he could barely breathe. He stared around him wildly, his eyes wide with terror. From the open doorway of his bedroom, the suffocating smell of Hadiza's incense drifted into the corridor, slowly infusing the wide hall with its cloying sweetness.

For several minutes, Khalid hovered in the corridor, his back pressed to the wall, willing his heart to slow its pace. *There had to be a rational reason for the smell, a simple explanation which had nothing whatsoever to do with Hadiza. Sidi Ibrahim had guaranteed her exorcism and he could testify to the success of that occult procedure.*

In the end, Khalid concluded that his new wife was a lover of the same incense that his late wife had loved. It was all a mere coincidence, albeit an unpleasant one. That particular incense must be a popular scent amongst women, he decided. But Oluchi would have to do without it. That was one aroma he was determined to do without in his house.

Taking a deep breath, Khalid made his way back into the room, wiping his sweaty palms on his kaftan. From across the room, he saw the covered contour of his new bride on the bed. She had pulled the sheet right over her head, making herself completely invisible to his eyes. He smiled at her modesty, nonetheless pleased by it. As he made his way to the bed, he pulled off his sandals and kaftan. Placing his mobile phone and Rolex Oyster watch on the side cabinet, he stretched out on the bed alongside his new bride.

Again, he forced himself not to choke. The pungent smell of incense was even more overpowering than ever. It was as if his new bride had bathed herself in the damned thing.

"Oluchi," he said, trying to stifle the annoyance in his voice. *After all, the poor girl didn't know that he had an aversion to the blasted scent.* "I want you to get rid of the scent you use after today, okay? I don't like it one bit and would prefer that you use something different, okay?"

Khalid waited for her response but she said nothing; neither nodded her head in assent nor turned to face him. It was as if he hadn't spoken, as if

she hadn't heard him. *Chineke! Surely, the silly girl hadn't fallen asleep on her own wedding night! He'll have to teach her a lesson in wifely duties if she had.* He shook her, pulling the silk cover off her head, seeing the sleek perm of her hair before turning her around to face him.

His blood froze into hard ice.

Waves of terror bathed his body in chills, causing his skin to break out in bumps. He opened his mouth to scream but the sound stuck behind his throat, choking him, causing his eyes to roll back in their sockets. He wanted to run, to jump from the bed and flee. He saw himself flying, leaping to safety from the open window of his bedroom. But his limbs were glued to the bed as he stared into the glittering cold eyes of his dead wife, Hadiza.

“Husband of my heart, father of my sons, don't you love me anymore?” The ghoul asked, its voice soft, insidious... chilling. Just as she had asked him over and over in his nightmares before Sidi Brahim bound her soul to the buried live cow. Except that he'd never remembered his dreams, never recalled her words - till now. *Our Lord, impose not on us afflictions which we have not the strength to bear...grant us protection! Have mercy on me...have mercy on me! Oh almighty Allah! The Beneficent...the Merciful! Master of the day... and night! Have mercy on us and grant us your protection... grant us your protection...*

Khalid heard the words ring silently inside his head, over and over, as he squeezed his lids, shutting out the horror, hoping for Allah's miraculous deliverance. He felt the cold clamminess of her touch as she pulled his head down... slowly to her cold, cold lips.

And the spell broke. Khalid reeled back in revulsion, falling out of the bed, knocking his head against the hard wood of the bedside cabinet. He was moaning, whimpering like a day-old puppy as his manhood became undone in an undignified puddle of hot piss. He heard the rustling of silk as the spectre rose from the bed, seeming to float towards him in a terrifying soundless motion. Abstractly, his mind registered the beautiful silk of her negligee, a bridal lingerie, expensive, sensual and light. He saw that the body beneath it was lithe, supple and shapely. But he knew that the truth lay in the eyes, the petrifying gaze of his ex-wife, Hadiza, bloodless, icy and dead...*Oh dear God...very dead.*

Khalid tried to back away, his movements clumsy, frantic. But she was everywhere, behind him, in front of him, at his left and at his right. There was no escape and Allah was not hearing his desperate supplications. He crouched low, shielding his head beneath his arms. His body trembled like dancing leaves caught in a wild storm. Cold sweat poured in rivulets down his exposed body. He knew his day of reckoning had finally arrived. Hadiza

would get her vengeance on him for his betrayal and the mutilation of her corpse by Sidi Brahim.

Suddenly, he heard a scream, a cry of such agony that his head snapped up from its refuge beneath his arms. Khalid saw yet more horror that nearly made his wits desert him for good. His new bride, Oluchi, was standing before him, goring her face with her pink-polished nails. Over and over she scratched, digging her nails into her skin, reaching deeper and harder till her silk bridal negligee was covered in her scarlet blood. And all the while she screamed, squealed like a pig being butchered with a blunt knife. But she seemed incapable of stopping the self-mutilation, her eyes wild, tears pouring from them, pleading for him to save her from herself.

Khalid jumped up and grabbed her bloodied hands, pinning them to her side, keeping them away from her face. Instantly, they went limp in his hands, all fight gone from them. Her body shook as if hammered by a quake, her movements spasmic and violent. He folded Oluchi in his arms, holding her tight, trying to quell her tremors. He whispered hushed words of comfort into her sleek permed curls, his voice as unsteady as her body. For a while, it seemed as if his efforts were in vain as she continued to wail and tremble, her voice choked with pain.

Then, she stopped crying. Her sobs cut off like a song paused in mid-play. Khalid felt a sudden chill seeping through the silk of her lingerie, sending the shivers to his bare skin. He remembered his state of undress, compounded by his piss-dampened underwear. He let go of his new bride. He needed to make himself decent before discussing what just took place with Oluchi.

But she held onto him with almost superhuman strength, her arms like metal bands around his waist. *The poor girl was afraid, terrified out of her wits and who would blame her*, he thought. She would have many questions and he had no explanations that would make any sense to anyone. More importantly, she would need medical attention for her facial injuries and he dreaded the rumour mill when it emerged that yet another wife had been disfigured in his house.

Khalid tried again to extricate himself from her hold but she held on tight. His teeth were beginning to chatter from the chill and his body grew numb with each passing second.

“Husband of my heart, father of my children, don’t you love me anymore?” Her voice was soft... chilling, muffled against his bare chest. Slowly, she raised her head, seeking his gaze. Her dead eyes pierced through the last boundaries of his sanity.

This time, Khalid did not fight the terror. It engulfed him and imprisoned his mind as completely as his body was being crushed in the grip of his dead wife’s arms. He was losing consciousness, his breath dying

out and his limbs becoming insubstantial, unable to hold up his heavy frame. The tightness in his chest felt as if a ten-ton truck was crushing him beneath its wheels. He tried to raise his hands to his chest, to release the relentless invisible grip on it. But his arms were like lead, heavy and useless.

The chill seeped right through to his bones, turning his body into a hulking lump of ice. Pin-dots of dazzling light darted around him, blinding him, coating his pupils with sightlessness. *Akalaaka! No man can escape his Karma. Sooner or later, we all have to pay. Hadiza, I'm sorry... so sorry...*

And Khalid gave in to the crushing chill, as the darkness of hades engulfed him in final, eternal oblivion.

THE WILD DOGS

By

Mandisi Nkomo

Why must you go Camilla?

We have a good life here – Cape Town is finished. Why waste your life?

I landed safely in Cape Town and was taken for a medical check-up. With the world still baffled about the causes and the cure for the disease, foreign aid workers like me are checked meticulously on arrival. I volunteered to help rescue a falling city, and I'm not completely sure why. I don't feel heroic. I feel like I'm running. Running from complacency and comfort into the unknown? Why do such a dumb thing?

After the medical exams they shuffled us through the airport and out onto 'Special Transports'. All tough 4x4 vehicles since the roads have been damaged. I remember the shacks that used to line the route to town. There are so few now. The land is barren. Even of its poor. I remember arguing with locals, wondering how they could handle the incongruence of this city. I suppose that doesn't matter anymore. The flood gates opened. This place was once both beautiful and ugly. Now it's just ugly. Or, I suppose I exaggerate – Table Mountain still stands with confidence while the city crumbles beneath. How's that for privilege?

I've been watching these briefing videos they're playing on the Special Transports. Apparently the police who greeted us are a special branch of The South African Police Force called 'The Wild Dogs', specially trained to combat the creatures that manifest from the disease.

I've got to meet up with Bonkosi and get to Hout Bay. We're meeting at what's left of Long Street.

I got off the transport half way up Long Street. While disembarking, one of the Wild Dogs handed me a brochure. *Meeting all your security needs!*

There was a list of private security companies sponsored by the African National Congress, and sections like, "How to Survive Cape Town", along with phone numbers, and pictures of armed men.

Right.

I made my way up Long Street, past dilapidated buildings. There was that annoying Cape Town drizzle. The kind that's light as a feather but ceaseless as a tyrant. Eventually I reached Zula Bar and stood outside for a while in shock. The architecture was disintegrating; paint peeling like flesh, chewed wood and worrisome blood splatters. Armed men roamed idly around Long Street, amidst one or two homeless.

I gulped, picked up my bags, and creaked up the stairs mentally beating myself.

Do you like the way the water tastes?

At the bar an armed man was nodding off to the music. The bartender approached twitching and scratching. Strands of hair were breaking through the skin at the top of his ears and his teeth were sharp – way too sharp. He just looked at me, said nothing.

“Black Label please.” He hobbled off.

Abruptly the armed man looked up and pointed at bartender. “He’s got it!” He laughed uproariously.

“Jou poes naaier,” the bartender replied.

“Ja! Keep talking shit. When you change, and start fucking everything that moves, I’m going to put a bullet in you. Right here.” The armed man tapped the middle of his forehead and laughed again.

I took my beer and went out to the balcony. Bonkosi was late. I waited and watched the drizzle hit the plastic blinds. He arrived about six beers later as evening was settling in.

“Well, we’re going to overnight here, and leave in the morning,” Bonkosi said after we’d exchanged formalities. “It’s great to have you here. Many have given up on the city.” He ordered a round of tequila. “Trust me, you need this,” he said. “It’s going to get really depressing.”

We took the shots, and sat for a moment. Bonkosi stared at nowhere, with a grave expression, as if he were on the verge of breakdown. I thought I could see tears in his eyes.

“Right, let’s go,” he said.

He drained the remnants of his beer and stood up. “I’ve organized us an escort for tomorrow. Just for things to run smoother. WCLS. Western Cape Liberty and Security – they give discounts for the volunteers. The owner’s a bit of a capitalist hippy. Ex-Executive Outcomes – very dangerous. Runs the family business with his two sons Zakhile and Jonno.”

We descended as Bonkosi spoke. I realised I was mildly drunk.

“Things can get a bit messy while traveling alone. Especially if a female turns up.”

“A female?” I asked.

Bonkosi stepped through the door and vanished in a swish of blood.

I heard gun shots and felt dizzy.

“Bonkosi? Bonkosi?” I could hear rustling through the door.

“Bonkosi?”

I was shaking, and each gun boom felt like the pound of a headache.

“Bonkosi!?”

Men were yelling and running up and down the street, and the laughter, the laughter was so penetrating.

I put a foot forward.

You should know by now.

Really?

That this could end.

Really.

You should know.

I could never make it work.

Wake up,

it's pretend.

Really?

Really.

“Good morning Ms. Haake.”

Where am I?

“You can relax. You’re safe here at Chris Barnaard Hospital.”

How did I get here? Who is this guy?

“I found you last night. You were hiding in the gardens. Do you remember?”

Do I remember? I remember stepping outside Zula. *Herregud!* Those things! Yenas! I’d never seen one.

“Bonkosi!?”

“Bonkosi? One of the casualties yesterday. Did you know him?”

He was slaughtered right in front of me.

I’d stepped out into Long Street and all hell had broken loose. Bonkosi was reduced to a mauled pulp – a Yena was eating his face.

“Excuse me. Ms. Haake?”

“Give her a moment please Sir, she’s just woken up. She’s still in shock. Hello, I’m Dr. Winters. You’re alright now. Just a few cuts and bruises but it’s alright now.”

I looked at the woman, failing to understand her.

Images flooded me, of blood and fur and maniacal laughter, streaking human beasts, Bonkosi's eyeball being pried from its socket. I drifted off to men screaming for their mothers...

I'd been crying for about an hour, clinging to this strange man.

"Where are you from?"

"I'm from Sweden." Mucus ran into my mouth as I answered him.

"I'm terribly sorry about this. We haven't had an attack of that scale in a long time. The Yenas...sorry, the creatures tend to maraud in smaller, more manageable groups. This was quite a big group, led by an Alpha-Female. Nobody was ready."

He looked at me with what seemed to be as much sincerity as he could muster and rubbed my back awkwardly. He pushed away from me gingerly, and rested his hand on my knee. There was nothing jovial in his face; it was thin and stern. Not unattractive, but not particularly warming either.

"I'm supposed to interview you. Gather any information I can regarding the attack. I'm with The Wild Dogs. We deal with, uh... the diseased. We also submit to the places doing medical research like Hout Bay. I'm Jacobs."

I nodded, lacking the energy to object – lacking the energy to even absorb. He ran me through a series of mundane questions: background, purpose of visit, how I knew Bonkosi. I answered as best I could before he turned to the hard part; my account of the night.

I began processing the nightmares.

I ran... I had to run. There were Yenas and mercenaries everywhere. Two Yena packs were converging from the top and bottom of Long Street. They were laughing and whooping hysterically. The private military seemed overwhelmed. There were gunshots and grenades going off everywhere, and Yenas zipping up and down, using their numbers to take the soldiers out.

I ran.

I ran in the first direction I could, screaming my lungs out. In my partially drunk terror-haze, I ran straight into The Company's Gardens. There were even more Yenas there – whooping and giggling excitedly, their eyes glinting an excited pale. I could barely see. I could hardly hear my screams over that deranged laughter. It was a choir of horror. There were entrails and residue everywhere. Sticky and gross, and at every turn there was a Yena...trying to touch, claw, or bite.

Then more gun shots rang out. Finally the Yenas started to scatter, many dropping to all fours. I felt them zipping past as I hid in the

shrubbery. I hugged my knees and rocked until a flashlight shone in my dirty face.

“I found someone.” Someone yelled, staring at me through a gas mask.

“Shoot her. It’s not worth the risk.”

“Are you mad? No extra hair. Ears look normal. Her arms and legs are still proportioned like a human. She’s fine.”

“Okay Jacobs, what do you want to do with her?”

“She looks injured, but not badly. We can leave her at Chris Barnaard and brief her tomorrow.”

“Are *YOU* mad? I’m not getting near her. And don’t put her in the car either – she’ll contaminate all of us.”

“Please man. You talk so much kak. I didn’t know you studied medicine?”

“Don’t give me that shit. Remember what happened to Peterson? He played hero – he’s lekker in his poes now.”

“Ja, ja. Just give me the bike. I’ll take her myself, and you can burn it after if you want.”

I was lifted and carried to the bike.

“It was you?” You found me.”

“Um... ja.” He looked uncomfortable for a moment. “Thanks for your testimony. I’ll be in touch if I need more information regarding Bonkosi.”

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “I need to get to Hout Bay. I’m a volunteer. How am I supposed to get there on my own? I was supposed to go with Bonkosi.”

“Maybe a transport?” he replied. “Here’s a pamphlet.”

He handed me the same pamphlet I’d received on the ride into town. This time I paid attention to the pricing.

“I can’t afford this!” I yelled, but the room was already empty.

I have to sit put. *Skit*. After no word from The Wild Dogs guy, Jacobs, I conjured up the guts to go to an internet café.

I was discharged from the hospital. Terrified, with nowhere to go, Dr. Winters suggested I shack up at Carnival Court on Long Street. Yes, back to Long Street, a place of much PTSD and former youth culture hub. So what could I do?

I headed back to Long Street and got a room with the little money I had. When the money ran thin I'd have to make another plan. I'd hid inside for about a week, moping and righteously so.

Do you like the way the water tastes?

I made contact with the doctors in Hout Bay. They told me to sit put, and wait for them to organize an escort.

There's someone banging on the door. What do I do? They sound human. This could be my salvation.

I jumped out of bed. *Skitsamma!* I grabbed the keys off the dresser and made my way downstairs, turning on every light as I went. The banging and yelling was getting louder. To be sure, I unlocked the balcony door and took a look from above.

I leaned over the railing still scared shitless. "Hello?"

It was a man. He kept on banging and yelling, obviously not hearing me.

"Hello?" I said again, louder this time. He stepped back and looked up. He looked at me for a long time in consternation.

"Do I know you?" he slurred.

My heart palpated with unsentimental joy. It was Jacobs.

"Since when do you work here?"

I didn't bother to answer. I ran downstairs and ripped off the locks. After I flung the door open he just stared at me again, swaying to-and-fro.

"Are you guys still open? I want a beer."

He barged past me, and sluggishly stumbled up the stairs.

"Ha! Where's the bouncer? I almost got into a fight once with that oversized Nigerian naaier. If he was here today, I'd shoot him in his poes."

He laughed. I didn't see the humour.

"Where's the barman? Let's have some shots!"

I followed him up after locking the door behind us.

"Um...he's not here. He dropped some beer off last time he was here. Hold on." I went to the fridge and got the beers out. I couldn't decide how I was going to play it. He was my drunk Knight, whether he wanted to be or not. For a moment I considered using sex to keep him there, but he interrupted me.

"Wait! I do know you, man. I had a girlfriend once. She liked tats and piercings too. You kind of look like her, except she wasn't so pale and blonde." He laughed obnoxiously.

I nodded slowly, and shook off the post-apocalyptic sexual sacrifice scenario. I figured I would just lock him in. He was already drunk anyway.

“So what brings you here?” I started pouring shots of whatever I could find. The faster he passed out, the less time I would have to spend trying to distract him from going home.

“Nostalgia, and everyone at home is pissing me off...what was your name again?”

“Camilla.”

“Ja, the Swedish girl with the nice bum who was hiding in the bushes. I’m Randall. Randall Jacobs.”

He stared at my chest for a couple of seconds, though he appeared to be zoning out. He then mumbled something inaudible, and suddenly began detailing his Long Street exploits for the next twenty minutes. Eventually I became impatient – the anxiety was killing me.

“So what happened?” I asked him.”

“What happened? Fok if I know what happened the rest of that night. I was dik gesuip.”

“That’s not what I meant,” I said. “I mean, what happened here? I’ve read about the Yenas. I’ve seen them in the news. I mean, I’m a volunteer you know? I don’t know much about medicine. I just sort of volunteered. I wanted to help with the humanitarian crisis and – and I suppose I wasn’t doing much with my life anyway. I’m not sure if I was expecting this. I knew it was bad but this...”

He looked at me from a humourless slouch and gulped down another shot. “White saviour, huh? Thought you could come here from your nice flat in Europe and help poor little diseased Africans, eh?”

I frowned.

“It started in Pollsmoor. Whatever it is started there. Spread to townships first. Skipped all the rich, white areas...naturally. They boarded themselves up nicely once people in Tokai started getting sick. Constantia and Bishops Court turned into security villages, and the concept spread like wildfire. It doesn’t even make sense to do that, but you know, paranoia and fear.” He took a gulp of Black Label. “There are only a few ‘safe’ areas left. Some don’t let non-whites in anymore, not that they’d admit it. Let’s see, there are villages in the Northern Suburbs, Southern suburbs, Camps bay, Hout Bay. I think I’m going there. At least you can visit the beach there. I can’t handle this. I don’t care what she says about betrayal. I’m getting out. I think Hout Bay is still accepting people into their security village. It’s safe there.

“The irony of this situation. Our history...” He chuckled dismally.

I was so taken aback by his description that I had to pause. It was as raw as an open wound. “That’s not exactly how they described it in the news in Sweden.”

He chuckled again, this time truly amused. “Well, you know what they say, right?”

“And nobody knows exactly what they are? The Yenas?”

“Nope. Niks. Fokol. Nada. Jackshit.

“The ones I’ve seen up close look like, like, hyena-men. Hairy, elongated ears, fangs. They travel in packs. Scavenge, attack each other. Mate excessively no matter what sex.”

He wobbled on his seat.

“I heard a rumour it came from a dirty tattoo needle in Pollsmoor.”

He beckoned for another beer, and I obliged him in silence. He definitely didn’t look like he was going anywhere after this, so I felt my mission complete.

After gulping his beer halfway Randall continued. “Who knows? I’ve heard a lot of rumours honestly. Nobody says it out loud but they’re blaming us – coloured people. We have the highest infection rate and enough sins to back it up. I’ve mostly been exterminating my own people. She keeps dragging me to these fokken sermons and kak. ‘Die vloek vannie nommer’ they keep saying. ‘The curse of the number.’ We should just let the disease claim us for all our sins. Drugs, rape, rampant killings – Cape Town’s disgusting underbelly of filth. I mean what kind of a people willingly indoctrinate their own children into gang culture?”

“Fuck man, this country, sometimes I don’t know. Jinne...all those years I worked the flats. Sometimes I think those religious nuts she follows are right. Maybe we deserve this.” He lit up a Dunhill and pulled hard on it. “Lucky for me I have two accents. Most people don’t think I’m from here. I’m leaving. Hout Bay – that’s where I’m going.”

Suddenly he was silent. Nodding back and forth on the bar table. Sluggishly taking sips of his beer and smoking his cigarette.

I figured he’d told me too much and would’ve forgotten by the time he woke up. I wanted to ask him more questions; not about the disease, but about himself. He seemed to be guarding something, and it was making me curious. I couldn’t bring myself to do it though. I’ve always felt there was something low in fishing out a drunk person’s emotional issues.

He’d unloaded a lot though. *Coloured* – Randall was coloured. The South African term for mixed race people. Weird...the coverage I’d gotten had been less...racially charged. I hadn’t even thought about it. Cape Town had been a wonderful city to visit, it had a lovely veneer and it was easy to think of it as perfect but I’d been to Cape Town enough times to know of its underbelly. To have heard about the notorious Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison. To know about The Numbers gangs, 26s and 27s, or something like that. ‘The curse of the number’. I hadn’t heard any of this in regards to the disease. He couldn’t have been serious about some security villages only letting in white people could he?

“Randall?” I tapped his shoulder and he stirred slightly from his drunken stupor.

“Are you going alone? To Hout Bay I mean?”

“Of course I’m going alone!” he slurred. “There’s no one here for me anymore. I’ve been disowned by my family and friends, and that stupid suicidal fucking cult. For trying to fucking help. Nobody wanted to come with me. Not even her!”

“I’ll come with you! I mean,” *shit*, I jumbled my words, “I mean – could I come with you?”

He regarded me vacantly. I wasn’t even sure if he heard me.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“It’s 3 a.m.,” I responded. I had been monitoring the time.

“I have to go.” He stood from his chair, wobbled, then collapsed into heap of tangled limbs.

I tried to lift him, but he was too heavy. Instead I shifted around a couch, and strained to roll him onto it. Once finished, I went upstairs for a blanket. As I placed it on him he began drooling vomit. I grabbed a bucket and shifted his head to the edge of the couch. I got a chair and blanket, wrapped myself in it, and watched him. I needed him; I couldn’t let him be another John Bonham.

Eventually I dosed off, and when I woke up he was gone. Temporarily I was terrified. I ran downstairs, and found that he had somehow managed to lock me in. I went back upstairs and looked at the vacant couch. There was a piece of paper with a number on it.

“I was drunk. My plan was to go alone. I don’t even know why I told you. I don’t even know who the hell you are.” He was different, not like the previous night – his tone was refined again, like the first time we met at the hospital.

“Please,” I begged shamelessly. “If you didn’t want company, you wouldn’t have told me! You wouldn’t have left your number.”

“I was drunk!” He barked.

He breathed heavily into the phone for a moment.

“Fine. I’ll come by in two days. That’s Monday. 10 a.m. Be ready.”

He hung up before I could thank him.

At exactly 10 a.m., I heard a car horn downstairs. I was ready for him; I had been packing and pacing since the phone call. I collected my rucksack and bounded down the stairs. I took what was left of the alcohol, plenty of water, and shoved it into a cooler box.

When I got outside I hesitated; I was unsure whether to lock, or leave it open. I didn't know if the bartender would return. I wasn't sure if the owner would return really – hadn't seen either of them in weeks. I locked up, and loaded my stuff onto the open boot of the Nissan. Under the tarpaulin were more bags and another cooler box.

I opened the passenger door, and greeted Randall. He nodded back.

"I wasn't sure what to do with these keys," I said. "I figured I'd hold onto them in case we don't make it. Maybe we can come back and hole up here again."

"Maybe," Randall replied. "Or maybe we could drop the keys off at the municipality and they can convert it to RDP housing for mercenaries."

He looked at me as if I should respond. "Are you ready for this?" he said eventually "I'm going to try Camps Bay first – I don't know – for kicks. Maybe they'll let us in. I doubt it though. If that doesn't work, we take the hard way...to Hout Bay."

I nodded tentatively, and made sure not to ask what 'the hard way' was. He turned on the engine.

We made our way up Long Street, and onto Kloof Street. We joined Tafelberg Road, and curved up the hill. Moving into the suburban areas, walls started to rise, interrupting the serene beauty of the foliage. Finally, on Camps Bay Drive, a fortress loomed, dead and menacing.

Randall had not been kidding. It was medieval and strange. The freeway was wedged between a giant wall, blocking the view of the ocean, and to our left the mountain loomed. I could see some of the Yenas marauding in the distance. To the right security guards manned the walls, eyeing us and the creatures through rifle scopes. Abruptly, Randall chuckled.

"Years of guarding white people from other black people has earned black security guards the 'right' to lock themselves up with white people. What a fucking joke..."

"How do you know they're black? They're completely covered."

Randall rolled his eyes.

We came to great black gate, with watchtowers on either side.

"Quick, tell me how to say hello in Swedish."

"What?"

"If I can convince them we're both foreigners, they're more likely to think we're clean, and more likely to let us in. If they figure out I'm Cape Coloured they'll never let us in."

"You're kidding right?"

"Sorry to state the obvious but we're not in Sweden anymore. We South African's don't really get the concept of social justice. Get with it sister!"

"I..."

“Or, you just speak Swedish. Quick, jump out before they get suspicious.”

I climbed out of the car with Randall.

“Hello,” he said in a poorly feigned Scandinavian accent. “My name is...is...Marten! This is my wife Camilla. We come from Sweden.”

“God dag,” I said, awkwardly.

“Wait there,” the guard yelled down at us.

He disappeared, then reappeared through a door in the giant black gate. He was wearing a gas mask. “What do you want?” he said violently, shaking his rifle like a telekinetic probe.

“We’re looking for shelter. A place to stay. We came for holiday, and now we’re stuck here. We just want to be safe.”

The guard searched us violently. After finding nothing he eased his aggressive demeanour.

“You came for holiday? Nice try. Nobody comes to Cape Town for holiday anymore. Where will you go, heh? The beach? We’re full up my bru. No space inside.”

“But please! I mean we came as aid workers. We just want be safe. We’re from Sweden...we’re not sick.” Randall looked at me, and I nodded, clasping my hands together.

“Doesn’t matter chief. Nobody is allowed in. We can’t risk it.”

Randall dropped the accent. “Come on bra! I’m from The Wild Dogs. I moes know I’m not sick. Don’t listen to those white people man. Hulle mal naai. Me and you, we’re moes one. I can teta even.”

The guard broke into Xhosa and Randall fumbled his words, his second bluff called.

“You think you’re clever, neh? Jy lieg! What else could you be lying about?”

Randall gave up and started walking away.

“En you Mr. Wild Dogs,” the guard called. “You moes know. Die baas is sleg.”

A guard on the wall said something in Xhosa. The guard below looked up to his comrade and nodded. He then looked back at the two of us. “Askies mense.”

He went back into the fort. We got back into the car and Randall swore.

“Die baas is sleg?” I asked.

“Yes,” Randall said. “That’s basically ‘black’ for ‘white people can be mean’. You know, our history, blah blah, white people are always the boss, and treat the help like shit, etcetera. So, I suppose we can’t blame the man. Him and his family would be out here with us if he’d let us in. Which brings me to another fundamental life question – who does the gardening in Sweden?”

I rolled my eyes and didn't answer. He started the engine, and began to back away, but the guard appeared again. He was holding a small crate. Inside was some food, water and gas masks. He handed the crate to Randall through the car window.

Randall looked through the items in the crate. "Hmm, not bad..."
He placed the crate between us and reversed away from the gate.

"We have to go round," Randall said, as we wound our way back into town. "Via Seapoint, along the beach." He laughed that pained bitter laugh of his again. "The beach community has fenced themselves off the beach."

I began to wonder about him. The more I'd gotten to know him, the more damaged he seemed. Just like his city. I suppose I should have expected it. I should have known what I was getting into before I came here. I suppose it's what I get for being a 'white saviour' and a runaway. I just wanted to help.

*Do you like the way the water tastes? It's like gunfire.
You knew that it was never safe.*

Would I ever get that infernal Deftones song out my head? It was his favourite.

As we weaved out of the city centre heading towards Sea Point, his beach statement resonated unpleasantly. We travelled along Beach Road, onto Victoria, passing a series of closed communities, all cut off from the beach by barbwire fencing. The Yenas roamed the coast indiscriminately, taking dips in the ocean at their leisure.

As we neared the coast of Camps Bay, the Yenas seemed to grow in number. Randall did his best to weave around them. Eventually he opened the glove compartment and took out a pistol. He stopped the car and took pot shots at a group of Yenas congealed in the road. After a few heads had exploded, the rest disentangled themselves, and cleared the way.

When we drove on, he spoke again. "Do you know how to shoot?"

My heart jumped, and I looked at him, utterly incredulous. My mind was already throbbing from the immense thunder of the pistol, and the blood, muck and fur that had slicked the road. I shook my head.

"I packed a cricket bat for you." He winked and drove on.

Without warning a giant female Yena leapt into the road. Randall swerved the car erratically until it came to a stop. She paced around the car ponderously, sussing us out, and her eyes made my blood cold. Randall's body was dead-still, but his head moved with her bulbous steps.

"I've never seen one this big!" he hissed. "Shit."

She was about the size of a bear, and moved clumsily on all fours, with her arms stretched, and legs stunted, as if through some medieval torture rack. Claws ripped unnaturally from her fingers and toes, which were deformed into the shape of paws. Other than a thick mane running down her spine, her body was spotted with random patterns of fur and human skin, like an unhealthy mosaic. Her human breasts dangled, lifeless and green with rot. Her nose and mouth were stretched into a snout, but the skin was hairless, and human.

She nudged the car, giggled and whooped, while rocking back and forth. Hyena-men spilled onto the road and joined her, while Randall struggled to keep the car moving through the assembly. They rounded the car together, snapping at it with broken hybrid jaws.

“Reach in the back. Pass me that grenade launcher,” Randall said. He sounded agitated.

I looked into the back seat. I hadn’t been paying attention to what was in there. It was an arsenal. Petrified, I looked around the rifles, pistols, and hand weapons, for something bigger. It was sitting on the floor, and with difficulty I lifted the oversized revolver and passed it to Randall. He stopped the car, his brow was sweating, and I swore at the prospect of his composure seeming broken.

“*Ma se poes...* I’ve never seen this before. Hurry up! Get me that case in the back.”

I reached looked back into the back seat arsenal and found the case. I put it on my lap, opened it, and watched Randall load up his grenade launcher.

“Throwback apartheid-style crowd control,” he said – and for the first time, his sour humour comforted me. He took out the pistol again. Yena males were snapping at the windows, and I was bent so far in my elbow bounced against the pulsating gear stick. Randall opened the window a little, and pointed his pistol out. He started firing with insane accuracy. Some Yenas began to scatter, as their comrades fell lifeless and faceless.

The giant Yena female watched the proceedings with disdain, and as Randall killed more, her agonized howls grew louder. She lifted a paw, and I ducked behind the dashboard. The impact shook the car, and I yelped stupidly. Randall appeared unfazed. As the Yena males began to clear he threw the pistol into the back, opened the window wider, and put out his torso. I was still hunched, but watched through my elbow, as he bashed any Yena that came close. He fired the grenades, and his confidence loosened my muscles.

The giant Yena female smashed another paw on the bonnet and I ducked under the dash board again. Randall almost fell out the car. She whooped piercingly then ran off. The Yena males followed.

As they disappeared, I looked at Randall in awe as he sat back down.

“What?” he said, defensively. “Quick, put this on. It’s tear gas.”
We put on our masks in unison, and he shoved the car back into gear.
As we rode I couldn’t resist. “Quite the badass,” I said.
He ignored me. “We’re out of Bakoven. If we can make it to the 12
Apostles Fort – I’ve heard they offer escorts.”

Randall began to speed up, and again I could see kinks in his
composure. I could hear heavy breathing through his mask.

“I think we’re okay,” I said. The road was winding.

“I want to get there...”

The Nissan squealed and there was a blurred lapse in time. A muddle
of sound, vision and hearing. Something distant. Weightlessness, glass, and
plastic created a whirlwind.

Thunder came into focus. No, it was gunshots.

I was alone in the car, hanging upside down from a seat belt, blood
dripping from my hair onto the roof.

“Camilla! Camilla! You need to get the fuck out! Get up! Alle kak is
nou hier!”

I fiddled with my seat belt and felt the tip of my forehead. A huge gash
leaked. The belt wouldn’t come undone. It was a terrible cliché.

“Randall I’m stuck, the seat belt!”

I yanked at the belt, then glass spattered my face. There was a clunking
sound.

“Jissus! Fok! Maak vinnig! They’re swarming us!”

I scraped the roof of the car below me, and slashed my finger on the
knife. I reached back, cutting myself again before finding the knife’s handle.

“Caaaaamilla!!!”

I could hear his fear, footsteps, growls, so much commotion I could
not see. My ears rang from the endless gun chatter and bodies were strewn
all over the beach. Waves crashed against the jagged rocks before me. The
belt was tough, but I eventually managed. I fell awkwardly, and shifted
around the roof like an invalid.

Randall stuck his hand in. “Crawl! Nou! Vinnig man!”

I took off my mask. I’d lost count of body parts that hurt. I dragged
my clothes and flesh through the sharp plastic and glass, grimacing. The
sand was damp. It had begun to rain. When I looked up, Randall’s face
wounds were clear as day as the rain inadvertently cleansed them. The only
thing that bled clearly was his nose. It was smashed, and he looked at me
through bruised swollen sockets. I was surrounded by stench, fur blood and
sand. Yena carcasses cushioned my arms.

“Wat maak jy?” Randall yelled. “Staan! Are you jas?!”

“Am I wha-”

A Yena male stomped over me, claws digging into my skin. I screamed
while Randall went to work. Each mushy thud was felt in my bones. The

Yena yelped and collapsed on top of me, it's open skull leaking brain onto my boots. It was largely hairless – mostly knotted mouldy skin oozing muck. I felt sick. I shoved it off and vomited into the sand.

“I'm low on ammo. There's too many. I can't get the fucking grenades out.”

He was panicked, looking around rapidly at the Yenas that surrounded us.

“We need to get to those rocks. Their limbs are deformed. Makes it hard to climb. Come on. Grab the cricket bat and ammo.”

I wiped my mouth and stood. There was definitely something wrong with my ankle. I winced, and Randall grabbed me before I fell over. He put the bat in my hand and loaded up.

“We'll do it together. Welcome back to Cape Town by the way. A veritable paradise, we have beautiful mountains and sandy beaches and a rich history.”

“Hilarious,” I said.

We started forward with my left arm over his neck. It was painfully slow progress. Randall was slightly taller than me, and half dragged me, while I clutched the cricket bat in my right hand.

“Like my knobkirie?” Randall gestured to the long stick with a bloodied knob he held.

“What are they doing?” I whispered. The Yena males circled around us in small groups, laughing.

“I don't know. They're... like... hunting. The female knocked us off the road. Now she's just watching. I think they're wearing us down.”

A group of three broke away. Randall let go of me, and I wobbled, leaning onto the bat. He shot one.

“Need to save ammo. I'll take the one on the left.”

“What!?” I squealed.

Randall paid no me no attention. He readied himself. I hobbled around to face the Yena. Lifted the cricket bat, forcing my shaking muscles not to tense. I shifted my weight onto my good leg. Rain poured, the wind howled, and the waves crashed. Cold...it was so cold.

I swung down and looked away. The Yena yelped like a pup and fell flat-faced into the sand. It moaned and cried, flopping about in my peripheral vision.

“Randall?” I still couldn't look down. *I'm not a murderer?*

“I'm busy!” More Yena's had charged him, and he dissected them with his 'knobkirie'.

“It's still moving!”

“So? Smack it in its poes!”

“But I'm not...I mean I don't...it looks so human!”

“Human? Are you jas? Smack it in its poes! Do you want to die?”

Something snapped. All his joking. All his snarky nonchalant answers. It reminded me of someone.

I just wanted to help! All I wanted to do was fucking help someone, anyone but myself. I didn't ask for this. My whole family laughed. My boyfriend laughed in his ignorance to how other people live. How could I come from the least socially conscious, most bigoted family in all of fucking Sweden?

I cried and swung. The heaviness of the blow hurt my hands. The Yena stopped moving. I didn't look down. Randall grabbed me.

"See, I knew you could do it. The more human they look, the weaker they are! Let's go."

I said nothing. Just wiped my tears and steeled myself.

He dragged me along to the rocks, and I clutched my bloodied cricket bat. As we started climbing the slimy rocks another group of Yena males broke away. Randall shoved me up the rocks painfully. My ankle throbbled and the jagged rocks scraped my skin. I could barely see through the bloody hair in my face. Randall began to climb up to reach me. He began kicking Yenas in the face. I joined him as he struggled up, breaking paws, hands, nails and claws against the rocks. Once Randall was up, I grabbed onto him. My tight boots crushed my swollen ankle.

"Now what?" I asked.

"No idea."

Waves crashed beside, spraying fresh sea water, as the Yenas assembled below us. Those with mostly human arms attempted to claw their way up. The giant female Hyena calmly walked through the crowd. She reached up on her hindlegs and propped herself against the rocks.

Her height was just short of us.

Male Yena's started to climb her.

She looked directly at us with a hybrid smile, making a sound that bordered on a human witch's cackle.

Randall slumped next to me and I followed suit.

Was this the end?

"They chewed my leg on the way up. It's fucked."

I dragged him closer to the ledge and readied my cricket bat.

Randall reloaded his rifle and pistol. "I know I'm not the easiest person to deal with, but it was good to meet you," Randall said. "And I know I gave you shit for being a white saviour and all that but I'm glad you came...I needed the company and I didn't even know it." He breathed heavily through the mouth, wiping blood that dripped from his nose. His eyes were bloodshot. I couldn't tell from what.

"I left her. I left them all to die. I've got nobody," he said. I thought I saw a tear roll down his face but it was hard to tell in the rain.

"Don't worry – neither do I."

The rocks shook, a ball of flame rose from below us, and the Yena's laughter became less hysterical. They began to scatter.

"Grenades?" Randall whispered.

A giant 4x4 appeared on the beach.

"Please remain calm. This is Western Cape Liberty and Security. Allow us to clear the Yenas."

A man in army fatigues and a gas mask stepped out of the 4x4 and pointed a flamethrower at the cluster of Yenas.

I looked at Randall. He was still sullen. "Look like you need a hug?"

He smirked with blood stained teeth.

Below us, the remaining Yenas began to burn.

The smell of burning flesh and hair assaulted us, as did their wild, pained screams. The closer to death they came, the more unnervingly human the howls. Watching the carnage from above, I bit my lip at the prospect that there was no cure yet. No humane solution. No way to reverse the transformations.

Was extermination the only way? Look at the toll it had taken on Randall. How many minds and lives lost?

I had even killed one of them with my own hands.

I started to shake in the wet, with more howls ripping my mind apart.

There must still be something human in there?

"Don't think about it," Randall said suddenly. *How long had I been lost in thought?* "It's best not to think about it," he repeated.

"You see bru! I told you! How many times did I say? I know that chick. I'd seen that binnet. I knew her bra! I was paying attention. You never pay attention bru. That's why--"

"Please man! You guessed. You didn't know shit. You never know shit. You just thought she was hot!"

Zakhile and Jonno, heir to the WCLS throne, had argued non-stop since we'd arrived in Hout Bay. Jonno was convinced that he'd seen my face on a poster my future colleagues had put out to all the private military companies. He was sure his 'positive vibes' had lead them to finding Randall and myself cornered on the beach. They had both hit on me endlessly since the rescue, and despite Zakhile being adopted, it was almost impossible to tell the two muscular monstrosities apart.

"I wish my family could see this," Randall said.

We were sitting on perfect white sand, watching the ocean, wrapped in our assorted bandages.

“Here we are on a beach, and people are dying out there.” He’d changed the more time we spent together. Less jokes, more intense. He was warming up to me, his guard slowly dropping.

“Sho...you’re so negative bru,” Jonno said.

“No, he’s realistic Jonno, realistic. Something you’d know nothing about.”

“Are you trying to start something Zaks? You know I’ll fuck you up boet.”

“You couldn’t fuck-up a squirrel china. I lift more than you. I’ll snap your chicken legs.”

The brothers started wrestling. Dr. Pillay walked past shaking his head.

“Glad to see you two are healing,” Dr. Pillay said. “Again, sorry for the screw-up Camilla, but you seem to have found your way.”

He looked at Randall. “I understand you don’t have a background in medicine. That’s perfectly fine. We’re severely undermanned and underfunded here.”

Dr. Pillay glanced painfully at the wrestling brothers. “We recently struck deal with Mr. van der Berg of Western Cape Liberty and Security. He’s offered to provide funds and security. As a part of a recent research document we’ve published, vilifying the Democratic Alliance for supporting security village initiatives over our proposed ‘Take Back The Flats’ initiative. Mr. van Der Berg has offered up private troops for the campaign. He’s using us to play politics but we are glad for any help we can get.

“Our research so far indicates that the disease is a bizarre rabies mutation. Rodents, notably rats seem to be the urban carriers, and we assume it was passed from Hyenas. We’re still piecing that part together. Of course the spread has nothing to do with race. It has everything to do with unacceptable poverty levels, lack of access to sanitation, health care, and the usual bullshit the poor have to endure. Initial symptoms are flu-like and there’s about a 10-day treatment window before people start turning. Many of the poor in the townships were the first to be infected and of those with health care access, many didn’t bother to get treated. Why waste your bread money on a flu? Now the mutation has worsened.

“So what do we do now? How can I help?” I asked, trembling.

“Not many people care about our research yet. But with the WCLS’s help and contacts in the government, we might be able to make some headway. I don’t know if we’ll ever find a cure, but we have to try. Maybe even the DA will get behind us eventually once they know the facts. I just hope we don’t have to kill all the infected. Anyway, I think that’s about it. Welcome aboard.” Dr. Pillay shook my hand, and walked off.

I looked to Randall. “What’ll you do now?”

Zakhile looked up from his tussle. “That bad motherfucker right there is hired! WCLS needs people like you, until all this kak is sorted!”

“I’m considering it. I don’t know if I have it in me anymore. But maybe I can show them Dr. Pillay’s research, convince what’s left of my family that working with you guys is the right thing.”

“And your girlfriend, you have to convince her too right?” I asked.

He shrugged. “That’s over. She’s ‘born again’ in the cult. In the ‘Vloek Vannie Nommer’. Plus I have my own personal ‘white saviour’ now.”

I flicked his healing nose and he squealed nasally.

“Ohhh! Jonno, this guy’s smooth hey. I’m pulling out of the bet off boet.”

UDU

By

Damilare Falowo

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“Move your feet, prostitute!”

Akweke stood still, tears running down her cheeks. The child in her arms shuddered and cooed in his sleep and the forest before her stood black and still as the bottom of a burnt clay pot. The men behind her were aflame with anger and deep disgust. They screamed and spat at her to walk into the dead blackness. She stood still.

*Dry papery palms grab her breasts in the dark.
“Papa, what are you doing?!”*

Thick snakes of fear writhed in her stomach and denied her access to her limbs. Tales flashed through her mind; of people who had run mad just from standing too close to Obioji, of the screams that soared across the skies at midnight, of loose women driven into the darkness by the wet flower between their thighs.

She shuddered along with her three day old baby who was wrapped in most of her own clothing; she had left herself a tiny wrapper to preserve what was left of her dignity. Pale, unwashed skin the color of ripe egusi gleamed in the dusky evening light. She could feel two of the three men behind her back lick their lips lasciviously at the sight of her firm breasts.

She could also feel the cold stare of the dibia, Anyabali; the one whose words could make her to go into the dark. She turned around and gazed into his soulless black eyes, holding on tighter to her child.

“Please.”

His face remained expressionless beneath the slashes of white war paint and palm oil, the bull skull atop his head seemed to mock her with its protruding dentition. Wrinkled and bent like the proverbial crayfish at ninety-nine years of age, Anyabali's glare was as potent as a snake bite. His eyes roved from the top of her head, crowned with four large knots of hair, down to her scratched and bleeding feet.

"Throw the child."

One of the large men flanking the dibia sprang into motion before Akweke could put context into his words.

Her child was grabbed from her arms and flung into the forest.

Her scream shredded the air with its pain.

Her shocked mind tried to choose between crumbling to the floor in sobs and running into the dark towards her son, but the decision was made for her already. She felt rough hands lift her and push her through the veil, into the forest.

He thrusts into her forcefully.

Pain blossoms between her thighs.

She screams.

The darkness was blinding and deafening.

There were no crickets in Obioji, nothing dared to live here in the stale, dead air. Akweke lay in the soft earth of the forest, fear and panic attempting to drive her brain to madness.

Through the deafening silence came the soft cry of a baby; rising and falling gently, interrupted by the occasional hitch of breath. She rose to her feet, bruised breasts tingling in the cold forest air. Walking with unsteady feet and blind eyes, she staggered forward. The baby was still crying softly, when another cry began behind her.

Akweke stopped.

Four months later, her belly is distended with an abomination.

The Elders ask questions she can't answer.

"Tell us who the father of your child is or we will throw you into The Darkness"

She clutches her belly and stares into nothing.

Her calm shattered and she stood still, the cries of both babies ringing through the unnaturally still air, her heart beat pulsed through her head making her eyes water. As both wails rose in volume, her skin began to crawl. She took a deep breath and stepped forward.

A third cry began.

This one was hysterical, not soft and lazy like the other two, she knew that cry.

Her son.

All her defenses crumbled.

She ran towards the crying child, feet sticking repeatedly in the soggy earth. She fell three steps into her run and tumbled, brushing her side hard against a tree in her blindness and falling *into* the ground.

The head of the midwife is between her thighs as she pushes.

Sweat rolls off her body in small rivers.

The child is coming.

The dibia stands right in front of her, illuminated by flickering palm oil flames, waiting to take her away.

Akweke lay still in the pit, defeated.

The cries had stopped.

She stared up, where the sky was meant be and tears flowed down her cheeks, her cries caught in her throat. When she felt something furry brush against her leg, she shot up into a sitting position and the smell hit her.

The stench of rotten flesh.

It crawled up her nose and filled her belly.

Akweke retched, her empty belly convulsing with agonizing fury. She was sitting in what seemed to be large pieces of raw meat, wet and clammy against her back. She shot to her feet with a yelp. Her eyes had finally adjusted to the light and she saw the babies.

All dead.

All rotting.

Eyes chewed out by the rats that slinked through the holes in their chests and entered mouths.

The stench moved again.

All thought fled from her mind and she let out a series of lung-bursting screams. She was shut up when her feet slipped out from beneath her and she fell deeper into the pit. Bones poked at her bare back and an unknown fluid shot into her left eye. Maggots crawled against the back of

her legs, and across her stomach and she could feel them in her scalp and between her thighs. She made one last attempt to rise out of the shallow grave when they *all* started crying.

*She hears her child cry and then he is brought to her.
Tears escape her eyes.
He is beautiful and he is hers.
The perfect taboo.*

The sound made her chest clench and more tears fell from her eyes.
Their cry rose through the darkness.
The red sound of fear.

As she struggled to find her footing within the bones and flesh and earth, a bulb of light rose from the mouth of an eyeless child beneath her feet. It hovered in front of her eyes, bouncing silkily, softly and then it suddenly flung itself into Akweke's chest.

The cold prevented her from screaming.

She gasped one hand on the edge of the pit and the other above her heart. She could feel it wriggle its way up her chest.

"Please." She whispered for the second time that day. And for the second time, no one listened.

The ninety nine ghost babies rose out of their decaying bodies; shimmering balls of cold light. They all hovered around Akweke lighting her yellow skin with the brightness of the vengeful dead.

Her wrapper was gone and she stood naked as the day she was born, covered in scars and dry blood. She was still retching as the first light made its way up to her head, when it got there she let out a silent scream as the icy hand of Death gripped her soul.

The other ghosts surged forward, sinking beneath her skin, taking her body as their home and chasing her consciousness to exile.

Anyabali sat in the total darkness of his round hut. Tendrils of smoke from the freshly-blown out lamp still hung in the air. He could smell them.

Ani was also around; the metallic stink of blood that always accompanied her hung thick in the air. He was as tense as the air that surrounded him, but he waited patiently. He had done everything he was asked after all; sent out all the masked men to rape all those unsuspecting

young women, blaming the neighboring villages for the crime. He had spoken for Ani that the women should be sent into Obioji, had the babies thrown specifically into a pit filled with Ani's essence, all one hundred of them.

He had even performed the final taboo.

He sat, ready to become immortal as Ani had promised.

A hundred children for an eternity amongst men.

He waited. And waited... until Ani finally slammed into him, filling his senses. Lightning crackled across his skin as hot blood surged into him from beyond the realms of men.

Hair sprouted on his head in thick clumps. His back cracked audibly and he straightened. His milky vision opened up and he saw her as he crested and found permanent youth. He stood to his feet, full of youth and power.

Akweke was glowing like she had been lit from within by moonlight, her eyes were dark caverns.

"You are not Ani," he muttered, confused.

Akweke stared at him with tangible malice. He trembled, despite his new power. He had never felt anything like this before.

She opened her mouth and the air shuddered with the weight of them.

"Spineless murderer."

Ani fled the dibia's body faster than the Orimili river.

Akweke lifted her hand and all of his youth came flying out of his body and into her palm in wispy red streams.

He screamed.

His back bent and his skin turned dryer than ash. He fell to his knees as pure fear shot through his being. He looked up to plead with this new creature that had stolen immortality from him and chased away a spirit older than the village but she opened her mouth wide before he could utter a word.

The wail of a hundred newborns filled the hut and flowed into his brain like a million fire ants, gnawing at his mind and stinging his consciousness and cutting open his very soul with red hot teeth.

He screamed, and screamed, and screamed as spittle and blood poured from his mouth and nostrils. The crying suddenly stopped and he felt himself levitate into the air. His red cloth toga fell off and he was as naked as his day of birth.

He looked at her through cloudy eyes and pounding head. She kept glowing. A pulsing light that chilled his bones. Then all of a sudden, the ghost babies came out of her and began to tear him apart.

They ran across his skin like fluorescent mice, ripping it apart with dead teeth. They broke his arms and ate his eyes, they entered his mouth and burst forth from his belly, spraying the still Akweke with blood.

And through it all he screamed as he felt every bit of flesh rip and tear.
When he died they let his remains fall to the ground with a wet thunk.
Swimming through the air, they returned into their vessel.
All but one.
Her own.
She grabbed him from the air, cradled him to her breasts and named
him.
“Nzoputa.”
A child born of a dibia’s seed.
The dibia, her father.
Then she walked back into the Darkness where she still roams.
A vessel for lost souls.
An *udu*.

BIOGRAPHIES

Chioma Odukwe is a reader first, and a writer second. She is currently based in Scotland where she fights monsters from the lochs to stay alive. Her stories have appeared in the *These Words Expose Us* anthology and several other literary platforms. She runs a literary blog: phantompages.wordpress.com and she is currently the series creator for TheNakedConvos' Halloween series *Lights Out*. She is still working on her collection of short stories and novellas and hopes to one day go on a vacation so she can finish them soon, in solitude.

Nerine Dorman is a Cape Town-based creative, who specialises in design, editing and writing. She has been involved in the media industry for more than a decade, with a background in magazine and newspaper publishing, commercial fiction, independent filmmaking, print production management and advertising. Her short fiction has appeared in anthologies published by Tor Books, Apex Publications, Fox Spirit and Immanion Press, among others, and she even has a few novels to her name. In addition, she is the curator of the South African HorrorFest's annual short story competition, anthology, and literary event - *Bloody Parchment* - and is a founder member of Skolion, a SFF authors' co-operative. She can be found lurking on Twitter @nerinedorman.

Suyi Davies Okungbowa writes crime and speculative fiction from Lagos, Nigeria. His fiction has been published or is forthcoming in *Lightspeed Magazine*, *Mothership Zeta*, *Omenana*, *Jungle Jim* and other places. He is an alumnus of the Gotham Writers Workshop in NYC. In June 2016, he was crowned winner of TheNakedConvos' *The Writer* competition, a Pan-African writing contest. When he's not writing, Suyi works as a Visual Designer. In-between, he plays piano, guitar, FIFA, and searches for spaces to fit new bookshelves.

Sawaleh's identity remains unknown. It is believed to have been a writing collective of between 5 and 15 members that published a series of (mostly bizarre, experimental and macabre) stories on the Sawaleh blog: sawaleh.wordpress.com between 2011 and 2012. They have been silent since and only communicate with us every Halloween, to say hello, or occasionally, to give us a story.

Raymond Elenwoke is a writer who currently resides in Port Harcourt, Nigeria, working (moonlighting) as an auditor and a financial consultant. He is a Horror/Thriller/Sci-Fi/Speculative Fiction storyteller. His work has featured in previous editions of the *Lights Out* series - *Lights Out: Monsters* and *Lights Out: Twisted Fairytales*. He tweets with the handle @lewoke, he is on Facebook too, with his name (at least he thinks so). He loves to listen to Heavy Metal, and he thinks you should too.

Ezeiyoke Chukwunonso is a charter member of the African Speculative Fiction Society (ASFA) and an MA graduate of Creative Writing, Swansea University Wales. A collection of his stories, *The Haunted Grave and Other Stories* has been published by Parallel Universe Publications. His short stories have appeared in anthologies such as *Emanations: Foray into Forever*, *Future Lovecraft*, *Lost Tales from the Mountain: Halloween Anthology Vol. II*, the *African Roar Anthology* and many other places. He has been short listed for the IdeasTap Inspires: Writers' Centre Norwich Writing competition, the Ghana Poetry Prize, and the Quickfox Poetry Competition.

Edwin Okolo writes to explore concepts that he seeks to understand but cannot directly experience because of gender and genetics. He used to run the experimental fiction column *The Alchemist's Corner* and created the YA series *Seams* at TheNakedConvos and serves as a fiction editor at StoriesNG. He has written for *TheLoneycrowd*, *Sable Lit Mag*, *Omenana* and *The Kalabari Review* and was longlisted for the Short Story Day Africa Fiction Prize. He is obsessed with children, cats and Paternak, exactly in that order.

Nuzo Onoh has been described as “The Queen of African Horror” and her books have introduced African Horror to the international stage. Nuzo’s works have been described as “deeply disturbing”, “spine-chilling”, “gripping” and “haunting.” Nuzo hopes that soon, African Horror will be as recognized and enjoyed as other regional horror subgenres, such as Japanese, Korean and Scandinavian horror.

A British writer of African descent, Nuzo was born in Enugu, the Eastern part of Nigeria, formerly known as The Republic of Biafra. She lived through the civil war between Nigeria and Biafra as a child refugee, an experience that left a strong impact on her and has influenced some of her writing. She attended Queen’s School, Enugu before proceeding to England and St Andrew’s Tutorial College, Cambridge, from where she obtained her A levels. Nuzo holds both a Law degree and a Master’s degree in Writing from The University of Warwick, England.

Nuzo is the author of *The Reluctant Dead* (published 28th June, 2014) a collection of ghost stories, *Unhallowed Graves* (published 28th June, 2015) a

novella collection and *The Sleepless* (published 28th June, 2016), a novel of haunting and vengeance from beyond the grave. Nuzo has made 28th June her annual publishing date so her fans know when to look out for another African Horror chiller from her writing desk.

Nuzo has two daughters, Candice and Jija, plus her cat, Tinkerbelle, who she describes as totally bonkers. She lives in Coventry, from where she runs her own publishing company, Canaan-Star Publishing, which publishes authors from around the globe. A keen musician, Nuzo plays both the Piano and the box guitar and enjoys recording demos of her songs. She's also a strong believer in The Law of Attraction and the philosophy of mind over matter. Visit www.nuzoonoh.com

Mandisi Nkomo Mandisi is a writer, drummer, composer and producer. He currently resides in Cape Town, South Africa, and spends most of his time performing with his bands, *Tape Hiss* and *Sparkle*, and *Oh, Cruel Fate* or, writing and performing his solo material, under his pseudonyms, The Dark Cow and The Mad Drummer. While Mandisi is more focused on his music career of late, he still makes time to write. His fiction has been published in the likes of *AfroSF: Science Fiction by African Writers*, and *Omenana*. He is also a proud charter member of the African Speculative Fiction Society. For updates and information on Mandisi's writing and musical endeavors, follow him on twitter and instagram: Twitter [@mandisinkomo](https://twitter.com/mandisinkomo) and Instagram: [@mandisithepolymath](https://www.instagram.com/mandisithepolymath).

Dare Segun Falowo is a writer of the Nigerian Weird and an alumnus of the Farafina Creative Writing Workshop. His stories have featured in *Saraba*, *BrittlePaper*, and previous editions of the *Lights Out* series – *Lights Out: First Blood*, *Lights Out: Nightmare Theatre*, *Lights Out: Monsters* and *Lights Out: Twisted Fairytales*. He has some old tales at dragonsinlagos.wordpress.com. He tweets [@owlinrelief](https://twitter.com/owlinrelief).

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Wole Talabi is a full-time engineer, part-time writer and some-time editor with a fondness for science fiction and fantasy. His stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Lightspeed Magazine*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Terraform*, *the Imagine Africa 500 Anthology*, *Futuristica Vol. 1*, *Omenana*, *Liquid Imagination*, *The Kalahari Review*, and several other places. He is the consulting fiction editor for TheNakedConvos (TNC). He edited the anthology *These Words Expose Us* and co-wrote the play *Color Me Man*. He currently lives and works in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

ABOUT THENAKEDCONVOS

TheNakedConvos (TNC) is an acclaimed and award-winning interactive community designed to create safe spaces where young Nigerians engage in open and honest conversations about life, love, relationships, community and society driven by opinion pieces and creative fiction. TNC was created and is run by Wale Adetula. TNC is the winner of two Black Weblog Awards and two Nigerian Blog Awards. Join the conversation.

Visit the TNC website: www.thenakedconvos.com

For the last 5 years, TheNakedConvos (TNC) has celebrated Halloween every October with Lights Out, an annual collection of horror stories published on their award-winning online platform.

To celebrate its sixth year, The Lights Out series expands into a full-fledged, continent-wide anthology, digging deep to find some of the best buried African horror fiction. This year, Lights Out issues a special edition of 10 horror stories – some original, some re-issued, all excellent – by some of the best African writers working today. These stories are set in Africa, feature African characters and explore African fears through the horror genre.

This is: Lights Out: Resurrection
They have arisen.
The things we buried, the ones we thought we would never see again.
But they are not what they used to be.
And neither are we.

Lights Out: Resurrection is an anthology that explores what happens when that which we thought dead returns seeking vengeance, when sins we thought hidden resurface to haunt, when prejudices we thought forgotten return to us, brandishing teeth.

Featuring spectacular African authors from the horror, dark fantasy, speculative fiction, and thriller genres, Lights Out: Resurrection showcases excellent contemporary African horror fiction.

Prepare yourself for 10 terror-inducing tales.

