

## ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: THE MOON CHASER  
Chika Onyenezi, Masters of Fine Arts, 2022

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The Moon Chaser is a testament of what it means to live on the margin, to function outside of the norms and line created by the society, and also somehow, miraculously find grace within the confines of the society. John Munaonyso, is a man who is at odds with almost everything around him, and sometimes finds grace in little things like friendship, thinking, and walking. The novel opens up with a walk through the city of Owerri, as a form of contemplation/judgment of the society in which he exists, and the world at large. Our existence is obscene, love is the only redemption, even though sometimes its nature is at odd with the fundamental situation of our lives. John knows this. He fights through it every day; in living with his girlfriend Annie, in loving his son Obiarika, in his surroundings, in confronting neighborhood gangster, The Pharell, and being friends with Prof. The Moon Chaser is a portrait of a city, a man's life, and a documentation of music.

THE MOON CHASER

by

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## **Dedication Page**

To those on the margin, have faith, there is light.

## **Acknowledgment**

Thank you, Professor Wandeka Gayle, Professor Rion Scott, and Professor Chad Infante, thank you for seeing me through.

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## **Artistic Statement**

Nothing about writing came naturally to me, and most formalities related to it, I learned with difficulty, but storytelling is something I found myself interested in at early age, especially while listening to the folks around me tell stories. I knew it was mine and from that early age, I knew that I wanted to tell stories about the human spirit found in unlikely places – in desolate spaces. My goal is to bring a new aesthetic to the art, one that is strong enough to carry the weight of our collective experiences, and for the world to deal with me on my own terms – in my perfections and imperfections. The human spirit, I learned cannot be taught, bought or sold, it can only be expressed, and so therefore a writer can never receive his payment in gold, he must strive for something more, a kind of spiritual fulfillment when the work is done.

In academic spaces or spaces that often claim to teach writing/storytelling, one often finds them lacking the human spirit and filled with violence. I write about violence in spaces like these. I may not be able to speak for all the programs, but this is a testament to my experience here. And even though I am writing this to one of those spaces, I must speak my truth sincerely – there is nothing worth writing apart from the strength of the human spirit, how much it can endure, and how deep it runs. I write for the folks that live on the margin. I write for those whose voice has been denied or muted by the society and intellectual spaces. In making art and creating characters, I speak for no one, and when my characters can't speak for themselves, then I have no stock in art. Art is communal. Art is an expression.

I owe it to my father, I owe it to my brothers, uncles, sisters. I owe it to the street, to the men that kept coming and going. I owe it to Darlington, and to Cuba—men who ruled the streets, and yet whenever they told stories, nothing but kindness and the strength of human spirit came out of it. I owe it to my grandfather, who taught me that my relationship to the world must be subject to subject and not the false consciousness of subject to object. The world destroys what it objectifies, and this kind of teaching never

fails me. I owe it to the wind, I owe it to the rivers that own me, I owe it to whatever moves and things that standstill. I owe it to my spirit. I owe it to the strength of the human spirit.



## Chapter One

It all began on a day I couldn't hold it inside any longer. I was coming back from a market where I priced nothing, bought nothing, and said nothing to nobody. I felt like everything in my head was about to creep out and spill on the hot sand. I walked down the dusty streets of Owerri, aimlessly. My stomach churned and it was painful. I bent down for a while until I felt better and began walking again. The pain in my stomach kept coming back. The last doctor I visited diagnosed me with a mild ulcer. He said that all I needed to do was eat healthily, avoid hot and spicy food, and chew antacid whenever the pain came back. The air was stiff and smelled like burnt ash. The grasses were tall and green and danced towards the direction of the wind. The sky was blue with patches of grey-white dropped around it. Such beauty. I swear, such beauty. I kept on walking. Down the road, a house came into view. It was a blue house that looked like a hospital. I hated visiting hospitals; the smell made me feel like vomiting.

It was so hot that I felt as if the devil was poking me with a hot fork. Poor devil, poor me – in a damned fire that burned us both. My throat was dry, and I was thirsty. I had no money on me to buy a sachet of water. I had no car, no bicycle. The transport fare was too expensive. The roads were deathtraps. Air transport wasn't any better; planes crashed for no reason. Buses packed humans like bundles of wood. The rich continued to grow richer, and the poor sunk in the abyss of hopelessness. It was all happening here, everything that was wrong about this existence thing. Here, a snake once swallowed another snake. Call it a metaphor, call it evolution, but I knew things weren't alright with the world, and it was eating me up. Everyone I encountered this week had been aggressive and hungry and complained about the sun. Behind gated compounds, dogs barked endlessly like their masters.

Soon, the sun walked into a dark cloud and it seemed as if the Holy Spirit passed over the city. There was calm. No sound. Only an eerie feeling that seemed to touch my skin remained. The air chilled for a moment. That tiny moment of peace that never lasts. The sound of birds and crickets leaped out of nowhere and crept on me like predator chasing a prey. I startled and called myself back to consciousness. For a moment I thought I had lost it. Like, go crazy. I wanted to scream at the top of my voice. I wanted to scream into the universe. I wanted to scream at everything that belittled my soul – my job, my family, my friends, and this earth.

For a moment, I remembered it all; why I was feeling this way. I was angry with everything that had ever been me. Annie. She sat at the back of my head. Annie. I was angry that Annie was angry. Well, we lived together. It wasn't like I wanted to get married or something, it just happened that we had sex once and she got pregnant. I was never in love with her. Just once, I swear. One afternoon, she packed into my house without telling me. She moved in with me when her belly was big. She arrived with two large trunks and never left.

Well, it was tradition, so I had no option than to live with her. I wasn't even sure if the child was mine until he was born. The day he was born, I arrived at the hospital early. I watched him through the windows. There he was. He twisted his smooth body and cried. No teeth. Only red gum, and red tongue. There was something soft about him that made all the bitterness in my heart melt away. When I carried him in my arms, I saw hope. I saw a reason to live on. His eyes, watery and clear – my image fitted right there, in that black pupil, illuminating the man that I was: frail and weak. He was happy. Just happy. He smiled. A big smile. I gently lifted him up, as if to name him. I let him down and touched his curly hair. The women sang and sang until their voices cracked. They rubbed talcum powder on their faces to welcome the newest baby on earth. That was the first time I held Annie in my arms since after the sex that led to the pregnancy. Her big

body sagged into my miniature frame. I felt every inch of her; her optimism, her dreams, her past, present, and future. I swear, tears of joy dripped from my eyes. At that instant, I remembered that I was afraid of what it was to be. Yet, I was optimistic that the future held something for me, or us.

I kept on walking towards a pile of dead logs and fancy oak trees. The statue of Alvan Ikoku came in view. A flock of pigeons perched on it and pecked the cemented effigy endlessly. Out of the dark clouds, a glint of sunlight struck a shiny bronze label mounted on the statue, and it reflected in my eyes. For some reason, it called me from memory and reminded me that I was there, in the present, still walking.

My mind drifted again. I remembered my mother who was back in the village, ailing, waiting for me to help her out from my meager salary, and it saddened me. I walked past a newspaper stand. An old man sat on a stone chewing tobacco and sweating like everyone else. I stopped and glanced at the news headlines. They were all depressing.

“Herdsman Invaded...” “Fulani herdsman killed...”.

I walked away and crossed a flyover and made my way downwards towards the direction of the wind. The news headlines kept flashing in my head. No one knew what to expect, sleep, or wake up to. Anarchy perched in the distant future, mocking us all, waiting to unleash armageddon on us. The Chad basin was drying up, and the northerners and their cattle were already invading the greens of East. We seemed more like farts, walking around, embracing the decaying stench of our civilization, and readying ourselves for a dusty future. I swear, I once held a revolver loaded in one chamber to my head and clicked it twice. Nothing happened. On the second click, I broke down and started crying. I hated these streets of nightly terror and occult boys marauding the

fucking peace out of my nights. Kidnappers snatching people in daylight, and bodies turning up at corners and bents.

I remembered when the news of men departing for Mars hit in the year two thousand, I applied for it. I was one of the first persons to sign up for the Mars One Project. I waited and waited for my name to be shortlisted, but it never happened. I checked my email every day hoping that someone with some sense would just take me the fuck out of this earth. A new day on Mars might fix it all. A new day on Mars might be a new beginning away from this drama that has consumed my existence. When the list came out, my name wasn't on it. The lucky ones made a podcast and posted it on the website. How excited they were to be leaving us behind. They talked about the joy of starting afresh and my God, how curious they were. I watched it and I was filled both rage and longing. I wanted it. I wanted what they had. I wanted an unpredictable future like theirs. I read everything I could lay my hand on about surviving on Mars. I bought a second-hand book, *Everything about Mars*, at Douglas Road, by the post office, right under the Mango tree. I learned that Mars was nicknamed the Red Planet. I read that it was the only planet that seemed livable, even though they doubted if it was livable; the swelling gas atmospheric feeling, the loss of body mass, no damn oxygen in that place. On Mars, a year is approximately six hundred and eighty-seven earth days. A year seemed like an eternity out there, but maybe, life will be worth living. Maybe, one day we would be able to grow bacteria there to support plants, and maybe life. Man had always tolled the path of impossibilities, and this wasn't going to be last. The possibilities of science were evident around me and I loved it. I felt it, every day. In moving cars, machines, and unlimited downloadable data.

Here I was, looking at the city I was native to. A city that swallowed my being, my dream, and my sanity. I walked towards Works Road, right off Orlu Road. Untarred. Lonely. The

December wind brought a lot of dust from the Sahara Desert and it was all over my face. I wiped my face with the back of my hand.

Three years ago, a man was kidnapped here, by the scrubs of overgrown elephant grass, with cocoyam plants scattered around it. Four years ago, a body was found in the uncompleted building in front of me. The killers mutilated the body; eyes, breasts, and vagina were gone. The ritualists took it, believing it would yield money for them. I swear, people were ignorant. I swear, people irritated me with stupid beliefs. I hated superstitions, make-believe. I hated religion.

The uncompleted building was still the same since then, and whenever I walked past it, I felt like something was watching me from the inside. My shoes were beginning to hurt, my arms flapped weakly as I trudged along the road. I got to a waste dump site and slowed down. Everything smelled like death around here. I saw something that caught my eyes. It looked like a small television. A few paces away, I watched a bald vulture drag a decaying intestine with its beak as if it was pasta. I lifted the dirt and touched the device, it looked like a receiver radio.

“I can do a lot with this,” I said to myself.

I lifted it out of the debris and walked away with it.

When I got to Amakohia, it started drizzling. Soon, the rain was pouring down heavily. My house was a two-story building on a lazy street. Even the sight of it weighed on my conscience. I walked under the rain and thunder and the only thing I was thinking of was the song, *let it be*, by the Beatles. For some strange reasons, my emotions lightened. I felt like I could smile again at everyone that I walked past.

My house was a blue building with six flats. The house was probably as old as the country. I presumed it was built in the '60s during independence. The roofs leaked during the rainy season,

and the painted wall peeled in the dry season. We were at odds with all seasons, and the landlord didn't care about repairs in any season, so we lived on.

There was a barbershop right beside my house. The barbershop was the center of all gossip. It was where those starry eyes observed all the women on the street and counted those they have fucked, or wanted to fuck, or didn't want to fuck. I knew this because they talked about it whenever I visited for a haircut. I knew that they talked about me and Annie too. Three ugly barbers, as ugly as the vultures that were staring at me a few minutes ago. One of the barbers, Sammy, looked at me as if I was an idiot and waved. I waved back and kept walking towards my apartment building. Sammy was the ugliest of them all. His smile made me laugh, and his laugh made me hit the floor laughing harder. I had never met a man uglier than him; fair skin, clean shave, short, and with a face like a crumpled paper.

When I got home, I dusted the machine and kept it on my balcony. I thought about what Annie would say when she sees me with another junk. She hated all the junks I packed here; wires, tools, and broken machines. Lucky for me she wasn't home to see me bring in another junk; she would have reminded me how fucked-up I was. I turned the machine upside down, and read the inscription on it. It was a vintage HAM, long-range radio. In my head, I saw possibilities; if I could get it to work, maybe I could talk to the International Space Center with it. On the International Space Station Center website, it said that it would be overhead my little town a few months from now. And also, that I had a window of about sixty minutes or so before it disappears, depending on the range of my radio. With this machine, I could join amateur radio operators around the world and talk to men in space.

Honestly, I couldn't tell if this was going to work, but it gave me something to live for and work towards. That was something hard for Annie to understand; that life wasn't just about how

much money or wealth one could make. That the quality of life was in little things we can't touch, like love and all that. Well, not just love. Hope too. Dreams too. I wouldn't lie that I've known Annie all my life. I wouldn't lie that we've sat in a restaurant and had a healthy conversation, but she told me a few things about herself. Her days growing up on the rough side of Mbaise, and like me, she felt a certain alienation in her secondary school and was made fun of by her fellow students for being chubby. But unlike me, she became a bully of a sort and walloped all those kids that made fun of her ripped pinafore and old slippers. And each time she told me these stories, there was a smile on her face. The same smile that first attracted me to her. The same smile that simmered into my drunken mood and disoriented my mind. That smile was first my first blind spot.

The face of my son graced my heart as I dissolved into nothing. In a society enmeshed in chaos, I wondered what the future will be like for my lovely son, Obiarika. Will he see a new Nigeria? A new him? A new society and a different thinking pattern? I laughed at myself because I knew the answer, and that was why I thought ending it all might as well seem dignified for me. Obiarika would join me in Obiarika's star when he dies. We would together dine with our ancestors immemorial and dance to endless cosmic music and sounds of flute. Like my Grandfather said, we become stars when we die. First, we must journey through the river that owns us until the water meets the sky, then we would become stars and shine forever. The river that owned me was Njaba, but whenever I stood before Nwaorie, I felt like she owned me too. I was born close to Nwaorie River. In the end, a river owns a man, and the river takes him to eternity. One must journey through a river. Ah, thoughts brandished me and squeezed me into the devil's box, and I had no other choice than to think.

This device and the thoughts of another world were a reason to trudge on. Finely. I wasn't just a mass of skin or culture. I was a soul, a being, a philosophy, a record of amazing DNA from

the beginning of time, from cosmic specks of dust rolling into the earth. I was part of this eternal universe and capable of everything great, and greater. I was a voice, I was a beginning, I was the sounds of all the rivers that run through me. I was me.

No, I wasn't a writer or a thinker or anything like that. I was just a man thinking differently in a place that has alienated him. I was just a man that spends his evenings drinking with his friend, my good man, Prof, whom for whatever sake should be transported with a time machine into the sixties. He belonged there, everything about him – love, fashion, fantasies, music, and his way of speaking.

I poured myself some red wine, sat on my balcony and drank. The city view bowed before me. Owerri, the city that trapped my imagination. Owerri, a dull city that resembled a man on psychedelics all the time, moronic most of the time, and today was no different.

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**My name is John Munaonyeso, I was twenty-nine years old when the New Year dawned on us,** and this is my life. My last name literarily translates into *who is with me?* And the answer is *no one* – just a few that hadn't been able to do much for me. My secondary school nickname was *Whome*. A sort of mockery for my last name and one of those things' boys made fun with. Back in those days, *Whome* could mean anything to me. A guy wanted to ask me for a favor, he would call me *Whome*, and I wouldn't see it as something bad. The same guy wanted to insult me, and used *Whome*, like: "Fuck you, *Whome*", and I would flame up and chase him around the school for calling me *Whome*. It was a name that carried both shame and pride.

I grew up with a very dark sense of humor. We made jokes about hunger, death, burial, heartbreak, and the condition of the country. We made jokes with the fact that we weren't even



living up to societal and family expectations. We made jokes about drowning. The shape of our teeth. Not being so intelligent. Suicide. We made jokes about the fact that three people in our family tree had previously committed suicide three generations ago. One hung himself and his tongue stuck out like a goat hit by a train. The other one, a woman, ran into a moving car and ended it. Another one hanged himself, and the story around it wasn't clear. We made jokes with anything, everything. It was what it was, and that was the way we loved each other. And that was the only way we barely moved through life – navigating its tedious corridors, armed with a dark sense of humor.

I heard footsteps. My girlfriend's. The heavy thud of her sole on the cemented floor woke my drunken ass up. I scrambled for consciousness. The back door was locked. She walked into the living room through the balcony at the front door. Her presence filled me up, with both happiness and sadness. Happiness that at least I had someone to live with. Sadness because I knew that whatever we had between us wasn't love. It was just a child. The baby strapped on her back. My little star. Obiarika.

Obiarika looked at me and smiled and held out his hands towards me. I carried him and looked into his eyes. In his eyes, all the songs I couldn't sing lay silent, and the beautiful dimple on his face reminded me of my mother's. All the kindness that I never gave settled on his face. Like my grandfather used to say, "a son that knows his father, he is a complete son." This one knew me. He knew the heaviness in my eyes. He knew my thin and tall body, and this unshaved head. Maybe he knew the way I walked too. Obiarika twisted his arm and body around me. He let out a little staccato laughter that hailed heaven closer to his face. I took my son into my arms and smiled. He smiled back. Saliva dripped from his wet thin lips. My brother said that he looked like me, and I could have sworn right now that that face was mine. That nose was mine, flat, broad,

and handsome. When Obiarika grows into a man, I would give him a notebook where I inscribed all the ancient wisdom of our ancestors, from proverbs to concepts, like Nsibidi, Igbo cosmology, and science. I would tell Obiarika to also learn to live in his time, work towards something bigger if there is one. Although, I swear, there might never be one.

“Are you back?” I asked.

“Yes, John,” She said.

I helped her with the tray she was carrying. Most of the vegetables had withered, and I wondered if anyone would buy them. I guess she barely made any money today, but I didn't ask. There were things that I knew would inflame Annie, and I tried to avoid them – especially when they seemed a bit personal. Even though I provided for the family, Annie never told me how much she made or had. I never asked. She dropped out in elementary-one to help her mother train the brothers and sisters. She carried a burden meant for her parents, and that saddened me.

Well, one could judge, but it wasn't always all black-and-white as I painted it. Sometimes, people fall into a mess they can't just bring themselves out of. In Annie's case, the father died a long time ago. This was the only thing Annie ever trained for in her life: how to buy and sell, also and look after her family. Several times, I had asked her to go back to school and she refused and asked if I finished mine. No, I never finished school. I never went to university. I took a training course in Information Technology, and that was about it. I could read and write. My little education got me a job to teach at a technology institute owned by a dubious politician in my city. A terrible man who ran a Non-Governmental Organization just to feed his family. Ugly world. Ugly man. Life at the office was dull and uninteresting.

In the living room were two sets of worn-out chairs ripped mostly at the part that people sat on often. On the left side of the wall were old pictures of me, some of Annie's and Obiarika's hanging in no particular order or pattern. In one of the photos, I was with my late father, and in another photo, I was with my family, the five of us: my sister, my brother, my late father, and my mother. On the right side of the wall, I had a large poster of earth captured by astronaut William Anders during the Apollo 8 mission in 1968, it stood almost the length of the wall. Beside it was another photo of Annie, smiling. Whenever she wasn't around and I did something bad, I always imagined she would run out of that photo and pounce on me. In that picture, she wore a blue pinafore with a white shirt. It was taken at the time she worked as a cook for a rich man. The mansion behind her belonged to the boss. The next photo was Obiarika behind a colorfully designed Ankara material, smiling, with his hands raised up. Taking photos behind an Ankara material seemed like a family tradition passed from my family. I had the same kind of picture taken of me back in the days. Obiarika had the biggest smile I ever saw on a baby, and also a thick afro that grew out beautifully. For a baby, he was too handsome.

A gecko crawled towards the wall clock, as if its existence was time itself, as if its existence defined us, its motion a replica of our feelings for each other: slow and cautious. In this house, everyone, everything, was skeptical of the other. It was no one's fault – it was just the nature of coexistence. Sometimes, I wanted to hug Annie, but I was concerned that a hug might lead to something else. She was always ready to bark at me, and I guess it was because she didn't trust me either. We feared each other deep inside. We feared what we might end up becoming. She feared an uncertain future with me. I feared that I couldn't love her, even though sometimes I wanted to. I wanted the best for everyone, especially Obiarika, but love wasn't something one could force into one's heart.

“I barely made any money today,” she said, unexpectedly.

“It’s alright Annie, I make enough for us to survive,” I said and tried to smile with uneasiness, rocking my baby in my arm.

“Survive? Survive?” she asked and rolled her eyes at me and walked into the kitchen.

“I know Annie, but it will get better,” I said and followed her.

“I know.”

She came back to the dining room, sat on a chair, and stared at me. I swear, one night I woke up and those eyes scared the shit out of me. I remembered the night we made love for the first time; I was drenched drunk. The events of that day flashed before my eyes and filled me with regrets. I remembered that even in my drunk state that night, I swore never to let myself slide down that path again. But life never gave me a choice or the opportunity to make amends. If it did, I would walk into the night, get home and jerk off.

Everywhere smelled of sweat. Annie smelled of sweat. I smelled of sweat. Our baby smelled of wet diapers. I took him into the bedroom to change him. He waved his tiny hands at me while I lay him on the bed and removed his pee drenched diapers. He took a hairbrush from the bed and hit my face with it. I smiled. He smiled. I rocked his hands and tickled him. He was so ticklish, just like my mother said that I had been. These tiny moments made me feel like I belonged to his world as much as I should. The thought of it, the imagining of his future intertwined with mine, made me blush in my dark skin. The magic of a little life in front of me, from me, was enough to keep us going.

The aroma of Annie's okra soup filled the house. She knew it was one of my favorite soups, and she made it for me every other day. The fact that she tried to please me sometimes amazes me about her. I wasn't in her head. I wasn't thinking about what she was thinking. But I swear, I knew that in this life, she was also trying to survive and be the best she could be. She was also trying to believe that the future had something in store for her too. Maybe me. And it saddened me. I could tell that she loved me in her own way. I too tried to love her in my way.

I rocked my baby until he slept. His breathing was a little loud. The doctors said there isn't anything to worry about, and that he would outgrow it. I didn't trust what he said, but I had no choice. I looked at my room, everything needed a change; bedsheet, rug, bed, tables that were being eaten by termites. By the wardrobe, Annie's panties hung on top of the door. It was so huge that just a pair spread across the length of the wardrobe door. I had told her to stop hanging her panties there, it always seemed like it was being thrown at my face, she hung it there like a scarecrow all the time. I wasn't just into her, but I kept on living with her because it was the tradition to do so.

I looked outside; it was getting dark. The stars are were glistening bright and huge and ready to burst and disappear. It reminded me that even the most beautiful things die. We were all destined to die. I quietly closed the door and walked out of the room.

"Do you know what happened at the market today?" she asked from the kitchen as I walked towards the living room.

"No, what happened?" I asked, dryly.

"Ego took my space oh!" she said and laughed.

"And?"

“I told her off, trust me. I don’t tolerate that nonsense in any way or form.”

“I hope you didn’t fight,” I asked, a little afraid because I knew she could easily use her fist.

“No, she moved away before I could come down on her. She knew what was coming. Who doesn’t know me in that market? I would have twisted her out of shape,” she said and squeezed her hand as if she was twisting a drenched cloth.

I hated it whenever she talked about fight and brutality as if it was something sexy to indulge in. Something to look forward to. Something a lanky frail man like me should be proud of. Like I was weak and needed protection. I hated to hear her say it, but she wouldn’t stop. She continued saying some hellish shit about her fighting skills. I left the dining room and walked to the balcony.

It was dark out here. I switched on my solar-powered battery lantern which I constructed myself some months ago. I downloaded the construction manual online, tried it and it worked perfectly. Now I had access to light without having to beg the government for it. Here, a man had to provide for everything for himself including light and water. Nothing from the government was reliable.

The device I brought back was on my table. The oscillators were down and dusty, it had several keys I could toy with: receptor, noise limiter, crystal phasing, selectivity, volume, and several radio waves signal. I plugged it into my battery to check for life, and no signal came on. I took a screwdriver and started to loosen the steel covers.

Tons of science magazines lay around me. I bought them from a bookseller near the post office at giveaway prices. I tried to organize them sometimes, but most evening I ended up tossing

them around again. They were mostly about science. I read them to understand how things worked in the world. I read works by Einstein, Galileo, and Stephen Hawking. I swear, the concept of black holes still puzzled me even though I had watched tons of videos about it, and listened to eminent scholars ruminate on the topic over and over again. But I knew that dark energies exist, and it has been sucking living things into it ever since. I imagined a black hole was death itself, my relationship, my whole life, and it would creep up on me and strip me of my sanity, and then suck me in again and again. I watched my flesh scatter into a zillion fragment over and over.

I heard Annie shouting in the kitchen. I wondered what it would take for her to realize that I wasn't listening, that I wasn't there, that I didn't like the story she was telling me.

I separated the covers from the device and stared at the circuit board. I stared at the machine capable of reaching another machine 200 miles away. A machine capable of translating sound waves into electrical pulse and electric waves into sound waves. I stared at the inner workings of a wonder box. I stared at the IC's and diodes.

I took a magnifier out of the cupboard and examined the circuit board, closely. First, I noticed that the integrated circuit that powered it was damaged. The rest of the machine needed cleaning too to see if any other thing was damaged. It gladdened my heart to know where to start. I dropped my tools and covered the device with a brown leather bag.

I heard a knock and opened the door. It was my dearest friend, Prof. He smiled at me. A longtime friend whose face carried all the memories of my childhood and adulthood. We went to the same secondary school. He was a geek, and a meek fellow, most times weird. He was just as weak and stupid as I was, at least in my own eyes. We became friends ever since the first day we met in junior secondary school, class one. But before then, I had always seen him on our street

dressed in laughable clothes. We never talked until we met in secondary school. Whenever I saw him, the image of him that comes to mind was that of his childhood; it made me wonder how lonely could one be? His mum shielded him from making friends until he was old enough to go to secondary school. Rumors had it that she was hiding a lot of things back in those days. Rumors had it that his dad left them and never came back. Rumor had it that they weren't wanted back in their home town. She later remarried a man that had kids, and those kids became his family; two brothers and a sister. As much I could tell, his life had always been that of a loner. We had always enjoyed the same things like cosmos, politics, and language.

His tall frame stood almost at the height of my door; he had the same rimmed spectacles he wore since our secondary school days. His lips were thin, and his upper teeth seemed hidden behind his lower teeth – like an underbite of a sort. His voice was soft and slow like that of a blues singer. In school back then, he was nicknamed, *Coldvoice*. He enjoyed talking about books, and Russian literature were his favorites. Even the dead would have enjoyed listening to Prof tell stories about the lives of writers and their works from Pushkin to Chekov to Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy.

His real name wasn't actually Prof, and it doesn't matter. Prof was another name he earned during our secondary days for speaking big grammar and solving a physics problem that left our teachers in awe. I continued to call him Prof because he hated being called *Coldvoice*. I swear, Prof could have gotten a job at NASA if he were an American. Here, he was in the same dilemma as me. He finished his tertiary education in Engineering and returned home because he couldn't find a job in Lagos. He said Lagos was too rough for a gentleman like him to survive in. I liked how he said "gentleman" as if it was a term for someone a displaced person. Sometimes, in the dead of the night, I imagined him saying *gentleman* and laughed uncontrollably.

We shook hands.



“Gentleman, what has the evening brought? Of goodwill and scientific discoveries?” He said and grinned, his brows lifted up a bit as if in anticipation of a sort.

He had been wearing the same sweater throughout the week, his shoes were worn out and he didn’t care. He placed his coat on a chair. He didn’t brush his mouth too; I could smell it; a mix of rotten onions and garlic. His afro looked tattered. I smiled and quickly embraced him. I tried not to breathe for a while until we were meters apart.

“Prof, himself. What good wave projected you to my abode?” I asked and laughed.

“I just returned from Aba. It was a mad day my friend, and this city isn’t kind to gentlemen like me. A woman on the bus cursed me out because I wanted a little more space for myself. I asked her to shift a little bit because I wasn’t comfortable. I said to her: ‘Ma’am, could you please shift a little bit?’ and she blew up on me, and asked me why I was speaking big grammar to her?” Prof. said, in awe, still shocked about the event of the day.

It wasn’t that his grammar was too much or something, even though that most times it was, it was just his damn voice and accent that sounded strange and out of place.

“Prof himself! Prof! You must have destroyed her with your kaleidoscopic language, maybe shredded her medulla oblongata with grammar.” I grinned.

“I held her at ransom with grammar. Igbo isn’t good for cursing at all,” he said, “these people will see that you are gentle and they will keep provoking him!”

“I trust you never to get into a fight,” I said, still caught in the joy of laughter.

Prof paced around for a while, and stopped in front of my tiny table, placed his hand on the books. I watched him look at his hand, he rubbed them together as if there were something in them that no one could see.

“Where is our wife?” Prof asked me.

“Which wife?” I said, and stared him down with my eyes, and continued, “Annie, Prof, point of correction.” I kept my voice low, so Annie wouldn’t hear me.

“My gentleman, let me remind you once again that this is the mother of your child. And you live with her. And you will continue living with her forever,” he said, jokingly.

He knew that the word “forever” scared me more than anything.

“Prof, I know you are a twenty-eight years old virgin, so you will not understand what it means to have sex. First, go and have sex, then we will talk about love, family, and children.” I tried to change the boxing game by leaping out of the ring he dragged me into and trying to make him defend instead of attack. And he bought the bait.

“I know my young man, John, but one day. One day I will tell you many things you don’t know about me,” Prof. said, in a shy way and continued, “Which of your demons were you working on before I came in?”

“Well, I picked up this machine while I was taking a walk today. It’s a communication device. I want to fix it, build a long-range antenna, and maybe contact the International Space Station with it. From my calculations, we will be able to do it in a couple of months. I just found out from their website. how exciting this will be. It will be my greatest pleasure on earth to do this.”

“This sounds beautiful, John. I want to be part of this project. Let me know what I can do to help. But for now, let’s go find beer, my friend, it’s been a long day for me,” Prof said.

“My friend, I cannot deny you this simple gesture that keeps our mind intact, but ask Annie first.”

I thought it wise to let him tell her so she wouldn’t accuse me of anything else, like cheating on her or something. Even though we weren’t sleeping together, she was always suspicious of me and reacted in a bad way if I talked about another girl.

“You see my friend, this is one of the reasons why you should have remained single,” he said and laughed at me, “maybe this family life isn’t for you.”

“Young man, this doesn’t give you the audacity to peruse my natural existence! I just want you to tell her as a sign of respect,” I said, and we laughed.

He walked into the kitchen. I heard her laughing, letting out staccatos like the sound of ogene echoing from a mountain top. I heard Prof. tickle her with big grammars over and over again, and he called her “My Lady”. She loved being called “My Lady”. She chuckled. She liked Prof; I know. She felt at ease with him; his decorum and meekness. She would grant him anything as long as he asked. The same respect that I had for him. Prof came out smiling and dragged me into the night.

The only sound we heard once outside was that of crickets cricketing. Opposite my house was also an uncompleted building with blocks laid to the lintel. That was where people threw away trash and dead animals when no one was watching. In the stench was also where, The Pharrell, a notorious cultist stayed. From my balcony, I could see everything happening in the uncompleted building. Most evenings, I saw The Pharrell smoking weed while leaning on a pillar. I rarely

smoked weed, but I enjoyed the funk. We heard horrible stories about The Pharrell. People said he was a nuisance. Rumor had it that he had sex with Annie in the same uncompleted building. A drunk man once said that to me in a bar at the road that branched left, up ahead. I never went back to that bar again. News like that, be it rumor or not, gave me more reasons to want to leave her.

We walked until we got to the tarred road, and crossed when the traffic eased. Like adventurers on a mission into the unknown, we walked towards Nwanyi Ncha's bar. Prof's black coat flapped against the wind. I nearly laughed my head off. I warned him not to wear that particular coat again, but it seemed like it was his favorite. The coat was too big for him, covered the length of his arm and shaped like a magician's costume with. One of those things one usually finds in a second-hand clothing market. He cared less. That was him. We went to our favorite bar laughing high into the skies. Ladies as fresh as morning dew sat with their men, drinking. They observed us from the corner of their eyes, and I did the same too. I and Prof took a chair by the window. A fly buzzed irritably. I slapped my left cheek and proceeded to slap the right one.

"I hate flies with a passion," I said.

"Well, how can you separate flies from beer?" Prof replied while observing me through the rims of his spectacles as if I was an organism under his mental microscope.

I turned around and saw a beautiful girl nearby; she was alone and waiting for her food.

"Prof, look at that girl by the side, she is beautiful. She is alone, go talk to her," I said.

He turned his attention towards her. I could tell that he liked her by the way he pouted and smiled at the same time; with his left eye nearly closed. She had an amazing figure in that red evening gown, and it seemed as if she was waiting for someone to arrive. Soon, she started eating the plate of food Nwanyi Ncha placed on her table.

Nwanyi Ncha, the woman that owned the bar approached us like a praying mantis hopping from grass to grass. She was always agile, always ready to provide quality service to her customers. And also, always ready to pounce on anyone that disrespected her place or her. She smiled at us, and quickly presented our favorite beers to us. The ice on the body of the bottle dripped slowly.

“Customers, Ah Prof. himself! Comment ca va? Voules vous, voules vous? Forgive me if didn’t say it right,” Nwanyi Ncha said, chuckled, and covered her mouth with her hand.

“Nwanyi Ncha, the woman of the river. The clock that ticks alone in the forest without night and day. The time keeper of the dead. The river that refused to flow. The cacophony of *têtu*, according the French people. Vous êtes si belle. That is, your beauty is like a shining star,” Prof said and watched Nwanyi Ncha laugh like a little girl.

Prof studied her closely as if she was an organism, too. She laughed so hard that we became frightened she might choke on her own laughter. If laughter were helium, she had enough in her to send her flying into the deep space.

“Prof, and John, may your days be longer than that of Melchizedek!” Nwanyi Ncha said, and bowed generously.

“May your children treat you better, and thank you for the quick service,” Prof said.

“Thank you Nwanyi Ncha,” I said.

The first bottle for me was always like a first run. I quickly gulped half of the bottle just to get a buzz in my head.

“Have you ever talked to a girl in your life Prof? Go ahead Prof,” I said in a very playful manner.

Prof stood up without talking to me, gulped half of his beer and walked over to the lady. I couldn't believe my eyes. I watched him. I felt he was more confident than I had ever seen him before.

"Excuse me, my lady, can I steal a minute of your time, if your kindness permits," I overheard him say to her in a subtle voice that could raise the dead to life.

I tried not to focus on him. A man stood beside me, his legs wobbled, he tried to take a step forward, his legs wobbled, and he fell down and slept. Nwanyi Ncha said nothing. All the drunk people around did nothing but laugh and continue drinking. I continued drinking, too. From time to time, a drunk person would stumble on the man sleeping on the floor and fall too, and everyone in the bar would laugh.

I was curious as to what Prof was saying to her. I listened harder, among roars of laughter. I turned and saw the lady smiling. I watched her wave her hands in a delicate manner that indicated excitement.

"My name is Nkechi," she said.

"Then tonight must be my lucky night to have met you. Can I buy you a drink?" Prof asked her.

"Sure! You seem like a good man. Just letting you know, honestly, that's so rare and hard to find in a place like this," she said.

She took a bit of her chicken and pushed rice into her mouth.

"You look hungry, and must have had a terrible day," Prof said

“Well, office is always office. I am not here because my day was hectic. I am here because I enjoy listening to the discussions. I know it’s weird to understand, it’s so exciting for me,” she said.

“Nothing is weird my Lady, not to me,” Prof said, “So, what do you do my lady? Permit my almost obnoxious inquiry.”

The room got nosier and drowned her sweet voice away. It finally dawned on me that Prof was getting a girlfriend at last. I watched Prof laugh differently now, more like a man beheaded by Cupid than one shot with his arrow. He always had a way with girls, just that he hasn’t been able to see it. He was indeed charming and had a great composure – I mean beyond his funny coat and bad hygiene.

My stomach began to ache. A great pain flooded my intestine. I walked outside. I walked to a place no one would disturb or find me. I sat on the sand and let the pain build up. I felt like I was dying. Those little invisible devils poked my stomach with an ugly forks. A few minutes later, the pain began to subside. I was conscious not to be seen, my pains belonged to me alone, and it wasn’t meant to be seen by anyone else.

I took a few minutes to check an application on my phone that could tell me the position of stars. Draco stood above me in the milky way. In China, I read that Draco star meant something forbidden and some people believed it carried a bad omen.

When I got back in the bar, Prof was drinking alone, texting and smiling. Music was playing on the radio set. *Fantastic Man* by William Onyeabor. My father loved William Onyeabor’s music and kept all his discograms safe in a short brown mahogany colored shelve that was always dusty. I remembered him playing them during the weekend, half asleep, nodding his

head behind the ixora flower, a box of snuff in hand, and pinching it into his nose whenever he flipped into consciousness from his several torment reveries that he never talked about.

When funk came to Nigeria, it was as if it wouldn't end or become something else. That was in the 60's. Bands sprang up everywhere and everyone sang funk. Around the same decade, psychedelic came too, but it wasn't called psychedelic, it was just a strange music with strange rhythm pioneered by William Onyeabor. The Fantastic Man ruled the early days of psychedelic and spun wordless tunes like tingling bell, and people danced. All the birthday parties I attended as a child played this song. It was what we danced to without even knowing what it meant, or what he was saying. When Black Children Sledge Funk Group released "Satisfaction", everyone went mad and danced crazy. Father always remembered those days with nostalgia, and never failed to tell tales of it. This moment, right here was like a remembrance of that old days. It was parting the iron curtain of my memory to behold my father's smiling face. Up to today, I haven't figured out how to feel about him. This place wasn't just a food or drinking place, I swear, it was a nostalgic bar.

Nwanyi Akwa knew how to take my soul back to the good old days that I didn't even exist in. I pictured our fathers in their baggy pants, dancing away their lives. Their afro high and dense and contained all the rascality of the '60s; all the dreams of a young nation. The same young men wore saddled bullet belts and shot through the late '60s for a nation that couldn't breathe, smoldered in infancy, Biafra. In this nostalgic bar, life was just life, just as it came, with no worries.

"Young man, it seems like you've plucked a ripe fruit from a tree," I said to Prof.

"Exactly, you understand what just happened. The lady gave me her number. Her name is Nkechi. I will be visiting her soon, it seems. She seems to be really into me," Prof said.



I ordered more beer for my friend.

“I am happy for you Prof,” I said. He kept smiling and looking at his phone and typing all his luck into it.

“I can’t believe I even did it. What got into me?” Prof asked me. I could tell he was in awe, a near shock situation.

“I am really happy for you,” I said.

I was drunk now, and everything stood like a haze. Everything doubled and appeared blurred. Everything stood before me like jazz; disorderly, cramped into melody, branching from nothing to nothing and from something to nothing. Just that feeling of nothingness made everything I was experiencing worth it, and beautiful. That was the beauty of alcohol – it magnified my innermost self.

“At what angle will a projectile go the farthest?” Prof asked.

“Well, let’s start with the fact that gravity is still constant. The distance attained during its flight is equal to  $\sin(2\theta) \times v^2/g$ , and we know that  $v$  is the projectile's initial speed,  $g$  is the acceleration toward Earth due to gravity and  $\theta$  is the angle at which the projectile is launched. The distance traveled here will be much greater when  $\sin(2\theta)$  is greatest. Let me cut the long story short and conclude that a projectile travels farthest at an angle of 45 degrees,” I said.

Whenever he was drunk, he talked more about science, so I knew he was drunk too.

“That means that with a little tweaking, the Biafra *Ogbunigwe* could have made a stronger impact on the advancing Nigerian troops during the war. That singular ingenuity remains the

closest thing we have ever had to a rocket being launched in this part of the world,” Prof said with so much profanity in his eyes as if to ask me if he was right. And yes, he was right.

“There you go again. By now, we could have launched to the moon and back. We could have taken that simple theorem further. But look at us,” I said, look at us.

Everyone at the bar stopped drinking and watched the two of us talk about rockets and Biafra and war and projectiles, over and over. Some laughed. Some marveled. Some screamed each time we pronounced words like “Projectile” “Ingenuity” “gravity”. Towards the end, Prof began to ululate with grammar.

“That singular political *crinkum crankum* and ethnic abracadabra have rendered our collective visibility to zero. What am I even saying? Does any of this even make sense?” Prof belched loudly.

The people went mad and screamed when they heard: “*crinkum crankum*” and “*ethnic abracadabra.*” I guessed they meant nothing, but the sound and the way he said them gave it another meaning and context.

People screamed and hailed him: “The Prof!”

The shortest man in room pretended to have fainted from the ferocity of Prof’s language. The other jokers fanned him until he got up and started laughing. Then, the short man began to throw plastic chairs around out of excitement.

A man in a light blue shirt who seemed angry all night eventually spoke up, “Please, a bottle of chilled beer for everyone, and the coldest for Prof. Nwanyi Ncha, watch my mouth, Cold-est.”

We drank quickly and walked into the night. When we got out of the door, he called them “nincompoops” and “halfwits”, and we laughed and patted each other’s back.

Just above us, the moon shined, larger, clearer, and whitened our path with clean light. It glowed into our drunk bones and hazy vision. I kept looking at it, holding Prof and holding myself, and gravity holding me too, and it seemed as if we were chasing the moon. In this small town, everyone existing in the torment of time was a moon chaser. We walked towards the debris of our existence until Prof couldn’t go any further with me. I said goodnight to him and staggered towards my house.

There she was, lying in the bed. Looking different. Smelling different. Her face as pretty as the moon that shone in the sky. There she was, becoming a moon with boons and beauty, with a smile on her face, as if she was waiting for me. I lay beside her and began to kiss her on the cheek. She kissed me back, slowly, and fiercely like she had been waiting for me to come back home. I undressed, kissed her belly button and rubbed my penis around her vulva. She said nothing. She muffled her moaning as not to wake up Obiarika. She shrieked in ecstasy. We made love, and the night took us.

## Chapter Two

Sunday morning.

A preacher posed perpendicular to my window and screamed the same message I've heard all my life: *Christ, heaven, hell, and Christ*. All salvation through Christ. Occasionally he called the apostles and numerated all their hard works to spread the message all over the world. He hailed all the holy ones and spoke in tongues when caught in spirit. I imagined the holy ones in white garments, gallivanting the streets of heaven openly and singing *halleluiah* chorus.

I was once a Christian and attended Sunday mass. I was the type filled with doubt and thoughts about everything in the church. I watched the priests with cynicism and always sat in the back of the church in defiance of whatever they were saying. Whenever they talked too much, I left. Back then, I went to church because my parents forced me to. Nowadays, it was because of my son and not for the hope of any salvation gimmick. I was afraid he would have no moral compass to navigate the society with. Christianity might be trash in all reasoning, but I was raised to accept the trash, and it seemed like a tradition I should pass to my son. To deny my little boy a chance to see the light seemed tragic to me. The only things that work here were church and generator engines, a common sight to behold on every street in Nigeria. Not to have any of them seems like living in great darkness, literally and figuratively.

The preacher's voice sickened me. I wondered if people were discomfited to be woken up at five AM with the sound "praise the lord" "Amen" and so forth. I heard my neighbor, the banker, Mr. Suleiman, reply "amen". His apartment was opposite mine.

Over time, I've learned that whenever a man replied "amen" as Suleiman does; with grin and tears, I swear, his life was fucked. Later on, I learned that Suleiman had been fired from his

job the previous day. That was why he kept screaming “Amen”. He must be drowning like I was, unlike me, he sought salvation. I laughed and bent my head. I needed no salvation.

I looked out of the window, the street watched me and I watched the street. I saw the preacher, he looked thin and light under the crisp morning sun, his beard was unshaven. He was wearing an old coat with seven colors, probably a cheap imitation of the one Jacob gifted his son Joseph. I laughed at how colorful he looked. He gazed at me, all the veins on his neck stuck out like a railroad line. He screamed more and more as if I was Judas and about to sell him to the Romans.

Owerri provided no reality of its own, it was a city built mainly on myth, and we needed it to survive. No one ever wanted to face reality, here. Everyone believed that somehow, someday, that Christ would step on the sand with a spittoon and spade and drive open the knackered gates of prosperity for it to flood the city, and the city would prosper. Yet, we were drowning, slowly. Year after year. Only prosperity preachers prospered. They knew their way to people’s pockets and they took what they could at will.

The Preacher screamed, “Repeat after me!”, “I will prosper!”

I heard Suleiman repeating after him in his lonely apartment, sentence by sentence as if a certain aspect of his sorrow would be carved away by his wailing. The first time we met, I thought he was a Muslim from the north, but later, I realized he was a Christian from the north. It was hard for us to differentiate between a Muslim from the north and a Christian from the north because they all dressed and look alike.

I swear, if God made me prosper here, I would go crazy. Imagine having gold in hell. I laughed in my pajamas and closed my mouth not to wake Annie. But it was too late, she heard me,

she looked at me as if I was crazy. She must have been listening all this while, awake, watching, and wondering what sort of a mad fool I was.

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It was a beautiful year of sun and moon and broken thoughts and fine wine and music. A lot of things were happening around the world. In Africa, the singular most beautiful thing that happened was that Mbongwana Star released Malukay – a raw psychedelic tune, with dimmed videos in two hues – black and white, about a futuristic spaceman dancing to cosmic beats on the streets of Kinshasa. The music turned my head whenever I listened to it. I had no television or internet at home. I saw the video on YouTube in a cybercafé. Mbongwana was the only video that I downloaded on my phone, and each time that spaceman glides in, it gladdened my heart, and I felt like I was connected to the cosmos in a big way. I swear, music kept me alive here. Strange enough, I made a list of all the music I wanted to play while floating on zero gravity in my diary, the same one with Nsibidi letterings, the same one that Obiarika was to inherit. Number one was Kala by Mbongwana, all of Benjamin Clementine’s music, Monk’s dream by Thelonious Monk, and My Favorite Things by John Coltrane. Or maybe if I was ever to travel on a rocket, I would like the inside designed like the front cover of Thelonious Monk’s Underground CD, a Nazi tied to a chair, floating in zero gravity with all the war gears scattering around me. And a mean face to go with it.

My small radio which I tweaked the signals could tune into stations around the world. I loved listening to a radio station in Indiana, it was there that I first heard Prof. Kent speak. He was one the most brilliant minds alive. He examined our earthly existence and saw a painful end. I mean, any thinking being must stared into that void, indeed there is nothing but void. He said our existence must continue in space, and I believed him. Not because he said it, but because my

ancestors had always known this. Man must journey through the rivers to the cloud, deeper into space, and become stars. Annie thought that I was crazy for listening to the radio all the time instead of buying a television.

“Look at your mates.” She always said to me, “John now drive a big car. Ikenna bought his mother a Prado Jeep. Chinedu now lives in America and is doing very well. Did you see the house he built? They tiled it from wall to wall, everywhere.” And then she would swing her left arm at me, as if I was nothing, as if I was worth nothing. She once brought those arms down on my body before. Skinny me, wailing for help under her, literally crying without shame. I swear, no one came to my rescue. My neighbors didn’t bother to ask me why I was crying. They laughed and said I was enjoying it. That was the night that I took my dead fathers’ revolver and squeezed the trigger while seating in an armchair. The same dirty old armchair was now in my workshop. The armchair of death, reminding me of my own mortality, just like the pain in the pit of my stomach. As devil would have it, the bullet was locked in the 4<sup>th</sup> chamber of the revolver and I stopped at three. Or, maybe life had other things for me to do here on earth. That night, I cried again and stared at the moon hoping it would blind me. Then I drank and drank and drank until I could think of nothing but laughter and chagrin and the weird news that had forever graced Owerri: “A Man’s Manhood got Missing”, “The Governor Flogged a Priest for Refusing to Give Way”, “The Bishop cursed the Governor”, “The Governor is a strong Voodoo man”, “Unpaid Pensioners protest Naked”, “Women in Solidarity with the Governor”.

No matter how much I avoided politics, it still found a way to simmer into my life. I had always wanted a place I could be my own self, and this wasn’t it. Owerri would always find a way to make you kneel and beg whatever god you served.

I sat in my living room feeling drowsy, ecstasy swelling in me, and around me.

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I had spent all my life here. I had always wanted to leave, go somewhere. Maybe Lagos. But I had things that held me back; my son, Annie, and other things that nag the shit out of my head. Well, such is life like we always said and comforted each other with words. Like my grandfather said: “An animal with a child strapped to its back cannot run too far.” But if I wasn’t chained to this life, I would have found my way around the map. Maybe walk and walk and walk until I get to a place where they speak something else. Then I can learn something else, and become something else. I always thought that one should be many things before death, he shouldn’t be bound to thought or whatever. The beauty of life was in seeing and being, but the meaning of life eluded me, however I imagined it. And being, I believed, was about freeing one’s mind.

Most of my friends left for Lagos after secondary school. Some joined trade. A few made it to the university, and Prof was among them. My parents had no money to send me to one. I had no zeal whatsoever to end up on campus or acquire more education. When I got out of secondary school, my life was simply dried up. I felt like a goat looking for water and fooling around at the same time. I scurried around for direction, and what to do with my life apart from school. At that point in my life, I had thought about killing myself twice, and actually tried it once. And when I told my mother, she began to cry. She was too soft. Too soft to even consider that her own son was dying inside. Too soft to imagine the lifeless image of her son in her arms, dead from pain. I thought about it a lot, and when I told her, the water was nearly up above my neck, and I had no one to talk to. My childhood was soot beaten out of an old lantern. Nights without food, and days with nothing in my stomach. Days that seemed hollowed and dimed, often we felt like leaves being burrowed by a weevil. Mother had no money; father was unpaid by the government. We stared at



our parents and it pained our insides. I barely looked back, because thinking back was painful enough.

I got out of the bed and stretched my arms until my bones cracked. The morning sun was beautiful and my head was beating like a drum. I had a hangover, or maybe I was overthinking. I lifted my dirty clothes and readied to go outside and wash. I took aspirin and walked outside. I fetched water with two empty buckets, soaked all my white shirts in one bucket, and left the other bucket of water for rinsing. I began to scrub hard. The sun burned my skin, and for some strange reason, it felt nice.

I remembered that I had sex with Annie last night. I felt a bit shy. I felt like I cheated my soul. Like I could have let her be, instead of making butterflies out of her skulls. I scrubbed harder while starrng at the green algae growing on the wall. My neighbors came to fetch water and greeted me. Some of them were dressed in pristine traditional clothes, ready for church. Each time they walked past me, I thought about what they were thinking of me – A strange man, living with the girlfriend whom he hadn't paid the dowry, and a cute son.

I heard Annie's heavy footsteps drumming down the staircase. I knew she was coming.

"Good morning honey," she said and rolled her eyes at me.

"Good morning, how are you Annie?" I said.

"I called you honey and you called me Annie, idiot. Ungrateful man," she said and screamed "Ahhh!" as if she was tired of trying to make things work. She looked at me through the narrow windows of her eyes and sighed loudly. I said nothing, I scrubbed harder, and harder, and cautiously watched her in case she decided to pounce on me.

“Won’t you go to church today? At least,” she asked.

“No Annie, I don’t want to go to the church today,” I said.

“The Lord’s mercy is what we have been living on. The Lord has been sustaining us. His grace is sufficient for us. The Lord gave you this job so that you can be able to take care of your family...” she kept on going on, and on, and on until I cut in.

“Enough, I know I owe the Lord everything in my life, even you. Thanks for informing me. Maybe the Lord too held a gun to my head and clicked it twice. Maybe the lord makes me tolerate all these idiots in my office?” I said.

“A gun to your head?” she asked, puzzled.

She looked at me with those eyes that said *what-the-fuck?* I bent down and stared at the bubbles. There she was, in all the bubbles foaming, her image, large and wild. I scrubbed harder. I tried to burst all the bubbles I could find, like a mad man. She noticed what I was trying to do and moved aside, a reflection of the blue sky appeared on the bubbles.

“You know nothing about the Lord,” I said. I weighed my words, and repeated them again: “You know nothing.” She said nothing. She knew I was ready to shut her out of my head.

“Well, you can just help me with the child, you know that I can’t do it alone,” she said.

I knew she was going to say that. I knew she was going to bring my son into this. I got up and stretched my waist, and it cracked. I soaked the rest of the clothes in a basin and walked upstairs to get ready for the Mass.

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We walked through the narrow road until we got the untarred road almost eaten by erosion. I held my son and walked faster than her. She dragged herself behind me. She tried to say something to me, but I wasn't listening. I wasn't feeling like having a conversation with her on the road. I wasn't comfortable when people walked past us. I was ashamed of her. I was ashamed to talk to her on the road. When she walked hard enough to catch up with me, I slowed down as if I was tired. When she walked slow enough to catch up with me, I walked faster. She wasn't a fool; she knew I didn't want to walk with her. It saddened her. I knew that it saddened her too. It saddened me too, but I couldn't help it. It was just beyond my control. I wasn't ready to pretend, or anything, or just shove it down my throat to make a damn happy ending. I wasn't ready to lie to myself or her.

The road to the church was paved with dust, sand, and an eternal churning and grinding sound of machines that followed us meters down the road. The sound was coming from a little industry that was about to die off and be forgotten, earlier that year, they dismissed almost all their workers because they weren't making enough to keep paying them. The water in the roughly dug gully spilled into the sand, and algae spread atop forming a nasty green deposit.

We walked towards the setting morning sun. Down the road, hundreds of small houses with brown roofs and dusty paint stood roughly on a hill. Some of the houses were built entirely with zinc, some were made entirely of wood. Beside the houses was a market that closed as early as nine at night. After the market was St. Peters, our church. The gate was red, and a big signpost was placed at the entrance, it listed all the acceptable clothes in the church. I unconsciously read it again:

*No Mini Skirt.*

*Tie your headgear properly.*

*No Trousers.*

*No makeup.*

*No show breasts.*

*No immoral behavior.*

*No show body.*

*Don't expose the handle of your bra.*

I laughed inside. This was no church, it was a place for phonies who thought they knew what pleased God. Look no further, those damned Scribes and Pharisees had abandoned the wall of the bible and physically dwelled among us. I looked straight at the altar and saw the chubby short man that drank with us at the bar, the one that pretended to have fainted, his funny face still had a smile on it, as always. He had a bunch of papers with him and looked serious today. Annie pointed at him and said he was the new catechist. I laughed, hysterically. I laughed until Annie tried to hush me. I laughed until we got to the doors adorned by carvings of Jesus himself ascending into heaven. I laughed at myself. I laughed at the fact that I still couldn't escape the hands of my mother dragging me to church every Sunday, making me sit down there and listen. she made me attend morning masses every day, and later I was sent to a Catholic secondary school. It was at school that we caught a Reverend Sister kissing a student. When I told my parents the story, they hushed me, and said "Do not judge," "people that serve God cannot do such a thing". They flogged me and said I was becoming "Immoral" for telling them what I saw. The culture that we held unto was one that weighed us down. A culture steeped in silencing my little self and that silence grew

louder and louder inside of me until something else took over. I still couldn't understand what that was till this day; but it made me feel like nothing in the world was worth it.

I swear, here, if a man of God killed someone, his followers would run to his defense. A man of God could get away with anything. Anything. Rape included. I laughed until tears dropped from my eyes. I laughed and choked on my own laughter. Annie left me alone when she couldn't stop me, and she wished I would choke on my laughter.

It wasn't just about my negative impulse or something. It wasn't just about the huge frame of the Virgin Mary and Jesus hanging boldly at the altar, staring at me as if I was lost. It wasn't just about me, and my slow decline into the abyss of existentialism. It wasn't just about whatever I wanted to be, or choose to believe, or followed to make sense of my existence. It wasn't just that Mother didn't respect my choice to be left alone. It wasn't just that father didn't respect my silence, he always wanted to me to scream "amen" after those lengthy prayers. I swear, I couldn't fathom if he was talking to a god or God. Father always screamed down the house and caused all his enemies. I could still hear his voice echoing around the walls of the church, telling me what I needed to do with my life in order to be a "better man". I could still hear his voice telling me about loving God. That was toward the end of his life, a few months after, he died from nothing. We had no money to find out what killed him. I feared that one day I would be a coward too, and when I am about to die, I would scream to all the cherubic help that ever was to come to my aide.

I listened to the priest bless us and preach. I held my son close to my body, his saliva dripped on my white satin shirt. I patted his head as he slept smoothly. I knelt when the priest asked us to, and stood when he said so. I watched the catechist escort a young girl out of the church for indecent dressing. The girl's head was bent in shame, and I couldn't see her face. The catechist looked so holy beside the priest, and it made me want to laugh, but I didn't laugh. I looked at

Annie, her eyes were closed in a genuflective manner, her palms were open, and her lips muttered: “I confess to you all mighty God I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have greatly sinned...”.

Rays from the sun splattered on the altar, like magic. The old woman beside me tapped me and said it was the miracle of light that happens every Sunday. She asked me if I could see it. *Yes*, I said. In a very low tone, and laughed in my head. We prayed for our country. We prayed for our state. We prayed and prayed as we had done for the past three decades. Like I was taught.

I held my son through the homily. I held my son and listened as we walked through Noah’s world and fabled lands that weren’t distant from those of my ancestors, lands filled talking tortoise and his fiddly ways of making other animals do his bidding. I looked around me and everyone’s head was bent low, deep in prayer and asking for forgiveness of sin. All I could think was the fact that fables have simmered into my reality, and I couldn’t tell the difference.

Obiarika looked at me in the middle of prayers and said “Dada.” While the priest was still flicking the incense, he said it again, “Dada.” Annie heard it, raised her head up and smiled. The first clear word he ever said was *Dada*, and in a church. For once, it felt like a miracle had happened before me. I rubbed his face in mine. I let him slap my face and spit on me and smile and smile. I looked at Annie, she had a lovely smile on her face too. I realized that in the end, we all wanted to be loved. We all wanted to feel loved; all of us, irrespective of what we looked like or felt like. The pain of realizing one’s true self, of seeing that dark side. That part that no one wanted to deal with, the ugly side we had to face – that was the source of all pain and aggression. I knew that. Many had looked into that side of their life and let go. It wasn’t really about what I looked like, or what Annie looked like, it was me, I knew. The darkness inside of me was screaming. Such

moments of love, of watching my son speak, I became sober from pain and wondered as if I could just see everything differently. I wondered if I had any space in me for redemption at all.

### Chapter Three

Each morning, I felt so heavy, like Atlas, cursed to carry the world for eternity. Much of my life, if examined properly, would show a large quantity of heaviness on the scale by which one's life was measured; and again, if such scale ever existed. It just came like rain. Waking up became so hard for me that I wished to dream forever, and ever, and ever, and never wake. My eyes remained dark even after seconds of trying hard to look around. I didn't know what was creeping on me. I couldn't tell if that was a symptom of some illness or other shit.

I managed to get up from the bed and brushed my teeth. I dressed up and readied for work. I kissed my son goodbye and smiled at Annie. I walked out of the door into the world. I walked down the staircase. Some of the rails on the staircase were broken and the landlord had refused to fix them. We complained over and over, and each time when he arrived, he only asked for his money. I've watched him evict three tenants for failing to pay on time. Why should I really be happy in a world where people were skinning me alive every day just for them to survive too?

Mr. Suleiman was walking to his car to drive to work. I walked past him and waved. He waved back at me. Mr. Suleiman had been living here before we moved in. He was one of the few rich men that lived around here, and only a few people knew that he was rich. He was a very reserved person. But these days, he looked terrible. He kept saying "Amen" repeatedly into his phone. I knew things weren't all right with him, but that wasn't my business either. I wasn't going to pretend that I cared when I didn't. He was taller than me and looked like a boxer. I had seen his family once, and I think they lived far away from here. Annie said that he was a wrestler before joining banking. She seemed to know a lot about him that she shouldn't know.



Across the street, The Pharrell sat in the uncompleted building smoking a blunt. A girl leaned beside him. She seemed drunk and was petting his goatee. The Pharrell had a blue bandanna tied around his head, he wasn't wearing any shirt, his six packs outlined like tallies. He wore light blue short knickers. He waved at me and smiled. I waved back too and smiled.

Though people said his presence around the street was dangerous, I thought otherwise, well, initially. He seemed calm and kind, but the ruggedness of his face always sold him out. He had knife cuts around his face and chest. The kind of guy you wouldn't want to employ in an office just by looking at him. He barely shaved. These days, there was all kind of news going around about him, some said he robbed them at gunpoint, others said they saw him mug someone. I never witnessed any of those things.

Mr. Suleiman stopped his red sedan in front of me.

"Come in my friend," he said to me.

I walked over to the passengers' side, opened the door, and entered. I remembered a few times people had given me a lift and it never ended well. They did it with a sense of wrought obligation. I had been in positions where I wished I was walking and never had to watch the face of the person giving me a lift. The peace that came with pacing along the road felt better than watching an angry man's face.

"Good morning Sir," I said.

"Good morning John, are you on your way to work?" he asked.

"Yes, I am," I said.

"Let's go, we take the same route," he said.

For the next three minutes, we drove without talking. The local station played a song that was dear to my heart, *Happy Survival*, by Eddie Okwedy. I sat there, relishing the colorful brushstrokes of the song falling on my soul like morning dew. The melodic drum came to life, slow and beautiful. It reminded me of my grandfather, again, like it does each time I've heard it. It reminded me of all the stories my grandfather told me about the Biafra war. How they greeted each other after the war, by saying: "Happy Survival". Grandpa said that whoever wanted to understand the present Igbo condition should listen to the lyrical nested hum of the song, *Happy Survival*, and I believed him. It was all in there. Human emotions tearing into pieces, and never to be repaired again. A melody filled with blood, the blood of unknown soldiers and men unsung, who marched to their own death in search of freedom. The freedom none of us had ever had. The freedom that had become an illusion of a sort, once promised by the colonial master, now fleeing from regime to regime. We died for nothing, he often said. And indeed, we died for nothing. We listened and it felt sad to remember.

My mind wandered to the green fields in my primary school. I remembered the bullets buried there which I unearthed while making ridges on our teacher's farm. Brown and rusty in a leather pouch, like something affixed to a soldier's belt. I wondered if the original content had split a man's head into two. It was a mixture of empty shells and live ammunitions. I guessed they were fired during the Biafra war. I stored them in a jar and took it home. It became my pass time thing, to wander around the field searching for war relics. What interested the other students didn't interest me, at all. When I got tired of searching for war relics, I would diverge to catching grasshoppers. I remembered carefully gauging with my two palms together, forming a "C" curve, I would aim and dive to catch a grasshopper resting on a blade of grass. I stored them in a matchbox

and let them out at night. I knew all the grasshoppers in the field and their names, and even their sounds.

“Ah, Mr. John, I didn’t see you at the neighbor security meeting the other day?” he asked and turned the radio down. I was a bit startled to hear his voice because my mind was far gone, roaming the fields of my childhood.

“I was out on business this weekend. Did they say anything I should know of?”

“Well, it’s the same concern. The same issue of security. This neighborhood is no longer safe. Did you see The Pharrell, or whatever they call him, smoking weed this morning?” he asked. A car overtook us.

I swear, I could have laughed when he turned to look at the car, he forgot to clean some shaving cream from the right side of his chin. He looked so stupid. He looked like an idiot, along with the bunch of other idiots who didn’t know that the problem of security in the street wasn’t just about The Pharrell and his weed-smoking habits. The street was already a hive for cultists and other criminals who didn’t have to hang out in an uncompleted building. I was happy not to be present at the meeting. I was so happy. Maybe The Pharrell knew about the meeting too, and that’s why he smiled at me.

I said nothing, and stared out of the window – it was cloudy and dull outside.

He continued, “What I know is that something needs to be done fast, we discussed it. The plans will be put in motion this week. We will clean this street. Vigilantes will take over the security here. Let’s see where The Pharrell will smoke his weed.”

His face looked truly troubled.

I was happy that I knew nothing about their plans too. I looked at him and laughed louder inside my head. That voice he spoke with belonged to his youth; it didn't belong to his haggard-weakened old self. It didn't belong to those hands holding the steering wheel. I looked into the street as if I was looking for something. We drove past a hospital.

I remembered the many times I walked past the back of the hospital on my way back from school when I was still young. I stole all the fruit at the back of the hospital. Back then, I thought the world was all beautiful, and I could change it for the better, to a place where children could have all the fruits they wanted. I dreamed as if the world belonged to me. As a boy growing up, I loved and laughed and watched the sun go down every day, and as much as I could remember, it was beautiful. I said I was going to be an engineer when our teacher asked me, and my childhood friend Adim said he was going to be a doctor. Adim never even made it out of secondary. He dropped out after senior secondary one to fight life, to be a man. Everything around him died, and he was quickly ushered into manhood. He learned a trade and began selling second-hand clothing at the new market in Owerri. The last time I saw Adim, he looked so sad that I wished never to see him again or watch him suffer like that. He looked as if a war was living inside of him, eating him up, piece by piece. Sometimes, I wonder what happened to him, but I quickly convinced myself that I was of no use to him in any way. At some point, we lost contact, and that was it. I swear, my dreams, no matter how rich and valid they were, withered and died at the back of this very hospital. Looking at it, I realized that it carried all the harsh memories of my final day in senior secondary too.

I turned to Suleiman, and I saw the same sorrow on his face. That of a man being eaten from the inside by a war he couldn't see and didn't know. I knew that war, I had seen it eat many

people up. It creeps from your soul, and into your body. I looked away, again. What was inside of us, sometimes, wasn't worth seeing.

“That will be a good step, but I doubt if that will ever stop the problem,” I said boldly to Suleiman.

“What do you mean?” he questioned me aggressively, with an authoritativeness that rejected dialogue. No matter what I say, it would still be discarded as the words of a fool, so I folded my thought and crumbled them in my head.

“Well, I hope. Because a safe street will benefit all of us,” I said and smiled. He smiled back at me too.

Prof flashed through my mind; his sense of humor came back to me. If he was in a situation like this, he would have said “humbug” at this point. People said he was lost. But I never saw him like that. He was a good man, brave enough to love what he loved and not be plundered in the name of becoming, of aligning, of fighting a war against his own soul. He was himself; he loved the books he read, and that mattered the most.

“Yes. It will be fine and everyone will feel safe in the end. This street belongs to us. I was here long before you moved in with your wife. This street was peaceful and children could go fetch water from the stream late at night without the fear of being molested or raped,” he said and sighed.

I had never heard any news of someone being raped by the riverside. My street ran straight into a river, and the river flows westward. The river was green and beautiful with tall palm trees. Whenever the water wasn't running, it was there that we went to fetch water.

“Did anyone get raped?”

“Ha! You haven’t heard? The woman that own the house at the end of our street,” Suleiman said, his mouth wide open.

I remembered the blue bungalow at the end of the street. I remembered the woman that owned it. They said she was rich. They said that all her children lived abroad. Annie once told me that that wasn’t her only property, that she had two other properties and was getting ready to buy our building from the landlord. I thought it was one of Annie’s gossip then until I saw her myself driving a year two thousand and nine BMW.

“Yes, yes, I know her,” I said.

“Ehe, yes, her. Her last daughter, the pretty one that studies at Federal University of Owerri, very tall...” he said and raised one his hands up to express how tall she was, “...Dark, oval face.”

Images of her formed in my head. I remembered her walking down the street in the evening. I remembered that I saw her from my balcony.

“Yes, I remember her,” I said with a slight enthusiasm on my face.

“Ehe! That girl, she is the one. She was raped two weeks ago. And they are yet to identify the culprit. Well, her mum doesn’t want to take the case any further, as to not spoil her daughters’ chances of getting married in the future. But I think it was The Pharrell that did it. I am sure,” he said.

“Did she say it was him?” I asked.

“What?” he asked, aggressively, again. I smiled at him to end the discussion, and express tiredness as to continuing the discussion through my roughened facial expression.

“Mr. Suileman, we will continue this conversation later,” I said knowing that my office was just down the road.

He pulled over, and I got out. I thanked him and watched him drive away. Again, I wished he hadn't stopped to pick me up after all. I shook my head and walked towards our building; a two-story rented space owned by my boss Mr. Obidiegwu – a politician that made money stealing from the coffers of the poor. Every week, Mr. Obidiegwu took pictures of poor children and posted them online to sway donors. When the money arrived, he would use it to feed his five children. He made more money posing as an NGO than providing information technology services to this community.

I walked upstairs, and behind me was Chioma. She smiled at me, and I smiled back. She was one of my new students. I could tell she liked me right from the first day she came to make inquiries – the way she smiled at me was so inviting. I liked her too, even though I wasn't so sure yet. She was a beautiful girl, indeed. She was currently completing her law degree at Imo State University.

“Good morning Mr. John.”

“Good morning Chioma, how are you doing?”

“Good, I looked forward to seeing you today. All weekend, I've been about you,” she said, smiling, her dimples showing beautifully on her cheeks. Her tall figure astounded and dwarfed me as she caught up with me. I had to look upwards to see her clearly. I wondered why she spoke highly of me all the time. Before her, I felt inadequate, like she could have had it better. We were probably a few years apart. I knew she wanted to date me or something.

“Thinking about me? What did I do to deserve a space in your heart?” I asked.

She smiled at me, and looked away, shyly. I wanted to just kiss her right there when her dimples appeared, again. I wanted to just walk up to her and tell her that I've been starved of love too. That I needed her as much as I needed air, but my position in the office restrained me. When we stepped out of the stairs and into the office, we parted. She walked into the classroom, and I went to the office to sign in.

The new receptionist greeted me with a smile. The previous one quit because the owner was an asshole and wanted to sleep with her. She told me before leaving. She actually said that the owner was an asshole. She cursed at him when she left in front of everyone.

The manager walked past me and waved. His name was Ndukwe. Ndukwe was an odd fellow, always finding fault with my work ethics. Always angry when the female students smiled at me, or tried to play with me after school. He would hush them, and threaten to expel them for indecent behavior. They would laugh because the school wasn't even a school and just a handful of students came there because it was cheaper than the other computer centers. The day Annie visited my office, he told her that I wasn't around while I was in the classroom teaching. Then later told me that someone came looking for me in the office and that visitors weren't allowed for the workers because we were supposedly "too busy".

He walked past me again, and I smiled at him. He was average in height, with a small body frame, and always kept a beard and mustache. He reminded me of Oliver de Coque – an eccentric musician that changed the course of Nigerian highlife music in the eighties.

"Good morning Mr. John," the new receptionist said to me smiling like she was asked to do whenever someone walks in. I knew that soon, the smile on her face would disappear. I had watched smiles leave people's face while in the same position as her. That position was just a trap



for the next victim. I knew what was coming for the new girl, call me pessimist and crazy, but that wouldn't still change the reality.

The next time the Manager walked past me, I was logging into my computer. He tapped my shoulders and said: "Can I talk to you in my office?"

He had a sheepish smile on his face that I couldn't tell where it was coming from.

"Just give me a minute Ndukwe," I said and continued typing on the keyboard. He went into his tiny cubicle to wait for me. I walked into the class room and asked my students to trace a shape on Coral Draw. It was still only Chioma that was in the classroom. I passed the instruction and when I got to the door and turned back, she winked at me. I knocked my Managers door and waited.

"Come in," he said.

I opened the door; he was sitting behind his computer.

"Yes, you asked to see me," I said.

"Yes, please, come take a look this," he said, his eyes fixed on the screen.

I went to closer to him to take a look at it. He was working on a spreadsheet program.

"Yes?"

"Yes, I need this spreadsheet to calculate the total sum automatically. I've forgotten how to do that."

"Alright, let me take a look at it."

I took the mouse and started working on it. I leaned towards the computer, a few inches apart from him. After a few seconds, I turned and looked at him, he was sweating profusely. I focused on the screen, again. I was busy working when I felt his cold hands touching mine, then petting it, slightly, as if not to disturb me. I kept quiet, I ignored it and tried to focus. But then, the rubbing started to irritate me. It pissed me off so much and when I couldn't take it any longer, I stood up, turned around and looked at him to see what he was doing. He had his dick in his other hand, stroking it like an idiot. I was mortified and moved away slightly in utterly disgust.

“You fucking pervert,” I said. I wanted to scream, but I managed to keep my voice low: “You motherfucker. Idiot.”

“Please, please, don't shout. Please, I beg you,” he said and quickly pulled his dick back. The strange snake withdrew, lifelessly, in a matter of seconds.

“Fucking idiot. Retard,” I said. “You are lucky. If you ever try that again, I will rip that dick apart,” I said, angrily. I felt so embarrassed. There he was, still sweating like a goat. For a few seconds, I watched him with my mouth open.

Two things could have happened:

1. I could have screamed until the whole street rushed into the building and burned him alive.
2. I could have screamed until the students heard me, that means, the street would hear me, and burn him alive.

He knew that, and it made me wonder why he tried it knowing the consequences that might befall him. He knew that this part of town wasn't safe for him, and his behavior was totally out of line. I wondered what demon directed him to me, and I wondered how many people the demon

had driven him to, to attempt the same thing. I wasn't about to diminish him in any way. But I was against an idiot that didn't know his left from his right. Not respecting personal boundaries, and my boundaries, and my choices too. No, I wasn't going to have blood on my hand. No, I didn't scream, I just walked out of the room, angry. Very angry.

James arrived now. James was another teacher at the institute, a quiet man. Probably he was being disturbed by the pervert, too. I never asked. We never talked about it. My face brightened on seeing him. It was a great relief to know that someone better was around here. James always had a smile on his face, one of his teeth was tobacco-stained, and I never saw him smoke. Maybe he smoked while hiding. Here, people did everything in hiding. Everyone was afraid of everything around him. And trust me people smiled too much too, even me. Being real could cost a man a lot here, people preferred people who pretended to be morally upright.

“Is the manager here yet?” James asked.

“Man, that guy is a pervert. I didn't know,” I said, out of anger and awe. I knew he wasn't going to blow up or do anything rash, I just wanted to know if he had any idea.

“Oh, you didn't know? He has been disturbing me forever and ever,” he said, laughing.

“Man, that guy is an idiot, he is sick. He was jerking off behind me while touching my hand, and sweating like an idiot,” I said.

“You would have slapped the shit out of him and break his dick,” he said and yanked an imaginary dick into two on his lap. The anger and ferocity he exhibited made me wonder if he had been a victim of Nudukwe's perversion.

“Man, this is ugly,” I said.

“Man, just leave him. Let him be. If he tries it again, then report him to the boss. Just let him stay alive, shouting or screaming might lead to his death,” he said.

“Don’t mind me, my man, good to see you. Let me go check my class,” I said to him and walked towards the classroom.

I no longer felt secure here, my job seemed to be in jeopardy. In my head, I was already searching for a new job. I knew I was going to leave the company at some point. I felt mad for being here all this while. I felt terribly unhappy. It paid enough to help my son grow, but not enough to plan for his future. My monthly salary was thirty thousand naira, at a time a bag of rice was five thousand naira and rent almost five thousand a month. It was the worst of times, and I knew it wasn’t getting any better. Things here never get better, they worsened. It was also the worst time to be jobless for me, too. I felt trapped.

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Chioma, and Ada had completed their Coral Draw assignment. Ada was another student of mine. She came in while I was handling the drama, and decided to work on the same problem with Chioma. Ada had just finished her secondary education and was preparing for the University.

“Did you get it done?” I asked Chioma first.

She showed me her work; a layered cube beautifully rendered. I was so happy to see she could do it. I didn’t want to ignore the fact that Ada got everything right too, so I went to her and congratulated her.

“Excellent job Ada,” I said. She smiled, eased herself, and breathed in deeply.

I went to the board and started a new lesson, and as usual, we joked and laughed, and together we created several “Hello Worlds” on Coral Draw computer application. Everything appeared as fine as it should be.

Ada left immediately after class, she said that her mother needed her at the market. Chioma stayed back and said that she would wait for me to finish so we could have lunch together. It wasn't strange, it was long overdue. Also, I knew she didn't mean it as teacher and student, she meant something else, and for some strange reason, I wanted it.

I kept her busy with several assignments while I worked on typesetting and other things that kept the damn business going. I swear, with all the perverts and criminals running this place, being here felt like living with scorpions in a pit.

My mind journeyed down to many months ago, the day Papa came back with his ax strapped across his shoulders, weak and tired. He had been fired from his work at the railroad. A railroad that in reality was never built and never existed in the city. They kept digging tracks that were never laid. That day, he looked so down and couldn't talk, his face bent downwards too. He couldn't look up. A bottle of local gin was by the foot of his stool. He neither drank nor moved. Three of us, my sister, my brother and I, knew nothing, even though we could tell he was sad. We had grown used to seeing him strong and mighty – we believed he could solve all the problems in the world. He taught us that he was the god we see on earth, and I felt that a god couldn't be broken. We ran around the house, playing hide-and-seek. He watched us, and each time I passed him, I noticed that he was in deep pain. I was surprised, so I stopped, stood by the door watching him from behind. Laughter came on his face just like a rose sprouting in a desert, and followed by tears rolling down his cheeks. As a child, I thought it was beautiful that my father could cry. It was an epiphanic moment that kept coming back to me from time to time.

Each time James walked past me, I pitied him. I wondered what his fate would be if this place was to be shut down. Maybe worse than mine. His parents were both ailing, and he was trying his best to see his three siblings through school. He was the only one in the family with a steady income. I knew his story because I visited his house some times. He had worked for this company close to three years now, without salary increment. He was an unhappy man too. Deeply unhappy, but always smiling. The smiles on his face shielded the world away from his own pain.

The thing about the smile on his face was that it looked different, as if he was telling the world “Fuck off, I know you don’t care about me”. His smile was haunting, especially in the sun, when the rays’ stream through the glass door and fall on his face. His eyes would twitch, his left eye would squint, and then a half-crescent smile would shoot across his face like a star, and quickly disappear. Pain was a colorful thing, and it visited many in different ways and manifested in odd forms. In him, pain was a shooting star.

Chioma walked with me down the elevator. She didn’t say a word as we ran down the stairs together, cautiously, avoiding prying eyes. We wanted to get far away from my office as possible. We wanted to go be ourselves and quench the hunger in our souls. Around her, I felt like I could let myself loose. Let myself feel. Let myself love. She was special to be around.

Down the road, I turned back and looked at the balcony. I saw Ndukwe, my manager, standing there like an idiot, watching us with his hands in his trouser pockets.

We made a right and walked towards Imo Transport Company Park, it was like fifty paces from my workplace. Further away, I turned around again and I saw a tiny frame of Ndukwe at the end of a vanishing point, still watching us – maybe in anger and awe. Whatever was his feelings, I cared less.

“Why is he still looking at us?” she asked.

“He is gay,” I said.

“Ah, I see. I knew all along, it was obvious,” she said.

“Keep it to yourself though,” I said, looking into her big eyes. Her pupils were a sparkling greenish color, like that of an alien, and it was beautiful. She looked at me intensely, as if there was something more she wanted to say, and couldn’t wait to say it.

People walked past us in a hurry until we got to Garden Park. There were a lot of young students trying to process their results for the university entrance examination, and they blocked almost everywhere. I didn’t know when I took her hands into mine, and we walked towards Douglas Road holding hands. We talked about the world we found ourselves today. The world of pretense and shit. I talked about wanting to run away from here, at the slightest chance I could get. She thought I was joking, but I meant it. She didn’t like this small town either. Her voice was slightly husky, so whenever she said something to me, I melted deep inside and smiled.

The traders placed planks across the gutter and sold their food. We stopped and priced roasted corn from a woman wearing a raffia hat. We bought two and continued walking. We munched along the way. Soon, we got to our destination, a restaurant down the road. We walked in and sat down. I held her hands still, unconsciously. No one knew us. No one had any idea about us, where we came from or were going. We could have been travelers that just dropped from the numerous bus stations along the street. We could have been lovers on a journey into the unknown. We could have been anyone. Sometimes, animosity brings out the best of you. All of you. Then you explode and begin to be your true self. We didn’t even talk about starting a relationship or something, just by the look in our eyes, we could tell that this life was meant for us.

I could care less about how unethical it was to be with my student. What we felt, the freedom, the passion, was enough to carry us through any wave attempting to crash at us. I felt like it was just like an opportunity to let the deepest part of my soul explode. Not by mere words, but by ways of looking and loving, and telling, and smiling, and laughing, and forgetting. Knowing that even if I wasn't sure about myself, how handsome or hot I was, that someone was willing to let me hold and feel her hand in a nice way, made me feel alive.

This was some of the times when I ate without looking at my plate, but focused my gaze on her face, just watching her sitting right next to me. I felt my heart beating, beating, beating towards her. I swear, I was in love and I felt it. I was in love for the first time in my life, and it wasn't just a hunger for sex or something, it was a different kind of hunger, the hunger to live and be with her.

"You see why I asked you to come, I know that you wouldn't regret it," she said.

I did nothing but smile. What I felt was real and I couldn't hide it. She smiled too, and none of her teeth showed. Her eyes blinked beautifully, and I could tell she was in her own kind of paradise. She ordered the same food as I did, rice and beans with stew, plus a side moimoi, but hers came a bit a late. I waited until her food arrived before eating.

"I have nothing to regret," I said.

"You are a brilliant and charming man," she said, looked down at the caked red earth, and continued, "and I have admired you from a distance."

"You are a beautiful girl, and I feel different now that we are away from the office."

"You deserve to be elsewhere; you sound smarter than being in that stupid place."



“Well, sometimes, life pins you down and gives you no options and no place to go. Like a man thrown into the abyss, all you can do is yell and hope that you will make a landing, and yet you never make a landing. The modern world has thrown many brilliant minds into the abyss,” I said.

“Did you go to a University?” she asked.

“No, I never went to one. I couldn’t afford to. My parents couldn’t afford it either. And I am not even willing to,” I said.

“I see,” she said.

She sounded a little skeptical about my decision not to try, especially in a country where everyone was trying to be a graduate.

“That is the smaller picture. The bigger picture is that none of us knows anything, and none of us is getting out of life alive. Look around you, does it look like where educated people exist? Education should be progressing us, not taking us backwards. I mean, it doesn’t excuse my lack of it, but it isn’t worth it,” I said, with all sincerity looking at hopelessness that I felt around here.

She just kept smiling and looking at me, like all my dark thoughts and words meant nothing, and it made me wonder if she understood any word I had said.

“Where do you live?” I asked her.

“Not too far from here, Orji,” she said.

That wasn’t too far from Imo State University, I knew the place very well.

“Maybe I can come pay you a visit someday?” I said.

“Any time,” she said.

“Tonight?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

I felt like I had won a lottery. We ate quickly. I paid and we walked into the night. It was around six o’ clock in the evening when we left. It was almost dark. The light from burning charcoals lit our path. Women sat beside the lights, fanning their corn and calling customers to come and try it. Occasionally, a car passed and brightened our path with light from the headlamp. It rained lightly, raising a lot of dust and chalky smell.

A little bit down the road, bus conductors screamed on top of their voices, competing among each other as to who will out-scream the other. We walked through the chaos and kept walking. We walked until a bus stopped in front of us and the conductor screamed: “Orji, Orji!”, and we ran into the rickety bus and sped away. We sat at the back of the bus, kissing. Loving. Saying things, we couldn’t remember to each other. The old woman in front of us tapped us and said, “My children it is not good to be kissing in public.” she turned her wrinkled face away from us.

We stopped kissing. I didn’t want to be disrespectful, not to an old woman. But it was deeply painful to know that a public display of affection seemed inappropriate. I held her hand and looked outside the window. I watched the streets. I watched the houses with electric light. I listened to the symphony of electricity generators humming across the town, playing an eternal jazz. We drove past the government college Owerri, past the government secretariat buildings and down into the night. By a shopping plaza, the old woman stopped the bus and got down. She looked at us as if we were an abomination, and walked into the street. For the last time, our eyes met, hers

were fierce and angry, and mine was filled with love. I watched her and thought about what she was thinking. The bus drove deeper into the night and joggled down potholes. Soon we forgot that she ever existed. We had the whole backseat to ourselves. We began to kiss again, and this time, we made sure that no one was looking at us.

When it was our bus stop, we got down and walked towards the street. Down the road, bamboo sticks were laid across as a sign that it was being watched by security men. We walked deeper into the street until we got to a waterlogged area. Three sandbags laid still in the stagnant water. I watched her skillfully navigate by stepping on the sandbags. I followed her. I stepped on the first one and jumped to the second and jumped to the next until we got to dry land and continued further down the road.

It was too dark. The only lights on the street were dim rays from lamps in people's houses. We switched the lights on our phones to see the path clearer. Inside an uncompleted building beside us, a woman was shouting at her child. Smoke rose from the zinc crafted kitchen on the outside of the building. Children ran in the dark and their laughter filled the air. For a moment, I remembered that we did that as children: play in the dark, especially on rainy nights. We called it dancing in the rain. I smiled as the memories came to me. We walked further down the street until it branched into two. We took the left turn and kept walking until we got to a gated bungalow. We walked into the house. A dog barked and startled me. I stood and watched. I thought it was going to jump out of the building at any moment.

"That's Mighty Billy," she said to me. "Shhhhh, Mighty Billy, Shhhhhh!" she shouted back at the dog and the dog hushed. The dog's house was beside the main house, but I guessed the dog was inside the main house. We walked to the back of the house, there was a two-bedroom boy's quarter there painted yellow with a small balcony.

“Why name a dog Mighty Billy?”

“Well, that will be a very good question for the owner.”

She unlocked her door and walked inside, and I followed behind her. It was dark at first, then she groped around until she found a rechargeable lantern and switched it on. I gently sat down on a chair by the mattress spread on the floor. She walked to the restroom and peed. I switched on her radio, and a song came up. If I remembered correctly, it was, “Thank God” by DaGrin, featuring Omawunmi. I removed my shirt and eased myself. Everything in the room was girly and beautiful, I could tell her favorite color was pink. She had a nice set of pink bedsheets, a pink clock, a pink towel hanging on a stand by the television.

When she came back, I walked up to her and held her. She lifted my face up with her wet palms and kissed me. She kissed my eyes my lips my mouth my nose. I was so hot and hungry for her like I had never felt for anyone else before, this feeling right here was new. I lost my mind at that very moment, and my shame too. I couldn't have been freer inside of me. Everything seemed to have perfected itself at this moment of intense love. And the strangest thing happened, Sam Cooke's “A Change is Gonna Come” began to play, right out of nowhere. My soul waltzed into a free fall and I felt like I was falling in a dream. The joy of floating freed my entire being, and we continued to kiss.

“So, you listen to this kind of music. I thought I was alone in this world,” I said and kissed her lips.

“No, you are not, this is the best song in the world,” she said, drew me closer and kissed my lips. I placed my hand on the wall for balance, but she weighed me down and we fell on the bed. Chioma was a woman of great strength. We both laughed at my light weight. We laughed at

the fact that I couldn't hold on, that I wasn't that strong. These things didn't matter to her. My hands were all over her. For a split second, the melody of Sam Cooke captured my mood. I wondered if this was all it took for one to want to live and breathe and love. Just chance. Just whim. Just something I haven't yet tried. Just something that was in front of me all this while.

My hands moved into her panties and caressed her buttocks and wetness and all the love she held deep inside of her soaked my fingers. She moaned and smiled and smiled and moaned and looked at me through those greenish crystals in her eyes, which I believed was a reflection of the small green light seated on her windowsill. We sucked whatever we could find on your bodies that belonged to us. She sucked my penis, and I sucked her breast. I used the last strength I had to get her off me, and gently penetrated her. We moaned. We eased all the cravings that had lodged in our bodies from the first day we set our eyes on each other. We saw our beginnings and our joy, and each step we took towards this moment of love and ecstasy. And when I came, she came with me. I swear, my heart was filled with so much joy that I collapsed on the bed and began to sing and hum and hum and sing.

“What are you singing about?” she asked.

“Nothing. I am just in one those moments where one can't keep calm or restrain himself from joy,” I said.

“Will you regret this?” she asked, thinking somehow that I might wake up the next day and curse myself for having sex with my student, but I wouldn't.

“No. No part of it. Even if it meant giving up my life for this very moment. It is like finding myself for the first time. When I tell this story, I won't miss any bit of it,” I said.

“Tell the story to who?” she said and laugh and laid her head on my chest. Her small breasts brushed against me. My heartbeat paced like blues and rhythmmed like jazz. I stroked her hair gently.

“You never know, I might one day decide to write everything down?” I said, imagining myself a man of words, which I didn’t think was possible. I could see Prof becoming a man of words and letters, but me, no. But I told her this because I wanted her to know that our stories were worth telling, and maybe one day I might choose to be more. Our love was worth seeing, even if we didn’t call it love, yet anyone that read it would feel it. It doesn’t matter what we called our relationship, the definitions were irrelevant. The most beautiful thing here was this moment that we shared together, what came out of our eyes and entered our souls, love, pure love.

“If you ever write it, describe my beauty as you see it. Tell the world about us, about our moment in this small town,” she said. She was a very confident woman. Her familiar characters shone on her face and gently tapped me in my sensitive parts.

Well, she wasn’t all mine. I couldn’t just think about why she wasn’t all mine. I wished I could have her in my bed every night, I wouldn’t have to move over to the edge of my bed. I wished a lot of things that I couldn’t have at this moment. I felt sad for the fact that I couldn’t just set things in motion as fast as I wanted them. Annie flashed through my mind like a character in a freak show, scaring the shit out of my decisions. Obiarika was the angle that kept me sane. I saw him, hovering without wings, and I didn’t want to hurt him.

“I guess Snake Girl is one Bollywood movie I want to see again,” she said.

“Well, I always loved Hollywood movies better, but the dance in Indian movies is something though. I don’t really know if I hate them or like them, well, the dance in Snake Girl wasn’t that bad. I love Chinese movies too – How can I forget The Drunken Master, Snake in the

Monkey Shadow. But I think Ousmane Sembène made beautiful movies, too. I have seen most of his movies and I think you should too,” I said.

“I have seen Xala, it’s a beautiful movie. Talking about Chinese movies, my brother went crazy after watching them. The one that took him off the chain was The Drunken Master. For two weeks, he practiced martial art in our backyard. I remembered the one time he went and drank my father’s palm wine. Two kegs. Alone. He was so drunk that he started doing his Kung Fu moves, badly for him, my father decided to leave work early that day. When he got home, he found his son drunk and practicing Kung Fu. Oh my God, you should have seen the kind of flogging my father gave him that night,” she said. We laughed.

“I didn’t know you had a brother?” I asked.

“Yes, I do,” she said.

“Since you are telling awkward moments, let me tell you this one. One day, after watching the movie, Commandos, I designed a gun that could shoot pins and tested it on our goats. I herded them into our garden and began hunting. I shot two dead. When my father came back and found out what happened, and he went mad. He went to his room and brought his cane; he flogged the demons out of me that day.” We laughed after I finished telling the story. She got up, walked over to the refrigerator, took out a cold bottle of stout, and opened it. We sat up on her bed and drank together from that bottle. She threw her arm around my neck and kissed me over and over. The pink clock ticked eleven. A gecko stood right there wagging its tail. When I noticed the time, I flipped and started dressing.

“I must go,” I said.

It occurred to me that Annie was waiting for me now. I checked my phone which I tucked in my trouser pocket and saw ten missed calls and several text messages. I quickly replied to let her know that I was alright, and also on my way back. I took my things, kissed her on her forehead and dashed into the night.

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The night was pitch black as I stepped out of the bus, I barely saw where I was stepping on. I walked down the street, towards my house. I wished that I was drunk or something. My heart was beating like a stereo and the sound filled my head. By the uncompleted building, I saw The Pharrell smoking weed with his boys. His gang had made a landing, again. They laughed loudly with red dots of fire burning from their fingertips, illuminating the night like fireflies. Everywhere smelled like weed. I hurriedly opened our gate, walked inside, and closed it. I looked at my time, and it was almost twelve midnight. I walked to the stairs and climbed up.

When I got to my door, I waited for another two minutes, contemplating whether to knock or not. Finally, I mustered the courage to face her wrath and whatever was coming for me. I knocked. No one answered. I knocked again and waited, but no sound came. I tried to push the door open, but it wouldn't. I tried my key, and the bolt didn't budge from the inside. It dawned on me that she bolted it from the inside. I sat by the door, thinking. I thought about how quick it was that every beautiful thing I was feeling could easily be overtaken by fear. After a few minutes, I closed my eyes and slept, and all that fear swimming in my body slept with me.

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In the middle of my dream, I felt hot water spreading on my skin and jumped up. Annie stood in front of me like Wonder Woman in a Hollywood movie about to dissolve her enemies. I



tried to squeeze out water from my shirt while looking at her. Her arms were akimbo, and her body was rocking like a newly repaired motorcycle engine. She stared back at me as if I had an explanation to give her. I swear, she made it easier for me. Without talking, I walked into the house and removed my wet clothes. Annie followed me, screaming: “Ashawo, Ashawo nwoke!”.

I locked the door and sat in the room with Obiarika. I wished he wasn't here to witness this. To hear his mother screaming about his father's misbehavior. It wasn't his fault anyway, no one chooses where to be born, neither to whom or when. If we had that luxury, we all could have had an entirely different parent. He looked at me and smiled and held out his hands. I carried him to the balcony at the back of the house, and we watched the end of the street together. The street was serene, almost gentle, a gust of wind and dew were rising at the river and green vegetation surrounding it. It looked almost dreamlike, to view everything happening around me as one slide. We watched brown roofs scattered like a pile of discarded leaves along the river bank.

“Dada...” he said and pointed at the moving clouds. The sun was setting, a set of beautiful pink clouds gathered around it. I cried inside of me. I couldn't tell if what I was doing was the right thing. If my feelings for Chioma was right. If abandoning Annie was the right thing. If pain and agony I've put Annie through were right. I couldn't tell if doing the right thing was even right. I put Obiarika in his cot and watched him sleep peacefully. I knew that the right thing to do now was to dress for work and hope for the best.

## Chapter Four

The bus dropped me and I decided to walk. The wind was strong today, and the milder, and somehow enjoyable. My skin turned white as it brushed against the harmattan wind traveling down south from north. I was wearing a light green shirt with black pants. I walked along fire service Owerri, towards Relief Market. Annie gave me a list of things she wanted me to buy for her.

Christmas was fast approaching, and everyone wanted to make fast money. People were walking up the road. They brushed against me. I brushed against them. Good people. Terrible people. Swindlers. Tricksters. Mostly tricksters and swindlers trying their luck with the crowd. Whenever I was on this road, I assumed that everyone I encountered was out to grab something from me. I walked cautiously, trying my best to avoid bodily contact. Children hawking plantain chips, banana, peers, maize, and coconut on metal trays. Children supporting their family, carrying the weight of the world at a very young age. They asked me if I wanted to buy it. They begged me to buy. I had no change to spare, only sympathy from my eyes. Sometimes, this city gave me vertigo. My body jittered from the fragments of pain that were visible on other bodies. Bodies that looked like me. Bodies that could have been me. Bodies that were me.

At the red gate of Christ The King Church, an elderly woman was blowing fire in a charcoal stove, beside her was a basket of corn and purple pears. She was old enough to be my grandmother, and that made me sad. She was sweating profusely and fanning herself with a plastic fan. Our eyes met, she smiled at me, and I smiled back. Around here, time moved in reverse, things worsened by the day, and it was evident on this street and on the bodies walking around it.

A mad man in rags with a basket on his head walked towards me. I walked consciously and a little scared, I didn't know if he was going to attack me or not. He kept talking to himself and making hand-gestures with his imaginary friends. He dragged his uncombed hair with his hands as if all his problems resided there. He scratched his body like a dog fighting to remove a tick. When he got closer to me, he spat at me, I dodged and kept walking. My heart skipped, even though I expected the worst from him.

I wondered why the mad man spat at me, *maybe I am cursed or something?* But I removed that from my mind – no one could actually be cursed, and if there was anything cursed, it was earth itself. I walked towards a *folknizer*, a tire repairman. His engine was running steady, his body and white shirt were covered in black grease. He laughed at me and said: “that mad man wants to eat you alive, right?”

“My brother, can you imagine? I don't know what I did to him.”

He touched his head with an index finger, as if ideas resided there, and said, “When he spat at you, I saw demons leaving his body to possess you. I will give you this advice, wash your body at the river, and rub olive oil, and before you sleep, put mustard seeds around your bed.”

“Did you really?” I asked.

“Yes, you must remove the curse or it will grow and affect you and your family tree. Come to our church on Sunday, right behind the yellow building,” he pointed at it, and continued, “you will be cleansed, God has cleansed a lot of people down there.”

“No, problem. I will.”

While he was talking, a vulture circled above us and flew towards the Catholic Church down the street. I thanked him and left. If I were a naïve person, I would have freaked out. I would have run to his church for salvation. I would have gone looking for mustard seeds and olive oil to bathe myself in. I knew that all he said was a lie, and even the mad man could have been arranged by him.

Soon, I was far from the area and approached the busy open market. I saw a man selling pigeons in a cage. I counted ten.

“How much for all your pigeons?” I asked him.

“Five hundred naira my son.”

I bought all the birds and carried them along with me in the cage. I added my transport money to my balance and bought food afterward. I held two leather bags and a pigeon cage and walked in the sun. My mind ran to Chioma, it’s been two days and three minutes since she replied to my text message last. She filled every space in my heart these days, and sometimes I found myself laughing for nothing, just at the thought of her. I checked my phone again and there was no reply from her. I kept walking on the road that led towards my house.

I started daydreaming about how I would talk to men in space. Men that lived in the orbit, collecting data and making sense of it, and in constant communication with the ground control. I thought about all the things I needed to fix the communication device – a couple of diodes and semiconductors. I remembered where I could buy the parts at a very cheap rate in Douglas, and decided to visit later.

All of a sudden, a tricycle nearly ran into me, and immediately I jumped over to the other side of the road and screamed: “You idiot!”

The driver turned back and spat at me, and laughed hysterically and rode towards the market unapologetically. I was so mad that I cursed him inside of me, and kept walking. It was the second time someone spat at me in one day. It seemed as if these events were pointing to something sinister, but I choose to ignore them.

I took the river side to avoid all the madness of the road. I wanted to be alone on a path and not be disturbed by a mad motorist. Nwaorie was at the other end of the street, deep inside, through the dense vegetation. I walked to the quietness that serenaded the ever-green lush path, corn, and cassava splatted around me. Fog rose deep among the palm trees down the river. I walked until I saw the water flowing. I walked until I was two inches apart from the river, and could see my shadow floating on the surface of the water, along with dancing ferns and sea shrubs. I walked until I got to a tree, and decided to rest under it. I sat down and stared at the beautiful pigeons in the cage. They looked at me, chirping and jumping around. I saw their souls, begging to be freed. I couldn't understand why a man would want to cage an animal and own it. I couldn't understand the origin of our selfishness. I hated seeing birds in cages. They belonged to the trees, and rivers, air, and whatever they choose.

I opened the cage and watched them fly away. Three perched on a nearby tree and sang their hearts out. They twisted their heads at me and bit into a ripe mango. they all flew away after filling their stomachs up, and I was left alone to my thoughts. I began to ponder the affairs of my life. Annie hadn't forgiven me for coming back late. She kept reminding me of my sins every other day. She chose not to speak or look at me. Not that it mattered to me, but honestly it wasn't that bad before. I mean the silence was alright, but it was ill-timed, and I felt guilty about it. I wondered if these were the stories she would tell my son about me when he grows up. *If Obiarika hears all these, what type of a father would I be?* I felt as if everything was crashing down on me, I felt as

if my head was about to explode. Sometimes, it seemed better to end this life, and probably that would settle it all. Whenever I thought about life like this, it came like a wave and overwhelmed me, it dragged me through the dirty streets of forgotten memories. I remembered when my father couldn't find any job and roamed aimlessly under the sun, I remembered how it made us feel, something I don't wish for my own son. Just the thought of it brought back all that original feeling, and I felt like I was back in 1993, still on that street, walking and feeling hopeless. Pains drenched my body like water. It dawned on me, the weight of existence, the weight of life, what it meant to trudge on, the price of love and hate. I felt like a jetsam sailing on the river.

*Why not end it all, right now, right here?* I asked myself.

The river was all me, all of my shadows and screams and reflection. The river was me, young, breathing and running away from the boy that threatened to beat me up because he could, and because he was the class bully and had already pushed little boys under his armpit and made them sniff it. The river was my uncles telling my father that we would amount to nothing in life, that any money invested in us would amount to nothing, and that since I failed my examination, it was better for me to learn a trade than go to the university. The river was me deciding that I wouldn't try again, that I wanted to be me, poor and hollowed, dancing in the shallow waters of nothingness. I choose this life, and it chose me. The river was my mother fainting due to migraines, ailing, taking medication every night and day. Sometimes, I had to hold her hands and walk her to the market. Sometimes, I had to walk her to the bus stop because she couldn't stand and needed to be at work. Sometimes, I had to sprinkle water on her because she fainted, and I was with her, alone, young, so young and embarrassed and heartbroken. I was only thirteen when her illness began. I watched her take pills all her life, I wondered when she would stop. I wondered if the perfect woman was an ailing one because my mother was ailing and perfect. I had a sister, who

was driven insane by madness. The last time I saw her, her scream roared into the heavens from the windows of an asylum. She never made it out of that asylum. The river was me wading through particles of myself, trying to rise against my own weight, floating through life, proudly floating through life, and yet knowing that nothing was left of me.

The river felt old, tiny fishes swam to my leg and kissed it and swam away. The river flowed. The river hissed. The river danced. The air was warm and the sun was full. Happiness seemed so distant; all the joy I have felt seemed short-lived. It died at this very moment. I raised my hands and screamed deep into the earth, but no heard me. I slowly submerged myself into the water and the only things I could think of was *death, death, fucking death, who the hell are you? Who do you think you are?*

The waters covered my face and began to drown me, bubble by bubble. The pain was hard and went straight to my brain. It felt beautiful to watch life depart from my own body. And it seemed hard to reconcile with the fact that in a few seconds I would be nothing, lost, non-existent, and returned to dust. I opened my eyes, and saw this reddish fish at the tip of my nose, breathing life into me. Urging me to go out and go on. For a moment I saw my son in his eyes, I managed to push myself out of the water immediately and laid down to dry. I looked around the earth and all his work was good. I closed my eyes for a brief second and opened it. I turned my head towards the little road. The little road meant a lot to me. It led me to the chasms of my childhood, the things that I couldn't make sense of. The things that I remembered faintly. Tiny particles of thoughts that never went away. When memories dissolve, they form particles, indivisible particles. These particles have a life of their own, and visit you in many ways, many times, in many worlds. Like an epiphany, I saw the tiny roach branch into another tiny road in my village, and I saw women accusing my mother of witchcraft. They said she was the cause of my uncle's illness. They said

she was ailing because she was a witch herself. The wife of my uncle clapped her hands and danced and cried and swore that whoever did this to her husband would die suddenly. That road suddenly closed and disappeared. Around here, no illness befalls anyone from nature. Every sickness, every death had a hand in it, here. That time it was my mother's hand they accused. We sat around her as if we could protect her from the world. From the bitterness and vile people. From culture and belief. I know I had harmed myself, but society had harmed my childhood more than anyone. They tore the veil of my innocence and opened me to this brutal world. I wasn't ready to see my mother cry; I wasn't ready to see my father defend her and was also accused of being an accomplice. I wasn't ready to see the villagers avoid them. Grandpa kept quiet and watched them. He only shook his head. He was old and frail and had already said his bit. No one listened to him, everyone was looking for who to blame. Those that went to a witchdoctor returned with the news that it was my mother, those that went to the church returned with the news that it was my mother, too. There was no difference between the church and the witchdoctors, I swore to stay away from them. From their lies.

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When I got home and saw my son, I felt alive. When I saw Annie, I broke down crying. I knew she might have thought me less a man for crying. But I needed to shed those tears. I needed to let the brutishness and unkindness of the world fall off my skin and become my shame. She held me and asked me what was wrong, but I said nothing. I said it was alright. I said that I just wanted to cry. I held my son and Annie together. For a moment, they meant something to me at the same time.

I left them and walked into the living room. I switched on the turntable my father left me and played the music of Oliver de Coque, and the world made sense again. His song, *biri ka mbiri*,



spoke through all the corners of the earth and bellowed deep into my soul. I danced with him towards the ends of the near empty seating room, with a few upholsteries apart. I danced towards the two wall geckos climbing and dancing. I remembered that geckos danced whenever they climbed. I remembered the happiness in my son's eyes, and it seemed sufficient to keep me going. Annie felt overwhelmed and all of a sudden, she forgave me of whatever I had done wrong. When she walked past me, she seemed happier, stronger. She gave me Obiarika and went to the kitchen to cook.

Obiarika was smiling as I rolled him in my arms. I kept him on the floor, and watched him walk. He took a few strong steps towards me. He laughed, and danced. I felt so happy to see him dance. He was growing into a man. He was growing to understand melodies and things around him. He was old enough to visit where he came from originally, even if he wasn't wanted there. He belonged there, to the land of his father's father. He belonged to that bloodline and lineage. The time was coming. I was still contemplating whether to travel for the Christmas holiday or not. Each time I thought about going home, I felt ashamed of taking Annie there, and walking around with her. I felt ashamed of being seen with her, I didn't want to be seen with her, and I wasn't proud of this feeling either.

Soon, Obiarika was exhausted, he lay on my old worn out upholstery and slept. I went outside and began to work on my machine. I removed all the power coils and began to recoil it. I checked for integrated circuits that might have burned out, and began to remove them. In my old dead television laying at the other end of my space, I found replacements. I drew out lead from a coil and soldered the integrated circuits. I tightened the board in its compartment with tiny screws. I plugged it to a current, and turned it on. The sound came alive. The light on the indicators came alive. The hands of the indicators moved. I raised my hands and screamed aloud as if I had won a

jackpot. When I realized that I could wake my baby, I put my hand over my mouth. I was happy the machine could now receive power. There were still other things to fix, but that would be later.

When night came, I dropped my tools, and walked into it. Its cold arms embraced me. I walked towards the crooked road to Prof's house. He lived like three miles away from me. It been days since we last saw each other, and from his text messages, it seemed like things were going well for him and that girl. It seemed like he was happy and in love. His texts messages seemed to stripped of his usual linguistics verbosities. Falling in love makes one's life simpler. You worry less about a bunch of shit, like pleasing the society and following dogmas. You begin to see the life within you, the real you.

Prof that couldn't stay a day without coming to my house was nowhere to be found. I walked along the tarred road that led to the market. I walked until I crossed the main road and began to walk into the water-logged street. Soon, I was at Prof's gate. This area was famous for producing the best and the worst alike. Touts like Benjamin the Drunkard, who famously sat on a highway drinking beer with his friends, and nothing happened, the governor couldn't do shit to him. The police couldn't do shit to him. He held Owerri hostages for years, coordinating crimes with his gang. He was later hanged by a defiant governor who said enough was enough, after they were caught for running a kidnapping ring. Two bullets to the heart by a soldier with raffia grass tied to his helmet. The whole of Owerri watched the execution, and a doctor had to make sure that he was dead. Benjamin the Drunkard grew up here too. A famous footballer once lived here too. He later went to play for Barcelona in Europe. After he became famous, parents sent out their children to play soccer, believing they would make big like him. It was customary to be greeted by children playing soccer in front of the building every evening. Bare chested. Dribbling. Scoring. Rejoicing. Their bodies wet with sweat and shinning under the sun.

I walked into a public yard, and witnessed a cacophony of tenant's jolting over their chores. Washing. Cleaning. Baking. Tanning. Joking. Laughing. Fighting. Bathing. Washing. I walked through the long passage until I got to Prof's room. A pile of unwashed clothing stood by the neighbor's door, stack up like the groundnut pyramid in Kano, and smelled like fish.

Prof lived alone in a single room with shared toilet and bathroom. All the tenants in the compound, like twenty of them, made use of one toilet and bathroom. The thought of using their toilet always sent feces back into my stomach. The stench hovered across the building. sometimes, and I wondered how they ate in such a place. It was the cheapest room one could find around here. Prof was ordinary folk, he cared less about how or where he lived, he just wanted to have peace wherever he was and to get himself together for whenever he would get a bigger job.

I saw Prof seated on a bench with a bunch of papers scattered all around him right outside his room. He was wearing black shorts and a red t-shirt and appeared way more serious than usual. His spectacles perched on his nose. He looked at me as if I were crazy. I waved my hand in front of him to draw his attention.

"What are you working on Prof?" I asked. I found a seat for myself and sat down.

"A book," he said.

"What type of book are you working on?" I asked.

It was my first time seeing a man with that many papers around him. Each chapter was bundled safely with a rubber band. It was about twenty-seven chapters, hand-written.

“A novel, about everything. About our life here. About what we are experiencing here. You know my friend, I have read many novels and I can’t find myself in them,” he said, and grimed.

“People think they can write us into history the way they want. Without knowing what it means to be us, or how we feel what we feel. They consciously eliminate poor folks, and those of us living on the margin, and pretend we don’t exist. They want to look fancy before their publishers, and afford themselves the rotten dignity of living abroad. Most African intellectuals and writers are cut off from the realities of our existence, they discard us and write their middle-class bullshit. That is why I began working on this book. And, since I’ve found love, it has given me more energy to end this story in a perfect way,” he said, and continued to pen words on his paper, furiously. The last time I saw him this serious, he was taking his final exams at the university.

“I really love this idea Prof. Do I appear in the book?” I asked.

“Oh yes, as my dear friend, and truest friend. As a man I have known all my life, a man that faces his own reality even if it kills him. When this book is published, you will go down the memory lane and be remembered like all the great literary characters,” he said and peered at me through his spectacles, and smiled roughly. I smiled back at him.

It felt good to hear that a man such as me could live in a book, and breathe for eternity. A man whose parents were excommunicated by the elders for a long time in the village. A man that had attempted suicide several times. A man that continued to question his own existence. I looked at myself again. I laughed inside me, and wished he truly knew what I looked like inside.

“What’s the title of the book and how will you publish it?” I asked.

“*Kill a Man First*, that’s the title. Don’t ask me to tell you what happens in it, because I hate to do that. Wait until I get an agent in the USA or UK. I hate the US; I want the agents in the UK. It might take years of trying, but I will sell it one day.”

“So, people will read us in future?”

That part marveled me, it raised something deep in me, that my existence could be exciting in the end. That I could be worth something on the pages of Prof’s novel, even though I truly felt like shit. Prof continued to add words after words. I looked inside his room, and a girl lay on his bed sleeping. It was the beautiful girl at the bar, Nkechi. She wore something light and transparent, and thought they must have had sex. I didn’t ask, but I was curious.

It was getting dark, Prof continued writing without saying a word to me. I looked around his compound and the ever-steady drama it provided. Two women fought because their children were fighting. I observed Prof, writing faster than ever, trying to capture the ambiance of the events as they occurred. A chicken walked past and pecked an ant, divided it into two, and proceeded to swallow both parts. A little bit further, a goat tried to eat the pumpkin leaves in a small garden, and the owner of the garden came rushing with a pestle in hand. At the same time, the owner of the goat ran quickly dragged it away. The two men started cursing at each other. I wished Prof could capture it all, the chaos and the beauty of the chaos. What we lived for under this sun.

Soon, the old man that lived opposite Prof came out of his house. He was holding a seat. His face was bright, his beard, white. He wore a light blue shirt with Harvard written across it. He also put on his cap showing that he was a titled man according to traditions. I wondered what he was still doing in township when men his age had returned to the village. The old man looked at me, and smiled, and sat down.

“John, have you come to see your friend Prof? he is a courageous young man. A man with a bright future,” the old man said to me, smiling.

“Pa Njoku, you definitely stating the obvious,” I said.

“My son, you are a wise man. You see great things. Even though you’ve spent most of your lives here, still, you embody that ancient wisdom of a traveler. You deserve the world to see your handiwork and praise you,” he said.

I have never sat down with Pa Njoku to discuss my life or told him anything personal about myself. And yet, he talked as if he knew my past, my present, and future; and it marveled me. Or maybe, he was telling me what I needed to hear. I once heard some call him a witch a long time ago. Sometimes, people treated him with disdain, like he was just an old fart. Like the day I saw a woman cursing him out, and he said nothing. He quietly walked into his room and closed his door. I didn’t believe anything they say about him, Prof doesn’t believe it either.

“I see Prof typing a lot of recent, I know it must be a book. I know he is trying to make sense of his world,” Pa Njoku said.

“How did you know Pa?” I asked.

“My son, I might look like an idiot. I might be old, but I am not an idiot. I went to school when grammar school was grammar school. After school, I worked as a government clerk. I have seen our civilization through the eyes of our forefathers. I have seen what it was and what it can be. I have seen young men like you question my intelligence over and over, and I do nothing but laugh. I have watched Prof closely, writing paper after paper, no man gathers that many papers without thinking about publication. I worked with Harford Gravey when he published, *In and Out of Africa*. I worked with Gerald Comb when he published, *A Cultural People*. I have been around

my son. I have seen wise men come and go. I have seen fools come and go too. I have seen young men return from abroad and write about our culture from things I have said, they return back to America and Europe, and become Professors. What do I get from it? Nothing. They become the wise ones, and I that gave the material remain poor and foolish.

“I served Harford and walked with him through the jungle to meet men in the hinterland. I saw what the white man was after in our life, and it was never beautiful. May evil never swallow us,” he said.

He removed a snuff box from his pocket, and hit it twice. He opened it, scooped some with his thumb and pinched into his nose. He sneezed twice. His eyes turned red. He looked into nothing and shook his head. He looked into nothing and laughed. He looked into nothing and waved his hands at a fly that was about to perch on his nose. He blew his nose, and took a deep breath. I watched him closely and with great interest.

“Harford will say to me ‘Ejiofor, interpret for me’, and I will tell him everything the diviners said, or everything the priests said, or everything the elders said. He would write it down in his journal. When we arrived at Igboukwu, Harford was stunned by what he saw there. The bronze crafted by these men were second to none. Some of the technologies found there were farfetched from their own technical know-how or approach. Some of the methods disobeyed conventional laws of science. Harford said that himself. He asked me to interpret everything they were saying, and I did. He jotted it down. He said to me, ‘Ejiofor, this is wonders. This is wonders’ you see. He knew what they were. He knew what we had.

“I saw our fathers, and I can tell you about our fathers. I can tell you the type of men they were. These lazy-thinkers coming back from Europe and America cannot be compared to them.

“When our fathers laid down their weapons and let the white man have his way, it was for us to see this day, and at that time, it was what any wise man would have done. What have your generation done so that your children will see tomorrow?” he asked me and looked towards the sky, sighed and spit. He took another pinch of snuff in his fingers and put it in his nostril. He sneezed. And sneezed, again.

“What was life like before the coming of the white men?” I asked.

Prof stopped writing and brought his chair closer to listen to the old man.

He smiled and looked deep into the night. Prof and I followed his eyes, but saw only trees and darkness. A few seconds later, the moon appeared again, exactly at the point of his gaze. The moon was brighter. He smiled strangely, removed a cigarette from the packet, crossed his leg and pointed at the moon.

“In the old days, before the coming of the white men. There were Moon Chasers, *ndi na achu onwa*. Have you ever heard of them?” he asked.

“No,” we both answered.

“There was never a time Igboland was one, as a people. Igboland has been many things but never one. Never one tradition. Never one culture. Never one land. The freedom across lands was the greatest gift of all. Each group of people could make their own rules and live however they wanted. This story happened in our land, *Umu Aki*, where I was born. It happened before the coming of the white men. Once upon a time, the elders decided to follow the moon and find out where it was going, and why the gods placed it there to see us.



“Men were selected to chase the moon. Strong men that could walk, run, and observe the moon before it disappears into daylight. These men were tasked with recording everything about the moon, where the moon comes from and where it is going. It was these men that built everything about us around the moon: time, love, gods, dance, market, songs. In *Umu Aki*, up to today, everything still revolves around the moon. We never knew what the white man’s clock were, but we knew the moon.

“When I talked to Harford about this thing, he said that the moon was a satellite, and controlled the flow of the water here on earth. Our elders had known this long before the coming of the white man. But how do we know what our elders knew when almost everything they knew is now myth and legend. These men tasked to follow the moon discovered many things that were never written or recorded in writing. They were hidden in songs, and these songs are still being used in *Umu Aki* to this day. My ancestors knew that the moon ruled us, the moon watched us, they moon closed each month circle and brought good fortune to the land. They knew that the moon was made of land and people lives in it. Do you understand?” he asked again.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“But what was the main function of the young men selected to chase the moon?” Prof asked.

“The elders selected six men for moon chasing. These men, all sailors, were sent out through the river to find the moon. It was the most ambitious journey of that time. Among the six men of them that went on the journey, only one man returned. The man that returned lived to tell the tale that I am about to tell you now.

“The men sailed in search of the moon. They followed the shallow waters with canoes until they joined the ocean. And then came their worst nightmare. Wave after wave pounded their canoes. They men literally fought against the sea. They adjusted their sails, re-roped it, and paddled against the high waves until the sea calmed down a little bit. Then the main battle began. They battled against hunger, having lost all their food to the sea. They battled against their own imagination in the form of monsters and singing mermaids trying to lure their souls away.

“Their boats crashed into an island in the middle of nowhere. Lucky enough, they all survived the battle. They cut down trees, and carved them with worn out tools, and began to build bigger canoes. They used that time to also observe the island and the moon. They recorded details of their discoveries. Mostly animals that we never imagined, they existed. Around the island, they saw a tribe too. Men with reddish skin that rode on horses and camels. They didn’t know who they were and tried to make contact. The tribe turned out to be flesh eaters, and attacked them. Three of the moon chasers were hunted down and eaten. Three escaped with the boat, and found themselves back on the high sea. Two died of hunger and disease. The last man standing used the stars to navigate back to our village. And that was how he found himself back in *Umu Aki*. And that man was my grandfather.

“When he got back to the village, no one recognized him. No one believed that he was still alive. It was many years after he departed. No one believed his story, they thought he was a mad man that had wandered into their village in the dead of the night. Most of the elders that sent them out to chase the moon had died. There was only one way to know, there was a tattoo engraved on the back of each moon chaser, and record of this tattoo was passed from Chief Priest to Chief Priest. By this time, three Chief Priests had already died.

So, the elders sent for the chief priest. The chief priest came, and performed several rituals. When he removed his shirt, they saw the tattoos, and welcomed him back properly. When the villagers heard his stories, about the sea, about the strange world out there, about men that rode on camels and horseback with their bodies painted red, about bays of gold and shores of silver, and winds so strong it could rip a man apart, and mermaids swimming endless with no sight of land, they marveled.

“He brought back stories, and these stories could only be told by the moon light till this day. He brought back memories of the wise dead men that journeyed with him. The villagers understood what it was like to chase the moon. They understood that the moon was a world of its own. To us, the moon means time continuum. It means today, it means repetition. It means what is to come. It means what has already been here. It means now. Here. Us. Under its pull, telling stories,” he said, and he breathed.

None of us moved. We wanted to know more about our how our ancestors made sense of the heavens and what it meant to gaze at it infinitely, and imagined all kind of things. The old man smiled at us, and gazed at the moon again.

“So that was how moon chasing ended in *Umu Aki*?” I asked.

“Well, that was how it ended. But did it really end? Or, did all of us become moon chasers? We all became moon chasers, all of us. Each man that hears the story becomes a moon chaser. You and Prof, are moon chasers,” he said, and puffed smoked into the air. He placed the cigarette in a tray and watched it burn for a while.

“We are moon chasers?” Prof asked.

“Are you not? You’ve heard the story,” the old man said.

Honestly, I didn't know if he meant it literally or metaphorically. But, whichever way, there was a sense in it. Because life and myth were no different, here. Myth has simmered into our realities, and become a solid truth. Myth had always been part of us and still is. And some of these myths were once living stories; they were how our fathers made sense of things. But moon chasing wasn't a thing of the past, like he said. It was an integral part of our science, our philosophy, and our metaphysics.

"Yes, we are," Prof said affirmatively, to himself, and then to us, "Yes, we are."

He removed his spectacles and cleaned it. The moon was just above us, looking at us. It was almost eleven at night, the old man yawned, and covered his mouth with his hands.

"Young men, I must go to bed now," he said.

He stood up slowly and painfully, probably suffering from arthritis. I helped him and moved his chair inside his room. It smelled like a rat died in there. The only light shining in the room was from the moon. His cooking pots were littered around, empty and dirty. The walls were black with soot, like he kept his stove close to the walls. He asked me to help him with a plate and food in his cupboard. When I opened the cupboard, cockroaches ran out of it. I scooped the rice for him and helped him warm it on his stove. Pa Njoku's children and grandchildren were scattered all over the world. The wife died a few years ago, and ever since, he had been living alone. I gently closed the door while he was eating.

I saw Prof and his girlfriend playing on their bed. The door was ajar. They seemed happy together. I was a little surprised and envious that he found what he was looking for in life. For a minute, I sat outside watching them. They kissed and laughed and touched each other's face, lightly. I knocked on the door to let them know that I was coming inside.

“Ha, Prof, who is this beautiful lady?” I said pretending like I hadn’t met her before.

“John, meet my love, the moon chaser in my life, the love of my life, the only boat in my ocean, Nkechi. Nkechi, this is my dear friend John. We have come a long way in life. We have seen the worst and beautiful things together. If you want to know me, you can always ask this man, I trust him with my life,” Prof said.

When he said *with my life*, I melted. I felt happy that someone on earth valued me that much to think me so important in his life.

“Nice to meet you my lady,” I said, and bowed generously, keeping his traditions, too.

“Nice, to meet you,” she said and took my hands in hers. We shook hands. I felt like it was some kind of movie, one of those movies a geek ends up marrying the most beautiful girl in the school, and it was happening, all before me.

“I hope he is taking good care of you?” I asked.

“Honestly, I couldn’t have imagined anyone better than Prof. I couldn’t have wanted anything else. He is kind and loving, so different. With Prof, I can be myself, and that matters most to me,” she said.

I understood why they were together now from what she said to me. Life could only meet us in strange places, at where we needed it greatly. I was happy for him. I remembered to call Annie before it was too late, she picked up the first time that I called her. I handed the phone to Prof so she wouldn’t think otherwise. Prof talked to her first, and then I took the phone from him and let her know I would be coming back soon. It was getting too late when I left. Prof, and the girlfriend walked with me to the main road.

I tried to ask her a few questions while we walked: “what do you do Nkechi?”

“I work at the bank,” she said.

When we got to the market, beside the broken fence, by the main road, they stopped.

“All right my friend, have a good night. Why don’t we all gather at Nwanyi Ncha’s place soon, and drink to this new and beautiful friendship?” I said.

“Oh definitely, it is the place we met. So, we will continually go there to renew our love and friendship. Nwanyi Ncha’s place is a *cine qua non*,” Prof said.

We hugged each other, and I walked into the night, alone. Down the market road, the light shining on the street was from trader’s kerosene lantern, and helped me not to step on mud or hit my leg on a stone. A few paces down, electric light was returned. People screamed with jubilation as if a miracle appeared for all to see. I have heard the same noise since I was a kid, since electricity became epileptic, since nothing worked to improve it either, since the machinery that ran this country began to slowly collapse and fade into oblivion, since politicians got greedier and greedier.

I walked past three security men armed with bows, arrows, and guns. They looked at me, cautiously. I walked cautiously. They were mostly men from the north, dressed in danchiki, chewing sticks and waving weapons. Here, neighborhoods that could afford security, employed one for themselves, and it was always someone from the north. They believed people from the north weren’t greedy, so they served as the best security around here.

People provided securities for themselves too. The only thing the government could ever do for you here, was arrest you, jail you, murder you, and bury you in a mass grave. That was it.

The government was a waste of blessed cosmic time, and if possible, should be scrapped in its entirety.

I thought about Prof's novel, everything him and I had been making sense of in life. I thought about how they could fit into a book. I thought about what it meant to capture our own existence, all the pain and joy and sorrow in one book. I smiled. It was a beautiful reason to live on; to watch my friend's dreams come true. He had always been with me in all my adventures. I had a penchant for oral tradition, and he had a liking for written words. Memories of our school days found its way back into my head. Prof always had a book with him. He was always reading, and because of that, people picked on him. Readers were a sort of endangered species here – it was a sign of weakness and not strength. I always protected him from trouble, from people that thought he was too weak to survive here.

One day, we were returning from school when a big boy with husky voice approached us and asked us to follow him. Prof had a copy of Dostoevsky in his hand. We had an idea who he was; a notorious bad boy in the city who molested other students. He was a bully and no one dared him. Even parents were afraid of him. Rumor had it that he once slapped a parent for confronting him about his child being bullied. He was the closest thing to hell that we knew back in those days. The pulse of our hearts could be read from miles away, beating in fear and uncertainty while we walked in his direction. He led us to a bush path, and sat down in between two Melina trees. I thought about the things I had with me in my pocket. I knew he was going to take them away from me. I was beginning to shiver, visibly.

“Why are you always reading books?” the bully asked Prof.

“I just enjoy them,” Prof said.

He asked us to kneel down and raise our hands up, and we did.

“Who has book helped around here? You think you will drink and eat book? You think this is how you will survive this world?” he queried us.

“No Sir,” Prof answered, crying. I said nothing.

“Idiot,” he said.

“Yes Sir,” Prof replied.

I kept quiet; my eyes closed. I just listened. He never talked to me. He snatched my bag from me, opened it and took all the candies I had in it. He did the same to Prof. He took prof’s novel and looked at it, flipped it as though he was reading it, and gave it back to him. He dipped his big hands into our pockets and found a few coins, and took them all.

“Stand up!” he screamed, and we did.

“If you call your parents for me, I will fuck them up too,” he said. “Now, get out of here. Run little rats!”

We both ran as fast as our little legs would carry us, and Prof was far ahead from me.

“He is gone,” I said when he met up with me, “Say no word to anyone about what happened here.”

He shook his head. I was afraid too, but I had a lot of composure. I had more stamina than him. I had more understanding of the world than him. I knew that if we were to survive, we needed to learn about the street. In the end, the street would always be the street. When we started walking, I noticed that Prof had peed his pants, and I couldn’t contain the laughter that followed afterwards.



I told him he needed to have “liver” to survive on the street. Having liver meant surviving the assault of the street. The person in the street becomes the street, one way or another, there are no two ways around it. When things happened to us in the street, we need the language of the street to overcome too.

He knew that if there was any man that would protect him and his interest, it was me. He was really lousy. I never bothered him to be someone else other than his lousy self. But, his father did. His father said he was too weak to survive around here. Whenever he could, he threw his books away and asked him to go learn boxing or karate, something that wouldn't get him killed. I remembered our life on the streets and how often I thought we wouldn't make it out of it, but we did.

I kept walking towards my house, armed with nothing but memories of me and my dear friend, on our condemned streets.

## Chapter Five

I was an avid art collector. My corridor was full of art collections. On the passage to my bedroom, I hung paintings on the wall, and kept carved artifacts. One day, that might be the only part of us in this city. With all the history that had taken place here, yet, there wasn't a museum. The artistic hands of men carving and selling and making art, became a beacon of light for me. I realized that I could collect them myself. Sometimes, I imagined people were frustrated because all the places for artistic expression had been demolished and churches erected in place of them. That was our saddest reality.

On this day, I was with Chioma, walking down the major street of Owerri, looking for art works to buy. I turned and looked at her face, and my heart gladdened. Her hair was weaved all back, and the wind pushed it a little upward from time to time. She removed a wet gloss from her purse and massaged her lips delicately with it. The weather was getting harsh on our skins, turning the white from dryness. My lips were dry too. I wet them with my saliva from time to time. She looked more beautiful than ever; her slender body fitted in a blue gown that glowed amid the chaos of the street.

A few days ago, I was telling myself that I would avoid her in the office in order to deal with myself and all that was going on around me. Here I was, with her again. Something about her kept beckoning me, and I had no resistance than to heed to its call.

“I hope we make out of this year's harmattan alive,” she said.

“Previous years, we've complained of no harmattan at all, and here it is crushing us to madness,” I said.

A thick fog rose at the far end of the road, and when we got to it, our vision was temporarily blurred.

“I mean, I used to love it. When we were small, it smelled like *nzu*, and I always wanted to lick it,” she said.

“Me too, I love the smell dust in harmattan,” I said.

We walked calmly along the road, holding hands and watching what was left of our city. In the middle of a roundabout, rubble of a demolished sculpture stood, and slowly was being carted away. There was once a beautiful sculpture around here, at least three decades old, an effigy of a strong black man with puffed muscles in an O shape. It was nearly thirty feet tall. Now, it was nothing but pieces of cement heaped in a pile, beside the pile of rocks was a newly installed massive Christmas tree. They said it would attract foreign investors to our state, and yet we haven't seen any since the new governor took power. Before me, the ruins of our civilization were being taken away, stone by stone. I kept walking, knowing that I could do nothing. Just nothing.

“I want to spend the Christmas with you,” she said.

“I really want to, but this time around, I want to be with my family in the village, and it will be too sudden to bring you home with me,” I said.

I didn't want to tell her about Annie and my son. I thought it wasn't the right time to say something like that. I knew that one day she would force me to take her home, and I would then tell her my position, eventually. If she truly loved me, she would stay. Yet, I was afraid of the decision she would make.

“No problem, but if you ever need me, you know where to find me,” she said, and winked at me. I swear, there was magic in her eyes, and I saw it dancing around her iris.

Before her, I felt naked. All the love I had for her rested on my face. I knew she could see it. She just took me as I was. Like she wasn't ambitious with me. Like just the moment that she was with me mattered the most to her. The freedom of time in context to love. That beautiful whim, devoid of all planning instinct. I knew that whenever someone would love me that way, it would make all the difference, and here she was.

By the post office, an old man sold wood carvings, and another sold old books. We walked under the canopy of tree, towards the post office's façade. Two beautiful colonial styled pillars held the building together. Books were displayed on the floor. I looked at them for a while and couldn't find a book I was interested in, and moved a little further, where a young man displayed woodworks. There was something so original about his art; the texture and shape raise curiosity in me. His artwork were mainly regular household items but blended into something magical. Piston, mortar, wooden spoons, etcetera, etcetera. There were wooden birds, wooden lion, wooden tortoise, and an effigy of *ofo*, an effigy of *ikenga*, polished and waxed.

“How much for the *ikenga*?” I asked.

It was a replica of the two faced *ikenga*: one looking into the future, and the other looking into the past. I picked it up, ran my hands through the edges, and admired it. I could tell he put in so much work into it. The ugliness of the face was quite remarkable and fascinating, almost new – resembling the exact primordial skill that had been long lost. I felt as if it was staring at me, and into my life. It felt so real to hold a sacred totem.

“The *ikenga* is two hundred naira,” he said.

“Man, this is real skills, how did you learn how to carve?” I asked.

Chioma looked at me, and pointed at a lady’s shop a few paces away, and walked over to buy things that she needed.

“It has been in our bloodline, my father carved the real things; *ofo*, *Ikenga* and the rest. He made graffiti for shrines and other things. It’s a gift from God,” he said.

I dipped my hand into my pocket and produced two hundred naira, and handed it over to him. I took the artifact and placed safely in a leather bag. I met Chioma at the beauty shop, waited until she finished paying for her items, and we left. We stopped a bus going toward Nekede zoo, and entered.

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I just wanted us to have some time alone, I just wanted us to breathe from nature and think and love where no one would see us. The bus stopped us by the bridge, and we walked across the road and made our way towards the river. When we got there, we sat down on the red sand, and watched the river flowing, with her head on my chest, and nothing but silence around us. There was something fulfilling in watching the river here, I felt like all my desires could flow into her and live in her, and all her desires in turn could flow into me and become part of my life, and the river like a priest in a wedding ceremony, beatifying all our heart desires. Here she was before me, and I was melting like ice.

Canoes passed. Slowly. Birds with beautiful feathers perched on palm trees and whispered beautiful songs to us, and we relished in the moment. This river was different from the one I tried to drown myself in. The river before us was *Otammiri*. It flowed like eagle wings through the narrow strips in the middle of the city and joined Nwaorie underneath a bridge where the coloration

is distinct. When we were little kids, we sometimes skipped class to come to this river and swim. We pushed against the current harder and harder until Caleb couldn't move any further. He drowned. His body was brought ashore a few miles from here by a fisherman. The river still smelled like that day; like fish, like chalk, and at times, a waft of dead things.

“I don't know if I love you or not. Maybe, I just care for you. Or, I just want to be here. This moment. This very moment,” I said.

“I understand what you feel deep inside, but look at where we are today. When we started, I didn't know that a day like this would come, when we will leave everything we are doing to sit before the sun, by the river, and bare our heart, think of love and how much we enjoy each other,” she said.

She closed her eyes. I looked around, and no one was coming. I kissed her lips. I licked the cracked part until it softened, and bled. I tasted her blood. My tongue brushed against hers. Life seemed lighter. Without love, we would all be dead, we would all give up. Deep in the sky, I saw a hanging bird fluttering its wing. It moved again, and stopped and danced. I watched in amazement. I had not seen the bird in a very long while, in fact since I was a little boy running shirtless and pushing a tire along on the small road that led to the stream. I followed the bird until it disappeared behind the tall palm trees. Today was the second time in my whole life to behold it, and it amazed me.

I looked into her crystal burning eyes, and all I could find was love. An abundance of love. We kissed again, this time, fiercely. A man sailing in the open river saw us and screamed, “Take it easy lovers!” And we laughed. He laughed too. He dipped his paddle deep into river and sailed west. Someone still had a sense of humor around here. I wondered who he was, and what his life

was like. I wondered what it was like to have his life. Sail towards nothing. Toil on waters. Fish. Breathe water. I wondered what it was like to be a moon chaser, and sail across the ocean.

“So, what do you plan for the future?” I asked her.

“Well, I am almost done with University. Probably, I get a job with the bank, earn good money, and start a family. Not too much I guess, but it will be enough for me,” she said.

My mind ran to Annie, I imagined if she had had a good education, would things had been different between us. I tried to answer it in my head, *no, no, no*. That question was a trap for my own self. I fell right into it. I knew I was avoiding myself. I knew that lying to myself was plausible, a matter of not really being in the situation. If I was in the situation itself, I would be in a better position to answer. Anyway, Annie hadn't any good education.

Grandfather laughed at me when I asked him if he loved mama. He said they grew into love, he said it wasn't there at the beginning. Their marriage was arranged by both parents, so it took some time for them to truly fall in love. He wedded her in the church when he was eighty-four. He said he later loved her. I doubt if that was love. In my own thinking, I thought he didn't have any option but to submit to life, to stop trying. Love what he had, even though he wasn't in love with her. Learn to live with her, even though he didn't want to live with her. Maybe love the children enough to love her. That was what my friends called “settling down.” One could “settle” with anyone. One could “Settle” when they've tried their best to have the best and it continually turned out wrong. One could settle for the sake of having children. One could settle for less, for coins, for security. One could settle just to prove to the others that you could actually “settle.” To settle was the main verb around here, one which everyone someone dangled towards.

*What could I settle for? Was I settling even without knowing? Was my fear of speaking the truth to this woman part of the life of comfort?* I thought to myself.

“And you, what’s your plan?” she asked.

“I don’t know, honestly, I don’t know. People grow up with dreams and want, but I have none. I have nothing that will impress anyone around here. Or maybe my dream is to live in a place that will treat everyone equally, and provide for everyone. Well, let me put it this way: I don’t have that longing for wealth and riches and all that. I just want peace. Just some fucking peace. If I can have it,” I said.

On a guava tree, a flock of birds swooped in. I watched them, unconsciously, forgetting where I was at this moment. The birds looked similar to the ones I set free.

“Maybe my dream is to be free. Like a bird. To dream of little things and be happy. To have just a little life. To go to the moon, or another planet. But, when I talk about these things, I run the risk of sounding stupid. I’ve been called crazy many times,” I said and sighed.

I knew that she might try to understand what I was saying, but those words certainly meant that I was insane, and my dreams weren’t even realistic. It felt like the first time I was asked to say what I wanted to be when I grow up. I was in primary school then. And the clock was ticking. Tick. Tick. Tick.

The teacher asked again, “John, what would you want to be when you grow up?”

I stood up. I didn’t want to say anything. I didn’t want to be a lawyer or a doctor or an engineer. “An astronaut,” I said.



“Astronaut? What is that?” the teacher asked in a low voice, and evidently, she hadn’t heard anything like that before.

“People that go to the space,” I said.

“You haven’t finished living on earth, and you are thinking about going to the space. You must be watching too many television shows. Don’t let the white man deceive you with all those dreams. Beyond those clouds is heaven and nothing else,” she said and laughed at my skewed mind. The other students joined her and marooned my little dream with their wicked laughter. That laughter still echoes in the dark chambers of my mind till this day. I sat in that class, hopeless, and I never wanted to feel that way again. From that day, I learnt that fear had origin.

“It’s alright to have a dream. It’s alright to think that your dreams are bigger than you. It’s alright to think that you are going to fail. Do you know what happened to my brother, the one that I told you drank a lot of wine, and practiced the Chinese kung-fu?” she asked me.

“No,” I said, and sat up, eagerly.

“He always said that he wanted to be become actor in a Chinese movie. We all thought he was stupid or something like that. One day, he traveled to China, and lived there for several years. During a movie production, they needed a black person to feature in film. He went for the audition, and was picked for the role. Today, he has been featured along with stars Jacky Ling, and Bling Ji. He is living the impossibility, not just his dream. Men have always lived the impossible, beyond their dreams. Men had always dared the unknown, and that remarkable feat has produced the best of our kind,” she said.

I wanted to love her a trillion times, if there was a space to love like that. In fact, my love looped to infinity at that very instance. A woman that could live inside the mind of a man and try

to understand his words before they are spoken. She was worth everything. She was that dream. She was everything that I had imagined.

“You are a smart woman, and I will count myself lucky to spend the rest of my life with you,” I said.

I meant it. Every bit of it, even though I knew that I wasn't strong enough to do that. Before I could make such a move, I might as well kill myself, because Annie would kill me first. I saw Annie as a woman that had nothing to lose. Yes, I was afraid of everything around me. I was afraid of being my true self. But moments like this gave me insight and escape at the same time. I wanted to tell her how much I loved her, but I didn't think it was the right time. I didn't know if I truly meant it, or if I would disappoint her in the end. The end wasn't something I anticipated even though I should have. It was my dark side. The end.

I took her soft light hands in mine and kissed them, softly, with my eyes closed. I kissed them again, and again. I looked into her eyes. It was true. What she was feeling. Love, love and love. And, she wasn't even asking me for too much. Just love, to be loved. Not money, not show, not expensive restaurants. She just asked me to give her back what she had given me and that was fair, I could live with that.

The day matured into an evening, and it was time for us to part. We were now at the bus stop. We kissed again. Passersby watched us. They hissed, and struck their fingers at us, violently. A woman said, “What type of generation is this!” and walked away comically holding a walking stick. I heard another passerby say, “It is not our culture.” I didn't turn to see who she was either. I was stunned at how people had taken turns to describe who or what we are, represent, or want to be. Everything against their ethics were against their culture, and everything in favor of tradition,

was for culture. Culture was locked, and the keys destroyed. It wasn't changeable or malleable. It was an unlivable stiff neck situation that drove me mad.

*I love; therefore, I am* I said to myself, and we kept walking down the road. Chioma entered a bus. She waved at me through the windows. I waved back. I watched her ride into the falling sun. Then I entered a bus and left too.

## Chapter Six

A few nights later, around midnight or early morning, shots were fired in the neighborhood. The sound roared deep into my dreams and shattered my inner consciousness. I woke up, and ran towards my son. Annie was awake, panting. She covered her mouth with her hands. I asked her to hide under the bed with my son. I went to the wardrobe, pushed the ceiling aside and brought out my pistol. I loaded it and walked cautiously towards the door. I heard someone scream in pain like he was being tortured.

“Shut up! You think you can fuck me up?” a voice screamed at the subdued victim.

My heart was beating fast. I leaned against the wall, tiptoeing towards my living room. I listened attentively, and it was clearly the voice of The Pharrell. I recognized his voice. I couldn't mistake it. I heard the victim wail followed by a sharp slap and harsh hush. I heard The Pharrell order him to bark like a dog, and hoot like a monkey. The victim did all that. A bullet was fired again, and I heard someone scream in pain and agony.

“Do you know who I am? You want to fuck with me in this street. I will fuck with you. I will fuck you up tonight,” the torturer screamed and the victim begged.

My son started crying. I walked back into the room and asked Annie to cover his mouth. I firmly held the gun and resumed my advancement posture. Honestly, I wasn't sure what was coming next, but I was sure that the first man to walk through my door would drop dead. I was sure about that. I swiftly walked into my living room, and towards the balcony.

“Let's go, let's go,” The Pharrell screamed.

The last bullet was fired, and I knew it was the kill bullet.

I stood at my balcony and watched. I saw The Pharrell and his gang running towards the gate, I had a clear shot. I could have taken them out. But I couldn't squeeze the trigger. They quickly climbed on their motorcycles and drove away. A trail of dust followed them. I slowly opened my door, and at the same time, my neighbor Mr. Okpara slowly opened his door too. Mr. Okpara lived on the first floor. He had a machete with him, and his body was shaking. I aimed at him and quickly retracted when I sure it was him. We ran to upstairs together without saying a word. Mr. Suleiman's door was open. Blood was everywhere. Suleiman's mutilated body lay on the foot mat by the entrance. The close-range double barrel shot had torn his head apart making him almost unrecognizable. He had two bullet wounds on his left leg, and another in the stomach.

I knew those that killed Suleiman. I knew that was the beginning of their kill list. I knew that everyone who attended the neighborhood security meeting would be targeted. It wasn't safe around here anymore. The night became colder all of a sudden. A brutalized body lay lifeless just as a warning to others that the street still belonged to The Pharrell. That he was still in charge.

It took the police six hours to arrive. We stayed with the corpse and watched it all night, till morning. Okpara covered the dead man with his bedsheet and kept hissing.

"Ah, Ah. Just small thing, I would have butchered those sons of bitches. Those cowards," he kept saying all through the night. Each time he said it, I looked at him intensely, as if my eyes were made of laser aiming to pierce his damn senseless head, ~~and looked away~~. He disgusted me, but I said nothing. My gun was stuck in my trousers with just a safety pin attached. We were all cowards. We all hid in our apartments while the killing was going on. I accepted my cowardice, but not Mr. Okpara, and others who didn't even open their doors, who were busy praying and thanking God for sparing their life.

We checked his phone. We found the contact of his family in Kaduna. I didn't want to be the one to tell them that such a horrible thing had happened. I gave the phone to Okpara, and in the early hours of the morning, he made the necessary calls. I heard the cry and hopelessness of the family at the other end of the receiver. I heard the wailing and it broke my heart. I wished nothing else but justice for him. But it wasn't going to be me that would get in trouble with The Pharrell.

When the police arrived, the sun had risen. They called the ambulance and started asking questions about what happened. No one knew anything. The wall geckos in my living room knew nothing. The crawling centipede on the rails of the stairway knew nothing. The frogs in the stagnant water, outside the gate, knew nothing. The owl that cried at night knew nothing. Every living thing in this neighborhood knew nothing.

We knew that The Pharrell had moles among the police ranks, too. We knew that we lived in a corrupt system, and I swear, the police weren't my friend. We all wanted to wake up to the next day without being hacked to death at twilight. Three lazy police officers wondered around with no writing pad or paper. Their interviews were more like a discussion than a collection of data. It was when they arrived that I left to wash blood off my clothes. Delicate lines of blood, caked and lodged in my blue shirt. Later they knocked at my door. It was now that I took a closer look at them. One was short with a mustache. The other one had hair all over his body, tall. He stank terribly, as if he was dipped in some ammonia shit. The third man whom I believed was superior to the other two, he had a baton on his left hand, fat and with a pot belly, and his uniform wasn't tucked in.

The pot belly boss that spoke up, "Good morning, sir, we are here to ask you a few questions. Just a few."

“Yes, go on, sir,” I said.

“At what time did you hear the first bullet fired?”

“Around 1 AM or maybe 2 AM,” I said.

“How many bullets were fired at first?”

“A lot, I can’t count,” I said.

“Did you by any chance see the face of the men that killed him?”

“No, sir,” I said and bit my lower lips in anger.

“Do you think Suleiman might have been involved in something that exposed him, or with people that wanted him dead?” he asked stupidly.

“Not that I know of,” I said.

“Can you recount the events of the yesterday again?”

Medical personnel walked past us with Suleiman wrapped in a white bag, and headed for the back of a police car. They flung the corpse down there like it was nothing. He lay in dirt and stench of the car. We hissed. We spat. We cursed whoever did it and we watched the car move down the dusty path.

“When I thought the assailants might have left, I walked out of my door, and met my neighbor, Mr. Okpara, coming out too. We found the dead body of Suleiman, and called the police. And if there was a quick response, we might have had a chance of apprehending the assailants. But no one came all night,” I said.

“Yes, that was due to some technical issues at the office. My apologies to this neighborhood. I will station my men at the street entrance to monitor criminal activities. We will crack down on the criminals. Soon, they will feel the sting of the Nigerian Police Force,” he said.

I looked at him as if he were a fool for saying that.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Thank you, Mr....?” he asked.

“Mr. John, sir.”

“John, yes John,” he said, and turned to his boys, “let’s go.”

I stood on my balcony till the last police vehicle left. I couldn’t move. I was lost, deep in thought. Annie and my baby were safe, and that mattered to me most. What if they had come for me, would I have fired? Yes, I would have. I would have gone for the kill too. They might end up shooting me dead though. The idea of a bullet ripping through my head flashed through my mind. I wondered how the contact between flesh and metal would have felt. It looped in my mind, over and over. It seemed ordained to happen to me too. It seemed like it was just a matter of time for it to get to us all. I looked up, the sun had risen at the level of my eyes and bled down the horizon. I went back to room and took the pistol from under the bed. I looked at the silver pistol, again. I ran my hands across its smooth edges. I removed the bullets and kept it in the ceiling.

I walked into the shower, turned it on and sat there. The water kept running and running, and my head seemed as if it was going to explode. I swear, it was about to explode. Annie knocked on the door, but I didn’t answer. She forced her way through by slamming her massive body against



the door. The door caved and she walked in. I didn't flinch or open my eyes. She thought something might have happened to me.

“Help me! Help me!” she screamed.

I quickly ran out, and hugged her. I felt so small in her grip, and told her I was alright. That nothing was wrong with me. I was just lost in the stream of my own consciousness. Behind her was my son, walking, holding the wall for support, and braving his steps. The innocence in his eyes struck into the windows of my soul like an arrow piercing skin. I took my son into my arms and he hugged me. I kissed him all over his face. In my eyes were tears, shame, rot, and devastation. And wonder. And fear. Fear of what was to come, of all the things I couldn't give him. I cried.

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I walked into the barber's shop by my apartment. They were talking about the killing and playing hip-hop music. When they noticed me, they stopped talking, but the music continued playing. After a few minutes, they started talking again. I needed a haircut, and I wasn't in the mood to talk to people. Sammy was barbing someone's hair; his lips were apart. His two front teeth were brown and broken. He was still the same old-big-mouth Sammy.

He was the best barber around here anyway, and I enjoyed the attention he gave my hair each time I visited. Cutting my hair was a bit tricky, I had an accident when I was little, and the mark was still visible on the left side of my head, above my ear. Any time I visited a new barber, they always made a mistake of cutting into it and making it visible. It was only Sammy that knew his way around it, without making it look visible. That was the only reason I kept coming here.

“They shot that man mercilessly. They butchered him like a ram,” Sammy said.

His two minions nodded their heads. I sat down, picked up a magazine, and began to read.

“I heard you were there?” the other barber said to me. He was new; tall fellow and light skinned. I knew they had been talking about it all day.

“Yes,” I said and looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was wild. My beard was wild. My mustache was wild, too. I looked terrible, like I ran out of the forest after being lost for several years. I had forgotten the sweetness of a fresh haircut. The newness of look.

“How did it really happen?” Sammy asked looking at me intensely as if I was about to lie, as if my version would be different from the others, as if there was something odd about me, and even my presence here or anything, as a witness too. To me, the look wasn’t strange, it was a symptom of what ails us. No one trusted the other. That was it here, that was an art of survival, and all men that trudged this street understood that.

“Well, I heard the shots...” I began.

“I heard it too,” Sammy cut in, I gave him a stern look that meant *shut up, I am talking*, and he understood and kept quiet.

“I stayed indoor until they left,” I said.

“How did you know when they left?” Sammy asked.

“I heard them say ‘let’s go’ and their footsteps got louder on the stairs, then I heard their bikes start,” I said. I looked at him as if to ask, *is that all?*

Sammy finished cutting the boy’s hair and asked me to take a seat. I sat down, he covered me with the white cotton cloth, and went ahead to rub white talcum powder on my chin and neck.

“What style do you want?” Sammy asked me.

“Clean shave,” I said.

The clippers began to hum, and soon burrowed into my beard, gently. Hairs began to fall off.

“But, if you heard the voice, you must have recognized it,” the tall new guy asked me.

The other boy never said a word. He was a quiet gentleman, a good listener and always minding his business.

Thunder struck. The heavy thud of rain descended on the roof. The sound made it seem as though earth wasn't earth. I felt lost, like I was in a projection.

“No, I didn't recognize the voice,” I said in a near robotic voice.

“What was the dialect like? Did it sound like central Igbo?” Sammy asked.

“I said I didn't recognize the voice,” I repeated, almost violently.

I felt like I was being interrogated more at the barber shop than by the police. I swear, I was more afraid of them than the police. They could easily sell me out, and for nothing.

“Calm down man, calm down,” the tall guy said.

“What is your name?” I asked him gently.

“Ebube,” he said.

“Ebube, listen. What happened here last night was the death of a friend. A man I have recently come to know for his tenacity. He had his struggles. He had a life. Apparently, he just came here for work, to make money and probably retire back in his city one day. I want you to see

these things. Just few hours ago, I heard gunshots that killed that man. I saw his body lifeless, and pieces of flesh scattered all over the floor from torture. Apparently, I never knew that man was all meat. He was all meat on the floor you know? Just like beef or pork or shit. Do you know that the blood that splattered in his living room and balcony is still there? A man died here, show some respect!”

They kept silent. They didn't say a word. I sat there for another thirty minutes of awkwardness. Only the sound of the humming clippers between us. The sound of trimming and shaving overcame their lust for data. I sat there thinking how foolish men could be. Thinking how their chief concern wasn't the man that died, but in serving as moles for the killers. Well, that I couldn't verify, but I knew their motives wasn't far from that. Or maybe I was just paranoid. Whatever the case, I was glad they shut the fuck up.

When he finished shaving, he dusted me as if I was a bag of feathers. He took the methylated spirit and poured it on my neck. A slight tinge of pain followed. I stood up, angrily dipped my hand into my pocket, and brought out one hundred naira and gave it to him. He wanted to find the balance of my money, but I refused and walked out. When I got to the door, I screamed, “Fuck all of you!”

I stood there and watched the horror in their faces. I stood there until my scream had filled the air and echoed in their soul. I stood there and watched while they bowed their heads in shame. I looked outside, The Pharrell was rocking his bike up and down the street. The same bike that was used for the operation last night. The same police stationed at the beginning of the street hailed him. Screamed his name out loud as he shook hands with them and put bundles of cash in it. It broke my heart.

We were just a lost generation, trudging in the desert of life, hopelessly. My soul bled and the veil of my sanity became dust and fell on my path and blinded me. First, I thought I had lost my mind, and I said the same word over and over to myself, *I am a strong man, I can get through this.*

I kept saying those words until I knocked on my door and Annie opened it. I kept saying those words until I walked into the shower and turned it on. I didn't turn off the shower after for a long while, I didn't mind what Annie was thinking. Moreover, the door was already broken, she could come in at will. I saw death walking up and down the bathroom. Dancing. Practicing his show of fear and force. I had seen death before, but this was different. This was death raining on me, rushing into my mouth and face and being. I sat under the running water, breathing.

I saw death when my father breathed his last in my arms. He choked, and it seemed as if he was swallowing his own tongue. He seemed angry, he seemed unfulfilled. It seemed like he wanted to live on if he had the chance. That look of surprise on his face as he breathed his last, had stayed with me up to this day. I had seen death around me. I once watched a friend die. Knocked aside by a bullet. *Tua, Tua. Tua*, three bullets rang out and into his belly. He flew across the gutter, and rested and struggled and struggled and rested. Two more bullets were offloaded into his stomach. It was at the gate of Imo State University. He was killed by a rival cult. He bled and struggled for life, just like father. He had that surprise look on his face, like he wasn't expecting it.

A dying man would always try to hold on. Try to keep life at all cost. The last urge one feels was to hold on, the urge to keep living. That was why I didn't drown at the river. That last urge. *What if people gave up freely, and welcomed death instead of fighting it, would it be easier?* I watched death dance before me.

When I walked out of the bathroom, I felt better. I lay on my bed watching Annie with Obiarika on her back. She rocked him over and over. Obiarika fell asleep and woke up, several times. She didn't know what to do to make him sleep. For all of her crimes I have heard of, I have never asked her if any of them were right or wrong. Including sleeping with The Pharrell. I turned my head the other way and stared at the wall. I knew that I would never ask her. Soon, I fell asleep.

## Chapter Seven

Nature was us. Nature was our beginning, and would be our end. It was in my nature to drink. To merry, and not to succumb infinite melancholy. I finished work early and decided to meet Prof and his girlfriend at Nwanyi Ncha's place. The bus dropped me, and I walked down the road. Nwanyi Ncha's place was a few paces away, and soon it came into view. I was wearing a suit over my white pristine shirt, with a black silky pants that matched perfectly. And of course, a pair of brown suede moccasin shoe. Prof and the girlfriend were already waiting me.

"My great friend, I have been about you! The horror and the brouhaha of life have kept you away from us," Prof said slowly, stressing key words like "Brouhaha" and "intimate" like a scene in *The Godfather*, with the Don talking to other wise men. I wasn't in the mood for the joke at first, but it reminded of where I was coming from. My home. Humor. Dark humor. How we could manage to laugh in the most extreme condition.

"Prof, you opine that I have suffered chaos?" I asked and laughed.

Everyone in the bar burst into laughter. The new Catechist was there again, he screamed, "Nwanyi Ncha, these men are here again, they have destroyed my medulla oblongata and re-strategized my head. May their children never ever resemble their landlord. I say, give them one bottle each!"

Nwanyi Ncha fumbled into the room, and gathered bottles of beer for us. I was happy for the free drink. I was happy that there was a place we all could run to and be safe from ourselves. The Catechist kept smiling at us and expecting another joke. Another man, Aja, who claimed his wife beat him up on a daily basis, he sat opposite of prof laughing. Ije Ego, who worked by the hand and preferred to piss away his money, sat at the end of the wall beside the big speaker pinned

to it. Akpan, the Calabar man, who hasn't visited his homeland in a while because he was poor, sat beside Catechist laughing with his mouth open. And the other men that I didn't know were laughing their hearts out. About five of them, whom I believed had their own reasons for being at the bar. The bar calls you; you don't call the bar. When, it does, like a faithful disciple, you journey to it and become part of it.

"Catechist? This man you see here actually has a son," Prof said pointing at me rudely, and comically.

"Ehhh," Catechist answered.

"But, emm, emm, we don't know if the child is actually his or the landlord's," Prof said.

It was a joke. A hard one to stomach. Everyone burst into laughter. I laughed and fell on floor, stood up, and dusted my pants. I ordered the next round of drinks for everyone. Prof's girlfriend sat lady-like drinking sparingly and laughing cautiously. I watched her; she was indeed a beauty to behold.

"Ehhh, Prof, you have taken me to the center of the game when I didn't mention your name. Do you want me to destroy you with my mouth?' I asked.

A fresh round of laughter erupted again and everyone participated. One of the men I didn't know laughed until he couldn't take it. He began to weep and laugh again. He stood up laughing, walked out of the bar and went home, laughing.

"No please, oga, forgive me. I have my cherry baby here, and it will be bad to squash me in her presence," he pleaded with me.



Even though he was laughing, I knew he was serious. I knew he meant every word he said. When it seemed like the laughter was dying down, Akpan raised his voice, and asked, “But, how can we move this society?”

Prof adjusted himself properly, and began to address the question, “That question is illusory and inadequate. We are already moving as a society. But the right question is: in which direction? When did the society begin? Whose construct is it? Who is enforcing the society? Why must someone insist that everyone follow a particular line? Who made the line? Am I even allowed to think who made the line? The last time I checked, we Igbos has never agreed to any society. The last time I checked, we were forced back to Nigeria. Have we ever been a nation?”

“That is a valid question indeed. We have never been a country. We’ve never been one, and why can’t be just be good neighbors if we can’t be in a marriage peacefully? Let them give us Biafra, let us go. We can do better on our own,” Catechist said, stuck somewhere between anger and drunkenness.

“That is the riddle, and every riddle must be solved before having an answer. Will achieving Biafra ensure a better country? Was there ever a country in the first place? *Igbo enwe-eze*, that is – Igbo have no king. That was the foremost reason why Ojukwu failed in the first place. He declared himself the king of Igbo land. He failed to realize that *Igbo enwe-eze*. A new Biafra might create bigger chaos than anticipated because we are free folks here. We respect nobody but each other and ourselves. We are not even looking forward to a leader. But that doesn’t destroy the first premises you stated: ‘there is no nation’, I agree. Nigeria is dead. If we can’t solve the problems of corruption right now, we can’t solve it later, not even in Biafra. If we can’t solve the problem of police right now, we can’t solve it in Biafra either. But the point at which Biafra was

arrived on, is a point of anger, and the people can't be wrong. This country must be reclaimed from the intellectuals that have stirred it to the ice. Non thinking-thinkers," Prof said.

I remembered Suleiman's death, the police, how they treated him as though he was nothing. The image of his corpse being dumped at the back of a wagon flashed through my mind. There wasn't a better place to talk about this dilemma than with my fellow drunkards. I was in my fifth bottle and the world was all haze. My body was shaky and shivering, with fear and so much laughter. Each smile that rose on my face was filled with so much sorrow. I couldn't hide behind those smiles.

"A few nights ago, a dear friend of mine was gunned down. He died like a chicken. We called the police, and yet nothing happened. It is the most disgusting thing that has ever happened around here. How did we get here? That the police no longer do their jobs? How did we get here? The police shook hands with the killer and collected bribes. What are we? Where are the values that we claim to have?" I said, and broke down in sobs.

Everything seemed to be happening so fast before my eyes. I wanted to say it out for all to hear.

"It is a sad thing. I am the eldest here, so I will start first," the Catechist said and beat his chest, "I saw our elders, and they were nothing like us. This generation eats everything that comes their way. They do not think about their children. This is the caterpillar generation. A caterpillar chews everything on his path. You all may laugh at me for living a double life, drinking, and still being a Catechist at the church. That is between me and God, and this will not prevent me from saying the truth either. I heard the story that happened at Ajay Street, and it is sad. It is the saddest thing I have ever heard. Rumor has it that the killer's lives on the same street. But here, among us,

rumor is no longer rumor, rumor is now the truth. The person that murdered him is known by everyone that lives on that street, and yet no one wants to speak up. The police in a corrupt society has aligned with the killers to judge the street, all in the name of money and survival. Today, everyone wants to survive. At any cost. They police is human; he has a family to feed. He has to return food to his family, every day. He wants to see the fruits of his labor. He wants to live like our sons returning from abroad, he wants to live like our son making it in business, he wants to build a house where he can retire to. Killing a man is a despicable act, protecting a killer for material gain is outrageous, but again, we must not pretend that we do not know where this is coming from. Hunger. Everyone is hungry, what lies beneath humanity is chaos. Once humanity caves in, chaos takes over in immediately. That said, The Pharrell and his groups must be brought to book. They must answer for their atrocities. They must,” the Catechist screamed.

“They must,” the people chorused.

I was drunk, but I still couldn't imagine how he was going to answer for his crimes. The Catechist said, “God will do it, I will continue putting masses until it's done.”

The land, the sea, the air was ours to do whatever we wanted to do with it, and we've made our choice. To pray. I sighed, and gulped a bottle beer and imagined the Nigeria my son would inherit. Credo in unum Deum, Patrem omnipotentem. The Gregorian turns began to play in my head, I believe in one God, the Father Almighty. The rubbles of my childhood resurfaced and administered a heavenly tune into my drunkenness. Just words and tunes and the belch of pianos cuddling single chords. Arms waving in priestly attire. Deum de Deo. God from God. Choirmasters. I drank more and more. *Maybe, our sons will curse us for even giving birth to them?* I sighed and kept drinking. I was dead drunk. Drunk from all the pain that had ensued in the past few weeks. Drunk from the fact that I knew that I was fucked and everyone in this city was fucked

too. Even though I was drunk, I refrained from mentioning names. I refrained from saying anything implicating. So, I was a coward, I swear. I was.

All of sudden, a song started playing, it was Onyeka Onwenu's *Iyogogo*.

"Please let's leave all these politics aside and enjoy life!" Akpan said, stood up and started dancing. His belly shook momentarily, and we all laughed. We stood up and gyrated round the tables.

Prof began to sing along: "Iyogogo Iyogo, Iyogogo, Iyogogo Iyogo, Iyogogo, K'anyi je na nke Bishopu na five akuola, Ihe na ewe m iwe bu na efe m akorako..."

He held his girlfriend and danced. She held him tightly. I looked at my friend, and he was no longer the person I used to know. Like me, he had shaved his hair and appeared clean. For a second, he looked exactly like young Otis Redding. And more handsome than ever with fresh mint flowering all around him. I never knew that a woman could change a man this much. A woman could make everything look different. For a split second, I felt like she was mine. I felt like I wanted her. I was happy for them. People danced and threw themselves on the tables. Raw debauchery.

Nwanyi Ncha danced too. She bent her waist so low that everyone began to scream. I let myself loose on the dance floor. I needed it. I needed everything that I was feeling to make sense of my yesterday, tomorrow, and today. Catechist laughed so loud and danced his heart out. I looked at him, and smiled. He smiled back at me. His face old, his hair white. He was only but a man, trying to live his life. Trying to make sense of life the way he had always known. The way it occurred to him. We danced until our legs wobbled and couldn't stand. We danced until we found the door and walked into the night towards the hotel avenue. We walked down until all the street

lights in Owerri came alive and we knew that we were far from the poor people's area. It was a city of lies, class, and silent segregation. Rich against the poor. In this rich neighborhood, two police men armed to the teeth were stationed in a small house at the entrance. They didn't talk to us, but they kept watching us, their prying eyes followed us closely. We walked towards an open field. When we got there, we threw ourselves down and sat right before the moon. We lay down on the beautiful green grass and began to laugh.

"This is a beautiful night," Nkechi said.

She lay her back on the wet grass, her light blue shirt and black skirt cast against the green grass. She removed her shoes, and set them aside. Her cat eye stared at the stars congregating in the heavens. She said when she was younger, they used to call her "China" because of her eyes, and we laughed.

"We have more beautiful nights to come, life is beautiful here," Prof said.

I looked around, life here wasn't that beautiful to me. I couldn't attest to that.

"The only beautiful thing I see here is the sky. Look at those stars. Do you imagine that they will die too? Even as beautiful as they are? What does it feel like to walk on moon? The idea of the universe is what I think is beautiful, imagining them and having that feeling inside of me. As if the universe actually lives in me, that is what I consider beautiful."

I stared deeper in the sky and felt like a god, and it all looked good to me. His work was indeed good.

"Moon landers, moon chasers. The white men said they landed on the moon. The old man said we chased the moon. An abstract visitation of the moon may be more beautiful than the actual

moon landing. I think moon is to be felt. It's something you carry, its shape is inside of you, locked in your heart, and that burning gentle flames warming the inside of you. Honestly, the old man said the truth about all of it, and that is why I respect him so much. I love hanging out with him. When such men finally die off, what will our fate be? What will be left of us? Our stories will become myth, even this day, all of it," Prof said, and removed his papas cap and dropped it on the grass.

"Most of our stories are already myths. It seems as if there is a large curtain put in our history, and our existence began when the white man arrived. But that is wrong. My grandfather told me stories, even though I didn't know if they were true or not. He told me how our people lived before the coming of the white men. Again, I was small, and I didn't record any of these. So, you might consider them myth too," I said and squashed a mosquito that landed on my arm. I wiped the smeared black blood off my skin, and continued talking, "Before the white men arrived here, there has always been a river. The river parted and became land. Grandfather never missed this fact. And the land had all that it needed to sustain life. Then men came, then animals came. Then men became too many and some left to be alone. Those that left soon became many and some left to be alone. Those that left soon became many again and it goes on and on. Migration. Our people migrated from a place in Onitsha called Nri, and never left their present location. When they arrived at their present location, there were men living on the land. Men that looked like men, but weren't men. Men that were fierce and beastly, and ate human flesh. Our fathers fought them, and conquered them. Grandfather said that the last of them was killed at the village square. After that, our people lived there and prospered. Farmed. Bred animals. Improved medicine. Expressed art through dance, paintings, and singing. That was how the nine villages were formed.

“And no, the white men were not the first visitors. The first people to visit the land of my grandfathers were tall giant black men that arrived by the sea in the middle of night, and raided the nine villages. The elders consulted the gods, and the gods chose the men that would fight the giants. The men fought and conquered the giants.

“There were other visitors, like the army of virgins, a band of only female marauders that invaded the nine villages, and looted everything. Once again, the nine villages fought them off.

“The sea had always been an opening to the world and men beyond our realm. Our village is by the river, a lot of things come in through it. There was another attack, it wasn't by the living. It was an army of the dead that rose to destroy the village. The chief priest himself led the battle against the army of the dead. He campaigned throughout the nine villagers with strong charms and men fortified by the gods, and the army of the dead were captured in a calabash, and the calabash was thrown into *Urashi* River. Legend has it, that the army of the dead is still buried in the belly of *Urashi* River. Maybe, one day, someone will open it and unleash monsters on us.

“There was also an attack by men from the north, riding horses, and with pieces of cloth around their faces. They drove their army into the nine villages. The people ran into the forest, and that is why the forest was named *Jidemuaka*, because it hid them. From there, they attacked back, maneuvered the foreigners, and used the advantage of the forest to defeat them. I don't know the part of the stories that are true or myth, or maybe they all happened, but the exact way by which they occurred has been blurred,” I said.

“Exactly, that is the point. Words have been lost in translation, and all we get from here seems more like myth than reality,” Prof said.

“Please, let us stop talking about all these things and focus on the upcoming Christmas holiday. Do you guys have any plans?” Nkechi asked.

We laughed. I thought about it again, I hadn’t figured out how I was going to spend the Christmas. The moon was high up above, and its light touched our skins. We were drunk and happy. Prof danced in the light and sang all the blues he could think of. He was extremely happy, just like that.

All of sudden, Prof knelt before Nkechi, and began to speak passionately: “I don’t know if I have a future with you, or not. I am not sure if I will be happy with you, or not. There is a lot about me you don’t know yet. I have lived in shame and pondered my sorrows. This man right here,” he stood up, held me, and knelt down again, “this man has been my friend. He has seen me happy, mad, and sad. He has seen the worst and best of me. To be sincere, I had no luck with women in my life until I met you. I thought I was too ugly to even make anything out of my life. He always encouraged me to try, to face myself. Find love.”

Nkechi stared at him as if she had seen a ghost, and I myself didn’t know what to say.

“I may have met you barely a month ago, but my heart, my soul, my being, is already yours. I don’t know what a day without you will look like anymore. I can’t imagine it. So, I have never been so sure in my life that this is the next step I want to take,” Prof said, he dipped his hand into his pocket and brought out a ring: “Will you marry me Nkechi?”

First, she was surprised, she held her chest with her hand and began to cry. She sobbed. She hugged him, and hugged me. I didn’t know what to say or how to feel. My heart was bursting with joy. My mouth remained open with laughter that filled it to the brim. We all cried together with joy, and for different reasons. I was just surprised and amused. It had been a rough road for



all of us. It had been a rough road for Prof. It had been everything we were afraid of, and yet, within it, he found beauty.

“Yes, I will marry,” she said.

They both hugged each other again. I began to clap. I clapped to the moon, and called on our ancestors to give them everything they would ever need. They began to kiss, first furiously, and then slowly, very slow. The emotion on their faces could have easily produced ten thousand kilowatts of electricity and lighted my city. They found love. I wished them happiness.

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I had no money, but I was buying all the drinks. I withdrew my savings to celebrate my friend’s marriage proposal four days after. We sat at Nwanyi Ncha’s place making merry. I had earlier thought about bringing Chioma to the merriment, but I didn’t. The fact that she was actually in my life that she existed, eluded me, sometimes. Honestly, I loved her so much, but I still couldn’t accept that she was indeed in my life. Also, my dear friend knew nothing about her, I didn’t want to introduce her to them just like that.

Nkechi sat beside Prof. She had become a drinking member of our fraternity. Always taking it slow too, and never drunk, like the lady she was. There was nothing more beautiful than knowing that my friend was in safe hands. A woman that enjoyed the same things as her man. I swear, people with contradictory opinions shouldn’t be together. Like me and Annie. Annie doesn’t drink, but I loved drinking. She was a hypocrite, but I wasn’t. She enjoyed spending night and day at church, but I enjoyed the bar for my social and spiritual upliftment. I used to enjoy Christianity, when I was a little boy. Those days when I couldn’t trade a scapular for gold neckless.

Back then, I knew all the beautiful saints and angels of heaven. I knew their stories and their miracles. Those days were now behind me.

Now I knew nothing about myself, and that had given me the room to seek more, to search for myself. No one told me whom I truly was. Mother said I was a child of God, and that God would take care of all my needs. That wasn't enough to make sense of my "being". That wasn't enough to set our eternal clocks ticking. That wasn't enough to examine my consciousness. It wasn't until grandfather told me about the moon, sun, and stars, that it dawned on me that that was the religion I wanted to follow. To accept myself. To accept my wholeness. To accept where I was coming from. Yes, I was all those things, but a good woman sees her man for what he had become, was, and would be. Nkechi seemed ideal for my dear friend in this instance.

*Let it be.* I breathed.

I was tipsy, and already in my third bottle. Everyone was drinking, and making merry. I stood up, and cleared my throat loud enough for everyone to hear and stop talking. I cleared my throat again, like I had seen my grandfather do when he gathered with the elders. My grandfather told me that clearing your voice for the third time was calling to the soul of your kinsmen. So, I cleared my throat again, for the third time.

"My friend Prof and this beautiful lady have decided to tie the nuptial knot."

Everyone started laughing as usual, first at my choice of word, and then at the seriousness in my near-comical drunk face. I choose those words for what my friend had come to represent to me; *the beauty of language*, sounds, and textures of words. How they blend into our locality to form an entirely different meaning.

"Ah, what is *nuptial knot*?" Akpan asked.

“Go and sit down. Illiterate. Simple English you can’t understand. *Calabar* man like you that refused to go to school,” Catechist said.

Everyone burst into laughter, again.

“You that went to school, and know all the English in the world, and still yet you don’t have a graduate job, ordinary Catechist like you.” Akpan lambasted him.

A few people laughed, but it seemed as if Catechist had the higher ground now.

“My friend, let me explain a few things to you. I schooled when Sir Lambert Hemingway was the principle at *Obirinze Grammar* school. I didn’t finish school, but those of us that went to school then at *Obirinze Grammar* School, went to school when school was school. I dropped out in form four. I have seen the so-called graduates of nowadays, they know nothing. I can read better than them, take memos, and do all that. And again, let me remind you, Catechist is not ordinary. Back then, when we were growing up, Catechist used to celebrate mass. Catechist was respected as much as a priest. The world has been destroyed by young men like you, Akpan. No one has any respect for anything anymore.”

I wanted to stop them at this point, but that was the thing about drunkards, whenever they started barking like engines, it was best to let them exhaust all the fumes. It was best to let them birth that itching truth within them, until then, they will not rest. There was nothing worse than unsaid words. Prof, and the girlfriend were enjoying the conversations, so I let them talk.

“Until you start answering to the crimes of the church, then we will start listening to you. People rob the priests and you, because they have judged all of you and found you guilty. Priests have defiled our girls; priests have sodomized our young men. Yet, mother hushed their children instead of exposing this. Wives have slept with the priests in search of holy semen, or whatever

they have down there. Maybe it is time we open up the church and talk about it,” Akpan said, defiantly. For a second, it seemed as if his eyeballs were about to fall out of their sockets.

There was a man sitting to the left of me, he rose up and said, “Please, let us be wise with all these things. There are things we joke with and things we don’t make joke of. When it comes to God, I don’t make jokes out of him. I will not. Blasphemy! *Aru!* Abomination. Who are the two of you to use Gods name in vein? I am leaving, I will not sit down with men who speak against God.” He ran into the evening and never to be seen again.

“That is problem with all of you cowards, we cannot even talk about the crimes of the church. How different are you from those who defended the priest instead of victims? You are more afraid of Gods wrath than seeing justice done? You will hurt your fellow man in other not to offend the church? Goats! Ewu,” Akpan said.

It was no longer a conversation; it was now a squabble. Even though Akpan had weighed into the matter with his own truth, it was time to stop everything.

“Friends, let’s not forget why we are here. It is because we are incomplete. It is because all men are incomplete, even when they claim to be complete. Like my grandfather always said ‘hurry up, hurry up, is why the frog has no tail.. It is word, it is wisdom. Let us be wise and not hurry things up more than we can catch up with, am I lying?’” I asked.

“No, you have spoken well like the son of the soil,” the Catechist said. Akpan nodded his head affirmatively.

“Now, our friend, Prof, has found his missing rib. That part of him that can complete him. That part of him that is him. The woman beside him. The woman that brings great joy to his heart.

We will drink to this; we will drink to their future wedding. We will drink to their happiness, and I am paying,” I said.

Everyone clapped. They all stood up, and hugged Prof, and his fiancé. The evening sun moved towards the horizon, sank lower and shone golden through the windows. Across the fields, the maize garden bent lightly and joyously. Everything was beautiful. I sat there, happy.

“*Ehe*, this is good news,” Catechist said, looked at Prof and smiled, “Prof! Prof! Prof!” he hailed him. Catechist looked down on the floor as if he was looking for something. The worry that appeared on his face seemed to reflect the fact that he couldn’t find whatever he was looking for. He looked up as if he had found it, smiled, and continued speaking again, “How many times did I call you?” he asked.

“Three,” Prof said, removed a handkerchief from his pocket, and wiped his face.

“You know I didn’t grow up today. You know I am a Catechist. Apart from that, I am the son of my father Ichie Aguiyi of Idemmili, Onatara Dike Nma One of Idemmili. A titled man with many hats. I still remember what my father told me the day I brought a woman to him. I will still say the same thing to you. *Nke onye ji di nma, ya jisie ya ike* - treasure the good thing you have. The familiars of a good woman shine forth like a lamp in a forest. This woman is beautiful. She is our wife. The first time I saw you making some kind of moves, I knew something was on. Please, she is our daughter. She has never judged anyone that comes here to drink. She has always laughed with us, and respected herself at the same time. Please, treasure her,” he said.

“Thank you, Catechist,” Prof said

Nkechi held unto Prof so tight. I felt like everything we said resonated with her. Everything we said made her look more beautiful. It was her world, her day, her night. And all I did was add color to it. To my friend, Prof. As the French say it: *c'est la vie*.

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I was in a classroom, teaching while my heart, my mind, my soul was doing all sorts of things with Chioma. She sat beside Ada, quietly and listening attentively. The way I looked at Chioma, for once, I was afraid Ada would understand what was going on between the two of us. I hated being noticed, even though I knew that she was no threat in any way. I taught about creating margins on a Microsoft word while my body was saying another thing. I swear, I was consumed. It felt good to feel, again. It felt good to love and be loved and the one you love staring back at you.

After the lecture, I walked into my office, a small cubicle reserved for me where I can have some privacy. The image of her face still stuck in my heart. I sat down, and played music on my laptop. Classical jazz breezed into my head like an alien melody. It shook the core of my soul; I felt a deeper sense of love. I looked into the void, thinking about nothing but emptiness. That moment with music when the mind becomes a void and sails off into the unknown, graced my heart. That was one of the greatest pleasures of being alive.

A knock came on my door. It was Chioma. I looked around, and no one was coming. We kissed. We kissed, even though I knew that my manger was in his office. James wasn't at work today, he called in sick. I knew the receptionist wasn't coming my way anytime soon. She threw her hands around me, and kissed me harder. Like she had missed everything I was. Like she had missed everything we'd become. We kissed and licked our bodies like mad men. We whispered "I

love you” to each other a million times. “I love you” was easier to say with the rush of blood down my penis. I heard a noise. Footsteps down the corridor. We stopped. She held my hand. The sound grew louder. She left. Guilt plagued me immediately. I felt like I had compromised my own soul. Like I had sold the last relationship a teacher was ever going to sell. Ndukwe, my manager walked in. he glanced at me suspiciously. For once, I thought he was going to fire me at that instance.

“You are sweating too much Mr. John?” he asked and smiled.

“Ah, it is the fan. I have asked you guys to get an air condition in here, and you refused,” I said.

He looked down, as if something was troubling him. He didn’t talk for a few awkward seconds. I watched him.

“I am sorry for what I did,” he said, deeply saddened.

“You need help,” I said.

That was the first thing that came to my mind. He needed help. He needed to be saved from condemning himself to an unknown fate, in this city of fire and brimstone and fanatical Christians.

“I know,” he said, and started biting his index finger nail.

I pitied him, for even realizing that there was something wrong with him. For apologizing. That was human, that I could live with.

“No problem, just be careful. I think I will be leaving now, it’s almost four thirty,” I said looking at my watch.

It felt like everything in the room had gained static energy; the clock, the old worn-out computers hipped in a small wardrobe, the damaged keyboards packed at the left corner of the

windowless cubicle. Even my chair and desk shocked me when I touched them. Literally. I was indeed sweating badly, like I was him the day he tried to touch me inappropriately. It was awkward. He left. I watched him leave. There was a lot of humanity in him. Something that kept pushing him to apologize. I recognized that part of him that was human. That part of him that didn't want to hurt others. That part of him that didn't just want to abuse his power. I had seen men lose it all, and eventually give in to that animal cruelty that lives deep inside of us. I recalled the day I was coming back from Obinze and our bus was pulled over by military men. They made us sit in the hot sun, and dragged the driver to the tarmac. They said he didn't bribe them. They beat him until his blood flowed on the road. Everyone was afraid of speaking, no one dared to say anything for fear of being the next victim. We were cowards. We represented the worst in humanity at that very point. We only whispered among ourselves that the driver was wrong, we blamed him. That was the easiest thing to do, to make it bearable for us, to rescue our conscience from the complicity of his misfortune. He deserved it. But, deep inside our silence, deep inside all the evil I witnessed without action, I gave birth to more demons. Some of these demons are familiar, and I see them every day. My manager's action was braver than mine.

I walked out of the main door, and there was Chioma patiently waiting for me by the stairs. At the same time, my boss walked in through the door with his kids, six of them. They were all being fed with foreign donor money. Contributions collected online with pictures of sick kids. Sick man. I hated even seeing his face sometimes. Puffy face, with his terribly bulging stomach, and hands that hung forty-five degrees away from his sides like a canon faced to the ground. I wondered how he wore his own stockings and laughed. Maybe one of his kids or his wife helped him do it every morning. He was ugly, too ugly for the wife, and it always reflected on the wife's face. She avoided his jokes whenever she could and sometimes acted as if she was ashamed of



him. Manager said that he once overheard her say, “you should count yourself lucky that I am still with you,” during a quarrel.

“Welcome, sir,” I said as if there was a lump of meat in my throat. I managed to squeeze out a smile on my face too.

“John, are you leaving already?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Ah, if you weren’t leaving now, I would have asked you to help me design a campaign flyer for our candle light fundraising program coming up soon. I need to upload it to some people at the Red Cross.”

He wanted me to sacrifice my time for him, as if he would have done the same for me in a reversed circumstance. A shrewd business man that paid poverty wage. I wasn’t a polite person. I wasn’t in the habit of pleasing others. My sense of diplomacy was mostly lacking. I could be a damn fool, as well as extremely nasty, especially when my rights were in jeopardy. At least, there wasn’t any gun pointed to my head, and I didn’t mind being fired from the job.

“No, sir, I have things to do this evening with my girlfriend,” I said defiantly, with a terrible smile on my face. He looked at me, surprised. As if I had insulted him. As if to answer and obey him whenever I was called upon was part of my employment contract.

“Alright,” he said, and dragged his minions to his office.

“Let’s go,” I said to Chioma.

We walked downstairs as fast as we could and continued down Wetheral Road. Hustlers were at every corner or junctions picking pockets and running into the night. I lived all my life in

this city, and I knew what it was like at this time of the year, and it wasn't going to get better until after New Year. It was the weirdest time of the year. We made our way towards the stadium. "Why are you angry?" she asked.

"The idiot asked me to help him work on something and I refused," I said.

"That's ridiculous."

"I know and that's why I refused. There are things I don't really want to deal with again, honestly. I am getting tired of this job."

"If you leave this job, what will you be doing then?"

I had thought about it too and came up empty. I felt like I needed to prepare.

"I don't know. But I will find something," I said.

"You will. You are a very intelligent man. You can go back to school," she said.

"What will school do for me?" I asked.

"Give you an opportunity to get a better job, at least," she said.

"I understand. That was the shit our fathers were taught. Our fathers went to school so they could occupy positions opening up in the colonial master's secretariats. I swear, that was real gold for them back in the days. Us, what are we doing it for? Our parents have refused to resign, and nothing has changed since they took over government. Look around you, jobs are not growing, the economy is not growing and school fees are fucking increasing. That is total shit. I just want to be myself and look the other way," I said. I thought about it in my head. Look the other way. It echoed into the void of my mind.

“Even though you want to look the other way, education will give you the opportunity to be an authority in your area. Imagine yourself being a professor?” she asked.

I imagined it, waltzing into a classroom with a portfolio in hand. Speaking big grammar, and shouting all the intelligent shit I could articulate. Yet, I couldn’t see anything changing apart of the amount of money I would be making. The country would still remain the same.

“My grandfather was a Professor,” I said.

She laughed as if I was a fool.

“You see were the problem lies – you believe that what he knows isn’t worth making him one, and unless he sits in a classroom and come out with a certificate, he doesn’t know anything. But he knew a lot more; where he came from. The science of his people. The technology of his people. The migration routes. Trade routes and all the secrets of ancient trade. Yet, you think he isn’t a professor?” I asked with my eyes wide open.

“True, you are right,” she said, thinking hard on my words. I didn’t want her to just give up because it seemed like I was right, I wanted to talk about it further at some point.

“This place, this city isn’t for a big mind like yours,” she said.

I looked around and everything looked familiar. It looked as if I owned everything, that I could recount everything around here by heart. It was beautiful, if only for a brief second. It looked exactly like the place that owned me. But it didn’t look like a place that I wanted to spend the rest of my life in. My ancestors moved around, why shouldn’t I? Why shouldn’t I decide to go to the next part of the world and pitch my tent?

“Maybe, if I ever get away from here, I will like to go to a desert and live there for a while. Delight in nature. Make a small living in a strange land, where the tongue is strange too. Understand all I can understand about this life, their life, and my life. I heard life in a desert is different. It’s a prayer on its own. I want to feel it move in me,” I said.

“I wouldn’t want to live with a man whose dream is to be moving from one place to another just to ink it in his memory. You need love and a woman. You need to take care of your children, and that means making money too,” she said, with dots of melancholy on her face.

I didn’t even know if marriage was what I wanted for myself. I didn’t know if I wanted to have any more children. She had the right to imagine. She had the right to dream. But, whenever our dream could no longer agree, or our visions stopped aligning, we would go our separate ways without quarrels. I believed life was that simple.

“I will be whatever I want. Because I can, and because I will. Having a beautiful woman like you beside me, is the only true pleasure in life. When I turn around and look at my left and right, all I see is chaos. Maybe that’s my default; to think about the wonders of strange lands. It’s hard to solidly believe in something that you can’t feel, I hope you understand what I mean by this. You are what I can feel, right here, and right now,” I said, and pointed at my heart.

She blushed. She laughed lightly. That was all a woman needed; the right words at the right time. That was the magic of it. That was the reassurance that life was meant for us both.

“Now where do we go from here?” she asked.

“Your home.”

A bus stopped beside us, and we hungrily jumped in. My mind roamed so dirty, and I couldn't turn to look at her. We sat close to the window, at the back seat. The woman beside Chioma was sleeping. I touched Chioma's legs and panties. She was wet. She laughed. I laughed. And life was just right there, before us. Life was what we were doing; touching each other. Holding our silky clothes. Finely loving. Finely seducing each other because soon we will be no more, and no one would ever remember that we ever existed. Dust.

The weirdest thing was when the radio station began to play *Jersey Girls* by Tom Waits. It boomed roughly on worn-out speakers as the car dragged itself through a pothole. The bus driver didn't flinch or try to flip the channel. He nodded his head to the strange music. He was enjoying the strange sounds. I remembered the strange sound clearly; a distant uncle of mine used to play it. A sailor. He lived in Lagos, and sailed the world on a trading ship. He visited us once in every five years. Whenever he came around, he brought strange music with him.

The fog covered the road. The bus rode slowly to avoid collision with other vehicles. Owerri was foggier these days, more than it used to be. When I looked outside, I couldn't see further into the night. Just smoke and whiteness. It looked so beautiful how nature could decide to be anything at any time. Chioma put her head on my chest, and I tried to touch everything I could touch. Her phone fell under the second seat, I reached out, and gave it her. I ran my hand inside her smooth purple silk shirt, and everything pleased me. And it pleased her too.

When we got her house, I couldn't even wait. I couldn't hold myself. We forgot to lock the door, and started tearing each other's clothes apart. We made love, and the only voice we heard was ours, her moan, and my very dirty talk. It felt better saying something dirty. She liked it, and was pleased. I smiled while holding her face and looking into her eyes. The evening rolled into

night, and the night rolled out the moon and I saw it through her window glistening in the firmaments of heaven. It stayed up there until we finished professing our love for each other.

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When I got home, it was midnight again, and again like other nights, I failed to text or call Annie. I felt bad too. But like a child that wasn't ready to listen to the parents, I walked to the door and knocked. I knew hell was waiting for me, I could feel it inside me. I knocked, no one answered. No one came to the door to check. I turned the handle, and the door opened. I walked to my balcony. It seemed as if no one was inside.

I noticed a stranger's slippers inside the living room. Then I heard moans, like musical notes, soft and low, low and high. The wall gecko was by the clock crawling, and ran under it, then peeped at me with his shaved head. The house looked scanty. My home didn't seem like a home any longer, the air seemed stiff, and I struggled to breathe.

I walked into the bedroom. There was my Annie, lying down and The Pharrell was on top of her, pounding the living daylight out of her. My baby was in his cot, holding the rails tightly, ~~and~~ saliva was dripping from his mouth, watching them with an unamused curiosity, and innocence. I felt both ashamed and numb. I didn't want to scream for any reason. I walked to my baby and picked him up. The Pharrell saw me and quickly rushed to cover himself. He took his gun, and pointed it at me and my little boy, as if I was going to come at him violently. I paid no attention to his shaky murderous fingers. I paid no attention to his eyes that nearly fell out the sockets.

I walked to the balcony. I tried not to think of what was happening. I tried not to think. I wasn't hurt. I rocked my son in my arms and looked at the machine that I was repairing. It felt like

dark clouds hung all over my house and cutting away branches of my happiness. It felt like the moon was no longer a moon, but a distant trickery conjured by God himself. Like something forever there and never there, at the same time. Strangely, it was looking at me. I believed that the foremost trick man ever experienced was from God himself. The odds stacked up against him while navigating this complex maze called existence.

I remembered the movie I saw on YouTube, *A Voyage to the Moon*. It was one of the earliest movies made about the moon. It showed that white men were fascinated about the moon, the same way we Africans were fascinated about the moon. As a myth. Maybe, they have solved the question of their fantasy. But the dangerous thing here was that we abandoned the question of our myth. The movie also reminded me of the earliest form of cinematography, without sounds, but beautifully made, to entertain. In the movie, silence spoke louder than words. At that instance of remembrance, I felt like I had been shot into the 1920's by a time machine, and my expression of visual art was just silence. The feeling of nothingness consumed me. My beautiful baby watched me; his eyes sparkled. He cried and struggled to walk on his own. I let him walk around the balcony. Each step, each mighty smile, each dripping of the saliva, beautiful clinched fist. Immaculate heart. Pure as purity itself. Beautiful face and curly black hair. Grandfather had curly hairs too. I imagined life streaming on a film, with my son as the protagonist, I laughed in my head.

The Pharrell came out, and looked at me and said, "Wata guan, I am sorry kind of. Not personal man. But if you come after me, I have no other choice than to gun you down. Mow you like a grass, bloody civilian. Your wife tastes good man."

This was the first time we were only a few inches apart. His teeth were tobacco stained, and his body looked dry, probably from too much smoking. The baggy pants he wore brushed

against the soil. His shirt unbuttoned. Our eyes met. I felt murderous, but I held myself because I didn't have it in me for some strange reason I couldn't account for. I did nothing but smile.

"You good brother. I am not angry," I said.

*How much ugly a man can be*, I muttered to myself.

"My nigger. My nigger," he said and walked into the night. I watched him climb on his motorcycle parked behind the gate, and drove away.

I imagined that I would be happy one day. Maybe marry Chioma. Maybe. For the first time, I considered marriage without holding myself back, without feeling bad about it. It flashed through my head that something like this could happen with the woman that I truly love; she might end up cheating on me at the end the day. I couldn't imagine it. If that was to happen, I would have put a bullet in my head.

I turned on my radio. I tuned it to a faraway land so I could picture what was going on in the other end of the world. It was a radio station in Florida, and they were singing Kenny Rogers' *The Coward of the County*. I listened until my son slept on my lap. Yet Annie didn't come out from her room or say a word to me. I sat there, barely thinking. Just empty, lacking imagination. Stripped of reason. Just me. After a few minutes, she emerged from the room roaring. She looked terrified and that frightened me too. I swear, what I saw wasn't her. What I saw wanted to swallow me.

"You don't treat me like a woman. I need to feel like a woman. I need this," she said, and cried.

I said nothing.



“You are barely at home. I know you are mad, but you are the one who caused it,” she said.

I said nothing.

“Love me. Make me feel something. What type of man are you, what type of man are you?”

I didn’t beg you to fuck me, I never begged you to impregnate me,” she said.

I said nothing.

Now, I turned away from looking at her, and stared at the stars. The firmament of heaven was as beautiful as it has always been. The thing about looking at the sky was it provided me with a place to hide and be myself. Just the art of staring deep into the heavens satisfied my soul in an unexpected way. It was like telling myself that there were things more beautiful than troubles and chaos of living. Things like the cosmos. It kept me alive, and I held unto them.

“You won’t say anything, because you have never cared. I have never meant anything to you,” she said, and fumbled into tears.

“We will go home for Christmas holiday, my mother wants to see her grandson,” I said, out of nowhere. I said to her something that was true. I thought if my life was going to be a mess, I better make a beautiful mess.

First, horror appeared on her face, then disbelief. A wave of speechlessness serenely moved across her face like a tin sound wave emitting from a guitar. She bent her head, looked at herself in disbelief. I observed her and smiled, and this time, it showed on my face.

“You have the right to love whomever you want to love. You have to right to do anything, but just make sure that my son is not there,” I said.

I meant it, with all sincerity. That was all the pain that I wanted to let out at that moment. She said nothing afterword. She left me alone. In this moment, strange music was comforting, like a blanket, it covered me.

I was indeed a strange man. A frightening one, and not many would want to mess around with me. I felt like I was living in her head, like I knew all she knew. I knew she was going to cave in with time. I knew that. So, I let her be. I, myself, had carved in many times. It was a human thing. It was a shame I was ready to bear. But the question was if she herself was ready to bear her shame when the time comes. I felt like someone nuked both our space, and I had the monopoly of a life jacket, and she didn't. Choice. Choice.

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When Prof came around my house again, he came prepared to fulfill his dreams. He came happy, he came with big dreams on how we could get the machine to work again. It was a Saturday morning, we sat on my balcony working on the communication device. We needed to test the power of the receiver and actually tune into radio channels, and listen to life transmissions if possible. Prof switched to his workshop clothes from his days at the university. A blue workshop cloth stained with black dye. He had a board in front of him. For hours, he kept staring at the device, drawing the schematics on a piece of paper.

Annie made tea and served us. She had been doing everything to please me of recent, and I never treated her bad in any way. Instead, we got closer. I even bought a chess board game which we played when we had nothing to do. She was learning easily, and eagerly. I hoped to find a connection between us through it, and it worked. It turned out that she liked the idea so much. It

felt so good, to reconnect with her in another way different from humping and my son. I never told Prof about what happened. He didn't notice too. It was too hurting to tell him.

“Man, the schematic is simple. Very easy to understand. The problem is here,” he pointed at a thin line he drew, “and here,” he pointed at three key diodes and IC's that I knew nothing about in the device. Then he went on to write a very long equation on how he can boast the range even listen to deep space.

“By the time I finish with this machine, we will hear everything happening on the outside world. We will be able to tune into satellites,” he said.

He bent down and examined the board again. “Give me a screw driver,” he said. I handed him one. He unscrewed all he wanted and went ahead to use the soldering iron on it. His precision was impeccable, that for once I missed going to the university to study. I watched him, and we talked, too.

“So, how is the engagement coming on?” I asked.

He smiled.

“This woman makes me want to reach the skies, and live there. She has woken up all that I can achieve on earth. This is it my friend, our wedding will be sometime next year. But for now, we will go to Obodu Cattle Ranch for Christmas,” he said, and I could tell that his heart was filled with so much joy and dreams and expectations.

“What are you planning for Christmas?” he asked me.

“Nothing really big. I will travel to the village in three days' time, with Annie. That is on the 24<sup>th</sup>. I want my child to see were the ancestors came from, I want him to feel the land of his

origin. I want to show him the old migration routes while he can barely remember anything. I want it to form the basis of his imagination,” I said.

He bent and soldered. Stripped wires naked, and asked for a brush. I gave it to him. He brushed the body of the receiver with a kerosene to rid it of dust.

“It’s the best thing that will ever happen to little Obiarika. Sometimes, you look beyond your own happiness and focus on the happiness of others. I think we are both at that point in our lives,” he said.

The same thoughts I’ve been having of recent, I was happy to see that he was thinking along the same lines. My mother had only seen the grandchild a few times. Irrespective of what I thought my own affair with Annie, it was selfish to deny Obiarika his right to visit his grandmother, and one day he will judge me too. Death isn’t the end of everything. It would be nice to lead a straight life, especially when it came to my son.

“Look at you now, you already act with so much happiness and love in you. You know I know you and how frustrated you used to be about everything around here,” I said.

“You see, this is also the part I have come to understand in my life. When one is truly in love, it’s like gaining another life in the Mario game. Love makes you love everything and appreciate everything. All your dreams will evolve from you, in you, and around you. Remember when we used to talk about running away from this part of earth?” he asked.

“Are you telling me what I already know my friend? I remember clearly, how much we both hate it here. Our plans to run away because we have nothing to lose,” I said and laughed.

“Yes, but, truly, I don’t feel like that any longer. I feel like there is a lot more to be done here. A lot more that we can do to fix where we are, right now. We can try. Even if we fail. We must build a world around us to protect those we care about and love. Her coming into my life has given me a profound insight into what life truly means. I am no longer fighting my pain either. I let her take them, as much as she can carry,” Prof said.

It sounded like a dangerous affair to let a girl take away all your pain. I had boxed mine, and carried them with me; since the day I received the first slap of my life from father. I was really fatigued from carrying them around. They were the reasons why I wanted to stay alive, and also the reasons why I wanted to kill myself too. I believed my pains were mine and when you let people take them away from you, they cease to be pain and become burden. Then, one day, they will get tired and leave. Again, the burden will become pain, just like liquid evaporating into gas and back to liquid again.

Prof stood up, and wrote some more equations on the plain white board. He used the marker to note what had been done to the device, and what needed to be done. I wondered how with all his education; he was satisfied with small town life. By afternoon, we agreed that we needed to go town and buy things needed to complete the repair. There was a place at Douglas Road, where we could buy scrap materials. We then proceed to get the items. It felt good for us to walk into the sun together.

At the barbershop, they looked at me, murmured, and laughed. I knew what they thought of me. A man that caught the girlfriend fucking another man and couldn’t do anything about it. An idiot. Half a man. I looked away from them, half ashamed. I had come to the conclusion that what people thought of me mattered less. That what mattered was being myself, and even though being myself was full of shit, it was better than not being myself.

“One day, this city will change,” Prof said as we walked along the way.

I never saw that. The only picture of the future in my head was that of an apocalypse. A day when the desert would eventually reach this hemisphere and eat everything in its path. Or waters overflow its banks and drown us all. In any case, there would be no future. The future had been hard for me to envisage. But it was here. Already. With us, and its chaos. That was all I could see.

“I still don’t see it,” I said.

“You can’t. You won’t see it coming. The young people here cannot be held down while the rest of the world advances. They will find a way to meet up with the challenges. Either in clear lunacy or by strategic planning. Like it or not, a change is coming, and that change isn’t disastrous. It is here already. It is what you and I can see this city becoming. The city of the mind. I see expanding trade. I see development,” he said.

I restrained myself from sounding negative. But I knew that for the future to be here, we needed to ready for it. We needed to prepare for a growing population and all that shit that wasn’t even being discussed, not anywhere meaningful.

“Honestly, I will stay away from the change-cliché, and stand alone. I see nothing. My life isn’t as pretty as yours, not yet. But you know that I am happy for you and will support which ever step you choose to take,” I said.

“You are a good man, John.”

I said nothing. I just smiled. Few minutes later, a bus arrived and we entered. It drove us to town. At Douglas Road right before the market, we made a stop. We walked until we got to the

place where they sold electronic parts. The young man at place welcomed us, and helped us search through the junkyard. It was heap of broken electronics parts piled in a room. Each part must be located and extracted with soldering iron. It was like trying to find a needle in the ocean floor. We searched and searched, and searched until the sun moved away from us and fell in the open soccer field. When we found them, it was almost dark and boys were playing soccer All the parts we needed to bring the radio device back to life was hidden in a worn-out panel. Prof put them inside a container after they were extracted. When we left, it was dark and windy. We took the bus to Nwanyi Ncha's place, and Prof texted his girlfriend to meet us there.

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We walked down the lonely alley that led to the restaurant. We walked towards the sanctity of our own soul. A place that was as holy as a church to us. A place that held us together, not just us, our sanities. The holy ground that we visited to discuss what our future would be. When we arrived at Nwanyi Ncha's place, Nkechi was already at the door waiting for us. Her face was hidden behind a veil. The wooden door to Nwanyi Ncha's place seemed closed, on it was a sticker, with the inscription: *My Case is Difference – Winners Chapel Ministry*, written in a sly beautiful cursive writing. Something was wrong; in years, I have never seen those doors shut at this time of the night. Nkechi saw us, she ran and hugged Prof. she hugged me too. I was lost, I couldn't tell what was happening.

“They killed Catechist at his home today,” she said.

First, I couldn't move. That was too much for just one year. A lot of deaths to bear in a short space of time. I felt as if my spirit was leaving my body. Like a transfiguration of some sort. I felt like I was at a point in my life where I wouldn't return from to be the same again. I was

changed by news and pain and this streets of death and broken promises. I broke down and wept. This death, was like my death. This death was like robbing us of our happiness. It was taking away what kept us together.

“What happened?” Prof asked.

“I don’t know. When I arrived, I saw Nwanyi Ncha packing up her things in a hurry. She said that The Pharrell heard about what the Catechist said about him in her bar, and that was why he got killed. She said he was chopped him into pieces with a machete,” Nkechi recounted with tears.

The news slapped me endlessly in my mind, it spread my deepest fear before my eyes like *kilishi* before the sun. I was naked, burning. The death. Previous encounters with The Pharrell flashed before my eyes. Beginning from the day I first saw him smoking in the uncompleted building, to the time he fucked my wife. Each time, each gaze, each encounter was as dangerous as any other. Each piercing of the eyes, each engagement of the iris, each low gaze and high gaze. Each hate, each happiness. It all flashed before me.

Catechist was a man we came to know differently, not just about his announcement at the altar every Sunday, but as a human being with thinking ability and all that. I walked round the beer parlor, and it looked like she left in a hurry left in a hurry. Baskets. Spoons. Forks. Broken plates. And spilled oil by the back door. Nwanyi Ncha was running because she thought The Pharrell was coming for her next, maybe for letting such things be discussed at her place.

“When next I see that son of a bitch, I will climb over his corpse,” I said angrily. A sudden cold chill ran through my body, and I felt as if my body was shutting down. I just hugged myself to keep warm.



“This has to stop. Someone has to do something about this criminal. We cannot be alive and let this man kill us off one by one for just talking. For saying the truth. And woe betide the man that spoke against him or conspire to get him killed. Woe betide the idiot that drank with us, and yet gave his friend up. We have lost a great man. A great orator. A son of the soil. Onatara Dike Nma One of Idenmili, may our ancestors never forgive the idiot that killed him. I curse him!” Prof said and screamed into the dark night in thunderous voice. It was plain dark, and his voice echoed and echoed. No stars, no moon, no rain, just black clouds hovering like evil spirits.

“This I cannot bear,” I said.

My mind ran to the night I saw The Pharrell on top of my wife pounding the shit out of her. A criminal. Even if Annie couldn’t find someone to mate with, was settling for a criminal the best thing? I should have moved her things out that night. On a second thought, I reasoned that I already took the best step I could have taken in that situation. I took my phone, and texted Annie that I wasn’t coming back that night. She replied that it was alright. Honestly, I didn’t know what to feel. My inside felt so cloudy.

I walked into the night with my friends. We sobbed along the way. We wept for the fact that our souls had been pierced. The smiling face of Catechist flashed through my mind. I remembered how he stood up to advise Prof after hearing that he was getting married. I remembered how eloquently he spoke. I remembered the argument he had with Akpan. I remembered the times he bought us drinks. I thought we were all comrades with bottle, little did I know that spies joined our humorous ranks. Rank of nothing but men armed with stories and language.

When we got to Prof's place, he brought out a bench, and we all sat down. He lit a green square stove and placed it in our midst to keep warm. We just sat like people that had seen a ghost. Pa Njoku came out of his room, clutching a bottle of Seaman Aromatic Schnapps in his hands. We watched him, silently. He kept the bottle on the floor. He slowly moved into his room, brought a stool and sat on it. I watched him. Nkechi watched him too, but Prof didn't notice him, he was deeply affected by grief that his face was fixated on emptiness. Pa Njoku opened the drink, looked up at the sky and shook his head.

"The iroko tree has fallen, and rain has refused to fall. Night has come faster than day. Yet, it will not prevent me from calling on my ancestors," he said.

He poured the drink on the ground and said: "Our ancestors, drink is here. Where one falls is where his god pushed him down." He poured more drinks on the ground.

"Prof, remember when the tree fell today, I told you something terrible was going to happen?" Pa Njoku said.

"Yes," Prof said.

It was a very scary thing to know that he was aware of what happened or even thought about it before it happened. I was beginning to think that what people thought about him was true; maybe he was a witch. I swear, to me, it didn't matter what he was as long as he wasn't hurting anyone.

"What happened?" he asked at last.

"*Nnayi*, Catechist was killed today," I said.

“His boat has finally set sail. He has taken that beautiful journey to be with our ancestors. Not only did a tree fall, the heavens are weeping on his behalf too,” he said.

He looked into the dark clouds and continued, “But, he will sail to the moon and be with our ancestors.”

Prof held his girlfriend close to him, and I held no one. I just listened to the old man talk. He offered all of us snap, and we drank. I drank a little bit more because I didn’t know what I was feeling.

“Drink my children, drink. A man of his standing deserves it. He will look from his boat and see you drinking and he will smile. Catechist was a man of justice; he will find justice for himself. But he was sail deeper away from everything. His pain has ended. It is no more,” Pa Njoku said.

“No Pa, it is time someone teach that hooligan a lesson. It is time for someone to clean this area for the sake of our children,” I said.

I was angry and it showed on my face and at the manner in which I spoke.

“My son, he who the gods want to kill, he first makes mad. That boy that murdered him is already dead, our ancestors has judged him already. Sheathe your machete, go home and take care of the people you love, and let the dead answer their names,” he said and drew a line with his walking stick on the sand like Jesus before the Scribes and Pharisees.

“Mmiri mara ugo sara ugo ahu, nke mara udele, o gburu udele egbu – The rain that beat the eagle washed him clean, but the vulture never made it out of the same rain. Ugo chara acha adighi echu’ – A mature eagle feather will forever remain pure. This is a tale of two animals: one

loved, one hated. The vulture and the eagle. The eagle fly with dignity and strength. The vulture seems like a cursed bird. The vulture, can be patient enough too. The same vulture has its important in our land. When a priest performs a sacrifice, he will patiently wait for the vulture as a sign that it well with in the spirit world. That is why our elders said that *Achu aja ma afughi udele, mara na ihe mere mbe ndi mmuo*,” Pa Njoku removed a cigarette from his pack. Held it to his lips. I lit it for him with a matchstick. He puffed a ring of smoke into the air.

“The vulture must die,” I said.

He said nothing for almost five minutes, he kept looking upwards at the sky. The moon rose, but it wasn't full. Stars appeared on its side beautifully. He smiled.

“When you kill the vulture, will you eat the rot in the village? Will you eat the rot? The problem is not and has never been the vulture. The problem is how the modern man sees the vulture. In the past, before the coming of the white man, there has always been vultures, and they remained sacred, but today, we heap dirt in the market place, and the vultures now live comfortable among us.

“One day, the villagers asked the vulture to leave and never to return, soon they realized that there is no one to eat the dead. In spite of its feeding habit, and appearance, the vulture is still a bird. A rare one for that matter. Despite the rare yellow-black stripes of *oguru*, it is still a rat. Like it or not, a vulture is still a bird.

“In those days, our elders were wise enough not to dispose of dirt where people lived, it will definitely attract the vulture. Yet, they were wise enough to know that they needed a vulture to eat their rot in the forest. So, all rotten things were dumped at the evil forest.

“Long time ago, a hunter appeared, gun ready, and moved into the forest to hunt. The bird Nza saw that hunter has moved into the forest, he decided to fly without perching, and hunter, in turn, decided to shoot without stopping. Back then, to examine who is wiser, is an abuse of knowledge. So, we took it that the hunter was wiser. But today, you men have all the tools to study both Nza and the hunter, what are you doing with it?

“Our time is almost gone; we hand this land to all of you to take care of it. We hand the future to you for survival. Survive. Learn the ropes. Crawl. Walk. Move. Never stand still. Young men, go to bed, you’ve drunk to the man he was. Bury him when the time comes,” Pa Njoku said and packed up his things and went to bed.

We all walked into Profs room and lay down. Before I slept, I thought of Annie, I thought about my son. *What was he doing? Which strange man was beside Annie now? What was I even doing by being with Annie? Did I set birds free only to cage another bird in my house?* The contradiction and juxtaposition of my everyday good life astounded me. Like I met myself more often than any other person I knew. Each act rebounds and reappears to hunt me. It was the strangest analogy that ever came to my mind. I held my son’s beautiful face in my mind until I slept off on the floor with a duvet over me. My son’s face helped me quiet the madness brewing in me. Prof and the girlfriend were on his bed.

In my dream, I was a giant with wings. I flew across the ocean and there wasn’t anything for me there. But I enjoyed the feeling of being the only man in an Island. Dream masters transported me to meet a man that said he was me. Then something touched me, and I woke up, it was Nkechi, she didn’t even know that something like that would wake me up. She went to the restroom and was going back to bed when her foot brushed against me. It was one of those strangest night that one felt like sleeping and yet found oneself not to be sleeping. Dreaming, but yet awake.

Thinking, but yet dreaming. There was something satisfying in being aware, being in charge of my own dreams.

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The next day was a Sunday. We sat in the church. The three of us; Prof, his girlfriend, and me. There was so much beauty in the music. The tempo. The rhythm. The touch of advent on a dusty hosanna air. The priest methodical way of worship. The choir indeed sang their hearts out. We sat in the front row. Colorful. Like we had walked out of a fashion show. I wore the clothes that my Aba tailor sewed for me last year. It was a blazer made with Ankara fabrics. I loved the design so much that I rarely wore it. Nkechi said that I looked like a star. Prof dressed to kill too; a suit with a lapel. Old school shoes and colorful stockings that made people think he was gay as fuck. Nkechi walked elegantly in her chiffon and beauty, her head gear that looked like a halo. She stood tall like our own Virgin fucking Mary. She stood magnificent, and everyone watched us when we walked into the crowded church and never stopped until we got to the front seat. They looked at us like the misfits we were.

A church warder came to us and informed us that the front seat was reserved for special men from the government visiting the church today. We told them that we were as important as those men and sat on the very front pew. When they saw that we weren't convinced of their fallacious words, they let us stay. The priest made a sign from the altar, and they walked away from us. I wasn't angry like my usual self would have been. I just smiled, and kept smiling.

“The Catechist is dead,” the priest said and waited for the church to react.

The congregation started murmuring. Soon, cries leaped out from the back of the church and launched several echoes across the building. Children started crying, mothers, and fathers.

They said he was a good man. They said he was a man of sincerity. A man of dignity, and so much love.

“He joined us a few months ago. Just a few months ago. I still remember him walking up to me, to say that he wanted to work in the Lord’s vineyard. The spirit of God chose him, not me. Soon, his good work became visible to us all. I remember the day he cried because a family in this parish didn’t have anything to eat,” the priest sobbed, and continued, “a good man. Filled with humanity and love.” He paused and weighed his words, he looked up at the painting of God in the ceiling, and continued, “A man of integrity. The last time I saw him was two days ago. He helped with the announcement during morning mass. He never missed a day here. Not, a day.” The priest started wailing uncontrollably. Some of the parishioners went to help him. I saw Annie with my son on the other wing of the church. She was wailing too. The priest pushed the parishioners aside and said, “I am fine. I am fine.”

The parishioners left him to return to their various positions. The priest wiped his eyes with a handkerchief, and continued, “He butchered a Catechist with a machete, and put a hole in his head with a gun. All because he criticized him. Because he mentioned him in a restaurant where he was having a meal. That was why they butchered him, piece by piece. I stand on the altar of God to lay cause on the man that killed him. Whoever he is. He will never find peace in his life. He will die, and the vultures will feed on him. I stand on the altar of God to say this. He will never find peace.” The priest sobbed badly, but this time, no one went close to him.

The altar boys sat down quietly, watching the passionate priest. I looked at the altar boys, and all I could see was nothing but myself in a different place. I remembered the time my mother forced me to join the altar boys because it was where the good boys went to. I joined them. I served with boys like Jimmy, and Congo. It was there that I first learnt how to fondle a woman’s breast.

It was there that Congo taught me how to make pass at a girl from the altar; hit her chin with the tray during Holy Communion, lightly, and then smiled at her. These dark images passed through my mind in a split second and I couldn't weigh them properly, or maybe, I didn't want to weigh them.

The priest continued speaking again, "His burial will take place after Christmas. We will bury him. I bless all of you. I bless all the parishioners; I bless everyone that is here today. I can see that our church is twice bigger today. That was the kind man he was, one that attract crowds. There is no person in this Owerri that hasn't come in contact with him, one way or the other.

"He was a man of the people. Sometimes he did MC too. He didn't mind if he was paid or not, as long as he was helping the parishioners. A wonderful man. He has given us a lot to think about this season. A lot to talk about in our countries. Where the leaders see us as nothing but corpses that lack dignity. I will say it; the state has derailed from its primary function. It is now a murder house. Nigeria is no longer a country.

"The police that is meant to protect the people have gone to dogs. Nothing is working. No job for the youths. All the companies Governor Sam Mbakwe built has folded and gone to dogs. The present administration continues to eat from where the previous one stopped. Today, we will pray for our country, we will pray for our community. We will pray for the state."

Prof touched me, and said it was time to go. We have gathered the most important information that we came for; which the day of the burial. We walked out the church while he was still talking, and all eyes were on us.

Sundays were unique and beautiful here. There was something relaxing about the word itself. Even though death lingered around us, there, in the bright beautiful sky, it was blue and clear



as we walked out. I saw Annie and my Obiarika coming towards me. We stood at the door and waited. I hugged her, and took my son in my arms, we walked into the beautiful bright day all together. By the market, we all parted. I went east with Annie and son, and Prof and Nkechi went west to their house.

“All right my friend, have a safe trip to Obodu tomorrow. We leave very early in the morning too. We hope to be in the village early morning,” I said.

“No problem, my dear friend. And thank you,” Prof screamed.

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When we got home, I changed Obiarika’s clothes and played with him. Annie went to cook rice and stew with fish. I sat with Obiarika in the living room, watching the galaxy through the application on my phone. We saw all the heavenly bodies just above us. We saw the wonders of nature. We saw the dots that represented the universe. Once again, I showed him the star I named after him, and he said “Dada, Da-dy. Mummmm, my,” and smiled as though the heavens belonged to him. And smiled like all he ever wanted was to see my face all the time. He hit my face with his tiny spoon, and said “ta...ta...ta...” like that was all that pleased him. My heart broke into two for all the things I couldn’t change.

I walked to my balcony with him. I held him, and didn’t let him walk around the place because I had electronics everywhere, including the radio device. I switched on a radio transistor, and my favorite program came alive. The presenter said: “Tunes of yesterday’s that deserved another listening, if only for the old times sake. Now we will play The Platters, The Great Pretenders.”

The music started playing, slow and beautiful. Momentary explosion of the heart. I rocked Obiarika and smiled. I had listened to this program over the years with my mother, when I was younger and lived not far from here. We would sit around the radio and enjoy the old tunes after Sunday mass. It was still being presented by the same guy, he had been there for years, and I wondered how old he was now. After that song, he played Paul Anka's *Diana*. The trees in the distance, danced. The birds flew in with their young ones, traveling miles upon miles to share love and beauty with us. I watched a bird walk, fly and perch on the pawpaw tree in front of me. It was a bird called asa. The legendary asa, yellow stomach and wings the color of earth. It had a beautiful eye that riveted around its surrounding quickly, and its tweets were soulful. It left the branch of the shaky pawpaw tree, and perched on the hibiscus flowers and suckled it. The wings flapped to hold it in the mid-air, while he suckled. When a big pigeon appeared in the scene, the *asa* flew away. The pigeon threw himself down on the hard-cemented floor, and lifted an insect, and ate it. Even in the world of birds, birds were still afraid of other birds. The little ones usually gave way for the big one. That was the nature of things. That was how it worked. That was life's default.

Obiarika slept from being bored by the music I was enjoying. Slow melody. Slow hum like the great highlife of the sixties. I stood up and carried him inside. The distant sound of the Paul Anka's *Carol* faded as I walked towards the dining room. Annie was putting the food on the table.

"Come and eat," she said to me.

"Wow, this smells good," I said. She giggled. She was a great cook. She worked wonders with her hands in the kitchen. That was one thing that I loved, her food.

I placed Obiarika in his cot and then returned. I sat down, and she sat opposite of me. I put the rice on my plate and spread stew on top. I took two pieces of fish. She watched me and waited

until I was done before she began to dish the food for herself. I bit into the fish, and pushed a spoonful of rice into my mouth.

“We will leave very early tomorrow morning, and should be there to celebrate Christmas mass with mother. Also, I want you to buy things for Obiarika and yourself, we got a bonus at work,” I said, smiling.

“Now you are talking, good man. You are a good man,” she said.

She was excited about everything. But I wasn't doing it for her. I was more concerned about my son than any other thing she was thinking or creating in her head.

“If we leave as early as six, we will get there by seven and attend Christmas mass with mother. She will be happy to see the both of you. My brother is already in the village,” I said.

“It will be nice to see your brother, Ugonna again, it's been a long time since we last met. I hope he came back with shoes, maybe we can buy,” she said.

I already told him to make shoes for her and Obiarika. Which I was sure he did already. My phone rang, I excused myself and walked to the balcony.

“Hi love,” I said.

“Hi honey, merry Christmas in advance. It's been twenty-four hours since you last called me,” Chioma said.

I peered through the window and noticed that Annie was furious, she kept staring at me. I laughed, knowing that she couldn't do anything to me, not any longer; even though she knew I was in love with another person. Somehow, women always know when a man is in love; men can't hide anything from themselves. I turned towards the sun, not minding her being upset.

“Honey, I am sorry. I had to take care of things around here.”

“I understand. I am on my way to Lagos now, for the Christmas holiday. My brother asked me to come and spend the holiday with them. Please keep in touch. I love you John, I do.”

“I will. I will travel to the village tomorrow, what do you want me to get for you when I am coming back?” I asked.

“Nothing, I want you as a new year present.”

“I will, you know I will. I can’t wait. We will start afresh in January, and there are a lot of things I want to tell you. I want to be with you, and I promise I will tell you everything when you come back.”

When I cut the call, I stared at my phone for a while, smiling. Then I went back in to finish my food. Annie had already left the table.

## Chapter Eight

On Christmas day, I got up at five a.m. I looked outside my window, and it was still dark. Annie and my baby were still sleeping. I took a long shower and while the water sprinkled on my body, I thought about my childhood Christmases. It was years of struggling, and an attempt at survival. Growing up, the best part of Christmas day was the food. At least we got to eat meat the way we wanted. If the governor was merciful enough to pay workers their monthly salaries, then mother would buy us second hand clothes. I remembered when I was fourteen years old or something, I asked mum to stop buying Christmas clothes for me because I knew that what was coming in and going out in the family purse was barely enough.

The water splashed on my back, gently. I remembered the last gift I got back then. It was a green second-hand pants, denim fabric. I wore it proudly on Christmas day with my red tennis shoes, and dangled on the dusty road to church. The whole neighborhood dressed to kill, too. Rich kids showed off their traditional materials, nicely tailored. Families wore uniforms. I never liked uniforms. I loved being different. I loved being a person of my own. And I took that into my adulthood. Maybe, something in me was still alone, feeling rejected, and still trudging down that dusty road and searching through the rubbles of my childhood. I could see my childhood face clearly now, I wasn't smiling. I wasn't. I was almost sad all the time.

I remembered one Christmas we had to send our materials to a tailor. The tailor lived behind a chemist store. He gave him the materials very early in the month of November, and he promised to in three weeks. Each time we came to pick it up, he said it wasn't ready. A week before Christmas, my brother and I went to pick it up, he flamed up and asked us: "How much are you people even paying me that you should be harassing me like this? How much?"

When he finally finished sewing the clothes, Christmas was already over, and it had all the wrong stitches in the right places, and all the right stitches in the wrong places. He even failed to stitch the inner pocket at all. We later took a family photo with the clothes. The only people that smiled in the photo were my parents. The photo still hangs in my living room till this day. My unhappiness was photographed, and whenever I saw that picture, I would see it, right there in my eyes.

Annie woke up and readied herself, and also helped Obiarika take his bath. When it was time to go, I dragged all the bags downstairs. Annie had Obiarika already strapped to her back, with her favorite akara wrapper, the one that had tiny corn drawn across it, she called it her *akwa-oka*. She wore her *akwa-oka* only festive period.

The taxi driver was already waiting for us outside. When I saw him, I leaped with joy and we hugged. He helped me put all the stuff in the car. I had known him for a long time now, since my childhood days. He was the same driver that my father called to take us home. Then he was younger and full of life. Now, he looked older, with grey hair and a wrinkled thick skin. But, one thing that remained the same was his ever-smiling face. We did all the catching up while we moved the remaining things. He was happy that he would see my mother again after many years. He was that kind of family friend that I rarely saw, but whenever we met, it was filled with nostalgia; memories and stories and tales of the old days. Soon, we were on the road, speeding towards the village.

“Ah, your father was strong man oh!” he said, while his hands were on the car steering.

He drove towards the market road, and continued northward at Orlu Road.

He smiled and started telling the story again, “December 1996, I was with your father, driving home, and the car got stuck in a gully. That man came down and single handedly lifted the car out of the gully.”

I remembered that story. He was right. Father told us about the events when he got back. Father was tall and strong. He wrestled in the village back in the days. His mates were scared of him. The villagers were too. I wasn't trying to be anything like him. I was on the opposite of it. I was lanky and weak, and didn't even like the slightest show of strength. Those tactics to me, had no place in the twenty first century. To me, survival as an act wasn't a question of muscular features anymore. Or maybe I was just trying to be anything other my father.

*Why was I even thinking all this?* I thought to myself.

I swear, I felt a little bit insecure about what he said, especially with Annie at the back of the car. She never knew my father, and it must have come as a surprise to her to know that such a man gave birth to me.

“Ah, your father, ah. The day he beat up the *Agboro* man at the park, the *Agboro* thought that he was one of those gentlemen he could play with. I parked my car and he was looking for me when the *Agboro* man walked up to him and wanted to snatch his bag.

“Back then, there were no phones for him to tell me that he was in the park. I left my car to buy food, when I turned back, I saw your father chasing the *Agboro* man. I dropped the food and started chasing them. Your father caught this man, and landed a dirty slap on his face. Two of his teeth flew away. Just slap. He asked the *Agboro* man, ‘Do you know who you just messed with?’ the boy's face was already bleeding. He started begging your father, and father landed another slap on his face. I heard the sound of that slap from miles away, and people heard it too

and wondered who dished out such a slap. It was when I caught up with him that I separated them. After that day, your father was known as *Brutal* at the park. Whenever he walked into the park, they will say that *Brutal* has arrived,” he said.

I smiled. I said nothing. I didn't want to say anything. I knew it all. I remembered that part of him that was violent. I recalled the day him and brother had a problem, and he beat my brother blue black. I remembered and looked outside the window. It looked like all the Christmases I had ever had. It looked charming. And here I was in the same taxi my parents used for years. The same car. The same man was driving me. I couldn't tell if it was a blessing or a curse. I couldn't tell. The window of the car wouldn't wind up or down. It just remained half way up. It was windy, and as the car accelerated on the highway, it became colder. I told my girlfriend to cover the baby with a shawl. I watched the road. I watched what used to be green vegetation, now covered with cement and blocks and stagnant waters in small potholes with green algae covering the surface. Everyone was building a house, and the land wasn't enough. It dawned on me that soon we would run out of land. The only place that looked like a forest was by the bridge, where the two rivers met.

We drove past the palm tree with three branches, which was a rare occurrence. The village was named after the palm tree, *Eziamaobiato*. I wanted to know why the palm tree was an anomaly ever since I was a kid. The story that father told me wasn't clear, and I couldn't remember it. The story of the palm tree was already getting lost in legend. Maybe, one day, the palm would die off and everything would be forgotten.

The car was making a terrible noise, and I wondered if he would be able to take us back after the holiday. I could tell the car was in its last days. The people that made the car would be surprised at the extent of damage it has sustained and yet kept running and transporting people. I



wondered if the old man would ever retire. All his children were grown up and living big cities. But I think they weren't rich enough to sustain him. He needed to work until his death bed.

By the bridge I saw a sacred python lying down on concrete floor. The sight of it called upon my memory. I remembered all the stories grandfather had told me about the river and the python. The python he said was a beautiful woman inside, and men that had seen it confessed to it. Grandpa said he witnessed three men caught by the awe and beauty of her sight. The men ran to the village square, joyful. "They python doesn't eat us, and so the river doesn't eat us too." He said that we couldn't drown in the river. That if we happen to fall into it, the river would throw us out, and away. Like a whale spitting out Jonah.

"Look at the python," I said to Annie. She watched it with her mouth open, she starred in awe, at the size of it. The damn python must has consumed a thousand goats over the years to be that big. The villagers worshipped the river a long time ago, but it was no longer so today. Today, everyone went to church. Pentecostal was where the light was. It was the new salvation, like Jesus coming down again.

On all the electric posts we drove past, there was a poster of a sort advertising a Christmas cleansing of a sort, I read them as we drove along, to have a good laugh and distract myself:

*Baptism yourself Again*

*Deliverance from deep causes*

*Cut the devils tail crusade Arise and Shine,*

*Capture the demon, Shield from generations causes,*

*Operation hee haaa, hoo haa against the devil*, and other funny things they wrote to attract “believers.” It was just a matter of time before the overzealous Christians kill the damn python.

“So, how are your children?” I asked the driver.

“They are fine. Trying their best. One recently left Nigeria for Libya, from there, he will get to Europe, God willing, he will leave Europe for America too,” he said smiling, with so much hope. I read the news, and I knew that most of them don’t even make it out of Libya, and a half of them will not make it across the sea. And when they even make it across the sea, and get to Europe, it would take them years to feel like human beings.

But, come to think of it, no migration has ever been easy. These men risking the sea, risking everything they’ve ever known, are running from something. Something bigger than them. Something they couldn’t comprehend. It wasn’t just about money. It was about discomfort, and discomfort is a human thing. I sympathized with him. What he had was hope, and I wasn’t in a position to say what he should think or not think. I wasn’t in the position to tell him about the news and how many men that would never made it back home. I smiled at him.

“He will be alright. I will remember him in prayers,” I said.

“Please do,” he said, and smiled.

That was the greatest comfort you could give to someone around here. Remembering them in prayers meant a lot. I had no other word or comfort to give. None. The road was still the same since I last visited it. I think five years ago. Some part of the road had gotten worse. Cars had to slow down, and gently run into the potholes before picking up speed again. Obiarika woke up and cried; I guess he needed food. He had a large appetite like me. Annie started to feed him. I watched

them through the side mirror. When the car dropped into another pothole, the food she had on the spoon spilled on the car mat.

We were in our small village now. Soon, the car branched into a smaller road. The road ran across another road that ran into towards house. The house that father built before he died. Development had caught up with the village too, and much like the cities, new buildings were springing up everywhere. But it was still the same people. The same men riding their bicycles towards the village square. The same suffering. The same greeting. The same fight for survival.

The men on their bicycles waved at us. There was no way one could come back to the village without the villagers knowing. I knew some of them, and they knew me as son of the soil. When we passed them, they screamed at us, and pedaled their bicycles faster to catch up with us. When we got closer to my father's houses, I could hear the audible sound of whistling pines, singing in the wind. It was indeed closer to nature here. The air was different: cleaner and fresher. The road to father's house was almost damaged and needed repairs. I thought about tossing a few sand bags to balance it when I had time.

Tall whistling pines stood in front my father's house. A small gated bungalow hidden in the woods. We had a few neighbors, too. Mostly our kinsmen. Smoke was rising from the houses down the little road, right behind the big *udara* tree. I saw some boys walking down the road, and waved at them. I knew them. We all grew up together, chased lizards and other things. They were still here, still walking around. Here, all the promises of a republic were nonexistent. No jobs. No government supports. People only dreamed of making it out of here. Some made it out and moved to bigger cities or traveled abroad. Most just kept their heads above the water and tried to survive. I saw Dan. He was one of the boys I grew up with. He was now a man like me. There was a young boy beside him, probably his son. I jumped out of the car.

“Dan!” I screamed.

“John de Django!” he screamed back at me, we ran and embraced each other.

Back in the days, they called me John de Django because I was wild. Whenever I came back to the village, I would explore the bush at night and day. Django was a protagonist in a Hollywood movie that everyone admired here. It was Dan that first said that I behave like Django the night we were hunting squirrels, and the rest of our crew started calling me John de Django.

“*Nwa afo*, son of the soil. *Ome ka nna ya*, welcome home,” Dan said and hugged me again.

“Ah! Ah! Ah! Is this your wife?” I asked and smiled at the tired and happy young woman that was beside him. Her pregnancy was visible too.

“Yes, my brother,” he said and looked into the car, and asked me, “Is that your wife?”

“Kind of,” I said, and the two of us burst into laughter.

“How many do you have now?” I asked.

“Four,” he said.

“Under this harsh economy? And you still have another one coming?” I asked with a surprise look on my face.

“My brother, it is the Lord that giveth, that is what the priest taught us,” he said.

We laughed and laughed. I said to myself, *what a lousy fellow, what a pity*.

My brother came out of the house and opened the gate, our car drove in. Soon my mother appeared, and she hadn't changed a bit. She walked out of the compound in her very fashionable

Christmas clothes, a long beautiful gown with flowery patterns. I ran and hugged her and lifted her up. We laughed and laughed and laughed. Happiness ran through us.

“Old woman, you are now a grandmother,” I said to her and we laughed.

Most of the people that came were my relatives, both distant and close ones. But I didn't know who some of them were even though they knew me. I left my mum with Annie and child, and started greeting them. Some of them I remembered, like uncle Phoenix, who worked in Lagos with white men in the 60's. In his usual out-of-the-box style, he was smoking and smiling at me, gauging me from the corner of his eyes, his white bucket hat cupping his head handsomely. Like he had always been: out-of-the-box thinker with an out-of-the-box lifestyle. Growing up, most people didn't like him so much around here, they said he was lost in his stupidity and the ways of white men. But I swear, he was the coolest person in the village, ever, and still doesn't give a shit till this day. If there was one person true to himself here, it was him. Most times when I remember him, I get a clear picture of what my old age might look like. His shirt was unbuttoned. He seemed older, weary, but wasn't out of style, not yet.

“My son, come here, come. Touch my body,” he said to me, and we hugged.

“You have Style Uncle Phoenix,” I said.

“Never lose it son, never,” he said and shook hands in style.

We laughed, and our thunderous voice resounded deep into the woods. I listened to my own self and watched. A monkey leaped out of a tree beside our house and dangled unto the next tree. Monkeys were considered sacred here, and they moved around however they wanted. It was one the beauties of coming back home. I moved over to another person, and greeted him. And the next. And the next. By the guava tree, my brother and the driver were catching up and exchanging

pleasantries. The driver always boasted that the story of my father wouldn't be complete without him, and that was true. No part of it. Annie walked into the kitchen and brought out kola for the visitors. They ate and left.

Soon, the driver left and promised to come and pick us up in two days' time. When everyone was gone, I took all our belongings into the room and arranged them. I watched mother; she was filled with so much joy. She didn't let Obiarika out of her sight. That was what joy felt like. The joy that filled the depth of her heart showed on her face, and she looked more beautiful than ever. I watched her and smiled.

"Happy Christmas mama," I said and brought out all the gift I bought for her; shoes, food stuff, clothes, and cooking utensils. She danced with so much joy and thanked me. She asked me and my family to kneel, and we all knelt. I would have wished she didn't consider her my wife, but she did. I had no say in that. She began to pray.

"My child, you looked after your mother, and brought back hope to her. Now that you are here, I feel well. You brought me my grandson on a Christmas day, like Christ being laid in manger. It will be well with you," she said and threw her hands up.

We replied "Amen".

"It will be well with your son."

"Amen."

"It will be well with your children's children's children, however they come, wherever they come from."

"Amen."

“You have looked after your mother; your own children will look after you.”

“Amen.”

She finished her prayer, and asked us to stand up. We joyously stood up and hugged each other. I walked to the back of the house. My mother’s chickens started crying. I knew that something was wrong. I looked up and noticed a brown hawk circling ahead like a Lockheed Martin F-22 Raptor. Swiftly, the hawk made a landing and carried away the lizard on the wall covered in green algae.

“*Agu-Nkwu* doesn’t waste time,” my brother said.

The hawk carried the lizard to the top of a nearby palm tree, plucked out its eyes, and threw away the carcass.

“Remember when we were young and wanted to catch a hawk with a chicken?” I said and laughed.

“Yes, look at the mark, it’s still on my arm,” my brother said and rolled his sleeve to reveal where the hawk’s three long nails dug into his skin. That year, we came back to the village very early. It was actually Dan’s idea that we catch a hawk. He said we could make a hawk stew. We set a trap for the hawk in the middle of the forest by tying a chicken in a clap-trap made from a milk tin. It was a very easy engineering. We just attached a rubber to the lid, and stuck a tin stick in between the lid and the tin. We hid in the forest, and watched the hawk circle the sky. We hid behind the trees. The hawk made a swift landing inside of the tin, and the trap shut. We had the hawk in the tin.

My brother was the oldest then, so it automatically fell on him to secure the bird. We underestimated the strength of a hawk. My brother went to grab the hawk, he opened it and put his hand inside; the hawk tore his skin, my brother threw away the tin and cried. The hawk flew away. My brother was rushed to the local health center where he received three stitches.

I remembered vividly now. I looked around; this house was full of memories. Discarded memories. Beautiful memories of what we could have been, of everything we've become. I could still see my father walking around in his strong body, trying to keep everywhere clean; trimming the flowers, clearing the shrubs, closing animal holes all around the compound. It became more apparent to me; the kind of man he was. A man contended in his own, by his own, and of his own. A man that built each block of that house with his sweat, and tended to it himself. A man that would sit? in front of the house in the evenings with a box of snuff in house and his palm wine beside. Joy was indeed a private affair, and everyone must find his.

I quickly removed my shirt, took the machete out and started trimming the flowers. I started with the Ixora flowers at the back of the house. Also, I uprooted whistling pines that were growing inappropriately. The fences were covered with creeping plants and green moss. I quickly yanked them off, since they were dry due to the season, I packed them outside, and set them on fire. Kites circled around the smoke in the sky.

Dan was returning from the market and came in to see us. He greeted me again and promised to come back later to help me clean up. This was what it felt like to fit into my old man's shoes; exhausting. I was sweating. I sat down in the pavement, and descended on a fresh palm wine that mother bought that morning, the famous palm wine tapper Dioche Iche. Here, life was



small and slow, in a way, more satisfying than in the city. I saw mother coming outside, I walked up to meet her at the gate.

“You have done well my son, just like your father would have done. God bless his soul, but now, we must go to church. And you must come. It is Christmas, then we will come back and have lunch, and all your friends and uncles will be here like we used to,” she said.

I quickly showered, and joined them for church. We locked the gates and walked towards the main road. People were also going to church. Mostly old people on their bicycles cycling downhill. Those that were too old to ride it, dragged it. There was a certain pride in dragging your bicycle even when you couldn't mount it. The forest flanked the main road, and branched into smaller routes. These small roads were trade routes, snaking into other villages and going miles upon miles. I knew all the small parts. I knew where they led. We recounted them along the way.

“This one, will get you to *Umudim*,” I said to my brother and Annie.

“Oh, you still remember this part. Do you still remember the man that sells palm wine across three villages? Grandpa only drank palm wine from him,” he asked, and laughed.

“Yes, I do. We had to walk miles before we got there. One time, Dan and I nearly finished papa's wine along this path,” I said.

I wondered why I hadn't been talking to Dan; why I forgot such a great friend while in the city and only to remember all these on seeing him. *Is this what life is all about? Remembering people at convenience?* It pained me greatly that I swore that I would keep in touch him when next I get back to the city.

The city life flashed in my head again, with so much heaviness. I remembered all the dead people in the city. I remembered those that had taken upon themselves to torment me in the city, people like The Pharrell. Also, other that derived all the pleasure from talking about others; like barbers. Terrible people. Returning to the village seemed like a temporary relief from all that city bustle and pain.

Memories were bursting in my head, and leaping out of my lips. Each step I took, each turn around here, became a nourished reminiscence. By St. Peters was a market. The market that grandfather spoke of all the time. The market that was bequeathed to our village by a great sage. A timeless witch and visionary who had found a way to see deep into the future. Grandfather said that once upon a time, when the men arrived here from *nri*. They settled and had nothing like their neighbors. Soon, a great sage manifested among them, and cured and did all kind of miracles in the village. The sage was said to have migrated from an unknown land. Men traveled day and night, from as far as Arochukwu to our village, in search of this sage. When he was on his death bed, he thought about his people and said that he hasn't done anything tangible for them. He gathered all the elders and asked them to go to other villages and gather all the discarded things in their market. The villagers did as the sage instructed. They brought back all the discarded things they could find. When a full moon appeared, the sage performed the grand ceremony and instructed that a new market should be started at this place. He prophesied that this market will be the envy of its neighbors. The sage struck his staff on the ground and died. The people started the market on an *Eke* day. The market was called *Eke*, and it only sold on *Eke* days. These days, the market sold every other day, yet, the best of the market was experienced on *eke* days. Looking at the market today; one would say that the prophecy came to pass. It has grown over the years to become the biggest market in this area. Men traveled all the way from Lagos to trade here.

“After church, we will go and play the raffle for Obiarika,” I said to Mama and Annie.

My brother smiled, because he was feeling nostalgic too. St. Peters Catholic Church was as old as colonialism in this place. It was older than my father, probably older than my grandfather. It was here that the white man arranged the boxing match. Father always boasted about his uncle whose boxing prowess began here. I could still see my father telling the story again and again. He would dangle to manifest every bit of the blow my uncle dished out to his opponent from the next village. It was after that march that the white men took him to Cameroon to fight a boxing legend named Killer. He defeated Killer, and took his title and name.

Grandfather often spoke of the St. Peters as the place the educational awakening started. In a comical way, he talked about Father Lambert, another white parishioner that was posted to the village to oversee Gods flock before independence. The night he arrived, the church had been without a priest, and the Catechist had assumed the post. During announcement, the priest walked into the church with a loud shoe. Grandfather said he was matching shoes hard on the floor, and would demonstrate to us how exactly he was walking: “koi, koi, koi, koi!” taking each step majestically. The Catechist got so mad that he screamed from the altar, “Who is that making noise in the church?” priest ignored, and kept walking: “koi, koi, koi, koi!”

The Catechist was infuriated, he asked again: “who is making that noise?”

The priest climbed the altar, gently took the mic and said: “Very, Reverend Father, Lambert Lambert, Ph.D. English Language, Harvard University, LL.M Columbia University.”

Father said he was there that day, and the church broke into an ululation right in the middle of service. After the event, rich men in the village found a way to send their children to universities

abroad for education. It became a dream for them. They had found the next gold; Ivy League colleges in America. It became a thing of status in the village.

My head felt like a thousand browser pages all open at once; trying to grasp one image wasn't possible. I was thinking everything all at once. In front of the church, Infant Jesus lay in a manger. A manger made of straw and effigies. We walked past it. Mother touched the holy water placed in front of it, and rubbed it on her face.

“Go on touch it,” she said to me as if she knew I had lost all atom of faith in this grand farce, and I did. We walked gently into the church. We bowed. Just in front of us was my uncle Nwachi. He waved at us, stood up, came to my mum and whispered in her ears, then came to me and said, “Agu, look at the size of wife you went and married! Eh!”

We laughed, but sincerely it wasn't funny. That was what I tried to prevent. I was in no position to explain that she wasn't even my wife. Some said that I didn't even invite them for my marriage, but we weren't even married; these were things I dared not explain. Each time that happened, I wished that I hadn't come back. But, I swear, what he said made me laugh and reminded me that I was part of them; People with a very dark sense of humor.

“Come to my house this evening let's eat and drink,” Nwachi said.

I looked at him, and laughed deep inside me. Not at what he said, but at the fact that his back bent badly, and his head shook like that of a lizard, without control. I laughed, I laughed that I had to close my mouth with my hand and bend my head so that he wouldn't notice that I was laughing at him. When I raised my head from the pew, I looked at him sitting down, against the aisle, and his lizard head still nodding uncontrollably, I fumbled into another fresh round of laughter. His successful children and grandchildren looked at me and waved and smiled. They all

came back from America. I smiled at them. My mother touched me again, and smiled at me. Life was moving, it was. Even if all my shames were unbearable, here I was baring myself to the judgment of my people, and may history find me unashamed. Even though I was ashamed deep inside of me.

The priest wooed us of the little money we came back with. He said we should support our parents with money for the completion of the new Virgin Mary shrine. To wipe the shame off my face, I donated something paltry, as much as I could afford. My brother didn't care about shame. He never gave a dime to the priest. My brother had always been like that. He had always been about himself. When the priest talked about money, he laughed. When the children of my uncle were donating millions of naira in hard currency, I laughed, and he laughed. We were trained that way, to give little or no fuck at all. Because that was the hallmark of jealousy, and attrition, and war and hatred – giving a fuck. We weren't as successful as my uncle's children, but we were fine with ourselves. Honestly. We did everything to please our little selves and no one.

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After church, I helped mother and my girlfriend prepare food. I killed the goat, washed it, peppered it, and added onions. I started the fire and placed the pot on it, letting it simmer for a while. It's been a long while since I last had food that was cooked by firewood. Mother said that I should let Obiarika crawl around and eat sand if he wants. She said we carried him around too much. She asked us if we wanted our baby to grow up weak. We laughed. She had a good sense of humor too, and it wasn't dark. When cooking was done. We all sat together in the parlor, and ate our Christmas meal. It didn't feel like old times, it felt like a new beginning. It tasted better than all the food I had had all year. We drank fresh palm wine, and told stories about the city.

“Malarkey and family, Dike and family, Polito and family, are they still at our old place?” mother asked me. She still remembered all her neighbors, and actually the place I grew up and the place I lived in the city wasn’t far from each other. Owerri was a very small town.

“Last I checked, Dike built a house and moved out, Malarkey has moved back to their village, and Polito still lives down street even though I barely see him around these days,” I said.

She looked at me and smiled, I knew she was going down memory lane too. Memories made up everything we ever wanted to be or love, in the present and future. And of course, now. Our happiness and sadness today as a family, had always been there. When we looked at each other, the joy of sight, the joy of being, and the joy of touching healed all our wounds, and comforted us.

Dan came around and ate food, too. After that, I decided to go with him and see what was going on around the village. He came with two machetes. I wondered how he was always so happy with four children and one coming, and a very little income to take care of them.

“Let’s behave like Bushmen today,” Dan said.

“Ah, those days we still had forest to prune, these days, I don’t know,” I said.

“We live here, I will show you the forest. Don’t worry. I know you had always been fond of nature,” he said and handed me one of the machetes.

We walked out our gate, and took the left turn towards a bush part. The only people missing from the original four was my brother and Okey. Okey, he died mysteriously few years ago. No one knew what killed him. Well, people barely knew what killed them around here. Sick people had to travel all the way to Owerri to get treatment, and Owerri wasn’t even anything. People in

Owerri had to travel to Abuja to get treatment, and those in Abuja traveled abroad for medical examination. In fact, the whole country was a healthcare disaster.

We kept walking into the forest carefully not to step on thorns. I still reminded myself of the time a thorn pierced my sandals and stuck under my foot, I was ten. It was my brother that pulled it out. In the forest, with palms fronds falling, there would always be thorns. I knew that about the forest.

“Are we going to hunt?” I asked as I slashed my path with the machete.

“The cries of birds heal; do you know that?” he asked smiling.

“I never knew that,” I said.

“Living in the township means you don’t know a lot about your own people,” he said and slashed shrubs with his machete.

“Well you might be right, but not totally. The township in question is just a few kilometers away from here, I don’t see that as an obstruction from knowledge. Our people had always been migrating, what mattered most are the stories we carried with us,” I said.

He pointed his machete deeper into the forest, towards a trail that didn’t exist. We kept walking.

“The forest is us. We are this forest. We own it,” he said.

“But, why are you still here? Others have left to the big cities, some found their ways abroad, why are you still here?” I asked him.

“Have you forgotten? An animal with children cannot run far, it is the nature of things. We will stay here and look after the wealth you people will bring home,” he said.

The wind got stronger. I could tell that we were getting closer to a river. The fog became thicker, and blurred our path. The sun was shining, so it wasn't too cold, but it was windy. Red saps from a mango tree dropped on my shirt as I walked past it. It was a yellow shirt, so the stain was visible.

"Look, that's a squirrel," Dan said.

"Ah! I see it," I looked up at the mango tree, and watched the squirrel hop onto a palm tree. And hopped onto the next palm tree. The leaves created a canopy, and we walked under it for a second.

"The sweetness of coming back to the village is the forest," Dan said.

"Yes, you are so right," I said.

Soon, we were at the river. It flowed eastwards and the color was rusty yellow.

"You remember this place?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," I said.

I remembered that I was learning how to swim that December. I quickly learnt how to float and beat against the current. But I started sinking, and Dan dragged me out of the water.

Dan removed his short pants, wearing only underwear, he jumped into the river and began to swim. I did the same, and beat against the current. I beat with all my strength. I beat towards the bridge. At a point, Dan began to float and let the river take him. I did the same, and the river took us down its path. Then when we were going too far, I threw myself back into the river, and wringed like a fish. I went ahead to push stroke after stroke against river, and Dan did the same. We took west together, and swam until we got the small island where we buried treasure when we were



small. After watching pirate movies, and coming back to the village, we convinced Dan and others that we could bury things in the small island. Dan still remembered the small island, and that was why he brought me here. We made a landing on the wet white sand. And breathed heavily.

“Who even owns this land?” I asked.

“It belongs to the outcasts, which was a long time ago. It was forbidden for us to come here back in those days, but you and your brother were really stubborn and defiant. The first time we followed you, we thought it was ghosts that lived here. Then we realized that it was one those lies? manipulative the elders told to scare you off a place they didn’t want you to go,” he said.

The island was a paradise in the middle of nowhere. Palm trees flanked around it and danced in the wind. The sand was white. The forest was dense like something found in tropical regions. Tortoises were everywhere, walking slowly.

“I want to buy this island,” I said.

“I am yet to find out who owns it,” Dan said.

“It feels more peaceful here than any other place on earth. Do you still remembered that I buried treasures here?” I asked.

“Yes, I do,” he said.

Soon, we unearthed tins of can we buried about thirteen years ago. The can itself had gone out of circulation; it was originally used to store milk. I opened the first one, and inside it were toys. The blue soldier toy I loved most, and other little toys we had. I threw them inside my pocket. Dan opened the next can, and it was filled with coins. Old coins that were no longer in circulation. I think we planned to use the money someday, but they were now worthless. No one used them

any longer. I opened the third can, and it there were three catapults in it. There were other cans we buried around the island, but it was getting late, so we decided to head back. With a pocket filled with treasures, we dove into the river, and began to beat against the current. In the middle of the river, I looked back, and saw Dan standing. He hit his machete in the water, and screamed, “I have it. I caught it!”

I stood up and watched. The water was around my chest. He killed a fish. A big one. He tied the fish with a thread to his underwear, and we began to swim back. When we got ashore, I helped him drag the fish out. It was nearly the size of a medium bucket. Catfish.

“That’s a big one, how did you do that?” I asked.

“You have to practice it, it’s easy. Just imagine where the fish is going to be and strike,” he said.

I wasn’t sure that I understood that, but I was happy to see him do it. The sun had gone down and turned into a big orange when we left. We walked back through the same path.

“We should go see the masquerade!” he said.

“Yes, we should.”

It was a good way to spend a half of the evening. I remembered the stories my grandfather told us about the masqueraders. He was fond of a particular one called *Ofuzo*, which appeared out only at night. It was considered a spirit, and only titled men were permitted to see him. Each titled man would make sure that there was no one around when the masquerade visits. Grandfather told me that once upon a time, a group of men conspired against the masquerade and planned to kill him. The masquerade was only slated to visit *Ozo* titled men in the community. My grandfather

was one of them, so he readied for the visit. He made sure that children and wife weren't around when the masquerade arrived. He said that the masquerade was crying when he arrived. He was weeping that something bad would happen that night. My grandfather asked the masquerade what it was, but he refused to speak. He said that the masquerade continued on his journey to the next compound, and the next. But on the third one, they ambushed him. When the masquerade appeared in view, they fired at him, the masquerade used his metal gong and caught all the bullets and dropped them, as if they were seeds. He walked a few meters, and they men fired again. The masquerade caught the bullets with his metal gong, again. When the men couldn't succeed, they ran away. The masquerade continued on his journey that night. The next day, the old man grew sick. Even though no bullet penetrated him, the effect of the bullets fired at him left heavy dents inside of him. Grandfather said that he died two days later. He said that all those men that killed the masquerade started dying mysteriously. The gods took their revenge. He said that they all confessed before dying, and were all thrown into evil forest when they died. The evil forest was still here, till his day, but was no longer called evil forest. People have used the land for other things like farming. Some even built houses on it. Father said that the land our Church was built on, was part of the evil forest. He said that that was one of the main reasons people converted to Christianity. When they sent the white man to die in this evil forest, he thrived and even built a house for his own God. So, everyone thought that there was something wrong with their own gods, and abandoned it. I believed that the evil forest was merely a state of mind, a state of being, and nothing else. The people only imagined what could have been in it, and it was never there. But those stories were us, and had been with us, and they made me.

“You still remember that the remaining part of the evil forest is still that way?” he said pointing north. The forest along that path was denser. Deep down was a house in the middle of it.

“Who lives there?” I asked.

“I don’t know, maybe an outcast?” he said.

“Are there still outcasts?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said.

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Masquerades were no longer masquerades. Everyone could see them nowadays. Christians walked past the village square and spit at the masquerades. We stood and watched them dance. When it was starting to get more interesting, a group of radical Christians came with their troupe to fight the masquerade. They said it was evil and part of the reason why the villagers weren’t progressing. It was the members of the *Lord Chosen Ministry*. They said that the Lord sent them to liberate the villagers from the evil holding them down.

They walked past Dan and I clutching big microphones, singing: “Jesus must conquer.”

The elders were astounded at the absurdity of their claim. One of the old men dressed in *ishi-agu* attire said, “This is something we have been doing since the time of our forefathers, and no one has been harmed from it. There is nothing bad here, we are just respecting our ancestors and keeping tradition. All of us worship the same God. All of us are Christians. We are here just to be happy and remember where we are coming from. And how we got here today. We are not hiding our women, neither are we hiding the children. The masquerade is for everyone, including the Catholic priest at St. Peters, we are not here to harm anybody.” The old man turned to the other elders and asked, “Our people is that not it?” The elders swiftly replied that that was indeed the truth.

The Christian rebels marched angrily around the village square as if to bring the down the walls of Jericho by stamping their feet. The leader of the Christian group spoke in tongues, and consulted God.

Dan touched me and said, “Let’s go.” I removed his hand from my shoulder, “This is the most interesting part of this, I want to really see what these Pentecostal men will do to the masquerade,” I said.

Their leader danced as if the Holy Spirit was ministering to him. Soon, he began to speak: “This masquerade must be burnt. This old man is a witch, but we will not touch him. We do not spill blood; we will deliver him from the clutches of the devil. If you want to deliver yourself from the grip of this evil, close your eyes right now and lift your hand up as a sign of surrender to the Lord God.”

To my surprise, Dan closed his eyes and lifted his hands up. Most people did just that. They all wanted to be recused from the chains of the devil. They all wanted nothing to do with the evil that had invaded their space, and their existence. They wanted to be rescued from the clutches of the devil by all means. I and the old men under the canopy were the only people that refused to participate. The old men shook their heads, and I guess the same thing that was going on in my mind was going on in their minds. The same puzzle. The same shame. The fact that everything we could ever be has turned to the practice of the devil. The fact that everything that was of our forefathers has become a threat to our own successes.

Their leader began to shed real tears in adoration to the Lord. He started singing a melancholic Christian song, “Jesus gbasara aka ya na obe.” he dragged the song so slowly that it became too sorrowful to bear, and people began to cry too.

“Now, your sorrows are being delivered. Your sins are being loosened. Jesus is recuing his people. He is dancing among you,” the man wailed unto the cloudy sky, and wailed with all the veins in his neck sticking out.

The first masquerade to remove his clothes was the one wore a carved wooden chicken head, and with rafia all over his body. He removed the locally made chicken mask and threw it at the foot of the man of God, and began to cry. The rest of the masquerades joined them, and laid down their clothes.

“Ah, Ah! Father, Jah! Your people will be liberated fire. Today all the evil masquerades have submitted their charms to you father! If this masquerade is evil father, light it on your own with fire. I will pour holy water on it, and you Lord God will transform it into a fuel and burn everything evil your path. Oji oku eri aja,” the leader said.

He signaled a dwarf who had been sitting there all along. The dwarf ran and brought the holy water, and something tied in a waterproof bag the size of a little finger. The leader poured holy water on the masquerade costume, and threw in the waterproof bag quickly. Smoke started coming out, and soon, flames followed. Dan screamed, “Halleluiah!” closed his eyes and began to praise God, too. I busted out laughing at him, at the grand farce displayed before us. It was the joke of all jokes, and better than watching all those magicians that came to our school back in the days. The flames burst into fire, and the men began to praise God. The fire grew wild and fierce, the converts and men of God danced round it, praising God. Dan wanted to go and dance with them, but I drew him back.

“What is wrong with you?” I asked him.

He looked at me with tears in his eyes and said, “All I want is salvation, I don’t want to know where the power is coming from.”

He joined them and started singing and dancing round the fire. They said that God burned the masquerades himself. They said that God had conquered the power of the masquerade. They said that everyone, right there, on that day, that witnessed everything, had been liberated. Dan danced his heart out at those words. I pitied him. With four kids and one coming soon, he really needed a miracle. I got so mad, and left. I walked back home, alone.

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When I got home, I saw Obiarika playing in the sand. I was weak. I sat down, in front of our house with my brother. A full moon was shining. We drank more palm wine. Mother drank. Brother drank. Annie for the first time, drank. We switched on the electric generator, so we could charge our phones.

“Now, what plans do the two of you have?” Mother asked.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Maybe God will give us more children, and marriage,” Annie said.

I swear, I wanted to slap her teeth away. *What is she thinking? That there will be a life for us after all she did? That we will live happily ever after? That I am doing all this for her?* My face swelled from the silent anger that filled it. She understood and kept quiet afterwards.

I looked at my brother and smiled.

“Your hairs are falling out like that of a cancer patient,” I said to my brother whose hair was indeed falling off and becoming barer.

Annie walked inside to get water.

“Your wife will soon grow to be beautiful,” he said, and we laughed.

“Your uncle, did you see him?” I asked my brother, and he nodded.

“His back is bent like that of a porcupine, soon we will join our ancestors in the grave,” I said, and gulped another cup of palm wine.

I never really liked my uncle; he had always been a crafty man and never believed anything positive could ever come from us. It was him who persuaded father not to send my brother to the university, but he sent his own son, and now they are graduates and lived abroad.

“He invited me for dinner,” I said.

“Us too,” Annie said when she came back.

“Dirty old man. Who wants to eat his food? He never came to me. I knew he wouldn’t. I would have knocked out two of his teeth right there,” my brother said, and punched his hand into the air.

Someone knocked at the gate, when I opened it, it was Dan.

“Dan have you finished receiving salvation?” I asked. He looked at me and laughed.

“When you left, we saw demons dancing in the flame,” he said.

“You didn’t see shit. Honestly, if we didn’t grow together, I would have asked you right now to get the fuck away from my house. But, for the sake of all the beautiful shit you made me see again today, I will say, fucking come have a drink,” I said, and we laughed.



He could tell I was drunk. He smiled and joined us. Dan only wanted his own salvation and nothing else, like any other Christian I had seen around here. It was always about escaping poverty of the mind, poverty of the soul, and poverty of the body. Nothing else.

Mother took my son and went to bed. Annie followed her too. We made a fire, and passed the palm wine around. We shared a cow horn filled with palm wine like old days. The fire burned into our faces, into our souls, into the moon, into whatever we were, whatever we would be, into our ambitions and dreams.

“I wanted to be a doctor,” my brother said.

I could see the sadness in his face.

“I know that, I still remember. I was the person that never wanted to become anything,” I said.

“Why?” brother asked.

“There was no need, I think I watched you try, and I didn’t even want to try. I still don’t regret it,” I said.

He looked at me and smiled; the smile on his face had sorrows in it, melancholy that made me remember the kind man he was. He made a lot of sacrifices so that maybe I might become something. My sister too. But my end and her end came in almost the same fashion. She went mad, and was taken to a mad house, never to be seen again. And I refused to be anything, like everyone expected me to.

“There’s no need even trying to become something around here,” Dan said.

“But God just liberated your ass, why are you worried still? You have become a new man in him, right?” I asked.

“It seems like, it looks like. I hope it will be. Do you know how many of those events I have experienced in this village?” he asked me. “I was there when they burned the shrine at the *eke* market. I was there when they burnt my father’s *ofo*. I was there when they burnt all those things and they said that our lives would change after that. Look at me, do I look changed?”

I watched him, his shirts were dirty, and trousers he was wearing had holes all around it.

“You look poor my friend,” I said.

My brother nodded his bare head, and we burst into laughter, again, this time, it came with so much pain and sympathy for our dear kinsman. Our voice followed the winds and journeyed to the world beyond.

“The white man even had more respect for what our fathers left behind than these Christian. The white man took them away to their homeland and placed them somewhere beautiful and worship it themselves. These Christians burn them,” Dan said.

“And yet you stood there and watched them burn another one?” I asked.

“Do you want me to be the evil one? Tomorrow you will leave this village, and no one will remember you. Do you know what has happened to those fated as witches and enemy of progress? Do you want to know?” Dan asked with his two eyes popping out. He was drunk, but he was right.

“Just in a day, I have felt so beautiful and so ugly. So beautiful because I can still find pieces of my childhood, so ugly at what it has become, I don’t want to see it again. I rather stay in the city, in my war zone and suffer,” I said.

“How is the city?” my brother asked.

“Rough. Dead bodies are turning up everywhere. Rough. Idiots are now killing people anyhow. It’s no longer what it was like when guys like you were around,” I said.

I remembered my brother those days in Owerri, 90’s, who were you to bite into his ears? He would eat you raw. We went to the roughest secondary schools, where men were taught to beast it out in life like fucking gladiators. He turned out differently, and I turned out differently. I think it was because I met Prof that I didn’t really join the bad gang. My brother left Owerri, because he had to leave everything behind and start afresh.

“One of the new guys controlling the street killed my friends. Two of them. Butchered them,” I said.

“Which family is he?” my brother asked.

“I think Oriental Boys, I am not sure, but I have heard people say something like that about him. I think he is their leader,” I said.

“You are never sure little brother; you are never concerned with protecting yourself or being strong. You grew up weak,” he said and looked at me the same way he always did, whenever he had to protect me, his right eyebrow would lift all the way up, and his head would lower a little.

“But I turned out better,” I said.

We laughed.

“That is the thing about the street, the violence never ends. The fascination never stops. In the end, it will take you. You have to decide to stop loving it,” my brother said.

“I know. I just don’t think I have any option,” I said.

“Me too,” Dan said.

“Father has lands, what are your plans?” he asked me.

“To build nothing, I have no money,” I said.

“Don’t be a fool, stop fooling around and start making money. Start. Happiness is about money,” my brother said.

“And how much have you made?” I asked.

I knew that it hurt him, but he had no option than to laugh, too. We laughed and laughed. Reality was right in front of us, like a stone about to strike, and what else can we do than to let it strike us. It was too late to move aside.

“You all still have hope, but I know my end,” Dan said.

I saw sadness strike across his face. I had never considered the depth of his sorrows. Things that he couldn’t change. Things that one needed the courage befitted by alcohol to say out loud. Things that made us more human than ever, irrespective of how many mistakes we have made in life. Irrespective of things we didn’t know about. I have made my mistakes, and I know some people call me a fool. Dan made his, he married so early and had all those children. I pitied him. That was brotherhood. No amount of blame could really change all that we couldn’t change. And no amount of blame could change mine or my brother’s mistakes. Served us right, I know. But the depth of our empathy for each other had more light in it than the one in the moon. We shone into the night with love and forgiveness and a new strength to carry on.

We looked into the heavens, and imagined that the stars above were the same as the ones that visited Jesus. In one way or another, one must believe in something; one must be superstitious.

Dan was in his own ways, I was in my own way, and avoiding that urge to reduce each man's stupidity to blame was part of what made us kind. Kindness would take us a long way. In fact, I got angry with myself for leaving Dan at the masquerade burning event. He needed love. He needed help, and not reprisal. Not preying on his ignorance further. I could have given him all that, but I choose to walk away in anger, and my anger changed nothing. I swear, the night couldn't contain us, and even though we were largely unsuccessful people, we were happy with our little life and lack of ambition. We fell down drunk on the floor, and slept outside of the house, like I had seen my father do a thousand times. In my dream, I saw my father, walking around the compound, smiling at me. Smiling at me. Just smiling.

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Mother said she was well now. I guess seeing us was more important to her than anything. Annie looked happy meeting my mother. We bid them goodbye, and left for the city to face our life, to start afresh if we could. The taxi driver drove us back to Owerri. The taxi didn't break down on the way or anything. It continued to spew smoke through the exhaust pipe, and moved ahead.

When we got home, home was dusty. Home was empty. Home was still home. Annie and I started to clean home together. It was few days before the New Year. We wanted to start the year afresh too, whatever that meant for the each of us. I looked out of the window at the uncompleted building and there was no one. No sign of The Pharrell or any of his friends. Everywhere was filled with fallen leaves from trees. Chickens walked around the uncompleted building, picking food from the cemented floor. The barber shop was open, even though they had no customers.

Everywhere looked abandoned. I walked towards the stairs, and the mess in Suleiman's apartment was still there; broken chairs and tables, blood splatters. No one had come to claim his

property and things, yet. I guess his rent was still running, and that was why the landlord didn't touch it yet. I walked back to my apartment, and tried to clean the balcony. I looked at the communication device again, and smiled. When prof returned, we would get it working, and in perfect order.

## Chapter Nine

Prof and his girlfriend returned from Calabar on the 30<sup>th</sup> of December, and we prepared to go for the burial of the Catechist. We swore not to be absent when a comrade would be laid to rest. On the day of the burial, I met them at their place. They looked happy together. They were cleaning when I walked in. Everywhere around their house was dusty too. Pa Njoku's house seemed like no one was in it. I walked past his door, and there was no sign of life in it. I presumed he must have gone home to see his people too. Prof and the girlfriend gave me a warm hug.

“Give us a few minutes to dress up please,” Prof said.

I sat outside and waited. The morning sun was coming out. My shoes were dusty from walking. My mouth blistered and dried faster. The dry season was stronger. I waited outside and looked up in the sky. I watched birds fly around in a solid formation. I thought of Chioma, my love for her and all that. We had only exchanged a few text messages since the holidays started. I was hungry to see her again. I wanted to have her in my arms, and be with her again. Seeing the couple Prof and Nkechi had become reminded me of the couple we too could become. Perfect couples; holding hand, kissing, loving, and walking through the streets of Owerri. The love she had given me was memorable. It was one that would take me to the grave. I brought out my phone, and called her. She picked up.

“Hello baby,” I said.

“I miss you so much,” she said.

Those words, that beautiful small voice echoing from a thousand miles away melted my heart. I smiled like an elementary school kid that first realized he loved a girl. I felt so innocent at that instant, and it was pure, pure love.

“I love you. I miss you too,” I said.

Even though it had been the hardest word to get out of me, I said it more often to her now. I wanted her to know that I wasn't in her life for games or anything. I wanted her to hold on and trust me to make everything alright. I wanted her to just come back home and it would be time to tell Annie that it was over. That was my plan. That was it. I wanted to be alive. I wanted to live and feel.

“Please, when are you coming back?” I asked.

“After the new year,” she said.

“Please come back, I need you in my life. I want you in my life,” I said, desperately.

My brother once told me that women don't like a man sounding desperate. I don't believe him. I wasn't in the world to do things people liked or didn't like. I wanted to feel and express what I felt the way that I felt it. I wanted to love and express my love the way it was burning in my soul. Not to watch my tongue or language or avoid getting “too emotional.”

Her voice mellowed me and threw me back into a love train. Her voice was like a water in the desert. It kept me alive. I no longer imagined how she was feeling about me because I knew that the love we had for each other would carry us for a long time.

When Prof and Nkechi came out of their room, ready, they saw me smiling and talking on the phone. I was that kind of a man that his emotions would show all over his face like a foot print on a soil whenever they came. They realized that I wasn't myself.

“John, you are in love, I can tell, who is she?” Prof asked.



I was still on the phone listening to her voice. “I will call you later baby,” I said, and cut the call. I laughed, and they laughed. Even Nkechi knew that I was in love.

“I have known you for a while John, I have never seen you this happy, even when you are laughing in the bar,” Nkechi said.

“You’ve been monitoring me?” I asked as we walked down the street, and toward the church.

“No, I can tell,” Nkechi said.

“Annie,” I answered.

“No, it’s not her. It’s so clear that it’s not her,” Nkechi said.

“True,” Prof said.

“Well, I will tell you. But, promise me you will not tell anyone,” I said.

Prof laughed and looked into Nkechi’s eyes. He held her face to his like he was searching for something. He began to sing for her, the music of Everly Brothers, *Love Hurts*. I swear, the range of his voice was better than that of Otis Redding. Nkechi stood there, quiet, and listened to him. It showed me what their love had become; a perfected understanding for each other.

I imagined Chioma being there when we would dial the international space center. I imagined she would consider me a hero of a sort. I imagined she would make me tea, bring it to my little workshop and not walk away, but rather stay there to ask me questions about those damn circuits. That was what I wanted; someone I could connect with in an extraordinary way. I didn’t know if that was something I could reach with Annie, but with Chioma, even getting a wedding ring from hell itself seemed possible.

Questions began to pop out in the depth of my mind: *Maybe I would get disappointed and realize they were all the same? Maybe I wouldn't get as lucky as Prof? Maybe I would just settle for what she was able to offer me?*

Maybe, maybe, maybes beat through my head like a series of bee stings. My head hurt, my heart hurt, but I hid it. At that instant, I felt like I should walk into a moving train and end it all, because life was damn series of bitchy *Maybes*. Maybe I could never be truly happy. Maybe. I slowed down because I felt I was hitting a hundred and eight kilometers per hour in my head, all alone. I swear, that was madness, knowing that all you ever want wouldn't be fulfilled, and yet you thinking through all the things you couldn't change. That was madness.

“Yes, I am in love, with a girl. She is my student at the computer institute. I love her,” I said.

“You didn't tell me about this, John?” Prof asked.

“It's a new thing and I really don't trust myself to do the right thing. I really don't,” I said and watched the vultures circling the dirt at the market place.

“Do you want to really talk about it? I thought you had a wife?” Nkechi asked.

“No, I don't. Just call her Annie. I don't even know what to call her. All I know is that for the sake of my kid, I wouldn't treat her bad, I just can't,” I said.

“You are good man, with a good heart. I have known that since the day you rolled your sleeves, and fought for me. I was too weak to fight, and you were too weak, too. But you didn't let that boy bully me. Your kind maybe isn't meant for this world, maybe. But I know you are too good a man. I will help you with this. I know it is a little complicated, and I personally want to see

Annie all the time. But this is about your happiness. It about the feeling that I saw in your face today. You deserve that kind of happiness. You deserve it,” Prof said.

“I don’t even know what I deserve anymore, I can’t tell. I can’t tell were morality stops and madness starts. I can’t tell what weakness is any longer. I can’t tell anything. I feel broken most of the time, and I feel like all I can do is hurt people more. Instead of hurting Annie and my son, maybe it’s best to hurt myself?” I said.

This was the first time that I ever said anything close to my suicidal thoughts to anyone. This was the first time, I ever said something that really gave me up. A thousand times I have imagined a million ways to die, I could tell the five easiest ways to just end it really quick and be free from all these. And the madness was knowing that it wouldn’t stop there; I would always think about what will happen when I am no longer around. What if I resurrect and my ancestors reject me because I took my own life? And for that reason, I wouldn’t sail with them to the moon. That my soul would be cursed to wonder this earth forever which was the worst punishment ever, almost the same as living on this earth.

Say what you may, and even though I knew that none of that was true, I was still superstitious. Oh Life, damn life. At times I look inside of me, and all I could see is darkness. One time I am happy, the next second, I am sad. Like all my emotions were being used at their extremes, like I had no control over any of it. And I swear, sometimes, I lack words to describe what I am feeling.

“You know that it is the right thing to do, you need happiness. You have never been proud of Annie, and yet you continue to live to with her. You need to accept this fact,” Prof said.

“I know, I think about it all the time. I know. But, don’t think it easy to just let everything go and begin a new chapter. Maybe the new chapter will burn me to ashes?” I asked.

“That is why it’s called life; nothing is ever guaranteed. Not one damn thing. Not even Nkechi and me. You and I, we are realists, even though we grew in place filled with fantasy and myths, but we are realists,” Prof said.

He was right. Irrespective of what I felt, and how I felt about life, it wouldn’t change a damn thing. We were realists, indeed.

When we got to the church, a few people had arrived. Women were crying. Men were consoling them. We stopped talking about our personal problems, and focused on honoring a comrade. His corpse hadn’t arrived yet. We sat on a pew in an empty church. People were outside waiting for the ambulance to arrive.

The inside of the church felt quiet and tranquil. Man-servers came out a few times and flickered incense around the altar. The smell of incense rushed to my nose. It was a familiar aroma, and I loved it.

Thirty minutes into our waiting, we heard the faint sound of an ambulance. We went outside to wait. As the sound grew louder, women wailed louder. Tears streamed from my eyes, and all the images of him began to echo in my head again and again, like a wave. He was full of life the last time I saw him, he was laughing and making merry. I guess he never saw this coming, and now he was nothing but a body in a wooden box. When the ambulance got closer, people fell at the gate, crying and waiting for it to come into view. The priest appeared from the parish house at the back of the church. There were two people walking behind him. They appeared to be saying

something to the priest that he wasn't ready to pay attention to them. I walked closer towards them, until I could hear what they were saying.

“That man was a drunkard, and we didn't know,” the first man said repeatedly.

“And?” the priest asked.

“He was a womanizer too, and we didn't know. You shouldn't officiate the mass here today. You should leave and let us just bury him,” the second man said.

That infuriated me so much that I called Prof and Nkechi, and told them what was going on. A man that gave his service, yet people were more concerned about what he had done or didn't do right. That made me angry. So angry that I wanted to leave the church, but I reminded myself why I came to the church in the first place. I was there because of the man himself and what he represented to me.

The ambulance pulled into gate of the church, and the mourners grew louder.

“No, I will bury him. I will say the mass. You are asking for too much from me. That I should ignore the man that haven't offended me in any way, who was like a father to me. A man who did nothing but serve this parish. You are saying that I should look at his sins and not give him a befitting burial? You all must be crazy!” the priest screamed, and kept walking away from them.

I walked away too. His corpse arrived in a blue ambulance, and was taken into the church by members of St. John's Knight.

We walked back into the church and sat down. I could see familiar faces around, most of the men that visited Nwanyi Ncha's place were there. For once, I imagined that it was one of them

that betrayed him. I saw Akpan, and he was crying. He was the one he argued with the most. He saw us, and came over to our pew to sit with us.

Soon, the mass began. After the mass, we proceeded to his house for his final burial. A bungalow surrounded by trees. He was laid in state in his living room, and men went in to pay their last respect. We walked into his living room to see what was left of him and his forever smiling face. I was behind Nkechi, and Prof was in front of her, as we marched into the room. His living room was a simply decorated. The coffin was placed on a polished mahogany table. The wife and children sat around the corpse. The body was dressed in a wedding suit. Nkechi looked inside and closed her face with her palm. I looked inside, and what was in there killed the inside of me. A cutlass mark ran the length of his face. The coroners did their best to conceal it, but it was still visible. He didn't deserve to die like that. He didn't deserve to have such pain inflicted on him. I could tell which leg and which arm was cut off, even though they were hidden under the dress. We left with tears in our eyes. We left, knowing how much pain humans can bring to one another. We left and walked into the hot afternoon to be ourselves.

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It was a sunny day, and wind was blowing. Harmattan was always harsher in January, even though it was almost time to give way for another season. We were back at the workshop. Nkechi said she didn't want to be alone, so she came over with Prof. We cracked jokes while fixing the machine. He started soldering bits of wires into the original panels and connected them to a new integrated circuit. For a second, it seemed as if it was now his project.

The street was still there, and each time I stood up at my balcony, I tried to see if the devil had arrived at the uncompleted building. Yet, there was no sign of The Pharrell.

Nkechi went inside to talk to Annie when she got tired of our jokes. We looked at each other, and laughed.

“Women that is the problem. They get you, and you are gone. Your life belongs to them,” Prof said.

“True, I just imagined the last time we were really alone. Just alone, without her presence. Man look at you,” I said and jabbed his shoulders with a clenched fist.

“That is really true. Seriously, it’s been a while since it was just the two of us, being friends. Talking literature, books, and science,” he said.

I heard Obiarika cry for a while, and then stop. I heard Nkechi and Annie laughing. They were getting along well. Since we came back from the Christmas holiday, I haven’t had time to talk to her the way I wanted to. I avoided her mostly and only said a few words to her. Perhaps it was best that way.

“I saw Mr. Njoku at the market the other day,” I said, remembering our physics teacher in secondary school.

“Ah, ah, that man really helped us in appreciating science. Ah, I remember him. Physics enigma himself. The way he solved problems, it was inspiring,” Prof said.

“I greeted him, and he told me he was still teaching and living inside the school. I thought he might have retired by now,” I said.

“Did you tell him about this project?” Prof asked with a childish smile on his face; that of a student that was eager to impress his teacher. He had always been that way, if he was the person that met him, he would have introduced himself and told him about his current projects, as if the

old man cared. That was one thing I hated about Prof; he was so focused on impressing people. He always tried to take the lead. I looked at him, and he looked the same like the first day I met him. People rarely changed, and Prof had a lot of faults that sometimes I couldn't stomach. But, none of us was without fault. None of us. I must have had a part of me that he resented and tolerated, and I think that was what defined friends. Being able to tolerate, or finding people you can really take their shit. I swear, I wouldn't be this patient with everyone.

"No, I didn't talk to him about this project! I hate talking to people about what I am doing, you know that already," I said.

"True," he said.

"Also remember that we have to get this machine ready before the station passes through. If we don't, none of these things would make any sense, you understand?" I asked.

"I do," he said.

He began to write another string of equations on a white board.

"What's that for?" I asked.

"That's a process, we need to intelligently convert sound wave to strings of data. I want this machine to be able to capture sound waves from the outer space and print out as data."

"Oh, my goodness, Prof, let's stick with just making the machine work so we can tune into the international space center."

"True, true. But we need evidence too. A machine that can print a conversation. Having evidence for posterity would be mind-blowing."

But I decided to let him go on with his plans.



“How is your job?” I asked him as he continued to brainstorm.

“Man, I don’t think I want to think about it. But since you’ve said something about it after all...” he wiped sweat off his brow, “Not too well. Well, not too well in the sense that I can’t start a family like this,” he said.

“But Nkechi earns good money?” I asked.

“You know what I mean, will I ask her for the bride price? Will I tell her: ‘hey I don’t even give a fuck about weddings, let’s just move in and live together?’ I want to do the right thing here, man. It’s not just about what I want for myself. It’s also about what I want for her. I don’t know what to do. I have only a hundred thousand naira left in my account, which wouldn’t get us anything. Also, I need to move out of my current place,” he said.

“Well, you and I know the truth. That you wouldn’t be able to do all those things alone. You need to find a way and explain to her. Nkechi is a very understanding woman my friend,” I said.

“I know, but I am ashamed to do that. I just can’t. I am also looking for another job. The other day, I went to the cybercafé, and applied for jobs that my brother sent me. He told me UN was hiring.”

“UN, United Nations?” I asked, I was indeed surprised.

“Oh, yes. Maybe I will turn to a policy maker, and leave this damned engineering thing,” he said and we laughed. We laughed because we knew what was possible and what wasn’t. We laughed because we knew that a future as a policy maker seemed unlikely for him.

“You want to leave me in this city and run away?” I asked.

“Where can I run to that you wouldn’t apparently run along to? find me? I will take you and Nkechi and your new lover, what her name?” he asked in a low whisper.

“Chioma,” I said bending my head towards him, and saying a low voice.

“How is she?”

“A goddess. An angel. A beautiful soul. Human. Well that’s abstract. Face as if God carved it himself. Eyes like that of the bird, *asa*. Classy. Educated. Everything that Annie can’t be. She loves me for who I am. Just as I am,” I said.

“Your story reminds of Thomas Hardy, the kind of beauty that genius will talk about,” he said.

“Who is Thomas Hardy?” I asked.

“An English writer, he is one of the best writers that ever lived apart from the Russians.”

“Why is he the best?” I asked.

“He will make you rip out your heart, and watch it beat. He will make you love and see love in a way you’ve never seen before. But the sad part of his stories is that they all have a tragic ending.”

“I will like to read it.”

“Yes, the way he describes things my friend. He will throw you in that old century, drop you in the middle of an English farm, take you by the arm and show everything. In one his books, a man gambled away his wife while drunk,” he said.

“How could a man gamble away his wife?” I asked.

“Does it sound impossible?” he asked.

I looked around, I heard Annie and Nkechi still talking. Then we roared into another round of laughter.

“Very possible,” I said.

Prof had already finished the board he wanted to install in a printer (he brought it with him) and connect it the receiver machine. He showed me. It looked neat, well arranged and perfectly soldered. We needed a lot of power to test it, but there was no electricity. We decided to do it another time. We walked inside, and saw them talking passionately. I was surprised that they found a connection. I was really surprised. We joined them, and burned the evening clean into night, with laughter, love, and friendship.

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Annie was snoring loudly. I woke up early in the morning and stared outside of my window at the uncompleted building. The Pharrell was there, shirtless, smoking weed. My heart began to race faster. It tormented my soul to see him. It burned the inside of me. It was a day before New Year, and here he was, back on the street, staring at us, again.

There he was, hatching another plan in his worm head. I groped in the dark until I found my pistol. I pointed it at him, and wasn't sure if I could make the shot. I wasn't sure if I was ready to take another man's life. I looked at him and sweated in the cold early morning wind. I looked at him, and my head wanted to burst. It was like being tormented by a demon over and over again. I aimed my pistol again, and I couldn't aim properly. I was sweating profusely as if it was hot, but no, it was just anxiety and fear. The fear that I couldn't even have the courage to kill even if I wanted to.

I imagined him in my house again, fucking Annie. I began to cry like an idiot. Tears ran down my face. I went to the wardrobe, and placed the gun back. I walked into the shower and turned it on. Luckily, the tap was running. I sat down there, and cooled my insanity and insecurity. I needed it. I slept off with the tap running on me. It was of the most beautiful sleep I've had in long while. I was there until Annie slammed the door with her fist.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked and rubbed my eyes. She stood in front of the door panting. Her frame covered my view and the sunlight that was coming into the room.

“Since I woke up, you’ve been in here. The tap has been running. Are you alright?” she asked me. “Yes, I am. I just wanted to rest, then I slept off,” I said and took a towel, wiped my body, and put on a short pants. I went over the window overlooking the uncompleted building, but he was gone.

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I was in my lab working when someone knocked on my door. I opened it. It was Annie’s family. The mother, and the uncle came. The uncle was huge and tall and had a very mean face. He posed behind her mother as if they had come to beat me up or something.

“Good morning Ma, ah, ah, when did you leave the village, and you didn’t inform us you were coming?” I asked, a little surprised.

“Do I have to give any special notice before coming to my daughter’s house?”

I knew trouble was brewing already. She was twice the size of Annie, and wore a gown that made her look three times her size. Her arms flapped endlessly as she walked through the narrow passage. I squeezed myself on the railing for them to pass. She consciously wanted to

squash my body against the rail. I felt like dying. She walked inside screaming, “Annie, where are you!” the uncle followed her around as if, had come alone, I would have beaten her up or something. I wouldn’t even stand a chance against her. I stood outside, sweating, trying to ignore the fact that she was here. I sat down on my stool and looked at the heavens. I texted Prof about what was going on. He said he would be there soon.

When I got inside the house, she was eating fufu and egusi soup. The uncle sat at the other end of the table, observing. I tried to talk to her, and she ignored me, like I didn’t even exist. She looked at the brother and laughed. Then Annie walked in and sat on an armchair.

“You people don’t have television in this house?” she asked Annie, who was also uncomfortable with the visit.

“No mama,” she said.

“No television, no radio. No gramophone. Nothing. What kind of a husband did you even find, Annie? You said that this thing here loves you? He can’t even decorate his living room? He can’t even take proper care of you. Look at you. You look like a mad woman. You are just twenty-five years, and you look older than me,” she said.

I didn’t talk. Actually, they both looked the same age. That was the true. But I wasn’t the cause of it. Each time I wanted to say something, I looked at the face of the uncle and shut up. I knew he was ready to beat me up at any instance, and I wouldn’t stand a chance. I knew that was why they came. To beat me up. I tried my best not to give them an opportunity.

“And you sleep with my daughter every night. Enjoying her, yet you don’t want to pay a dim on her head. You don’t want to do the proper marriage ritual. Pay up lazy man! Pay up! Pay up so my daughter can protect a lazy man like you! Look at you, ugly man, nose like hook, eyes

like that of a fish. You look dried up like a stock fish, no flesh. Ugly man. I don't even know how my daughter got herself in this mess. Look at you Annie," she said and pointed at Annie, "Look at you." she swallowed the *fufu* without rubbing it in the soup. I laughed inside of my head at her stupidity and delusion. Yet, I kept silent. It was getting to the point that even my silence was a problem.

I didn't talk, I didn't respond. She kept talking and screaming until Obiarika crawled in. She ignored him because she came to fight and not look at her grandson. Annie held Obiarika. The mother marched towards me with her fist stained with soup. She stuck it on my face.

"Idiot, what will you do. A man with watery penis. Annie said you can't even satisfy her. You are good for nothing. How are you sure that you can even father a child, that the child you've called son is yours?" she said, barking like a dog.

I knew Obiarika was mine, not that I was sure, but because I choose to believe it, and not think otherwise. That doesn't make me fool either. That was no reason for her to come into the house that I pay for every month with my money and stick a finger at my face. No one dared that with my father. I felt so weak. I got so mad at myself, and everyone around there.

"Shut the fuck up woman! Shut the fuck up!" I said, raising like flames burning into the sky.

But I had no opportunity to even react, the uncle had me in his strong grip and landed a spirit shattering slap on my face. I didn't know where I was anymore. My eyes were bloodied. I struggled like a blind man looking for his stick with my two feet hanging above the air. He slapped me around as if I was a kid. Annie's mother danced round in jubilation. Annie cried. Obiarika cried and said "Daddy." Annie used her body to force me down from the uncle's grip, and freed me.

“Leave him alone uncle Apollos, leave him alone,” she screamed and begged. All I could see was stars rotating in the galaxy.

I heard Prof’s voice. I felt his hands dragging me away, and I followed.

“You are safe now,” he said, “You are safe now.”

“Keep running, we are not yet done with you. We will deal with you properly, look at what calls himself a man. Half man. Idiot,” she said as we walked down the stairs.

I struggled to go back and at least land a slap on Apollos face. But Prof held me tight and dragged me away. If Prof hadn’t come, I would have gone for my gun. I had enough bullets for everyone and myself. Enough. I swear. When he dragged me into the barber’s shop, I felt like dying. I could hear those idiots laughing at me. I felt like strangling one of them.

I was ashamed, but Prof didn’t care. He was more interested in making the bleeding stop, and I was interested in revenge and protecting my fragile ego. I wanted her to leave my house that very day. I wanted to go upstairs, and throw her things away into the uncompleted building behind us so that The Pharrell can properly take care of her. I got up and ran, and Prof caught me. My chest was rising with so much anger. My blood pressure was running high. If a cup of water was placed on my head at this point, it would have boiled in seconds.

I sat there until my vision cleared. The idiots at the barber’s shop helped me with water to drink. I looked outside, and saw Annie’s mother and the uncle leaving, without their Annie. I wondered what sort of a fool they were. Or maybe they considered me too weak to even act. I sat there, unable to move. My anger had turned to a strange feeling of melancholy. The kinds that waters your bones down, and you don’t even feel like doing anything. I asked Prof to go upstairs, and make sure my son was fine, and grab my wallet.

He came down, and we left. We found a bus, and rode to town. There was a bar right at the bus station, we settled for it and soon began to drink. I was in a wondrous state. Like my life had surely ended. We stared at each other in silence. Prof knew that it was best not to talk when I was angry. He was waiting for me to say something, but I said nothing. I looked around for something to love, like art or nature or anything. Flies buzzed endlessly, and hummed in our ears, and shitted in our beers. That was all for me to see. Shit. No matter how little. Life was an endless circle, and no one escaped it alive. It became more apparent to me, more glaring, it was meaningless in the end. Well, it appeared it be. I looked outside, and the rays from sun couldn't comfort me. Down at the courtyard with large umbrellas and a few jolly good fellows, our eyes met; a young girl dancing on a potbellied man. It infuriated me for some reason. He looked like a politician. Thugs. Nothing was ever sure, no damn thing. Growing up I wanted to leave home, to have my own place like any other man. To marry, to love, to be at peace and not let my life be a dry specimen stored in a bottle for ages. And yet, I was becoming that.

One day, I would turn dust and might not know shit about anything that happened in this damn life. If I didn't know a damn thing before I was born, there wasn't any guarantee that I would know anything when I died. Fuck all that shit, I said in my head, staring at Prof. He looked so empty, and something in me wanted to fight him. I felt like he had never fought for me, he had always stood there and watched me get into trouble, but he never fought for me. I had always gone all the way for him. *Fucktard friend*. I ordered more beer, and imagined all the time I had gone out of my way to knockout a few teeth because of him even though I wasn't strong, even if it meant going down myself.

I looked at him, he wasn't much of a fighter. Never fought anyone in his life. Searching for peace wherever he could find it. Spent most of his days alone. Got a girlfriend at last because he



was with me. Because I was pushing him. He owed me a lot of thanks in this life and the next. I pinched myself. I was going too far with all these things. My damn thoughts. I was taking my anger out on someone that wasn't even part of it. On someone that I love. On someone that had been a friend to me. All he had ever wanted was to be a friend. Maybe this was my own vice; that whenever I got angry, everything appeared like shit to me. And the only thing I can think was how to kill everything off. Sadly, even relationships. I was lost. I realized myself and stopped.

On a dwarf tree close by, a dove perched. White webby feet. Blue eyes. White feathers. Beautiful Black stomach. The cacophony of beauty. The endurance of a changing nature. What if I was a dove and could only branch from tree to trees? What if. On a second thought, I was lucky to be human and have a great friend like Prof around me.

“Thank you, my friend, I am sorry I put you in the middle of this,” I said.

He knew immediately that it was time to talk too. He had downed almost three bottles, and this was us together, alone again. Friend to friend. Robbing minds. Even though it was unexpected, but it was worthwhile.

“It's fine, my friend. It's almost over. I will grieve when you grieve, I will drink when you drink. You have done a lot more for me than I can ever imagine.”

“I know, the day started just like any other day you know. When they arrived, I knew they came for me. I knew they weren't going to leave until they draw blood.”

“Now they have blood, let's see if that will make them happy.”

His face saddened.

“Forget about me, how is Nkechi?” I asked.

“She is at home. Finally, we talked about moving. From January, we will find a place. Also, we concluded that the wedding should be a small one. Not big. Just you and a few other people. Simple.”

The news made me happy. It felt good to know that he had decided to confront his fears, and let go of them.

“We both are realists, you know it. We will always find a way to exist,” I said.

“Yes, we will. Sometimes, it’s better for people to face all they truth they can at once and decide what to do with it. There is no curtain for us to hide in, nothing,” he said.

There was something about alcohol that I loved so much. It could take someone from point A to B in a matter of seconds. I felt lighter hearing about his successes.

“I will be at your wedding my friend. Have you fixed a date?” I asked.

“Yes, we have. First, I wasn’t really sure that this was what I wanted for myself. But as the day progresses, I saw how happy I am with her. How much humility she has brought into my life, I decided that this was the right step to take at this time,” he said.

“You are a wise man. I am the fool, but life always gives a second chance. Even if there is none, I also intend to do the right thing with Chioma,” I said.

“The most beautiful thing here is that the parents even agreed to a payment plan for the dowry. I mean, I plan to go with you officially for the introduction, but she talked to her parents and they agreed to let me do as much as I can as regards to the bride price. She also wants to pay her own bride price, so it wouldn’t be like bought her,” he said.

“Much of this argument we have made several times my friend. We make culture. We decide what culture will look like, not the other way around. I realized that most of our elders walked out of their communities at a very young age, to start another village because they weren’t satisfied with the set of rules that governed the other people, they got to a new place and made new rules and lived and thrived,” I said.

“We both know this. We both know that at a certain point in our history, somehow history became static, so did culture. But that was never the entire truth. With love with understanding, people can find a way to survive,” he said.

We smiled, and then burst into laughter that made everyone turn and look at us.

“Now, you have solved most of your problems. I will start to work on mine, but today, in the spirit of 31<sup>st</sup> of December, which is the end of the year, we will drink until we can’t walk,” I said.

“I have already told Nkechi to start preparing the *Nkwuobi*. We will eat it tonight, and Pa Njoku just came back, we will end this year very well and burn it away,” Prof said.

“Yes, we will. I will start the New Year afresh, and I will stop being afraid of things I can’t change. Can you guess what I am thinking now?” I asked like I had always asked him since the first day we met at school.

“Chioma,” he said, and we laughed.

“Exactly, the thought of her melts my heart. Chai, a good woman is a good thing. The wrong one will make your life a living hell. Look at me, I was beaten like a child today,” I said.

We laughed and rolled on the floor like two clowns we were. Our darkest sense of humor was becoming apparent as alcohol increased in our system. We laughed it off.

“Chai, you have always been like this since secondary school. You will never change,” Prof said.

That was the truth. My sense of humor developed while in secondary school. Back then, we would make fun of each other from morning to night. Call ourselves awkward names and things. I remembered the student we named “The penguin”, because we thought he walked funny, exactly like a penguin. There was another we called the “The centipede” because he was too ugly, and all of his body seemed like the same size and rigid. That was the fun of humor and it was best when dark.

“Do you remember all those names: Penguin, Dentist, and Centipede?” I asked.

“I remember them, and a lot more. Like *Akpa Dirty*, Pig master, Bling de Joe, Spiro, Semper Fi. Hard men, De Heros, Jokers, Fighters, Gamers. Some of them ended up in jails. Some made it in life. Others became the best they could ever be in life, and one of them is you,” Prof said.

“De Capo got shot, Delilah died at University of Jos. He was shot at the campus gate. Maybe it was better that I never went to any university,” I said.

“You would still be alive; you were just a smart coward. Even though you fought with me and for me,” Prof said.

But that was true, I had always been a smart coward. I had always hidden behind my own fears and masking them as my strength. I had always been weak, but I survived the brutality of our high school, and that meant a lot. It meant that I could survive anything, too.

“I loved those little days. Now we are older, and life seems so unbearable. How is your book coming up?” I asked.

“Beautiful, it is taking shape now. Language needs taming, and that takes time,” he said and scratched his head, and continued talking, “Now that we are high, there is something I want tell you that Nkechi told me that Annie told her the other day we were at your place. I wouldn’t be saying this ordinarily, but is because we are friends, that is why I am telling you. You understand?” he asked me.

“Yes.”

“Annie told her that you are a good man, and she knows that you don’t love her. She wants to leave you at some point, she said she can’t keep on going like that. Tormenting you and everyone, her fear is that she might never have enough money to care of Obiarika. She said you haven’t talked to her too in a while. That you have been avoiding her. That you occupied yourself with a lot of things, just to avoid having a conversation,” Prof said.

I knew they weight of her sins and my sins would one day crash on the both of us. She was too strong to give up soon. I was ready to make compromises in the name of peace.

“I will make her an offer for peace, but I barely make enough for myself. The most I can do is to make sure that the money which I already put aside for Obiarika will continue to go to her. She barely makes enough from her job, but I think honestly, she has to move back to her parent’s place. That is the rational thing to do,” I said.

“That is fair, this new year, you will make her an offer can’t refuse, like in the movie, *the God Father*,” Prof said. We laughed.

“I loved that movie,” I said.

“The movie is not even the main thing here. The book is, you need to read Mario Puzo,” Prof said, “So all our problems seems half solved.”

“Well, apart from the fact that I was beaten today for no Goddamn reason. Is my face swollen?” I asked. Prof pulled me closer, removed his spectacle, and tried to inspect it with his drunk eyes.

“It’s just a small cut, you must have too much blood in your body. You bled badly, I must confess that I got scared,” Prof said.

“Well, it’s almost over,” I said.

A little boy threw a firework into the bar, and it went off three times with a loud bang. Prof wanted to run away, but I held him because knew what it was, then I showed him and he sighed. When we left, it was already dark, we took the bus to Prof’s Place.

In the bus, I thought about Annie, and what she was doing now. The depth of her sorrow was one that I couldn’t imagine. My pain had gone away, and the only pain left in me, was the feeling of pity that overwhelmed me. I cried. Tears ran down my eyes, and I wiped them away.

After the storm comes the rain. It would always get us wet, and then we can ponder on everything on our path. Prof slept off for a while. When we got to our stop, I woke him up. My wound was still open, and a little disgusting, I didn’t know until Nkechi saw it and screamed, and ran to get bandage and put on it. I think Prof was too drunk to even think about it.

“What happened to you?” Nkechi asked.

I was indeed getting too tired of saying the same thing over and over again. I just wished that no one would ask me what was wrong again, but sadly I had to answer her. Prof had gone inside to take his shower.

“Annie,” I said.

She kept quiet, and watched me, expecting me to continue with my story, and I did, “The mum and the uncle came, they beat me up.”

“Oh my God, that is so wrong,” she said, and place another wrap of bandage on it as if it was a reward for my talking the second time.

“Thank you Nkechi. Let’s forget that, and go into the New Year with so much grace,” I said.

“I bought all the palm wine, we have fireworks we bought from Calabar, and the *Nkwobi* is ready,” Nkechi said.

“Ah, it’s like you know where I want to start right now, from that *Nkwobi*,” I said.

She went inside a dish a plate of me. I sat down and ate. She placed a lantern in the middle of the compound. Soon the door to Pa Njoku’s room creaked, and the old man walked out on three legs.

“My son,” he said and smiled.

“Yes, sir,” I answered him.

I was happy to see him again. I was happy to have him around. The end of a year was significant time, and I wanted to go into a new year with all the confidence I could find. Pa Njoku had a tray with him. He placed the tray down on the floor, and there was kola on it. He wanted to go back inside and get a chair for himself, I ran inside and brought it for him.

“What happened to you?” Pa Njoku asked.

“My girlfriend’s mom beat me and her uncle attacked me,” I said.

“What did you do?” he asked.

“They said I haven’t paid the bribe price, and that I am poor,” I said.

“Is it true?” he asked.

“Somehow true, not the whole truth here. I don’t intend to marry her. We have a child together,” I said.

“Let us leave that one aside. Let the smoke rise, we will examine the smoke later. For now, let us examine this kola,” Pa Njoku said and picked a kola.

Prof joined us with Nkechi by his side.

Pa Njoku began to bless it: “this kola, we will break it, and it will reveal the path it wants to go.” The old man broke the kola and it split into three parts.

“Oji Nze, Oji dike. When the Kola nut reaches home, it will tell where it came from. Kola is here. Kola is life, kola is a way of life. Kola is living. It is us, our very existence. It’s almost New Year, we will stay here until it is New Year. Our ancestors will see us, and will look at us. They will look into our hearts examine it and see that it is clean. We have offended no one, may no one offend us,” the old man said.



“Iseeee,” We all responded together.

“He who seeks our blood when we haven’t offended him, may his own blood spill.”

“Iseee.”

“If it is in the bottom of a river, let it sail. If it is under the ground, let it germinate. If it is too far, let it come closer. The evil we see cannot kill us.”

“Iseee.”

“Let the kite perch, let the hawk perch, whichever one that refuses the other, may the wing break.”

“Isee.”

“A matured eagle’s feather will ever remain pure.”

“Isee.”

“The rain that beat the eagle, washed him clean, but the one that beat the vulture, killed him. Is it not the same rain?”

“The same rain,” We all replied.

“Next year will not turn us into vultures, we will remain eagles.”

“Isee.”

Our voice vibrated and echoed into core of our humanity, from the beginning of time, from creation. Genesis. Beauty. Language, and all that was about us, came back to us, and became us.

He further broke the kola into smaller pieces, and took one, and began to eat. Then, he passed it to us, and we took a piece each. We ate in silence. Nkechi went inside, and prepared Nkwobi for us. I descended on the palm wine while they ate with my plate beside me.

“Now, you said that your girlfriends’ parent did this to you?” the old man asked.

“Yes,” I repeated again.

“Then you must return their daughter to them according to our tradition,” the old man said.

I wasn’t in the mood to start explaining that there wasn’t anything traditional about impregnating a girl and having her move into my house without notice. I wasn’t in the mood to start explaining all this to a man that was already dying, and whose moral codes were different from mine. He wouldn’t even understand it, even if I explained.

“Yes, Pa Njoku,” I said.

“Don’t treat me like I am an idiot, John,” Pa Njoku said.

I wasn’t expecting to hear that. I was stunned.

“What happened?” I asked.

“I know you think that I am stupid to ask you to do the right thing and return their daughter to them. Even if she agrees to go on her own, yet I think you should return the daughter as our tradition demands,” he said.

He looked at me, looked up at the sky, and continued, “I know some things will be difficult for your generation to understand, but let’s face the truth; before God and man, you have been living with their daughter. Whether you accept the son as yours or not, you have already accepted him as yours. I know that your greatest fear is about your son, you still want to keep your

relationship with him. When you bring their daughter back the right way, they might chase you away, but you have done what you are supposed to do.

“No, it’s not payment for living with someone. No, it will not make up for your loss or her loss, but it is the right thing to do. If a man believes in a certain way, respect their belief,” Pa Njoku said with so much wisdom, and I understood what he was saying.

“Wisdom, is knowing where you are in your own evolution. Wisdom is knowing that I am different from you, and I deserve that respect from you. Any day you treat me otherwise, then you are no more intelligent than me. You have become me, Ignorant,” the old man said and stared into the sky, and looked at me.

“You see. You see, the spirits. When you chase the spirits for too long, you will start to smell like the spirit. Be careful about the battle that you pick, and how you fight them. Be careful, so that you will not become what you are fighting against. You are right by insisting that nothing should be done. But you have already done well for yourself so far, why not finish it in a good way? You are thinking this way, remember that your son has the right to think the way he wants to think too. And when he does, how much can you take?” he said.

And that was the truth. I had changed. I had become something else, away from what my own father wanted me to be like. I had looked into my son’s eyes, and wanted him to be just exactly like me; to reject norms and build a world of his own. But it may never be that way. He may decide to be the opposite of me and my dreams for him. He may even decide to join Islam, and that would be his choice. Pa Njoku was really a wise man; he had a way of creating absolute understanding.

“When we returned from Lagos. We came back with money. Most of us started businesses. We made a lot of money from it. We wanted those business to be taken over by our sons, and the

sons of our sons. But the irony is that our sons had no interest in those businesses, they imagined a different life for themselves. That is why most our businesses failed. Ask your father about *Father Father Transportations*. I was the owner. I had a lot of money, back in the days. I trained my eldest son to take over the business, but he never wanted to take over that business. He wanted to become an artist, a painter. He could draw beautifully, but I kept pushing him to be what he didn't want to become. There is no day that passes, that I don't regret my actions. I forced him to take over the business, and he ran that business down to the ground. I had to sell off the rest of it, and retired. These are my own mistake and I will not like any of you to make them again. Your children will be different people. People of their own thinking. People of a new way of life too. Remember that. When we were younger, do you know the type of shoes that were reining back in those days?"

"Old schools," Nkechi said, and we laughed.

"You are right, my daughter. When I first saw those shoes, I thought that they would last forever, but it didn't. New things came out, and young men loved them more. Nothing that we ever conceive with our head will be the same forever," he said.

We all looked at ourselves, and thought about his words deeply. After a few seconds, I decided to break the silence.

"Thank you, Pa Njoku, for your beautiful words. Look at my head, I have been asking Prof and myself what I will do to make sure that my son doesn't get affected by all these, but you have told me to do the right thing, and I will," I said.

Pa Njoku brought out a pack of cigarettes, and began to smoke. Prof brought out his smoke pipe, and lit it. Nkechi said nothing. I imagined myself doing the same thing in front of Annie, she

would have taken the pipe out of my mouth. Prof passed the pipe to me, I dragged it, and it felt so good. We kept passing the pipe between the two of us.

When it was almost midnight. Prof set up two tires in the middle of the compound. The clock chimed sixty minutes to twelve. We began to count down together, even Pa Njoku "...ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one... happy new year!" we screamed at each other and hugged and laughed, as if we knew what the new year was going to bring to us. Deep inside of me, I was happy that my Chioma would start her journey back home tomorrow. It was New Year; I was happy to be here with Prof, and his girlfriend and Pa Njoku.

"Make a wish all of you!" Pa Njoku said.

"I wish to marry this young man this year," Nkechi said.

"I wish to spend my life with this beautiful woman," Prof said.

"I wish that we all find happiness," I said.

"We have seen it all this last year, death, revenge, killings, bad health and other things. This year will be different for all of us," Pa Njoku said.

We danced round the burning fire in the middle of the night, clutching glasses of palm wine, singing songs of victory and love, and being ourselves. At least we weren't dead. I got so drunk that I wanted to just fall right there and sleep. When the fire died down, I traced my way back. Prof begged me to stay, but I refused. It was bad enough how everything in my life was going, and worst for the fact I wouldn't see my son on a New Year.

The night was busy. People were walking around shooting fireworks. Girls falling down by the bush paths, giggling, and young boys chasing them. The next thing I heard, they were

moaning, loving. I kept walking. Birds of the night kept crying, and a new year dawned bright upon me. When I got to the church, the bell tolled. I walked through the cold night. Soon, I got to my neighborhood. I knocked on my door in the middle of the night. I heard Annie praying. She was crying and praying. She stood up, walked to the door, and opened it. I looked at her face, tears were streaming down. She wasn't happy either. I was too drunk again, and I had a lot of pity for her.

I hugged her, and we began to kiss. Light small kisses, then heavier kisses. I lay her down on the floor gently, and we started making love.

"I miss you," she said, "I am so so sorry."

She was really sober. It was fast and mechanical. I didn't even know why I was doing it. I wasn't even enjoying it, but I was just doing it. I fought hard to keep my penis hard, but I couldn't. Not loving someone meant all that. She didn't notice that my penis was no longer strong. I struggled, and it managed to get strong again. I came. We lay down on the bed, looking at each other. We lay there knowing that this wasn't going to work. We lay there breathing heavily, staring at our emptiness.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?" I asked.

"For trying your best, it not your fault in all this. I understand. Sometimes I feel like I trapped you in this, I can only ask God to forgive me. It has caused me so much sorrow. So much. Whatever you decide, I will go with it," she said.

I heard it all, I said nothing. I just slept off, coldly.

## Chapter Ten

\*Another day came, and we began to live it all. I had a few days to resume work still. I woke up early in the morning, and left home. I walked towards the river *Nwaorie*. Hoping that the solitude of its arms would comfort. Chioma hadn't returned from Lagos, and her line was still out of service. I felt so depressed and for some reason, the river seemed like the only place I could get myself together.

Prof, and Nkechi had already moved into a nice home somewhere at Works Layout Street. I helped them move, and watched them kiss a million times before me. I watched how happy they were to have a house.

As I sat by the river, everything around me played music of its own. The river's flow hummed. Some tree clapped in ecstasy. The birds sang beautifully like angels chirruping before God's altar. The harmony was just too strong and beautiful. Soon it began to rain while the sun shone brightly in symphony. The rain came down on the forest like an orchestra, the light clapping thunder became a maestro, conducting the affair of all nature. I sat there breathing and wet and filled with light.

When we were small, this river was us. This river took us into its arms full of legends and far-reaching beauty. This river was where everyone in the city came to fetch water when the government couldn't supply water to people. This river held tales that marveled us and sent shivers down our spines. Tales about someone seeing a million animals congregating around it; a friend told me this story at their apartment, staring through the backyard, a few meters away from the river. I was small then, but I had always sought solace around the surface of this water.

I had felt my extreme fear, joy, and even attempted suicide in this very river. I will tell you about the fear first. Father came back that evening shivering. He said that what they saw by the river was frightening. We sat round the fire eating the maize and pear that he brought home the previous evenings from the farm. Mother asked father what he saw. Father said that he was walking along the river bank with a friend when they saw a beautiful woman taking her bath by the side of the river. Father said they kept walking on their path without approaching. The woman asked: “Who are you?” father said that her voice was as smooth as silk and created a hollow inside of them. Father said that he froze on the spot, but his friend kept walking.

The woman asked again, “Who are you?”

Father said that they told the woman that they were just passing and meant no harm.

The woman replied, “You and I, who will harm the other, will you go back!”

Father said that all of a sudden, his legs unfroze, and he started walking back. Father said that her voice broke into echoes, and immediately the woman turned into a big python and crawled back into the river. Father said that she was the sea goddess.

I was around six years old, but I listened to him talk about it. I was so afraid, but something in me wanted to see the river goddess too. Something in me wanted to know her like my father had. To stand in her fullness and beauty. That was when the river began to fascinate me in a special way. But I have never seen any river goddess. Did it exist? I never knew, but to doubt my father would be to contradict his sanity too. I didn't know what to believe, but I was sure that the river wasn't empty, it had its own magic and beauty, and whatever was in it isn't here to harm us. That wasn't the only story father told about his encounter with a river goddess.



I watched a fisherman row his boat with no shirt on. He was sweaty. He had a machete for clearing his path. Shrubs had overgrown in most parts of the river. When we were growing up, people always cleared the river. On the first Saturday of every month, everyone would go to the river and clean it up. They said that the mermaid wanted it clean. Today, no one respected the mermaid anymore, no cleared the river anymore. People rarely visited the river; apart from crazy fishermen like this one, white garment churches, and me. Empty cans floated on the surface of the water. Some part of the river smelled like human feces. Yet, it was still a beautiful place to be. People now believed that whatever belonged to the river was evil and should be avoided. They all found Jesus and everything changed.

I sat there watching the skies and everything around me. The rain stopped. Kites hovered deep in the sky, and the hawks peered through the palm trees. Father once told me that seeing the kite deep in the sky was a sign that it wasn't going to rain. It was a way of telling the weather when they were younger.

Back in those days, the joy of being here was watching a splinter of sun break itself on the surface of a leaf floating down the river. I was small, but I watched it float and move beautifully along a narrow path. I was small when we threw each other into the river, and landed on the surface of water and slumped down to the silty bottom. I was small when we pushed the water hard on our faces and tried to dry it up as fast as we could. My brother was the fastest, he would quickly splash water into everyone's face, and swim away. For a moment, I thought that I saw Chioma pass me, down the horizon, by the shrubs. The thought of her beauty made me weak, again. I felt odd, like something was wrong, but I couldn't make sense of it. *It wouldn't be death* I said to myself. It was just a fragment of my imagination. I had seen a lot of death that only through death can the world truly make sense to me. I left the river feeling alive again.

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I was at home, naked, washing my face when a call came in, I picked up my phone. The voice at the other end of the line was in panic.

“Please come and help, come and help. Manager has been caught, come to the office, right now,” James said, screaming.

I took my shirt and ran to the bus station. There was no bus, so I started running on the tarred road and tried to make sense of what he meant that manager *has been* caught.

*Caught for what?* I asked myself.

James had never been in the habit of calling me. I was losing breath, so I slowed down. A bus caught up with me. I flagged it down, and entered. I was sweating profusely. I tried not to look at the other passengers. I was deep in thoughts I didn't know what to expect. I was just agitated. I wished the bus could move faster. I called James a million times but he didn't pick up. The bus was the slowest bus ride I had ever taken in my life. If I was strong enough to run, I would have out run it. It slouched lazily on the tarred road. After much delay, it finally stopped at my junction. I ran to the office, but there was no one. I looked at the end of the street and noticed a large crowd down there. Smokes were going up. People were running around as if the city was under attack. I ran down the stairs, and towards the crowd. I saw James coming back. He seemed confused, and didn't know what to do.

“They caught him, please, they caught him. They are about to burn him. Run to the police station, run, run, run,” he said.

I didn't think about it. It was a matter of life and death. I ran like a mad man towards the police station around Fire Service. I ran with all the strength my body could muster. I was burnt out, but I kept running. For a second, I thought my heart would fall out of my chest and dance on the hot tar. I ran for over two kilometers. When I got to the station, I was panting like a dog. It took me a few minutes to speak.

"Help..." I said and tried to rest, "help...they..." I panted, "They are trying to burn someone around my office." I said.

The police department head officer quickly ordered them to follow me. They brought a van. I jumped in and went with them. The drove with the siren blaring. When we got there, two men were burning. They were already dead. Just ash and black bones with wisp floating in the wind. I broke down. I cried. It was two men. Lovers. My manager and another man. There was nothing left to recognize. No one deserved to be burned alive. Not for loving who they wanted to love. Not for choosing to love. No one deserved to be burned alive. No one. What used to be the man that I had come to know was now ash. The New Year that I was expecting to bring forth a sort of satisfaction, now began with death. Maybe the other year never ended. I laughed in anger. I laughed because I knew deep down inside that last year wasn't over yet. It was still here with us. Burning us. The killers were now mobs. What was left at the scene now were sympathizers, woman who sat there crying and claiming that they tried to stop the killing but the young men were overzealous. They told the story over and over, to whomever that asked. They looked like the woman that followed Jesus to Golgotha, they wept. The policemen tried to cordon the area. When some of the policemen heard that he was caught in an act of sodomy, they even spit at the burning bodies. I didn't know who the other boy was. But he seemed smaller, judging from what was left of him.

James came back with my boss. No one knew what to do, or where to start. We just sat down by the gutter watching people pass. I saw the charred hands twitch. I looked, they twitched again. It seemed like the bodies tried to hold hands before they breathing their last. I tried to imagine what they went through before finally **giving up** to ghosts, and I couldn't even think it. The pain, the hellishness, the trauma that their body must have undergone. The capacity of the human mind to inflict pain on the other. The capacity of the mind to carry out jungle justice on another man because they were caught in the act of sodomy. It was one of those moments in life that I was unable to move. My boss made arrangements for the bodies to be removed. I looked at the people that were passing. I looked at their faces. I saw those ones that were judging him. I saw those ones that pitied him. It was all on their faces. I couldn't understand any of these, I couldn't understand the hatred that would drive someone to burn another alive.

On our way back to the office, I asked James to tell me what really happened.

“Honestly, I was at home and had no idea about anything. He called me and he was shouting ‘help me James, help me James’ I started running since I lived not far from here. When I arrived, there was a mob here. They had beaten his face? to pulp. His face, no longer looked like his face. I asked them what he did wrong, and they said that they caught him fucking another man. Apparently the one that was beating him was a man that came to make photocopy in the office and noticed that there was something going on inside. He caught them red handed and descended on them. I don't know how he managed to call me under that condition. When I arrived, all the market people were here, beating him mercilessly,”

“Do you know any of his family members?” I asked.

“I know the mum, and I also know that he has a brother living in Abuja,” James said.

“Then we should contact them,” my boss said.

But before we could even think about finding a phone number or something, the mother was already at our doorstep. She wailed when she saw us at the balcony. She wailed and wailed. Owerri was so small that news could get to the other end of it in a matter of seconds. Moreover, the video was all over social media. People tweeted it, pinged it, shared it, and all that. I watched her walk upstairs with grief. We ran down to meet her. She fell on the stairs. We tried to console her. I swear, when we brought her upstairs, she couldn't even cry. She fainted again. We fanned her, and told her it was going to be alright.

We consoled her, that was we could do. Deep inside me, I knew it meant nothing. And that was the thing about sorrow, when I looked into her and said “everything will be alright” I knew she felt like dying. I knew she wanted none of it to be true. We fanned her, we sprinkled water on her. When she woke up again, her eyes were red, and wide open.

“Mama *ebesila* oh,” James said.

I swear, that word was better left in that language, because it carried every bit of the pain that she felt. Every bit of the sorrow that weighed her down.

“Where did I go wrong? What did I not do to make sure that he turned out alright?” she questioned herself. “I sent him to seminary. I did everything right. He came out of the seminary, and said that he couldn't imagine himself being a priest. I gave him all the opportunities he needed to succeed. Yet, he chose to be sleeping with other men,” ~~she said.~~

James brought water for her to drink, hoping that she would calm down, but she kept on.

“The first time I saw him behaving like a girl, I thought it was a joke. I thought maybe he will turn out alright. No one in my family has ever turned out this way. How did he turn out this way? What did I do wrong? I took him everywhere and God refused to heal him. One time, we slept on a mountain so that he will be washed and rescued from homosexuality. When we got back from the mountain, I thought he was fine. Then he started again. Then we took him back to another prophet that kept him by the riverside for one month. Yet, my son came back unwell. We had already found a wife for him to marry. A beautiful wife, do you know that his traditional wedding was coming up in two months?” ~~She asked us.~~

None of us knew anything about him that much apart from the fact that he attempted to molest us. The mother told us everything with pain in her voice, and we listened. We couldn't let her close the site of his death. There was no need. My boss drove her home, and took over from there. James went home. I too went home in pains. It was almost midnight when I left.

I sat in the thinking about my life over and over again. It rang through my head like a motorcycle buzzing through the highway. A lot was happening, and I couldn't tell what I was ready for or not ready for. I tried to call Chioma but it went straight to voicemail, again. For the first time, it occurred to me that she might have found someone else to be with. Maybe it was over, and I was the one not seeing it. She might have met someone else, someone willing to give her all she wanted without wasting her time. Someone willing to love her and marry her without waiting. I blamed myself for not being spontaneous enough. For not taking charge when I was supposed to take charge. I blamed myself because there was no one I could blame. One minute, we were talking, the next minute she disappeared. Gone. I wondered what I will tell Prof and Nkechi happened, why she couldn't meet them.

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I was still trying to make sense of the violent death my manger went through. I was still thinking through. I couldn't get anything done. But, when Annie walked past me, I felt like it was time. There wasn't any need for any of us to be tormenting the other. We both have tried to make it work. We both have worked hard enough to make it work.

"Annie, we have to stop trying," I said with tears in my eyes.

"Yes, we have to, but help me out with Obiarika if you can," she said.

"I earn forty thousand every month, I will give you ten thousand for Obiarika every month, that I can live with. That I think is fair," I said.

"Yes, that is fair. Obiarika has seen a lot. It is time to move to the next step in life. I thought about it, even though I desperately need a husband, and I am afraid to end up alone. I don't want to get married like this. I don't want to force you into this. I don't want to take over your life pretending that I didn't know what I was doing. I have prayed about this, and this is about us like you will always advise me. If I hurt you, forgive me," she said.

"I am sorry too. I apologize for the times I provoked you. I apologize for the things I can't change, and I promise to take responsibility for Obiarika," I said.

I looked at the tears in her eyes, I wanted to touch her and say it was alright, but I held myself and stared out of the darkness. I didn't know what was ahead of me. I felt like a blind man wondering in the forest. I didn't know where to start from. I was sure that here was a place to start from.

"I will leave tomorrow morning before you wake up," she said.

"No problem," I said.

I went to fridge, and took out a bottle of beer, sat on the sofa and started drinking my heart away. I wondered if I had made the greatest mistake of my life. If this was life telling me to settle down. To just take the woman nature has given me. Maybe I should listen to my mother and just settle, stay with my son, and make Annie my wife. I was at that border line of telling her not to leave, that I loved her. I wondered which of the love that I profess would be real, or just a fragment of my imagination that wanted to play it safe. That would be cruel I said to myself.

I was lonely. I had always been lonely. I had always known that one day life would come for me like a wave, and I felt the tide rising. I fell down in my workshop and slept with a bottle of beer in my hand. All the mosquitos in the world sucked my blood, and it didn't matter to me. It was alright. It was just fine. We were all already dying. Let them feed on me.



## Chapter Eleven

I woke up late in the morning with a hangover. I walked into my room. Annie, and Obiarika were gone. No trace of them. They didn't even leave anything behind. I didn't know what to do or what to feel, sometimes one would think that doing one thing would be easy, but in reality, it was really hard to face. I had space. Big enough space to do nothing with it. I watched myself in the mirror and brushed my teeth. I observed all the lines on my face while scrubbing my tongue. I looked at a healed wound on my head, something inflicted on me by Annie's family. The mark would be there for a long time. Maybe one day I would show it to Obiarika, and he might remember when it happened. Maybe he would forgive me after all. I walked to my bathroom, there was no one to stop me from splashing the water on my body forever. I sat down on the tiled floor, and sprinkling water fell on me. I felt alive. I felt alright. I breathed.

For a long time, I had wanted my house to look a certain way – minimal decoration, lots of empty space, and with my scientific or engineering tools having a place inside. I spent the day cleaning up, discarding things I didn't want, things that I just kept there to please her, like the upholstery in the room. The picture of Jesus and Mary. I removed all of them. I removed the broken pots in the kitchen that she left there because she believed in preserving wealth and the traditional notion that nothing should be thrown away. I cleared the trash that littered my dining table.

I thought about Chioma. I picked up my phone and tried her number again; it went through, but someone cut it off and it went into voicemail, again. I wondered why she would treat me this way. I resolved that I didn't see her in the coming days, that I would go check on her.

That day, when I finished clearing the house, I started walking around, to look at the streets of my childhood again, to look at the places I had grown to love and hate. To see if I could see this city in a different way. I knew that was almost impossible, but I was willing to try. People had returned from the holiday and long resumed work. The street was now as busy as it used to be; it didn't really make me feel any different, and so I returned home and slept.

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While I was sleeping, something nearly touched me, it was white, and the eyes were bright. I swear, I got up immediately and I knew that something really touched me. I was so afraid. I remembered when I was a small boy. I was so afraid of everything. I was so afraid of sleeping alone in my bed. I was about ten years old. I wouldn't go to the toilet alone at night. I had to have my brother watch me. I had to have him stand by the door. Nights without light were the most frightening. I remembered the days I used to attend morning mass. I would stand at our door and wait until someone passed. Once I saw someone coming, I would run and trail the person. Those days, everyone complained about seeing ghosts here and there. My imagination was wild, and believe you me, I saw many things that weren't normal. One day, I stopped believing in monsters and all that. Maybe I outgrew it. These discarded memories came upon me in my loneliness and became a reality, again.

For days now, there had been no sign of The Pharrell. The uncompleted building was empty. The first thing I did when I woke was stare across the street. It had become like a sport for me. Something obsessive, like I was afraid of his return, like I knew he was going to return. Being alone made it worse, not hearing from Chioma worsened it too.

I called Annie, and told her that I was coming tomorrow to see her people. She was happy to hear that. I wondered what they would do to me when they saw me, maybe beat me up. But it was better to try, than not trying at all. I asked Prof to come around so we could go together. He was one friend that could calm things down when they go wrong. I also invited Pa Njoku.

I had nothing to do, and I didn't want to think too much on things that I couldn't change. I went to my lab, turned on my radio, and started listening to Tom Waits. I loved most of his songs. I sat down there and listened. The way he sang got into my head and heart and I felt like I was on the streets of Minneapolis while the song, "Christmas Card from a Hooker in Minneapolis" played.

A knock came upon my door. I opened it and it was Prof. I hugged him and smiled.

"Man, congratulations brother. You made it like you said you would. Sometimes, faith is all you need. I dig your new home brother," I said.

"Thank you. I am truly sorry that I haven't had time. I found a new job as an engineer in the ministry. It's better than what I currently have now," he said.

"Congratulations, I have always known that you were capable of turning the table around," I said.

"Thank you, my friend," Prof said.

He dressed in clean and simple T-shirt with jeans.

"I love your new style man. New shoes, new clothes, jean pants. Do you actually know the last time that I saw you in jeans?" I asked.

He bent his spectacles in his usual way, and asked, "When?" with a little surprise on his face.

“Alright, I will tell you. It was when you were taking your University Entrance Examination.”

“You are crazy man, you are so crazy, you keep a record of these crazy things.”

“Sure, I do.”

“So, where are we? We need to go far on this project today,” he said.

“I was waiting for you. Alright, we are done with radio, well until we test it. Also, we need to construct a 1/4 Wave Ground Plane Antenna. I have the brass and other materials that we need to make it work,” I said.

He removed his shirt and revealed his lanky body. He was ready to work, I showed him the brass, and since we had all the equipment’s ready, he used a scroll-saw to cut the brass, and I started to fix the connectors properly. Everything needed precision. A feeder, quarter radical wave, 19.5 brass welding rods of 3/32 diameter, a connector, brass rod radicals for our one fourth ground plan, coax cables. We aimed for at least 440-megahertz reception. We wanted to catch the ISS at least 145.800 MHz FM. Prof began to write another set of equations on the board to make sure that he was right.

“By and large, we will be able to tune in and listen, but if we have a conversation with the ISS, and this printer takes it down noting detail, my friend, we could send it to the ministry of education,” he said.

“We will,” I said.

I knew that we had different purposes for attempting this communication. His was just to reach that level of success he had always wanted, and I was just in it for the love of it. For self-

fulfillment. To tell myself that this was it. To tell a story. To tell Obiarika that his father once talked to men orbiting this earth. Men doing nothing but making sense of things from the outer space and reporting to their various countries and sharing discoveries with the scientific world. It was something to live for. It was something to look up to.

“I am sorry that I didn’t come earlier. I feel like I should have been here when she left, and all that. I feel like I failed. I just failed you. I have no reason to leave you alone. I had known that you were suicidal a long time ago, but I had kept it myself, tell me that I am wrong?” he asked.

I didn’t know what to say. I felt at ease to know that someone was listening. So many things we had known about each other, and never spoke a word about it. I knew how shy he was. I knew that his first sexual encounter must have been initiated by Nkechi. I knew these things about him even without asking. I knew that he loved Nkechi the first day I saw him talking to her while drunk. I knew everything he was thinking. I knew that he knew I was suicidal even without talking about it.

“Well, can an African kill himself?” I said and laughed and wanted to turn it into one of those dark-humored-moment that we always had. But he was a man of reason and wouldn’t let me bluff off things with easy comments like that.

~~“No, I don’t know.”~~ What I know is that men are jumping out of their window and into the lagoon in Lagos. What I know is that men are hanging themselves on ceiling fans. What I know is that I have always been afraid that one day you would shoot yourself or something, but I never said anything because I wasn’t even sure about what I can do to help you carry on.”

“Remember when they called us weirdos? Remember when we submitted the first science project and won an award?” I asked.

“I remember it all. I remember that first science project that blew Mr. Njoku out of his natural mind. I remember when that plane ran on the field and wouldn’t lift up at first. The field was large my friend, and it ran and ran and when it finally lifted its belly into the sky, the whole school went mad. The next week, all the boys in our school started doing one project or the other. We inspired people,” Prof said.

“You know, that we told them that we could do it, that we were damn capable of making a machine fly into the sky. That is still what I want to do with this project. Instead of listening into the space, I want my son to dream about going to the space because there are opportunities waiting for us there. We have to look at earth from a distance to understand it. I still remember how long it took us to construct that damn plane. A year!” I screamed.

“If we were living in US or something like that, we could have gotten a scholarship for it,” Prof said.

“Fuck this place. Fuck these politicians that want to make us look stupid every day. That want to make science look like something idiotic. My anger here is with everyone, everything that has stumped my dream whenever it tried to bloom. Imagine that we got the support that we needed. Well, we are Igbos and that meant little to them. That meant that no support was coming for us. They even wanted to sue us. They said we have no authority to fly a plane into the Nigerians air space. Stupid people,” I said and continued working on my brass, “When did you give up?”

“A long time ago, but something in me tried to keep going. When I saw you with this machine, I knew it was another opportunity to try. To feel those old days again,” Prof said.

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt like I belong here. Remember when we wanted to just walk until we were far away from this place?” I said, feeling nostalgic.

I wanted to remember all there was to remember. All there was between us and our dreams and the horror we faced here while growing up.

“I remember, and honestly, it’s no longer burning in me like it used to before. Before, it was an obsession. I wanted to just leave and never to look back again. I wanted to stick my middle fingers at the whole system when I get to the next point. Science has been part of us, it has been our obsession. There is never anything weird about science. What people couldn’t understand, they mystified. That was it, no one could understand you and I. I tell you that doesn’t mean that there is no space for you and I in this city. Imagine me getting married, focusing on personal happiness?” Prof said.

“Imagine me breaking apart, being visited by so much sorrow. Watching my manager burn to death because he is a homosexual. Imagine me, living alone. I was the dope of town you know. I had never had ill luck with women, you know? Since secondary school. But look at you? All the happiness is now with you, and I, what do I have? Death around me, disappointments, disappearance,” I said

I threw the almost done antenna on the floor and sobbed. He watched me. He had always known that my emotions could skyrocket at any time, and that doesn’t make me a bad man. That doesn’t make me a despicable person, or hater. It was just me. Just me.

“My friend, you know that I never planned for this happiness. I planned to be miserable. I planned to never even talk to a girl even though I wanted to talk to a girl, imagine that. Then you, you changed my life, you gave me hope. You threw that light into my dark tunnel, and here I am today loving this woman the best I can. And I can’t guarantee anything about tomorrow. I don’t want her to stay with me forever. She would one day die or I will die. I don’t want to think about

it. God forbid, but that is the reality of our very short lives. Maybe you are looking for long term happiness when short term would do.”

Each of those words slapped me. It was true. I had never imagined that loving could be so short. That loving could be just a bit of us together. I had never imagined that loving Chioma for that short period of my life could just be the purpose she had in my life.

The air got hotter, and it reminded me that nature itself wasn't even steady. That a bird could perch here doesn't mean that it wanted to spend the rest of its life at that particular spot. A bird was a bird, and was meant to fly. He was right, my expectations of life were bogus, and I had no damn reason to compare my freaking wasteful life to his. I should just be happy for him and fight for his success. I should see the light in all my failure and tribulation. It wasn't my fault. Sometimes burying friends messes you up in a way people can't understand. It throws nihilism up your face, and all you want to do is dance in the rain.

“I feel terribly sorry, and don't think that I am not happy for you. You know I am your biggest fan. It's just that within these few days, I have seen it all. The pain is almost unbearable and spews into other aspects of my life. For days now, I have been having nightmares. Nightmares of seeing ghosts, of watching my manager burn into ashes. I don't know the extent of damage that has done to my psyche.”

“I am sorry my friend.”

“It's no problems, I just want you to know that there is no smoke without fire. I have lived in constant fear ever since then. Even though I try to appear strong. I wake up every morning to see if The Pharrell had returned. Then I sit down there and think about what will happen when he returns. He might choose me to be the next person to die. The government cannot protect me, and



they don't care. Catechist is now dust and forgotten. Suleiman, I don't know if the family ever came down here to take his corpse. A man once told me that his son left for Libya, and I nearly laughed at him, at the odds of actually getting to Libya. Even with knowing all these things, do you know that right now if someone should offer me a deal like that, I would take it," I said.

"I know you would, I know. There is nothing for you here anymore." We looked at each other and smiled.

We tested our radio, and it was working perfectly. I walked a mile away from my balcony, and transmitted sounds with a walkie, and Prof received them and it printed. It printed all the coded signals that I gave. We laughed. We felt wild with joy and it spewed out of our faces. I hugged my friend and we rejoiced for having achieved it. We packed all the items in a box and that made it so easy for us to transport it at any moment.

"I know that sometimes my imagination runs wild, but you've never judged me for it. Thank you for being that kind of acquaintance," he said.

It was already dark when we finished. He called Nkechi and told her that he wasn't coming back home that night. I spoke to Nkechi too and told her that I needed him to accompany me to go see Annie's parents tomorrow. She agreed and gave me her blessings, too.

We were ready to launch our device and that made me happy. Since he was sleeping over, I went and bought all the wine we needed to get us till morning. We sat down in my living room drinking. Just the two of us.

"Man, we got it right this time around," Prof said.

“Now, we wait for the right time. Also, we have to find out the best place in Owerri to communicate with them,” I said.

“It seems like we will be successful. I hope so. It will show that we haven’t been playing,” Prof said and drank from the bottle.

“Do you miss Nwanyi Ncha’s place?” I asked.

“You don’t need to ask such a question. You should know that we all miss it, that loquacious space. That is the only real place in this city, the rest are just fake people walking up and down expressing psychosis and frustration. All the real people in this city came to that place,” Prof said and sighed.

“Do you think your book will ever be published?” I asked.

“Sometimes, you just don’t write for it to be published. You write to remind yourself that you’ve tried,” Prof said and laughed, “Have you heard from Chioma?”

“No, I haven’t. I don’t want to disturb you with that too. I have a lot of baggage in my life, and you have things to sort out for yourself too. I will go visit her soon; I have come to that decision,” I said.

“Things can always be sorted out fairly,” Prof said, and stared at the white ceiling, “Do you miss him, your son?”

“Every day. That smile, it’s crippling. I wanted to take him to his first fishing trip. I think I can still do that if they let me have some time with him,” I said.

“At least you deserve that. You are a good man, even if the world doesn’t see it,” Prof said.

“I don’t know what I deserve anymore. I don’t even know if I am worthy of breath,” I said.

“Seriously, don’t ever think about taking your own life. That boy needs you. He needs you to be strong, and that’s not the story you want to leave behind. You want to leave a better story,” Prof said.

“I won’t. I will outlive all this bullshit, and even it if leads to my unhappiness. I think I am ready to accept that I am not entitled to anything, including happiness. I think acceptance makes a difference,” I said.

I was still imagining what it would be like living with Chioma. I was imagining her waking me up in the morning with kisses. For the first time, I imagined us sitting down in my living room, watching a television. Maybe African Magic for a start? But I wasn’t interested in television generally. I wasn’t that kind of guy, but what if she was that kind of a girl? Then I would have to compromise, easily. Love is accommodating. Not loving is not. When not in love, you tend to put up boundaries. In a place of love, they are really nonexistent. They melt away. I remembered many instances I had watched that happen. I remembered the type of man my friend Prof used to be before; he barely cared for his own hygiene for Christ sake. Since he met a woman that he actually loved, things had changed for him. He now lived differently.

We drank and laughed and chatted like we had always done. Like we started doing many years ago. We talked about death and also the good friends we have lost. We talked the future as if we owned it, as if we were going to ride it to perfection. After a while, we slept.

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The sun burned my eyes, I woke up and ran to the window to see if The Pharrell was back. Prof was coming out of the bathroom, he saw me looking out there, but didn’t say anything. He knew best not to say anything. He could tell that I was in one of my weird moments.

“The cream please?” he asked, and I pointed on top of the desk. He took it and began to rub it on his body. My driver was already here because I asked him to come early. Annie’s village was like fifteen kilometers away, and the roads were terrible. I opened the door for the driver. We hugged and greeted.

“Thank you for coming early,” I said.

“No problem, anytime. The same way that I answered your father, is the same way that I will answer you too,” he said, smiling.

“Have you heard anything from your son in Libya?” I asked.

“Yes, he made it across the Pacific Ocean. He called me from Italy the other day, he told me that he nearly died in the sea. He said the wave and tide were too high and it nearly killed them. God saved him, Jesus pulled him out of that water alive, and he finally made it to the shores of Europe. I know that this is the beginning of good things to come for my family. This is indeed a sign of his blessing,” he said, smiling.

“I am really happy that he made it, Chai!” I screamed, “What a blessing!”

I shook hands with him again, this time around, it was firmer. I knew that he felt my inner joy, that I was indeed happy for him.

“Thank you, my son, good things can never finish, can they?” he asked.

“No, Sir. Talking about good things, I have beer, do you care for some?” I asked.

“You are still asking? Let us start celebrating from here,” he said and laughed.

I gave the driver a chilled beer.

“So, my son, let me ask. I thought she was your wife already?” the driver asked.

“No, we have never been married. The story is that I got her pregnant, and she moved in with me,” I said.

“My son, you could have settled down. That your woman is plump oh! Beautiful and big,” he said, and we laughed.

I knew that he meant. But honestly, that wasn't what I needed to hear at this point in my life.

“Nna anyi, I just couldn't. It can't work,” I said.

“You know that size is a very mighty size. Before the war, my son, that was the main thing oh,” he said.

“But I think that it doesn't go well with me based on that. It's about the inside mostly, and not the outside,” I said another bull-crap thing I've heard people say, and yet no one has ever made a choice based on the inside. We all lived on the outside. The eye is the first instrument for beauty, like my grandfather would say: *The eyes will eat, then the mind*. I was a little bit superficial, and I knew that, I wasn't denying it.

“I know my son, I know...” he said.

“Please let me get ready quickly, we can talk about this in the car. Also, we will pick up Pa Njoku, he agreed to come with us,” I said.

“Who is Pa Njoku?” he asked.

“You will meet him,” I said and walked back into the room to get ready. Prof was already ready.

“Please help me move the things into the car,” I begged him and went to take my bath.

Soon, we left. We picked up Pa Njoku and drove towards Mbaise. The roads were old and dusty. It was a beautiful day, and I was happy that Pa Njoku agreed to go with us. He was dressed in his full traditional regalia as a titled chief, with a red hat to go with it. I looked at the houses as we drove past them, old apartments and small markets scattered along the way.

“Pa Njoku, you really dressed fine today. I love this,” Prof said praising the old man. He smiled at Prof. I watched them through the rear mirror, beside the driver.

“My son, they can chase all of you away, but not me. I am a titled man,” Pa Njoku said, and we laughed.

“I really want to thank all of you that came here to join me on this crazy visit. When Pa Njoku said that I must go, I took it very seriously. Thank you, all of you. I am just saying in case I don’t make it back,” I said, and we started laughing again.

“My son, you have done the right thing, and that is what matters most. Not coming back from this journey doesn’t in fact matter. You know why I am here?” Pa Njoku asked, and his face was serious as ever.

“No,” I said.

He cleared his throat and continued, “A fly that has no counselor follows the corpse to the grave.”

“It is what it is. True,” the driver replied.

“Gbam!” Prof said.

Pa Njoku looked outside at the green field, then looked to at me and said, “My son. You are like a son to me; I will not be here and let your goat die in the barn. I will try to rescue it. I have an obligation to help you. My forefathers would have done the same too, and I hope you do the same in future. We have to go to and see them and return their daughter properly. Where I come from, women are treated with respect, and if joining the modern world means losing my respect for women, I say may the gods take me away.”

“Thank you. Thank you,” I said over and over.

This was it. This was the journey that I was afraid of. It felt like I was pulling myself deep into the unknown, and not knowing what to find. I had indeed endured a lot, and here I was going back to the same woman that beat me up in my own house with her goon. I was only a human, and I didn’t know what to do. I just watched the gullies, and hills, and valleys, and sparse vegetation’s growing on hills. I watched abandoned government projects; hospitals, homes, estates, water board, ambitious dams that were never completed. I hissed. Things were changing. This society was becoming something else even without us knowing.

When we got to her village and made a turn towards a dusty road, my mind skipped. When we approached her father’s house, the gate was almost covered with shrubs. Children were playing beside the gate. Annie had a little store in front of the house already. There she sold her vegetables instead of walking all the way to the market. When she saw me, she ran and hugged me, and I started crying. I started crying because I felt ugly deep inside. When I saw my little boy, I ran and carried him, and he said “Papa.” I swear, I didn’t know what to do with myself. My friends greeted her too. She showed no malice, no hatred or anger. The mother received us in the living room, she showed no hatred or anger either. It was like a dream, everyone agreed and looked at each other with hope. With so much hope and forgiveness that I began to thank Pa Njoku again, right there,

for making me see the light. He had always pointed me to the light that I couldn't see. Pa Njoku spoke first.

“The tortoise says that his family did well to dress him in a garment of iron. I am not saying that you will kill this young man or anything. But we are here to support him, first of all. Together, we can achieve a lot more. As individuals, we are nothing. We make mistakes, and we must correct them. We need one another. You see the joy that is here today, may it continue to be in each of your individual lives even though you have decided to part,” he said.

“Isee,” we replied.

“We have come to formally make peace here, like our elders have done since the beginning of time. Our problems will not eat us, rather we will eat our problems and clean our mouth, is that not true?” Pa Njoku asked the driver. I guess he looked at the driver more often because he was the next oldest person in the room and his affirmation meant a lot. The driver nodded in affirmation, and Pa Njoku continued, “Peace is the answer and never the problem. If there is joy, then peace will reign. But we all have to agree and make that peace reign. It is all our jobs to make sure that it happens. The young man has made his mistakes, and all we ask is for forgiveness, Prof, please.” he looked at Prof.

Prof already knew what to do when he called him. Prof and I ran to the car and brought the items one by one: six tubers of yam, a white hen, a bag of rice, three cans palm oil, two jugs of palm wine, and three ankara materials. We placed it in the middle of the room. Obiarika kept touching my beard and laughing. He smiled. He was so happy to see me. My son, my star, my stone, the rock upon which my existence rested. Having a son was a different experience, being



called *father* had its own sense of joy and fulfillment. He now sat in my arms, and I listened to Pa Njoku.

“Now, this is what we have come with, because we want to tell a good story after all. The young man here will speak for himself,” Pa Njoku said.

I stood up and bowed, and began to speak, “I am truly sorry for not doing all the right things that I should have done in the beginning. It’s my mistake, and I hope to correct them. I brought these items not because I want to bribe you for your daughter, but because I just want to show appreciation. The bad has happened, may it never happen again. I brought these elders not because of war, but because I want peace. Because we are here to do the right thing, whatever is done well, is called beauty,” I said.

“True, the son of his father,” The driver said and smiled.

“It is a proverb and it is wisdom,” Pa Njoku said.

The mother was smiling all this while, and she motioned Annie to go and get Kola for us. Pa Njoku blessed the kola, and it was passed around before she started to speak.

“Now, you have said why you came, and we have broken kola in peace. That means, we can work towards peace from here on. Thank you for your gift, and I will not start digging around the past. What has happened has happened. Obiarika is your son as much as he is our son, so you can always come and visit, and whatever a father is supposed to do for the son, that is all we ask for. Forgive me for my behavior,” she said tried to to kneel down, but Pa Njoku held her up because he was sitting closer to her. She continued, “Now we can move forward from here. I am happy that you came to do the right thing. Anger can never solve any problem. This problem has taught

me a bitter lesson too. I hope you find all you want in life, and I hope Annie finds all she wants in life too,” she said.

She stood up and came to me. I hugged her, and she asked me to kneel. I knelt down and she placed her hand on my head.

“You have done what a good son will always do. What a man that drank his mother’s breast will do. You have forgiven us, and we have forgiven you, and may our ancestors forgive you too. Chukwuabiana will see you through all your struggles. In fact, you will no longer struggle again,” she said.

We all replied, “Amee”

“You will bloom like a flower planted by the riverside. You will find peace. I have forgiven and blessed you, stand up,” she said.

I stood up, and we embraced each other again. It dawned on me that life wasn’t about the problem, but how we react to the problems of life was the problem. It wasn’t about our imperfection, but our response to our imperfection that mattered the most. Afterward, we ate and played. And I gave them ten thousand for the first month. Instead of returning all the time to give them the money, I set up an automatic payment that goes straight to Annie’s account, right there.

That evening, when I got home, I sat down and felt at ease, I felt lighter. Like my sorrows were beginning to ease. Apart from the pain of knowing that Chioma wasn’t yet back. Her face, her face, her kind nature flashed in my heart. A lady that accepted me for who I was without even me doing anything for her. I decided that I was going to find her no matter what. Even she wanted to end it, at least a final goodbye would do. But I knew deep inside of me that everything wasn’t well. That something was deeply wrong, but I couldn’t tell what. I took a bottle of beer from the

fridge, sat down, and drank. A few minutes later, I walked out of my house and walked towards the riverside. It was dark and cold, but I wasn't afraid any longer.

When I got there, I sat on the leaves and watched the river flow amid scant hyacinths. I sat there, facing my fears of darkness. Confronting all the stories that I have heard about the river at night. I dove inside the water and avoided the hyacinths. I followed a clear path and beat against the flow of the river. I swam until I got to an island and lay flat on the soil and watched clouds move in the heaven.

I looked deep into the moon, it seemed as though it was Chioma's face on it. she looked like a Madonna, veiled and smiling back at me. I felt my heart open, and I was so happy. I couldn't tell where my happiness was coming from and how long it would last. I was afraid that it would never last. Happiness for me had always been a strange thing. When nothing happened, and I got tired, I swam back home.

## Chapter Twelve

I was determined to find Chioma, today. I sat in my cubicle typesetting. James joined me because we had a lot of work at hand. He was working on the excel sheets, while I typed. It was the first time we were hanging out since after the death of our manager.

“Do you still think about it?” I asked.

“Yes, a lot. That a human being could be hated like that is something I still can’t understand. That they killed him that quick. If he was around, he would have checked on us by now, you know?” he asked.

“Yes, I know. He was a good man. He just needed help or something,” I said.

“True. True. I can’t stop thinking about it. In fact, let’s not talk about it,” he said, and I agreed.

I wanted to ask him if he knew anything about Chioma, but I refrained and decided I would find out myself.

“Students are not coming,” I said.

“Better places in town to learn a computer program, not just here, they have options and here looks like the worst of it,” he said.

“I will start looking for another job,” I said.

“Do you like the new manager?” I asked him.

“Not really, but I think he needs time to understand what he is doing around here. He needs to start marketing now. He needs a clear-cut agenda on how to attract students,” he said.

“Maybe he will turn you into a marketer soon, and have us go around Owerri distributing flyers,” I said.

“I will not do it,” he said, and we laughed.

“How are your parents, and your dad’s health?” I asked.

“He is healing, coming back together, we are hoping on the lord,” he said.

We sat down there and talked away our time until it was four o’ clock, and I left. It was a dry windy day. I stood on the road waiting for a bus. I was thinking if I could accurately remember where Chioma lived, because I went there only a few times and at night. It was getting cold, I put on my red cardigan. Soon, a bus stopped and I entered.

I made a stop at her exact bus stop, and everything seemed familiar again. The water that flooded the street had receded, and the sandbag lay on dry land. Only one of the sandbags was still submerged in water. I remembered all the turns we took. When I got the gate, I opened and walked towards her room at the back of the house. The familiar dog barked, and this time, there was no one tell the dog to shut up. I was afraid, my heart was skipping, faster and faster. I didn’t know if I should knock or not. I knocked, and waited, no one answered. I knocked harder again and bolder.

The window in the main house opened and someone gazed at me. I examined myself to make sure I wasn’t looking crazy or appeared like a burglar or something. I was too conscious of myself, especially in an unfamiliar environment. The door cracked open and someone peeped. A lady.

“Excuse me,” I said, and she walked out of the door and quickly locked it behind her.

“Have you seen Chioma?” I asked, my heart was beating as I said it.

“Chioma is dead,” she said.

I looked at her like she was joking. I gazed at her from head to toe and all I could see was a messenger from hell bringing the worst of news to my ears. Someone that I was with last year. But again, it made sense, it made a lot of sense, otherwise there was no reason for her to disappear from me. For the uncountable time in my life, I felt my spirit leaving me. I didn’t know what to do, I cracked into pieces. It was as if life was breaking me down again, piece by piece. It was as if whatever I was chasing was as unclear as life and death.

“What happened to her?” I managed to ask, with tears running down my cheek.

“Accident, she died while returning from Lagos. They ran into a pothole around Ibadan expressway and it happened so fast. Their car fell into a ditch,” she said and began sobbing.

For the first time in a short while, tears crowded my eyes and held them back. I didn’t want to cry. I tried not to cry. I stood there petrified for a few minutes.

“Thank you,” I said, with so much heaviness in my voice.

“And who are you?” she asked me.

“I am John, I don’t know if she ever mentioned me to anyone,” I said.

“Yes, she did. Before she died, she kept saying your name. She said that we should tell you that she loves you. There was no way to contact you. Just to let you know, she really loved you, she really did,” she said and cried.

Tears were dripping from my eyes, I just couldn’t take it. I just sat there and let it roll down my cheeks in abundance. I lost it all. I did. The universe left me naked, and I was just wearing my skeleton. Life played me and won.

“Has she been buried?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said.

When I walked into the sun, I didn't know where to go. I didn't know if I was to return to my empty house, or just go drink my life away. The bus sped back through the chagrin of my own consciousness. The bus sped through my sorrows and feelings and dropped me into potholes that scrambled my imagination. I just wanted to keep her face in my head forever. I wiped my tears and sobbed and didn't even know what people were thinking about me. It was the worst day in my life. I felt every inch of that pain.

When the bus dropped me, I couldn't go home. There was a bus going towards Nekedi, I entered. I remembered the time the two of us were on this road laughing and playing and touching each other in a weird way. I remembered exactly where we stopped. I always brought my lovers to that very spot. This was the first time I came here alone, no friends, no lover.

This particular side of the river was special to me.

I sat down, alone, at the same spot we spent hours together, kissing. I swear, I felt her lips on mine, again. I opened my heart to wind, to the thought of her face, to her love that was so so so wild, and no other woman could come into my life with such a way, and if any woman ever tried to come into my life in such a fashion, I swear, I would make the mistake of calling her Chioma.

I immortalized her in my heart, in all the sorrow that clogged my heart. I imagined her sailing, sailing to the moon to be herself once again. To live in the moon. To journey with her ancestors. She was a kind woman, a sweet woman and the kindest that I might ever meet in my life. I sat their clutching sand and leaves in my hands and rubbed them together to release all the

fear that I felt. I inked her into the vineyards of my memory. All I could see on the surface of river was her face, smiling, forever smiling.

No, I wasn't going to kill myself, I wasn't going to jump into the river. I was going to live and confront all my fears. When I got home that night, I fell on my bed and slept. The only thing I could think of was how stupid I was. And I couldn't even tell how stupid I was and I didn't even know how stupid I was. My radio was on and I couldn't make sense of what it was saying. Just sounds, blaring.

In my sleep, I kept hearing the weirdest song I hadn't heard in a long time, it was *Nekwaha* by the funkiest band in Nigeria to ever exist, The Semi-Colon. The psychedelic music mixed with my pain and dream helped me through the night. This was one of the few time music has saved my life. In my dream, the moon became a tune and played to infinity. The clouds dance. The sky danced and took all divine forms and suddenly, dissolved into nothing.



## Chapter Thirteen

\*Moons came and went. Prof got married, and I continued to live alone. I continued working at my job. Two new students came in and joined my class again. One morning, I woke up. I brushed my teeth and sat on my balcony. The sky was blue and grey and beautiful, something that looked like a balloon was floating deep in the air, small. I watched it with amazement. I heard a noise across the street. I heard motorcycles loudly buzzing by, and my heart skipped. I dove behind my junk. I knew that The Pharrell had returned. I tiptoed to my window and saw him and saw his gang speeding hastily down the street. They were making their way to the river on three motorcycles. I went for my gun. I held it tight and told myself that if he ever came back to the uncompleted building that I was going to fire my gun at them. I was going to kill him. I was determined to go to jail because of that idiot.

Two cars drove past onto my street, tailing them. They were driving as if it was a highway pursuing The Pharrell and his men. I watched them with a beating heart. I saw them fire the first bullet at one of the Pharrell's men, he fell from the motorcycle and cried out in pain. The Pharrell replied to the gunshot with a wild aim that didn't get anyone. The men were too fast for him, too brutal. I watched them and their execution was military style. The way they held the rifle pointed to mastery. One man with a long rifle stepped out of the car, aimed, and fired at the Pharrell. The Pharrell fell like a heap of cloth and leaped and leaped like a toad. He dashed another bullet through his heart-

Another guy that had a rifle, aimed at the friend racing towards the river, a little bit further, and fired, and the man fell into the river. The river ate him and cleaned its mouth. The men walked up to the dying The Pharrell who was now begging for his life. They took out a machete, and cut out his heart. They placed it beside him open chest, on his right breast. I didn't think he felt a thing, and it was too far for me to see. I walked into my room and bent my head while holding the windowsill. I heard the men drive away. I ran down from my apartment and watched them, a trail of dust followed their path. People went into their houses. The barbers were about to close their door when I stepped in.

“You know who they are?” I asked.

“Cultists, probably Black Men Cult group,” Sammy said.

Soon, the street went into jubilation. People were running up and down, dancing over the death of The Pharrell. People stepped over his corpse, spit at it, cursed it, wished him the worst journey into the next world, and called on their ancestors to maroon them in the world beyond. I walked down the street, and there he lay like the common criminal that he was. The dead had taken their revenge on him. People were saying a lot of things. Some said that he messed with the University student cult groups, and they came for him. Some said that the assassins came from Lagos, and one of the finest underworld shooters. His body lay on the street for days, and no one tried to move it. No one touched it. The next day, vultures began to circle him. The third day, they were already eating him. When the local government people arrived, he was already rotting.

One evening, they carried his corpse away, and people danced. People felt safe again.

That evening, I took a bus to Prof's new home. It was a beautiful apartment at Works Layout, yellow building, with creeping flowers and hibiscus on the fence. Nkechi opened the door

for me, and I walked in. His living room was large and beautiful. He bought new things for his living room. A television, sound system, a video game, and an Arabian rug in the center of the living room. Chandeliers dangled on the ceiling. I felt so happy for him. Nkechi brought me water.

“Nice to see you, John, we haven’t been seeing you around in a while,” she said.

“I just had a lot of thinking to do, honestly. And I wanted to leave you guys alone to enjoy your new beginning,” I said.

“You can always visit us, John, don’t think like that, kai, this man,” she said.

“I will visit more often now,” I said.

“How is Obiarika?” she asked.

“I spoke with him two days ago, he is alright and with the mum.”

“It’s good that you keep in touch, it means a lot too,” she said.

Prof came out, and we hugged. We all sat down together as we used to.

“The Pharrell is dead, he was killed by unknown gunmen,” I said to Prof, I wanted to break the news to him in person.

“Good lord, in as much as I would have loved him to face justice, but in the absence of that, I will take this. At least the dead can rest and have peace. He killed a lot of innocent people,” he said.

“Like Pa Njoku said, the vultures fed on him. I saw it with my two eyes,” I said.

“That man is wise; he saw his end. He has witnessed evil. So, he could tell how evil men end up. The Pharrell was an evil man. He took the life of our friend. A harmless man. A funny and witty man, talking about that, we need to do go to Nwanyi Ncha’s place now,” Prof said.

It was like he knew what was going to make me feel better. We decided to go check if she ever came back. When we walked outside of their apartment, instead of walking towards the bus stop, Prof walked towards a car.

“Whose car is that?” I asked.

“Mine,” he said, “We bought it.”

“Man, look at the two of you, doing so well,” I said.

I was surprised, things were changing for him, and I was happy about it.

Prof drove through the streets of Owerri in his new car. Nkechi sat beside him, and I was at the back.

“Imagine that we had a car like this when we were growing up?” I asked.

“When we were famously nicknamed *Ojukwuaga Aba*, it would have been the best thing to happen to us. My parents weren’t rich, and yours weren’t rich too. People here are barely managing,” he said.

\*Crazy enough, that was the truth. That was all of it. Our parents hadn’t the money, so we trekked to school. We always walked together, almost every day. We knew the path that would get us to school faster. I still remember the road by the waterside, and the two of us walking along the lonely path. Passing the mortuary, and imagining that a ghost might just come out of nowhere and own us. To worsen things, those were the days when the television aired *Wiliwili*, it was the

Nigerian version of Dracula, a man sucking blood and killing people. Disappearing and appearing. I thought back then that one day, *Wiliwili* would appear from the back of the mortuary and hurt us or something. But the fun of walking back home was the fact that we had the opportunity to steal fruits along the way. The wild trees by the river fed us. Guava, orange, avocado, and all those beautiful fruits. Prof was always afraid of climbing, but I loved climbing.

“The government is very stupid, they will not repair this road,” Prof said as his car bumped into a pothole. It sounded so funny, so funny. I smiled.

“That is the saddest thing about this place, I don’t know if I am ready to have my kids grow up in this kind of hell,” Nkechi said.

“I think about it every day. Every day, and I still don’t know how to save my Obiarika from what it is to come,” I said.

“If I see a way to leave this country, this place, with my family, I will do that,” Prof said.

We all knew the truth; the country was sinking, and no one was talking about it. Everyone wanted to leave. The youths couldn’t even imagine living and dying here. It was the worst fate a man could have. It was the same as a suicide or something.

Prof parked in front of Nwanyi Ncha’s place. The door was open. She came back, and her business was booming like before. Sounds of life and happy people was coming out of the bar. When we walked into the bar, everyone stood and up screamed. They remembered us. They knew we were part of this invisible brotherhood. Well, we knew almost everyone. Akpan sat by the window drinking and laughing.

“Please Nwanyi Ncha, give these beautiful people one bottle of beer each,” Akpan roared like a lion. Everyone stood up and hugged us. We sat down, and began to drink. Nkechi ordered food like she had always done.

“This is reunion deserves to be celebrated in a grand *à l'occasion...*” Prof said, and everyone started laughing and screaming. People stamped their feet on the floor while laughing.

“Kai! Kai! Kai! Prof is back,” Akpan screamed.

“Prof, this is me, look at me. I am honored to know a man so *linguistically* capable like you,” A tall fat man said. He was also a regular at the bar.

“This is a sign of *jollity*,” Prof said, drawing the word *Jollity* as long as he could. Everyone burst into a fresh laughter, they touched each other in a deep anticipation that he still had more to say.

“This is a sign of *euphoria*,” he said again. People started to laugh again. A man ran to him, shook his hand and bowed, and screamed, “Speak it! It is your father’s money.”

Prof adjusted a button on his shirt, and continued again.

“Tyranny, bellum, war, *higgidy piggidy*. The *modicum* of a tyrant that oppressed our basic drinking existence has been toppled, and abandoned, and eaten by vultures,” Prof said.

Again, people started to throw seats around, the atmosphere became electric. A man began to speak in tongues and swore that the language Prof was using made him see ghosts.

Here was the house of comedy, and it came back to its full picture. To the time of love, and excitement and relaxation. The only hypertension clinic on earth. The only hospital for us crazy

men that needed constant healing. The profundity that used to be here, once betrayed by an unknown informant, returned to the place and bound us together again.

“On a serious note. Let us keep a minute silence for a dead brother, our dead comrade, part of this crew, part of our blood. A man that contributed immensely to the intellectual dissection of Nigeria’s socio-political situation, sadly, he won’t be recognized. But we can keep a moment silence for him,” Prof said.

All the men in the bar stood up and put their hands on their chest. Some staggered because they were too drunk to keep their feet together. For one minute, no one talked. In my imagination, I could see the soul of the Catechist flying around. Smiling, laughing loving that we dedicated so much time to honor him. When the one minute finished, I screamed, “Hip, hip, hip.”

“Hurray!” everyone responded.

“Catechist was a good man. He always wanted to drink. Not as a sign that we were drunkards, but for the fact that what we are doing here is more than drinking. It is brotherhood. Others may not see it. The preachers may walk past us and say we are sinners and going to hell. But who are they to judge us? We can’t even judge ourselves. Catechist never judged us. May he journey to our ancestors,” I screamed.

Everyone responded, “Isee.”

We resumed another round of drinking. Nwanyi Ncha came around and raised her hand.

“Thank you all for fearlessly returning, even though we fearfully ran away. Any rational being would do the same. But that doesn’t mean that we are cowards, We are strong people. We came back again. For the rest of the evening, the drink is on Nwanyi Ncha, and I will provide the

best of music for everyone. Old school, *schoolu Mgbeochie*, just like you all love it,” she said and smiled, and people screamed again.

“Now pay up for the ones you’ve had already, Nwanyi Ncha is here for business too,” she said and laughed, and people cued by the counter.

She turned on the turntable to William Onyebo’s *Fantastic Man*. We all danced to the natural psychedelic music. Life was moving, life was here. Life was us at this moment trying to make the best out of it.

“This government is useless,” Akpan said.

People started laughing, again, at what they already considered the obvious of the Life in Owerri. Owerri was a city of its own pace, and time. Sometimes I imagined that our time was totally different from the time of other Nigerians. We drank and made noise and drowned the evening, finely.

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When I got home, I was drunk and had no one talk to. I took my phone and called Annie, she picked up.

“How are you Annie?” I said.

“Fine,” she answered, and her voice was a happy one.

“Please can I talk to Obiarika?” I asked. She didn’t hesitate, she ~~walked into the room and~~ gave the phone to my son.



“Papa...,” he said coupled with other inaudible sounds. He was learning. He was growing, picking up words little by little. I felt a great joy when he called me papa. I felt like the whole world belonged to me.

“I love you my son,” I said.

And he cut the call. I loved him indeed. He was all I lived for and all I cared for. That night, when I walked to my balcony and looked into the heavens, there was my son, seated among the star, gallantly shining for all to see. I was drunk. I sat on a chair in my workshop watching all the boxes of our invention packed together. The moon was up above, watching me. Half a moon, but bright enough to show me all I needed to see.

A shooting star passed, and I imagined all that I wanted. I made a wish that I would find someone to love, someone like Chioma.

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A month later, on the day the day the International Space Station passed over Owerri, we drove to the hill close to Imo Concorde hotel. By the foot of the hill, we offloaded our equipment from Prof’s Car, and dragged them up the hill one after the other. The local television station was already there when we arrived. They had taken interest in the project after Prof invited his contacts from the Ministry of Industry.

I checked the website again, and we had an hour prepare. The generator was constantly humming, and supplied us with electricity. Prof had checked out with the nautical location, and this place was strategic and elevated. I mounted the one fourth wave ground plane antenna, and Prof Set up the printer and other things. Soon, our amateur radio was ready was ready for transmission. We listened, we listened closely and carefully. The first transmission that came in

was a digital packet transmitted at 145.825 MHz We still had a few more minutes to go and we could tell that the ISS was already in our range. I adjusted the squelch, but the signals were still weak. I tuned into 145.800 MHz, and let Prof direct the helm of the antenna.

People came from all over the city to witness the event too. Nkechi was there, and I believed that my mother was watching it live on the television, because I told her it was going to be televised. Soon, the signals came in. The voice of a woman came in range: "ISS, I hear you loud and clear, over."

"It's getting stronger," I said.

My heart was beating. Here I was testing something I had prepared for months. Something that in a few minutes could end up failing. I was afraid to fail. I could see Prof sweating too. Prof was seriously messing with the channels out of anxiety, because he thought that they wouldn't hear us.

"Please leave it on 145.800 MHz," I said.

I checked on the ISS tracker on my phone and found out they were already in our range, along our coordinates.

I ran to the radio and transmitted: "Is there someone out there? Over..." a squelch sound followed.

"Is there someone out there over?" I said again, and another squelch sound followed. I looked at my friend's face, and he was sweating. The crowd was looking at us, jittering, anxious, and some were laughing, while others were smiling. I was afraid. A squelch sound followed over the radio. A voice came through.

“This is Jessica from the International Space center, over,” the astronaut said, and people screamed. The camera men tried to hush them.

“Jessica, this is an amateur radio station enthusiast from Nigeria over,” I said.

“This is amazing, what is your name, over?” she asked.

“Our Names are: John Munaonyeso and Matthew Oden, aka Prof, and the well-wishers from Imo state, over,” I said.

“Wow, ok, I wrote that down in zero-gravity. Greeting from the international space center, Mathew, John and Imo state. This is the first time we are actually getting any transmission from this area. Over,” she said.

“We have a few questions, over,” I said, and motioned Prof to come over with the first question.

“Please go on, over,” she said.

"What is the International Space Station. Over?" Prof said.

"The International Space Station is a habitable artificial satellite in low earth orbit. The ISS maintains an orbit with an altitude of between 330 and 435 km (205 and 270 mi) by means of robust maneuvers using the engines of the Zvezda module or visiting spacecraft. It completes 15.54 orbits per day. Over," she said.

"Which nationality are you? Over," Prof asked.

"I am Italian, Over," she said.

"Do you have Italian food on board over?"

"We have everything you can think of, but I am not a big fan of Italian food. Over,"

Prof waved at the people, in case any of them had any questions.

Nkechi screamed, "Is it hot or cold, there?"

Prof transmitted the question over to her.

"Outside is around minus one hundred, one hundred and fifty degree Celsius. With sunlight, we are looking around one hundred. But we keep it around twenty to twenty-two. Over," she said.

"How do you feel about taking off from earth? Over," Prof asked.

"Well, it's not something that is uncomfortable, anyone can live with that. Imagine someone giving you a strong push in the back and you are raising upwards, over."

"How do you feel about zero-gravity? Over," Prof asked.

"Very comfortable too. Imagine floating in the air, just floating, and there is nothing to stop you. Over."

"What is the favorite thing to do in space? Over," Prof asked.

"I guess talking to scientist enthusiast like you and your friend, and the people of your city. Over."

"What's the weather like in space? Over," Prof asked.

"We are much higher than all the clouds and all the air, so we do not have weather as you do, we do have something called 'space weather' which is caused by the particles that come from the sun and namely it is radiation. Over."

“What word of encouragement do you have for this city? Over,” I asked.

“You people have started the first part of scientific inquiry. Anyone can be here; anyone can get here. All you need is a dream, and the will to do the right things. Over.”

The signals began to fade and we lost signal. People were already screaming, and more people came to the site to see what was going on. There was jubilation in the hill. At home. And every part of the city. The governor called and requested a banquet at his place. Prof told me. He was excited and happy.

“No, I don’t need that in my name,” I said and continued to pack the equipment’s.

Prof knew that for me this wasn’t about being famous, or the need to be known. This wasn’t even supposed to get this much publicity. I wanted to do it because I was fascinated about space. The only place I deemed worthy of celebration this evening was at Nwanyi Ncha’s place. It was up to him what to do with the publicity. My job was done. My phone rang, and it was my son, and Annie. They were watching it on the television.

“Daddy, space, space,” Obiarika said.

“You are already a star,” I said to him, “Remember that you can do a lot more. That what I just did was nothing. Remember that you can’t take to another level,” I said. I knew that he wasn’t going to understand, but I wanted to say it. I wanted the words to live in his head and heart. When the phone cut, I packed the last piece of equipment, and stored it in Prof’s car.

“You can keep the equipment’s, I barely have space in my house,” I said.

“What do you mean, this is yours. This is your idea, your equipment, your everything, and I already feel like I am stealing your victory,” he said.

“There is no victory here. We just did what we set out to do, what we have dedicated our lives to. Remember the story the old man told us about moon chasers?” I asked.

“Yes,” Prof said.

“I have never stopped thinking about it,” I said, “We are all moon chasers here.” Prof hugged me tightly.

When we got to Nwanyi Ncha’s place that evening, we were already like a celebrity of a sort. I didn’t like the feeling that it was giving me. I wanted to be ordinary, to be seen equally as everyone. Maybe it was time for me to leave this city? I had nothing left here. No love, nothing. Just people that wanted to turn nothing into something that I wasn’t ready to be. Just a friend that decided that it was better for the whole world to see what we were doing. People like me wanted a damn quiet life, and people wouldn’t respect that, not anymore. I was something else already.

Everyone was screaming. Nwanyi Ncha served us food for free. Then people were buying beer for us. Akpan was there, and it was great to see him.

“So, you guys talked to men in space?” Akpan asked.

“Yes,” I said.

Prof was at the other corner shouting. Telling everyone what it was like to talk to men in the space. Telling everyone how much work and sweat that went into designing the equipment from junk. He walked up to me, put his hands around my neck, and screamed, “This is my friend, this man. John Munaonyeso, no you are not alone my brother, I had always been with you. No, I will always be with you. I know what you go through. I know what you went through to be the man you are today, and yet, you are humble. So humble. Full of love. This project is dedicated to

you. To all you did. None of it would have existed without you, without your madness. Without your extraordinary capacity for endurance,” he said.

Everyone screamed on top of their voices. It was reassuring to know that I meant all these things to him. I smiled. Prof could only be Prof, and I, John, could only be John. If there was a man that ever came close to understanding me, it was him. If there was a man dedicated to friendship, love, and good laughter, it was him. I knew that I was generally a terrible asshole. But, this friend, this particular friend had stayed right there, through the storm, through the wind, and never ran away. Nwanyi Ncha brought out a television and quickly switched it on, we were being broadcasted on the evening news. We watched ourselves again, and people walked up to us and greeted us.

“So, we have been here drinking, and playing and we didn’t even know that we had great men among us. Men that have set the sail above this earth and fashion their path beyond these pathways. Men that have inspired a new generation. My only sincere regret is that Catechist is not here today to bless these great men among us. But wherever he is, I know that he will be happy about this. Like he will always advise us: ‘drink and make merry’,” Akpan said.

There wasn’t anything in it. There was glory, but not the type I was looking for. I was looking for the glory that could fill ones inside to the brim. The type of glory Pa Njoku talked about. It was nowhere to be found here. But yet, I smiled.

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When I got home, I cleared my lab. I cleared all the junk I had stored over the years. I started mopping the dusty floor. I cleaned everywhere. I wanted the moon and the sun to shine into my house whenever they were out. I was missing something. I closed my door and started running towards the river. I ran towards the wood. I ran past where The Pharrell was shot dead. I ran into the small road. I ran until I got to the river. I dove in and began swimming towards the island. When I got there, I was panting and sweating profusely. I wanted to be here. I wanted to look at myself from here. I wanted to face my woes, myself, my beginnings, my love, and those hatred that I stored somewhere for those that had hurt me.

“Chioma, I love you. I know you are here, somewhere watching me. I know. Your presence around the river is something that I can feel, that I have tried to deny. But you see...” I looked up and smiled. A night owl flew past me and dove into the wet night. “I know you are here; you see me, I know. I know you are bold enough to come around me all the time. Remember the first time we met, and I wasn’t sure if I even wanted to a relationship? You struck me as a beautiful person. As a woman of great difference, like magic. Sometimes, that was all I asked for or ever wanted. A little magic and you gave it to me. You brought so much sunshine into my life, and some people will say that I am crazy. But I know that I am not crazy. The day that I met you, I stopped trying to kill myself. Even though I had tried to kill myself a few many times,” I said and laughed.

“I told myself that when you return from Lagos that I was going to tell you everything, and I never got that chance to tell you. I will tell you everything you need to hear, and maybe it will make your journey well. I still love you. I wanted to marry you; I would have. I wanted to live in the same house with you and play all the crazy music the world has to offer,” I said.

An owl cried very close to me from atop a tree. The sound was calm and subtle, and very familiar to me. I felt as if something or someone was trying to talk to me.



“I have a son, and I was living with a woman when we met. Her name is Annie. She is a good woman, but I wasn’t in love with her. When you came to me, I felt it. I felt something strong something extraordinary, something out this world. It wasn’t the usual longing. It was a deep conviction. I know that I am saying a lot to you, but I need to say it.”

I found the courage to smile, and my heart became lighter. The trees shook greatly, and nothing came out. I stood firm, unafraid, just a deep sense of love that overwhelmed, and I began to cry.

“I was born here, by the hospital along the river. The river was around me and had been around me. I haven’t made sense of it like I did these past few days. When I went home, I discovered myself again, and there was a part of me, a part of my childhood that was dark. I can feel that darkness, it’s like a wind that had followed me for a long time. It was the fact that we couldn’t have all we wanted as children, so I stopped asking. It wasn’t just that I didn’t want to go back to the University and all that, it was just circumstance. I had no ambition, but let me tell you what happened today. I spoke to the people in space today. I told you I was going to do that.”

I threw pebbles into the river and slowly walked to the other end where the moon touched the river. I watched the horizon.

“My mother would have loved you. I wanted to take you to her, but death had a way of playing tricks. I have one brother, he lives in Aba, a shoemaker, and a sister confined in a madhouse and I think about how to save her, every day. I don’t even know if I can save myself, but whenever I look at my mother, I see hope. She has suffered enough.

“Enough about me. Tell me about your family, I never really got to know them. Would your mother be happy to see me? Would your father be happy to meet?”

I waited but no one said anything to me. I raised my head again and looked at the river. There she was on a boat. A woman with a black veil was paddling slowly towards the moon. She turned and smiled. I said a thousand words that she couldn't hear. She kept smiling and smiling at me. I smiled back. I watched her boat sail closer and closer to the moon, towards the offing. I watched it become a speck and disappeared into the big moon. I watched her become light, she ascended through the foggy dew and drew herself moon's surface. She became moon. She became everything I had ever loved or obsessed about. She inked herself right into an eternal clandestine art, one every living thing admired. I was jealous for a second. I smiled. Honestly, I couldn't tell if my imagination was playing me, but to hell with that. Let it play me. I was happy to have felt this way. I swam back, and walked into the small road and went home.

**The End**